The Holocaust Diaries

DARE TO SURVIVE



CHAIM SHLOMO FRIEDMAN

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CHAIM SHLOMO FRIEDMAN

translated by
Avraham Yaakov Finkel

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New York · London · Jerusalem

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Published and distributed
in the U.S., Canada and overseas by
C.I.S. Publishers and Distributors
180 Park Avenue, Lakewood, New Jersey 08701
(908) 905-3000 Fax: (908) 367-6666

Distributed in Israel by
C.I.S. International (Israel)
Rechov Mishkalov 18
Har Nof, Jerusalem
Tel: 02-538-935

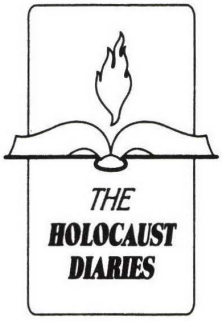
Distributed in the U.K. and Europe by
C.I.S. International (U.K.)
89 Craven Park Road
London N15 6AH, England
Tel: 01-809-3723

Book and cover design: Deenee Cohen
Typography: Nechamie Miller

Cover illustration reproduced
from original painting by Francis McGinley

ISBN 1-56062-097-9 hard cover

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



כָּל זֹאת בָּאַתְנוּ וְלֹא שְׁכַחֲנוּךָ

(תהלים מד:יח)

All this has befallen us
yet we have not forgotten You
(*Tehillim* 54:18)

DEDICATED
TO THE MEMORY OF
THE AUTHOR

לזכרון עולם

הר"ר חיים שלמה
בן הר"ר אליקים ז"ל

נפטר ביום כ"ה תשרי תשמ"ו
ומנוחתו בירושלים עיה"ק תו"ב

ת. נ. צ. ב. ה.

RABBINAAT
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ISRAELITISCHE ORTHODOXE GEMEENTE
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JACOB JACOBSSTRAAT 22 - 2018 ANTWERPEN

Rabbi Chaim Kreiswirth
Chief Rabbi of Antwerp, Belgium

בס"ד

Antwerp, *Rosh Chodesh Kislev*, 5746/1985

I am delighted that my dear friend Rabbi Chaim Shlomo Friedman is publishing a book recalling the dreadful events of the holocaust. I am convinced that every holocaust survivor, each a "firebrand saved from the flames," will find these memoirs to be a reflection of his own experiences.

I have known the author for many years, and I can attest with full confidence that all his writings are the unadorned truth, without omission or addition.

Chaim Kreiswirth
Chief Rabbi of Antwerp

APPROBATION TO THE YIDDISH-LANGUAGE EDITION
PUBLISHED BY THE AUTHOR HIMSELF DURING HIS LIFETIME

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

THE QUINTESSENTIAL IMAGE OF THE HOLOCAUST IS A long line of terrified Jewish men, women and children being herded into the gas chambers by sadistic Nazi guards and snarling dogs in the shadow of watchtowers and barbed wire. But this was only the final step in the monstrous German genocidal attack on their innocent Jewish victims. It was preceded by a carefully designed strategy of dispossession, degradation, disorientation, duplicity, treachery, terror, forced labor, mayhem, indiscriminate murder, deportation, ghettos, round-ups and liquidations—all executed with fiendish Germanic efficiency and brutality—so that when the Jews were finally transported to the concentration camps they were already physically and emotionally exhausted, numb with grief, dazed and defeated.

DARE TO SURVIVE

In *Dare to Survive*, the third volume in *The Holocaust Diaries*, Rabbi Chaim Shlomo Friedman relates his own experiences in the ghettos and labor camps in the environs of Cracow in southern Poland, followed by his flight to the illusory safety of Slovakia and Hungary. Although the author himself was never deported to the concentration camps, he experienced every step of the tragedy-filled process that led up to deportation, and only through the most phenomenal tenacity and resourcefulness, as well as numerous miraculous escapes, did he manage to avoid being inextricably trapped in the web of the Nazi spider.

Dare to Survive was originally written in Yiddish and first published in 1985 in a Yiddish-language edition, under the title *Ich Vell Zei Iberleiben*, shortly before the author passed away on 25 *Tishrei* of that year at the age of seventy-two. In 1987, it was translated into Hebrew by Yitzchak Eizik Ovitz, re-edited and published in Eretz Yisrael under the title *Lo Amus Ki Echyeh*. The present English-language edition was translated from the edited Hebrew version by Avraham Yaakov Finkel and subsequently underwent further painstaking editing. However, because this volume is being published posthumously, and because we were very careful not to compromise the extraordinary authenticity of the work by unauthorized additions and embellishments, we were restricted in the kinds of clarifications and adjustments that could be incorporated into the text itself. Moreover, due to his characteristic humility and self-effacement, the author would never have agreed to write about himself some of the things that need to be said. Therefore, the burden of presenting some important clarifications falls to these prefatory publisher's remarks.

As the reader progresses through this amazing memoir,

he will be impressed by the uncanny ring of truth of the author's words. The author has clearly attempted to record the unadorned facts to the best of his recollection, utterly devoid of any heroic posturing or self-aggrandizement. Yet in spite of his efforts, a very sharp characterization of the author emerges from these pages with great force, a portrait of a man with unusual physical, mental, emotional and spiritual qualities, a tenacious fighter with the heart of a lion and the soul of a saint.

At the outbreak of the war, the author seems to have been leading a very idyllic Jewish life. At the time, he was a young, gregarious Belzer *chassid*, with beard and *peyos* and the traditional *chassidic* garb, completely absorbed in the communal Belzer dedication to Torah, *avodah* and *gemillus chassadim*. He had a young wife and an infant daughter, as well as an elderly mother and several brothers. He also seems to have been reasonably well off. As the war began, however, his entire life collapsed; flight and the search for a safe haven became his overriding concern. But the rapid onslaught of the German invasion of Poland sealed his avenues of escape at every turn, and there was no choice left but to dig in and try to survive under the yoke of the Nazi oppressor.

As time went on, the near impossibility of this endeavor became increasingly clear. Virtually every day, there were new oppressive Nazi edicts, full of cunning and deceit, designed to crush the spirit of the trapped Jewish people as the noose was drawn slowly, inexorably and ever more tightly around their necks. In this desperate situation, the author's natural penchant for defiance and independent thinking prevented him from being swept along in the carefully engineered mass attitudes and protected him from the false sense of security and the disorientation that were deliberately

planted among the Jews by the Germans in the psychological phase of their attack on the Jewish people. He did not grant the Nazis even the smallest modicum of credibility, refusing to accept anything at face value. If everyone was running to take advantage of a new opportunity that suddenly seemed to present itself, he would hang back in wary distrust, an attitude that saved his life numerous times. He became an insatiable sponge for information, ever alert, ever vigilant, his antennae always attuned to the slightest rumor, constantly evaluating his findings and seeking the tiny grain of truth amidst the overwhelming dross of disinformation and fantasy.

When he did find that tiny opening in the Nazi net, he never vacillated but plunged forward with resolute determination, great personal courage and an utter lack of fear. Extremely resourceful and persuasive, he felt very confident in his ability to wriggle his way out of any tight spot, and this confidence was continually tested.

With frustrating regularity, however, one escape attempt after another ended in failure, but he was not discouraged or disheartened. Buttressed by his staunch faith in Hashem, he would simply accept his temporary defeat with humility and grace as *gam zu letovah* and forge on to the next scheme, hopeful that perhaps in this new attempt Hashem would grant him success. And when, time and time again, he miraculously eluded the hungry hand of death, he never attributed his deliverance to blind happenstance or his own formidable abilities but to divine benevolence, which he acknowledged with humble gratitude. Never did he become an instinctive, cornered animal fighting for survival without heart, without soul.

In one memorable episode, he was standing in a railway station, part of a large crowd of captured Jews heading for an

unknown fate, when he saw a man of his acquaintance and felt certain that the man was penniless. In that terrifying predicament, he had the presence of mind and the compassionate impulse to take up a collection among the other captives so that the man would not feel utterly lost. Yet the author's description of this episode is brief and matter-of-fact, as if such a remarkable act of kindness and compassion is nothing more than is to be expected under the circumstances. Clearly, this was a man of rare and outstanding personal qualities, an exemplary *baal madreigah* who refused to posture for the reader. Indeed, quite often throughout the book, the reader may be struck by the author's reticence about his feelings and emotions, but although we have scrupulously avoided inserting such passages into the text, the discerning reader will find the author's innermost feelings occasionally bursting through in a flash of emotion, which is then quickly suppressed.

It is also quite clear that it must have taken tremendous physical strength and stamina for the author to endure all the brutal beatings he suffered at the hands of the Nazis on numerous occasions and to be able to pick himself up and continue undaunted in his desperate struggle for survival. The author also must have had enormous reservoirs of energy and endurance to withstand the constant long marches, privations, hunger and sleeplessness in relatively vigorous good health.

All in all, we are presented with the image of a man of truly heroic proportions in a very Jewish sense, powerful and fearless but non-violent, deeply pious and compassionate, driven by dedication to the highest ideals of the Torah, vastly resourceful but humbly subservient to and accepting of the divine will. And yet, in spite of all his remarkable ability, many

manifestly miraculous incidents played key roles in his ultimate survival.

In this light, we are presented with a very convincing explanation of one of the more puzzling aspects of the holocaust. People often ask: Why didn't the Jews resist? Why did they allow themselves to be led like sheep to the slaughter? The answer is clearly that the Jews were overwhelmed and crushed by the enormity and scope of the merciless Nazi assault so graphically depicted in *Dare to Survive*. Only the strongest and most audacious people could even dream of evading the Nazis, and often, even those were only able to survive through manifestly miraculous intervention, as the author's experience demonstrates. Most ordinary people, however, were simply incapable of such heroic escapades. The infernal Nazi trap was cleverly and diabolically sprung, and there was simply nothing to do, nowhere to turn. But in their final hours, the Jewish victims—especially those imbued with Torah values—found within themselves a deeper and greater heroism. Bowing their heads to the inevitability of their destiny, they separated themselves from their tormentors by a veil of holiness, and they resolved to give up their lives *al kiddush Hashem*. In the end, although overcome by an unspeakably profound grief and dread for themselves and their loved ones, they still went to their deaths with pride and dignity, never lowering themselves to the bestial level of their accursed tormentors.

In one illuminating passage from the book, the author receives a final message from his mother in which she says, "I'm well aware of what they are going to do to us. I have only minutes to live, but I'm not afraid to die. I am going to my death as if I were going to a wedding. I am happy mainly because I have been granted the *zchus* of marrying off my

children the way I have always hoped for, to decent, Torah-observant husbands and wives. I am also happy that my son Chaim Shlomo . . . managed to escape from the ghetto . . ." Paradoxically, at the time this gallant woman sent her final message, the children she was so proud of having married off properly had already gone to their final destiny, and yet, she did not feel it had all been for naught. Rather, she felt an abiding sense of accomplishment for having fulfilled her duties as a Jewish mother. Her life had been fully dedicated to the Creator and His Torah, and even the slaughter of her entire family could not take this away from her. This was heroism of a much higher order, and such heroes and heroines were far beyond the reach of the Nazis. The Nazis could kill them, but they could not defeat them.

Unfortunately, not all Jews were cut from this noble cloth. Many Jews of a baser nature, motivated by greed and the spurious assurance of personal safety, became the tools of the Nazis in the perfidious deception, oppression and deportation of the Jewish people through the infamous Judenrats (Nazi-installed Jewish community councils) and the Jewish police. In a very important aspect of his eyewitness testimony, the author angrily accuses these ruthless men, drunk with their Nazi-endowed power, of deliberately misleading, brutalizing, plundering, cheating and betraying their own people. The author points out, however, that none of these men were Torah-observant Jews, although some came from Torah-observant homes, which only underscores that the Torah has a tremendous power to elevate a person and protect him from his darker side, that what ultimately separates the Jew from his barbaric oppressors is the mantle of the holy Torah.

The author received his mantle of the holy Torah in the hallowed environment of Polish *chassidus*. His grandfather

Rabbi Reuven Friedman was an outstanding *talmid chacham* and a *chassid* of the Radomsker Rebbe (author of *Tiferes Shlomo*), and his father Rabbi Elyakim Friedman was a similarly outstanding *talmid chacham* and a *chassid* of the Zhabner Rav (author of *Yad Shalom*). The author himself, who lost his father at a very young age, felt strongly attracted to the rapidly growing and dynamic Belzer *chassidus*, and as a fifteen-year-old boy, he traveled to Belz where he studied diligently for the next five years. Afterwards, he always remained a devoted Belzer *chassid*, and he maintained a close association with Belzer Rebbe for the rest of his life. In *Dare to Survive*, the author describes his role in the Belzer Rebbe's dramatic escape from Poland and their moving reunion in Budapest before the Belzer Rebbe went on to Eretz Yisrael. Indicative of what lay close to his heart, the author closes his narrative with an account of his activities in helping the Belzer Rebbe establish the world-renowned network of Belzer *yeshivos* in the aftermath of the war.

The publication of *Dare to Survive*, closely following the publication of *Late Shadows* by Moshe Holczler and *They Called Me Frau Anna* by Chana Marcus Banet, is a significant milestone for the *Holocaust Diaries* collection. We feel that it is a great *zchus* and honor to have presented volumes of such stature to the public, as each of these works, in its own way, depicts the nobility of spirit and the deeper heroism of the Jewish people in the darkest chapter of their history. A fourth volume is scheduled for release later this winter, two more volumes are in advanced stages of preparation, and several more are in the planning stages.

In closing, I would like to extend a note of acknowledgment to Rabbi Avraham Yaakov Finkel for his highly professional and meticulous efforts in the translation of this work

and to Editorial Director Raizy Kaufman for her scrupulous preservation of the integrity and authenticity of the entire book. I would also like to extend a note of gratitude to our entire staff who labored vigorously and devotedly in the production of this distinguished book. We all feel that autobiographical accounts such as these are an inestimable legacy for all future generations, and we are humbly grateful to the *Ribono Shel Olam* for granting us the privilege of participating in this important work.

Y.Y.R.
Lakewood, N.J.
Marcheshvan 5752

DARE TO SURVIVE



Chaim Shlomo Friedman before the war

PROLOGUE

ON JANUARY 30, 1933, ADOLF HITLER BECAME CHANCELlor of Germany. Almost immediately, he began an intensive program of rearmament as the first step in forging the new Germany into a superpower that was to dominate all of Europe and eventually rule the world. In the process, he promised to rid the world of all Jews. It was a program he had spelled out explicitly in his book *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle), but no one had believed he would actually try to implement it in full.

The Jewish population in Germany at the time of Hitler's rise to power numbered six hundred thousand, many of them Polish immigrants or their descendants. Jews lived in tranquility, prospering and gaining prominence in commerce and professions, and relations with their German neighbors

were friendly and peaceful. All this came to an abrupt halt when Hitler's incessant anti-Semitic tirades encouraged all the Jew-haters to come out into the open. The most virulent form of anti-Semitism reared its ugly head.

The first anti-Jewish government decree provided that all outstanding debts owed to Jews by non-Jews were cancelled. Since the majority of Jewish businesses were based on credit, most Jewish businessmen found themselves destitute overnight. Those who saw the handwriting on the wall disposed of their possessions at fire-sale prices or simply abandoned them and fled the tyrannical regime. Most Jews, however, remained in Germany, thinking that the Nazi tempest would blow over before long.

The second decree was not long in coming. All Polish Jews were ordered to leave Germany forthwith. Hundreds of thousands of these hapless Jews were rounded up and transported to the Polish border town of Zbonshin. They arrived there with little more than the clothes on their backs, since the Nazis had ordered them to leave everything behind. People who had lived in comfort all their lives were suddenly thrust into abject poverty. The Poles, unmoved by the plight of these unfortunate people, did not permit them to enter the interior of Poland. Even people with relatives in Poland who offered them shelter were not allowed to leave the confines of Zbonshin, where they were condemned to live in squalor and deprivation. The leaders of Polish Jewry, sparing no effort, eventually persuaded the Polish government to permit the Jews of Zbonshin entry into Poland where they settled in various cities. Later, many of them managed to emigrate to other countries.

In the wake of this expulsion, Polish Jewry organized a boycott of German goods; all new orders for German goods

were cancelled, and merchandise that had arrived previously was returned to the shipper. This boycott sparked a great debate in Jewish circles. Many people wholeheartedly supported the tactic, while others, fearing the wrath of German retaliation, questioned its wisdom. Concern and confusion filled the hearts of the Jews of Poland.

In the meantime, German subversion bored its way into the very foundations of Poland. For example, anti-*shechitah* legislation was passed in the Polish *Sejm* (Senate) through the efforts of Senator Pasterovna, a German undercover agent. The Germans, in an accurate assessment of the Polish mentality, knew that the best way to divert Polish attention from the German military buildup along their border was to induce the Poles to focus on the Jews. Under the prodding of German agents who had infiltrated all strata of the government, Polish police were instructed to harass Jewish merchants with all possible means. Gendarmes passed from store to store in search of "violations," such as scales that were not spotlessly clean, a sack standing in the wrong corner, a clock that ran fast or slow. For each of these "violations" the storekeeper was fined one *zloty*.

My store also received such a visit. The police officer, finding the usual "violations" was ready to pull out his summons pad, expecting to be paid on the spot.

"No," I protested. "You're lying. I won't pay the fine."

"All right," the officer shot back. "Then I'll have to cite you for contempt."

Flushed with anger, he entered my name and address in his little book—where it remains until this day.

[Editor's Note: The author's natural penchant for defiance and independent thinking, as described in the Publisher's Note, saved him a few *zlotys* on this occasion, but in the dark days that lay ahead,

it would save his life numerous times. In fact, it was this kind of stubborn, non-violent resistance, the simple refusal to acquiesce meekly to oppressive decrees or carefully engineered mass attitudes, that protected him from the false sense of security and the disorientation that was deliberately planted among the Jews by the Germans in the psychological phase of their attack on the Jews. The same instinct which led him to dare defy this Polish police officer eventually helped him dare to survive the horrors of the ghetto—although it still required an almost daily succession of miracles to actually see him safely through the war. It is quite possible that this was the author's subconscious reason for mentioning this relatively trivial incident at this point, but in his humility and self-effacement, he could never have spelled it out in these terms. If the reader has not yet read the Publisher's Note, it is respectfully suggested that he do so prior to reading the entire book because of the perspective it will provide.]

All this was happening about two weeks before the outbreak of World War II. Understandably, intimidations such as these spread anxiety among the Jews who knew full well that the Germans were pulling the strings.

The German espionage network also spread its tentacles into the heart of the Polish defense establishment. Its agents successfully recruited a number of high-ranking Polish military officers in command of strategically sensitive points. Regrettably, this only became apparent when it was too late. Just a few days before the outbreak of the war, the Polish Chiefs of Staff made an inspection of the state of readiness of the various defense industries, confident of finding an ample supply of battle-worthy arms and ammunition ready to be shipped to the front. The first inspection took place at the huge Mashtzitza munitions plant, named after the late President Mashtzitzky. To their shock and consternation, they found that none of these shells fit the gun barrels, the

specifications being either too small or too large. The huge stock of ammunition, which had taken years to accumulate, was worthless.

I saw with my own eyes how "effective" these Polish weapons were. It happened as we were fleeing from the advancing German army and ran into a company of retreating Polish soldiers. Overhead, German bombers were advancing on their targets. The Polish soldiers aimed their guns and pulled the triggers, but nothing happened. It was useless; their guns were no good. In disgust, the soldiers addressed some choice Polish curses at their government that had betrayed them. The German bomber pilots continued blithely on their mission, certain that they had nothing to fear.

By the time it dawned on the Poles that the modern mechanized German army was about to invade their country, it was too late. For the moment, their preoccupation with harassing Jews was placed on the back burner. Defending the border against the Germans took priority.

Looking out the window of my store, I could see long trains moving day and night toward the front line, jam-packed with soldiers, while hundreds of local well-wishers smilingly cheered them on. The poor soldiers did not know they were being led like sheep to slaughter. The more astute observers of the political situation, however, understood the utter hopelessness of the Polish position, but I don't think anyone could have imagined what a horrible fate awaited the Jewish people.

BOOK ONE

The Beginning of the End

CHAPTER 1

The World War Erupts

THE DREADED, UNTHINKABLE EXPLOSION BEGAN ON Friday, the first of September, 1939, at 5:30 in the morning. I was on my way to *shul* in Cracow when I noticed planes flying overhead. Were they Polish planes on maneuvers? The answer came in the form of the ear-piercing whine of falling bombs, followed by thunderous explosions. Huge columns of thick, acrid smoke rising from all directions blackened the sky. The Germans were aiming their bombs at the industrial plants on the outskirts of the city, sowing death and destruction. The streets were suddenly deserted; everyone was seeking shelter from the rain of death. All one heard was the droning of the bombers' engines dropping their death-dealing loads on preselected targets in town. Here and there, a Polish fighter plane attempted valiantly to drive off

the invaders. It was all in vain. All day long, the city of Cracow was enveloped in a curtain of thick smoke punctuated by huge tongues of fire. Still, no one knew what was happening at the front. Finally, toward evening, there were news reports that the German army had invaded Poland from Upper Silesia and was advancing on the interior. The Jews shuddered at the ominous news of the German successes.

Judging by that first Friday's heavy bombardment, we could surmise what the situation at the front was like, but we had no hard facts until Sunday. All through Shabbos, we tried to imagine what might be taking place, but it was only guesswork. Meanwhile, a general feeling of unease gripped the city, especially the Jewish population. When on Sunday column after column of soldiers returned from the front, the situation became all too clear. The enemy had attacked with such overwhelming force that Polish resistance had crumbled in less than one hour. During the brief attempt at engaging the enemy, thousands had been killed and thousands more wounded, prompting the issuance of the command to retreat to the interior of Poland and regroup for a counter-offensive. At the same time, the troops were instructed to spread rumors throughout Poland about unspeakable atrocities committed by the invading Germans who would murder all males in the territory they conquered.

The crushing collapse of the Polish army on the very first day of the German invasion was due mainly to two factors. First, the German army was well-trained and fully equipped with the latest in mechanized heavy artillery and modern tanks. All the Polish army had for its defense were horses to pull its outmoded tanks and guns. It took many long hours for the horses to pull the guns to the front, with rest stops in between. No wonder the German juggernaut overwhelmed

its primitive opponent on the first day of the war. Second, the majority of the elite officers, as well as a number of high government officials, were on the payroll of the German espionage service. They did all they could to sabotage the Polish war effort, revealing military secrets to the German command, not to mention rendering Polish arms and ammunition unusable. The war for Poland was lost before it had even begun.

For the Jews, the news reports of the Polish military collapse were particularly frightening, especially the reports that the Germans were killing all Jews, young and old. On the spur of the moment, many Jews decided to leave the city by joining the retreating troops, in the belief that they would thereby escape the murderous hands of the Nazis.

It was an impulsive flight, an escape to an unknown destination. All that mattered was to get away from the rapidly advancing enemy. People hastily formed small groups, loaded their bundles on their shoulders and ran for their lives.

We were hesitant to embark on such an uncertain flight. Who knows, we wondered, if the open road does not hold more hazard than staying at home? After all, the enemy was in total control of Polish airspace and could bomb any location at will. For the time being, we decided to remain at home, to wait and see.

Monday morning, going out into the street, we encountered hundreds of refugees. It was clear that the fear the Polish soldiers had inspired with their tales of German atrocities had sunk in. That many Jewish soldiers in the Polish army confirmed these gruesome stories only helped heighten the apprehension.

Swept up by the general panic, we decided not to swim

against the current, and noting that many people from our circle, including aged persons as well, were leaving, we also resolved to join the flight. The decision was not an easy one, but we had *bitachon* in Hashem, trusting that He would help us wherever we would go. Since it was impractical for the entire family to leave, we decided that at least some of the men would escape German occupation and then work to bring the rest of the family to safety. We—my brother and I—explained the situation to our families, and having no alternative, they agreed that we should go.

We packed our things, some food and drink, some clothing and, of course, our *tallis* and *tefillin*. We could not carry more, since we would be marching on foot all the way. Altogether, four members of our family joined the march—myself (married), my younger brother Yitzchak (also married) and my two unmarried brothers Shimon Yaakov, who we simply called Shimon, and Yosef. Our older brother Pesachyah was forced to remain at home because of a childhood leg injury that still caused him trouble. Our starting point was to be our mother's house, where we all assembled along with our wives.

It was a tearful good-bye. No one knew what the future held. Our situation brought to mind the verse, "Outside, the sword will kill young boys and girls, infants and white-haired men, while inside there will be terror." (*Devarim* 32:25) Our greatest fear was being hit by German bombs. It was German policy, before mounting an assault on a city, to soften up the defending forces as well as the local population by spreading terror through indiscriminate bombing from the air. Of course, it would be extremely dangerous to be out in the street at a time like this. Nevertheless, most people opted for escape, hoping somehow to survive the German onslaught.

Our families realized there was no other way out. We parted with heavy hearts. Smiling through their tears, they wished us a speedy return in peace and good health.

Outside our group was waiting, ready to set out on the long trek. We were not alone. The roads were swarming with thousands of refugees, each group heading for a different destination. We decided to head straight for Belz, since we were accustomed to travelling to Belz for the *Yamim Nora'im*, only that this time we were on foot. This would be no small feat, since Belz is about three hundred kilometers (over one hundred and eighty miles) from Cracow. Still, we calculated on reaching Belz by the end of the week.

No sooner did we set out on our journey than we were forced to interrupt it. The sky was black with German planes, bombing and strafing the city incessantly. Of course, continuing our march with a bombing raid going on would be sheer insanity. Every now and then, we slipped into an air-raid shelter, to emerge at the first sound of the all-clear siren. As a result of the constant interruptions, we lost a great deal of time before reaching the city limits, but at long last we were out on the open road. The sun beat down relentlessly. The heat was oppressive. The water in our canteens was gone, and now we had to depend on the Polish peasants in the small villages along the way. Most of the Poles refused to give us a drink of water. Sometimes, they would chase us off, pouring pails of water all over us, drenching us from head to toe, to the accompaniment of a long string of Polish curses, but not one drop of water for our parched throats.

We also had our share of trouble from the retreating Polish army. Looking at the column of soldiers gave us an insight into the military "might" of Poland. It consisted of cannons and machine guns—drawn by emaciated horses. The

troops, although finding themselves in the same quandary as we did, had not given up their inbred hatred of the Jews. Seeing us, the cavalrymen goaded their horses to charge into our group, and it was a miracle that we escaped being trampled to death.

After overcoming these and other troubles we reached the town of Bochnia, about thirty miles east of Cracow. Bochnia was steeped in darkness, in a total blackout. Still, we were able to discern clusters of Jews anxiously analyzing their predicament. The refugees from Cracow, who had been arriving in a steady stream over the past two days, had told them the bad news. Now they were pondering whether to join the exodus or to remain in Bochnia.

Meanwhile, we paid a visit to my cousin Eliyahu Klapholz, a longtime resident of Bochnia. He graciously welcomed our entire group, offering all of us a meal that materialized within minutes. Exhausted, we lay down to sleep, planning to take to the road again early in the morning. We had a long trip ahead of us, since we had in mind to spend the *Yamim Nora'im* in Belz, as we had in previous years.

Rising early was easier said than done. Dead-tired from the two-day march, we did not wake up until mid-morning. We *davened Shacharis*, ate a hearty breakfast and resumed our journey. The march was strenuous and painful. The relentless heat, hunger and thirst wore us down, but we did not allow ourselves a minute's respite. We were obsessed by the thought of getting as far as possible from the German menace.

It was midnight when we reached the outskirts of Tarnow, a city to the east of Bochnia, where we were greeted by thunderous fireworks. The entire sky was lit up by exploding rockets launched from the bombers to illuminate the scene

and enable them to pinpoint their targets. The streets were deserted, except for military personnel who were on duty to assist the retreating troops who were approaching.

It would be dangerous to be out on the city streets, but to spend the night out in the open was even worse. After carefully weighing our options, we decided to enter the city.

Bone-weary and scared to death, we dragged ourselves through the city streets, bombs exploding all around us. Finally, we reached the home of my uncle Shimon Yaakov Friedman, only to find the doors unlocked, the house empty and everyone huddled in the air-raid shelter. The apartment was a shambles; the bombs blasts had shattered every window pane in the house. Joining the others in the shelter, we waited for the bombardment to subside. After a tense wait of several hours, we returned to the apartment. Too tired to eat, we plopped into the beds our kind host prepared for us.

We got up early and, after *davening*, returned to the road. Finding both lanes of the highway filled with retreating Polish army units, we were forced to trudge through the freshly plowed fields. Progress was slow, but we kept going, until by nightfall we reached the hamlet of Tcharna. Our strength was slowly ebbing away, and in desperation, we decided to look for a way to continue by train. It was useless—the railroads were not operating. But we simply could not go on. Since we did not know anyone in this village we decided to spend the night outdoors in the fields. The frosty night chilled our bones, but what else was there to do?

We had hardly bedded down when, seemingly out of nowhere, a peasant appeared.

"Why don't you all come over and sleep on my farm?" he said, scratching his head. "It's just a few hundred feet up the road."

The kindness of the farmer took us by surprise. Could it be a trap? we thought. But having felt the shivers of the icy night, we decided to accept his invitation. On the farm, the man spread some straw on the floor of one of the rooms, and we dropped off into a deep sleep. Thank Heaven, our suspicions were unfounded, and the night passed peacefully.

Rising at daybreak, we paid the farmer for his trouble, thanked him for his kindness and continued our odyssey. Once again, we stopped at the railway station, hoping to find a train going east. Happily, at the platform we saw a long train, ready for departure, loaded with Polish soldiers. We jumped onto the train, found seats and waited for it to start moving. One hour went by, then two hours, but no sign of movement. Time was running out; we didn't have a moment to lose. We had to get to Belz. Disappointed, we left the train and went back to walking, which we did for twenty-four hours without a break.

Heartening reports by Jewish soldiers of a planned counter-offensive by the Polish army gave us hope and encouragement that all was not lost and that our painful journey would be worthwhile after all.

On the fourth day of our wandering—at three o'clock on Friday morning—we entered Reisha, tired and exhausted strangers in a city where we had neither friends nor relatives. Where could we turn in the middle of the night? Suddenly, we heard voices. A group of Jews was passing us.

"What are you doing, standing there in the middle of the night?" one of the men asked.

We told him our story.

"Wait just a moment," he replied. "I'm taking these people to the station. I'll be back in a minute."

After a short while, he returned and invited us to his

house. Notwithstanding the unearthly hour, his wife treated us to a sumptuous meal. We caught a few hours sleep, ready to get up at the crack of dawn to continue our march.

The person who treated us so royally was a man named Schuldiener. He was not a wealthy man by any means, but he and his family were experts at observing the *mitzvah* of being hospitable in the full sense of the word. Knowing the distressing life of a refugee, they went all out to relieve our plight to the best of their ability.

At sunrise, we immersed ourselves in the *mikveh*, *davened*, ate breakfast and prepared to leave. Mr. and Mrs. Schuldiener urged us to stay for *Shabbos* at the very least, so that we would not have to spend the holy day among Polish peasants. We readily accepted their generous invitation.

During the afternoon, several formations of German bombers appeared in the sky, dropping their rain of destruction. The townspeople, particularly the Jews who had never before experienced a fire-bombing, were thrown into a panic.

We, of course, knew that this bombing raid was only the first step of softening up the enemy, to be followed within hours by a German ground attack and occupation. We quickly packed our belongings, preparing to leave at any cost. However, when Mr. Schuldiener and several other people again implored us not to expose ourselves to the dangers of the open road, we agreed to stay. We were put up in a separate apartment with a private kitchen and comfortable sleeping quarters.

We had planned to leave immediately after *Shabbos*. But the Germans were a step ahead of us. *Shabbos* morning, their barking and screaming could be heard all over town. Many Jews came out into the street, curious to get a close-up look

at the monsters. At first, the Germans behaved quite well and spoke courteously. But we who knew their true character waited with bated breath. It did not take long–just a few hours–until we heard the real story, how they forced Jews into labor battalions and cut their beards and *peyos*. We decided not to venture out into the street.

Not long after the German occupation, the food shortage became acute. The shelves in the food markets were emptied; everyone stocked up before the Germans would cut off all food supplies. In a way we were fortunate, since in our building there was a kosher bakery, and one of the tenants ran an egg business, so obtaining food did not present much of a problem for us. But our nerves were on edge as we were wondering what the outcome of all this would be. In the meantime, we just stayed indoors, day after day.

On the day before *Rosh Hashanah*, we had our first encounter with the Germans. They entered our house, grabbed all of us, put us to work and gave us a bad time. When at last they let us go, we thanked Hashem for having survived the gruelling day.

On *Rosh Hashanah*, we arranged to conduct services at home–our group comprised more than a *minyan*–since we did not want to risk being inducted for hard labor again. But Heaven had decreed otherwise. Our services were rudely interrupted by German troops who hauled us off to work. At the site, we met the majority of the local Jews, many of them still clad in *kittel* and *tallis*, who had been transported there in trucks straight from *shul*. Understandably, it was these Jews who had to bear the brunt of German abuse and humiliation. Aside from the back-breaking work we had to do, they beat and kicked us mercilessly. It was a sheer miracle that our bones were still intact at day's end. Home again, we con-

cluded the services and ate the *Yom Tov* meal, which consisted of bread and eggs.

On the second day of *Rosh Hashanah*, we outwitted the Germans. Before daybreak, we padlocked our front door to trick them into thinking the house was unoccupied. We then climbed back in through a window and commenced the services—this time without interruption. For a change, we had an uneventful day.

CHAPTER 2

Back to Cracow

NOW THAT *ROSH HASHANAH* HAD PASSED, WE REALIZED that it would be impossible to continue our march. Then again, staying in Reisha did not make sense either. Thus, we decided to return to Cracow, a distance of one hundred and twelve miles. We packed our bags, laid in some provisions and, to avoid German patrols, set out early in the morning, well before sunrise. However, as we reached the main highway we ran into a German guard.

"Halt!" he barked. "Where do you think you're going?"

Our hearts sank as we contemplated what he might do to us. Fortunately, he did not do us any harm. Turning to the Polish street cleaners, he took their brooms and handed them to us.

"Go ahead," he ordered. "You do the sweeping, *los, los*!"

He exempted me, perhaps because I was the oldest of the group. When the job was finished, he let us go. Breathing a sigh of relief, we were on our way again.

Every now and then, we encountered German troops on the march who would threaten us by pointing their guns in our direction. Afraid that they might actually shoot us, we began to march through the fields along the highway. Before long, our canteens were empty, our supply of bread was dwindling, and the sun was scorching us. Eating the raw sugar cane growing in the fields only aggravated our thirst and irritated our throats. Relief came when, passing through a village, we found a Jewish family who shared with us the little food they had. Of course, there was no shortage of delightful cool water to quench our thirst and fill our canteens. Those of us observing the fast of *Tzom Gedalyah* suffered quite an ordeal trudging in the blazing heat on an empty stomach.

That evening, we found shelter in the home of a warm-hearted Jew who graciously offered us a place to sleep. There we met a number of other wanderers who, like us, were returning home. Each had a story to relate about his experiences at the hands of the Germans and the Poles.

After a good night's sleep it was back to the road, mile after mile, hot and thirsty, without letup. What kept us going was the hope that each mile was bringing us closer to home and our loved ones. But as the Torah says, "Many designs are in a man's heart, but it is Hashem's plan that is accomplished." (*Mishlei* 19:21)

As the sun began to set, we found ourselves about four miles away from Tarnow, racing to reach the town before the onset of the nine o'clock curfew. Since we were completely out of water, I suggested to our group of thirteen men to go on ahead while I would try to get some water from one of the

farmers. Fortunately, I was successful on my first try.

Suddenly, as I emerged from the farmhouse carrying my suitcase in my left hand and a full canteen in my right, a sleek German limousine came to a halt in front of me and two high German officers jumped out.

"What do you have in your suitcase?" one of the officers brusquely shouted at me. "*Los, aufmachen!* Open it!"

Instantly, I opened the valise, displaying its contents, which consisted of my *tallis* and *tefillin* and a few meager possessions. One of the pair grabbed my suitcase and flung it clear across the road. Taking off their jackets, they took turns at giving me a savage beating. When they had enough they drew their guns, pointing straight at my heart, ready to shoot. One slight pull on the trigger, and it would be the end.

Trembling with fear but with outward calm, I asked, "What have I done wrong? Why do I deserve to be killed?"

Unable to control my emotions, I broke down, sobbing bitterly. Looking bewildered, they slowly returned their revolvers to their holsters. But this was not the end. As a souvenir, they gave me another thrashing and ordered me to run into the fields. I ran and ran with my last ounce of strength, while they went back to their limousine. I continued to run until my legs buckled, and I collapsed on the soft grass.

Resting there in the pasture, hidden by the high grass, I reasoned that by now the two Germans had very likely caught up with my group and given themsimilar treatment—or worse. And indeed, within minutes, I heard the sound of shooting coming from nearby.

They've massacred my friends, I thought with horror.

"*Ribono Shel Olam*, Master of the Universe," I prayed. "Have pity on my brothers and all Jews. Save them from the hands of the enemies of Your people."

The shooting continued. Afraid of being struck by a stray bullet, I kept my head down.

Suddenly, I heard a voice crying in agony, "*Oy vay! Oy vay!* They've killed me!" It sounded like my brother.

"Is that you, Shimon?" I called out softly.

"Yes, it's me."

"What happened?"

"They shot me," he replied faintly.

As soon as the shooting stopped, I began to search for Shimon, groping my way through the high growth. I found him in terrible condition, his entire body covered with blood. The bullet had entered his upper left arm, ripping apart his biceps.

I went looking for the other people in our group, especially my two brothers. Not a trace. Who knows if they are still alive, I thought. After an agonizingly long time, however, I discovered to my great delight that all were alive and unhurt. One after another, they surfaced from the high grass, and I quickly summoned them to come to the aid of my brother. Seeing what had happened to him, they were shocked and appalled.

I interrupted their lament. "This is no time for weeping," I said. "We've got to get him to a hospital before it's too late. It's getting dark, and if we don't act quickly he'll have to spend the cold night with us outside under the stars. In his condition, this could be fatal."

Some of the men ran back to the highway to try to secure transportation to the city. In the meantime, I used my belt to tie my brother's arm to his body. It was hanging limp, attached to his shoulder by mere threads.

We gently lifted him on our shoulders and carried him to the highway, hoping to catch a ride for him. But no one was

willing to give us a lift—even after being offered a large sum of money—for fear of being stopped by the Germans. Time was running out. I decided to split the men into three parties. One of my brothers was to go with a group to the nearby village to try to procure a wagon, my other brother would go into town with the second group to try to have a Red Cross ambulance take the injured Shimon to the hospital, and I and the third group would remain with him by the side of the highway.

The sun was setting slowly. Soon the night would be upon us. As we were sitting and waiting by the edge of the highway, we were filled with fear and trepidation. German vehicles—military trucks, cars and motorcycles—were passing constantly. They might easily finish the job their comrades had started. We camouflaged ourselves as best as we could. One hour went by, then two hours, and still no sign of a car or wagon. We were getting very worried. Shimon's wound was bleeding profusely. His face was contorted with pain, and he was groaning in agony.

Feeling totally helpless, I turned to Hashem in prayer. "*Ribono Shel Olam*, have mercy on my young brother who is in the throes of death, tormented by anguish and pain. I cannot help him. But You can. Please, Hashem, help him."

The night fell, and darkness enveloped the earth. I sat looking up at the star-studded sky, absorbed in agonizing thoughts, "From where will my help come?" (*Tehillim* 121:1) Suddenly, a car stopped about one hundred feet from our hiding place, its headlights illuminating the full width of the road, shining directly at us.

"Shimon, stop moaning," I implored my brother. "Control yourself, or we are finished. I'll bet there are German officers in that car, and if you keep on groaning they are

bound to discover us. Please, try your hardest."

Shimon, biting his lips, suppressed his cries of pain.

When the car did not move for quite a while, I assumed it must have broken down. We deliberated whether it was advisable to ask for help, since in all likelihood the passengers and driver were German. What was I to do? I could not sit idly by while my brother slowly bled to death. I decided to approach them, come what may.

Coming closer, I noticed two German officers trying to repair their car.

"What do you want?" they asked.

I told them that my brother had been shot and asked them if they would be good enough to drive him to the hospital in town.

"Who shot him?" they asked.

"Germans," I replied. But I instantly realized I had made a mistake.

"Impossible," the German retorted. "You did it yourselves. And as far as taking him to the hospital is concerned, that's out of the question. We're not allowed to carry civilians."

I did not know if this was true or just an excuse not to take a bleeding Jew who was going to soil their shiny new car. At this point, it really made no difference.

While we were talking, a Polish farmer riding a wagon loaded with manure passed by. The German told him to stop and ordered him to take us into town.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I cannot take them right now," the terrified Pole replied. "First, I've got to go to the village to unload the dung, but I promise I'll come back as soon as I'm done."

Soon after the Polish farmer left, the Germans got their

car started and continued on their journey. Here we were, still by the side of the road, afraid of every passing car. We waited and waited—but no Polish farmer and no wagon. I felt hopelessly dejected, certain that Shimon's life would end right there in the middle of nowhere. But at long last, I heard in the distance the creaking sound of wagon wheels. The Polish farmer had returned.

"Hop in," he said.

We lifted Shimon into the wagon that was still wet from the manure. We were ready to go.

Just then, a car pulled up alongside of us, and out stepped a German officer. Seeing Jews travelling in a manure cart aroused his curiosity.

"*Was ist da los*?" he wanted to know. "What's going on?"

I told him what had happened to my brother, but he did not believe me and peeked into the wagon to verify my story. Seeing Shimon lying there, dripping with blood, he had nothing more to say. Gathering all my courage, I asked him to give us a pass, because it was already past the curfew hour of nine o'clock. He had no objection and gave us the signed document without hesitating.

The guard at the city limits waved us through after examining the pass. To my utter surprise, when I asked him for directions, he came along and showed us the way to the nearest hospital. It was filled to capacity. He took us to several other hospitals, only to learn that these, too, were filled. Finally, he took us to the Jewish hospital, and although there was no room there either, they admitted Shimon. The surgeon was nowhere to be found, and the doctors bandaged his arm in an effort to stanch the severe bleeding. In view of his serious condition, he was given a private bed to sleep in, whereas patients with milder injuries had to share a bed. The

excruciating pain did not allow him to eat or sleep.

The rest of us received a small snack and stayed in the hospital until morning. Only then did I learn from my friends the whole story of what had happened.

As they were walking along the road, a car suddenly stopped. Two officers dashed out and began to give them a brutal beating, saving their most vicious blows for my brother Shimon. As the thrashing was in progress, another car arrived from which an older officer emerged.

"Why are you beating up these people?" he inquired.

"We're paying them back for the German soldiers that were killed by the Jews in Warsaw," they replied. (It is well-known that at the outskirts of Warsaw the German offensive encountered stiff resistance by Polish forces who were joined by civilian fighters, including many Jews. During the fourteen days the battle lasted, thousands of Germans were killed.)

The older officer thereupon told our men to run away as fast as they could. Everyone ran for his life into the fields while the two Germans started shooting at them. All fell to the ground immediately, except Shimon, who continued running and was hit by a bullet.

The hospital was a scene of total chaos, with injured Jews and non-Jews arriving in a steady stream, all clamoring for help. Of course, wounded Polish soldiers received preferential treatment. Small wonder, then, that Shimon was left without any medical care. Although the doctors worked around the clock, it was impossible to care for all the patients. Meanwhile, Shimon's condition worsened by the hour. His arm was merely bandaged and resting in a sling.

Two days went by without anyone examining him. However, upon repeated urging, Dr. Schiffer, the chief surgeon,

agreed to begin treating him the following morning. The initial examination showed that Shimon had been hit by a dum-dum bullet, the kind that expands on impact and tears a gaping wound. Recognizing the lethal and destructive effect of these bullets, they have been outlawed by international treaties, but the Germans paid scant attention to such agreements. The bullet had shredded the muscle, splintered the bone and caused blood-poisoning which had spread throughout Shimon's body. According to Dr. Schiffer, it would be impossible to restore the arm, and in order to save the patient's life, the entire arm would have to be amputated. Even with the amputation, his life was still threatened by the blood poisoning, but without amputation, he had no chance at all of surviving.

The doctor's diagnosis struck me like a thunderbolt. I was handed the consent form to sign, but baffled and bewildered, I broke down in tears. After regaining my composure, I realized there was no choice and signed the form.

The surgery, which severed his entire arm, lasted several hours. Hours later, he had still not opened his eyes. The doctors explained that he had been given a strong anesthetic in addition to heavy doses of painkilling drugs, which accounted for his deep sleep. At long last, after several more hours of anxious waiting, he regained consciousness.

I stayed at his bedside most of the time, taking care of him, feeding and bathing him, and helping him turn from side to side.

Five days went by without any noticeable improvement. The operation itself had been successful, but the wound was still festering. Shimon, fearing for his life, continually asked to see Mother, but I tried to bolster his spirits. "*Der Oibershter vet helfen,*" I assured him. "Have faith. Hashem will heal you."

I discussed his general condition and his unbearable pain with the attending physicians. They all encouraged me not to give up hope, and thank Heaven, after a few more days we began to notice a slight improvement.

Shimon's insistence that Mother be notified placed me in a dilemma. On the one hand, Mother would be devastated hearing about the amputation, and yet, how could I ever face her again if, Heaven forbid, something were to happen to him?

I decided to write to Mother, hinting that Shimon was not well and required surgery. The railroads were still in disarray, and it took two days for Mother to come. En route to the hospital I was forced to tell her the truth. Wiping away her tears, I told her, "*Baruch Hashem*, we came out alive. After all, the German were shooting at us, trying to kill us all."

The joy of seeing Mother worked wonders for Shimon. Under her gentle care, he began to take nourishment and gradually regained strength.

I stayed in Tarnow until after *Sukkos*, returning to Cracow with my brother Yitzchak, while Mother remained to care for Shimon until he recuperated, after which they also returned home. After receiving the prescribed therapy, he made a full recovery.

CHAPTER 3

The Noose Tightens

EARLY ONE CHILLY WINTRY MORNING, I PREPARED TO leave the house to go into the dark and silent streets of the city. As I opened the main door, I found myself confronted by a burly German soldier.

"Get back into the house!" he growled.

Startled, I turned around. What is this all about? I wondered.

Peeking through the window by the early morning light, I saw an ominous sight. Posted in front of each Jewish home was a German soldier, preventing people from leaving. The streets were swarming with soldiers in full battle gear, and personnel carriers filled with troops were passing regularly. For the next twenty-four hours, we remained under house arrest. From time to time, we heard shots ringing out in the

neighborhood. Since I had heard rumors to the effect that a looting raid was in the offing, I deposited all our jewelry, cash and other valuables in a secret hiding place.

The following night it happened. Two German soldiers, armed to the teeth, entered our home.

"Do you own any weapons, firearms, gold, silver, diamonds or other valuables?" they snarled as they surveyed the room.

I led them into the living room, showing them the china closet, crammed with various silver objects. Then I opened my cash box which contained a few coins. Pushing me aside, they began their own search, looking in every nook and cranny but coming up empty-handed.

"Hey, I found a weapon!" one of them suddenly cried out.

It was a long knife, broken in two. My knees were shaking with fear. Who could know what they might accuse me of?

The German showed it to his buddy.

"*Sei doch nicht so dumm*," he replied contemptuously. "Don't be a fool."

Since they could find nothing, they decided to frisk me. Unable to find anything on me, they took my wife into another room for the purpose of searching her, but when she adamantly refused, they let her go and left without taking anything.

I breathed a sigh of relief. *Baruch Hashem* we were rid of them. But not everyone was quite so fortunate. In my neighbor's apartment, they took all the silver he owned. Waiting in the street was a truck into which they dumped all the loot as they proceeded from house to house. In many cases, they abused the women who refused to cooperate, brutally beating and even killing some of them.

The looting raid continued for two days, at a cost of about

one hundred Jewish lives, most of whom were shot as they looked out their windows to see what was going on outside. It is impossible to calculate the value of the plundered gold, silver, diamonds and furs. But the Nazis had counted on a much larger haul. During those two days of pillage, they had managed to rob only a small part of the Jewish population. The majority was spared, since the looting raid was interrupted due to the unexpected arrival of an important visitor from abroad. Vyacheslav Molotov, the foreign minister of the Soviet Union, was coming to pay a visit to General Frank, Hitler's appointee as Governor-General of Poland, who lived in a stately castle in Cracow. After Molotov's departure the raids were not resumed. Instead, the noose was tightened by other means.

Shortly after the invasion, the Nazis issued a decree mandating that every Jew over the age of twelve was to wear a yellow patch, a *Judenstern* in the shape of a Star of David marked *Jude* in black letters and worn on the left side above the heart. Everyone dutifully sewed the yellow patches on his clothes, since failure to wear the *Judenstern* carried the death penalty.

The patches made it easier for the Germans to round up Jews who were then put to work doing back breaking labor, accompanied by whippings and clubbings. Often, people did not return from these labor details and were never heard from again. I myself was picked up numerous times, and I thanked Hashem each time I came home alive.

The Germans would often conduct raids, rounding up all Jewish men in a district to be worked to death in the Pustkov concentration camp, situated in a forest not far from Dembitz. To this camp, they hauled thousands of Jews from the entire region to be killed by starvation, disease and merciless

beatings. Many met their deaths when they were ruthlessly lined up to serve as targets in a sharpshooting contest. Jews died like flies, by the thousands. Whenever the camp population became depleted, the Germans quickly brought in a new supply of expendable Jews.

In Cracow, such *Aktionen* were held periodically so that people were afraid to go out into the streets, never knowing when the next roundup would occur. Once, I almost fell into their net. It happened early one Friday morning as I was going on business toward the Padgursz section of town. As I was crossing the Vistula River Bridge, a Polish man came over to warn me.

"Listen fellow," he said, "you'd better not go to Padgursz. There's something going on out there. The streets are blocked off by German soldiers and policemen."

I ignored his warning, thinking that he was just trying to scare me. But another Pole stopped me, giving me the same warning. This time, I took the advice seriously and doubled back. Later, I learned that there had in fact been an *Aktion* and that several hundred people had been rounded up and taken to the Pustkov concentration camp.

Throughout the winter of that first year of the German occupation, we lived with a sword hanging over our heads, never knowing what terror the new day would hold. The Pustkov camp was kept in use until German *Kultur*, science and technology devised the gas chambers in the notorious extermination camps where tens of thousands of Jews were killed daily by a far more efficient method.

Not everyone was paralyzed by fear. Take Meir Friedman, for example, a well-liked man of *chassidic* background, with connections to leading government figures, in particular to Sapiecha, the Bishop of Cracow, a personal friend of his. In

the face of the growing German excesses of maltreatment and killing, Friedman organized a delegation to go to the bishop with the request that he persuade the German authorities to moderate their harsh treatment of the Jews. The delegation was made up of Friedman, Rabbi Shabbesai Rappaport and Rabbi Schmelke Kornitzer, the son of the Chief Rabbi of Cracow. The bishop received them cordially and assured them he would do all in his power to help. A few days later, in the middle of the night, the three men were suddenly arrested by the Gestapo. The entire community was crushed. All efforts to find out their whereabouts were fruitless.

A few months after this, the families of each of the men received a parcel containing the ashes of human remains. The meaning was clear. With horror, everyone realized what had been the fate of the men who sacrificed themselves to obtain relief for their oppressed brothers.

These were heroic Jews, but sadly, there were others who were less than heroic.

One of the methods the Nazis used in carrying out their fiendish plans was to appoint in each town a Judenrat, a Jewish community council which was to serve as their instrument in facilitating the program of total annihilation of the Jews. Lamentably, although the purpose of these councils was known from the start, a good number of Jews volunteered to serve as partners in crime with the Germans in liquidating the Jews.

The Judenrat established a Jewish police force, the so-called *Ordnungsdienst*, OD for short, and gave it such duties as rounding up Jews to be carried off to labor camps, arresting Jews who had escaped from extermination camps and delivering them to the Germans, and similar perfidious

tasks. In all the expulsion raids, it was the men of the *Ordnungsdienst* who dragged the Jewish families from their homes. It was they who informed on people for engaging in black-market activities (after all, what legal business was there for the Jews?). These Jewish policemen wore Polish-style or German-style police uniforms and black leather boots, and they carried rubber billy clubs. The only thing that distinguished them from the Germans was the yellow Jew-patch on their jackets and caps. They were not allowed to carry guns (the Germans did not trust them *that* much), but the clubs were enough to inspire fear, and they used them quite liberally and with great relish.

However, there were others who, knowing the true intent of the formation of the Judenrat and the Jewish police, were unwilling to participate. Sometimes, they paid with their lives for their refusal, but they preferred death to serving as German stooges. History has shown that virtually all those who were active in either the Judenrat or the Jewish police sullied their hands with Jewish blood. My own experiences with the Judenrat, which I shall presently describe, bears this out.

Without the help of Jewish collaborators, the Germans would not have been able to exterminate such an enormous number of Jews, and countless lives would have been saved. Regrettably, these Jewish henchmen did the bidding of their German masters, faithfully fulfilling their sordid task.

On Meisel Street, near Kozmarek Street there was a tavern that was reserved exclusively for German military personnel. A large sign posted on the door prohibited anyone except Germans from entering. The Nazis would while away their time with binges of riotous drinking. Often, as they staggered dead-drunk into the street they would beat

up the first Jew they encountered.

One day, as I was passing this tavern on my way to my brother-in-law Avraham Dershowitz, I ran into a German policeman who mumbled something to me. Not wanting to get slapped, I sneaked away into my brother-in-law's house, but the German followed me up the stairs, breathing down my neck. To my luck, the German stumbled and fell, which gave me a chance to get ahead of him, but unfortunately, all the doors were closed. At my wits' end, I forced open the last door, and since the upper section of the door was made of glass, I crouched on the floor so that he would not see me, pressing my shoulders hard against the door. Only minutes later, I felt the German pushing, trying to open the door. I pressed with all my might until he gave up and left. I stayed there for a while, then I went to see my brother-in-law regarding the matter for which I had come.

As the hour of the nine o'clock curfew was creeping up on us, it was not very long before I left. As I reached the bottom of the stairs, the German jumped out of his hiding place.

"*Du kommst mit mir nach Mantilupa*," he snarled, with a diabolical smile on his face. "I'm taking you to Mantilupa." Mantilupa was the largest prison in Cracow. It was used for the most hardened criminals.

Many thoughts raced through my head. Going along with him would be suicidal; he was likely to shoot me in the street. And even if he did take me to Mantilupa, my prospects would not be much better. I decided that I simply wouldn't budge.

"*Komm! Komm!*" he kept screaming. "Come on! Let's go!"

As we were standing there in the open door, three German air force pilots suddenly appeared on the scene. When they saw a German policeman arguing with a Jew

wearing a beard and *peyos*, they became curious and started asking questions.

"*Was ist denn da los?*" they inquired. "What's going on here?"

The policeman told them about the crime I had committed. Before I knew what was happening, one of them gave me a slap in the face that threw me flat on the ground. Then the four of them began to work me over, kicking me with their heavy boots all over my body. I just lay there, limp and motionless. Thinking that they had finished me off, they left me there, bathed in my own blood. I waited a while to make sure they would not come back. Then I got up and took stock of myself. I had two teeth missing, blood was running from my mouth and nose, my head was throbbing, my eyes were blackened, and my entire body was mangled and aching. They knew the business of giving beatings that left a person crippled for life.

I rushed back to my brother-in-law's apartment and washed off the blood, and despite the late hour and the danger of walking the streets during the curfew, I quickly went home. My wife no doubt would be waiting anxiously.

At the sight of me, my wife was shocked. I did not want to tell her the truth; instead, I said I had slipped and fallen down the stairs. The next morning, however, when she saw me by daylight I was forced to reveal the truth.

It is difficult to gauge the full extent of the many miracles that happened to me. First, the fact that the German did not take me to Mantilupa prison. Second, the very fact that I withstood a horrendous beating that most people would not have survived. On the other hand, for many long months I suffered the aftereffects of the thrashing I received and was obsessed by the gnawing fear that the Nazi would catch me,

since he had my identity card and knew my personal data. However, Hashem in His goodness helped me, and everything went by smoothly. I prayed that nothing like this would ever happen to me again.

CHAPTER 4

From Bad to Worse

NOT A DAY WENT BY WITHOUT NEW DECREES BEING announced on large yellow posters in all cities, towns and hamlets (yellow was the Jewish identification color). The appearance of each new poster sparked renewed consternation among the Jewish populace, since it meant another directive in the long succession of anti-Semitic decrees, such as: "All factories and businesses under Jewish management are to be transferred to German ownership. Jews may continue to conduct their former business under the supervision of a German *Verwalter* (administrator) at a salary to be determined by the German authorities." Another ordinance decreed that all Jewish businesses had to display a large sign stating, "This establishment is under German management."

Jewish businessmen saw these measures as a blessing in disguise, thinking that at least they would be able to remain in Cracow rather than be deported to an unknown destination, inasmuch as rumor had it that the Jews of Cracow were to be transferred to an unknown small ghetto.

Then one day, a convoy of huge trucks pulled into the Jewish quarter. Officers jumped out, going from house to house. Any piece of furniture that caught their eye was immediately appropriated and loaded onto the waiting trucks. And there was an abundance of elegant furniture ready to be seized. Their excuse for confiscating the furniture was that in the wake of the bombings on German cities many German families were left without furniture and, of course, the Jews were obligated to replace it.

The furniture we owned was Viennese style, which was quite expensive. I quickly disassembled it, loaded the parts on a wagon and took it to a nearby village. There I sold the furniture parts to a Pole who was happy to pay a decent price for them, since due to the war no furniture could be obtained anywhere in Poland.

During the early years of the occupation and the first stages of the persecutions, it was very hazardous to venture out into the streets. Often, the Germans would seize a Jew—preferably a bearded one—beat him up and brutally pull out his beard and *peyos*. Occasionally, they would abduct people, taking them to places from where they never returned. As a result, many Jews remained cloistered in their homes for weeks and months on end. I could not allow myself this luxury, however. First, I was forced to support my family, and second, many Jews had no means of support and were literally starving, and someone had to care for them. Thus, I

divided my day in half, doing business during the morning and collecting money for needy families in the afternoon. I simply could not worry about losing my beard and *peyos* or receiving a beating.

One day, I was walking near the royal castle named Vovel, the residence of Governor-General Frank. In the middle of the street, the German SS man directing traffic called me over, demanding to see my ID card. I started to shake and shiver. Who could know what he had in mind? Glancing at my card, he ordered me to go to a barber shop and shave my beard and *peyos*, warning me, "You'd better be back here clean-shaven within half an hour, because that's when I go off duty."

Happy that he did not pull out my beard as had been done to many other people, I went to the barber shop as he had ordered. When I presented myself to him he returned my identity card, complimenting me on my handsome appearance. I got away as fast as I could.

On another occasion, I had an encounter with a certain German who was in the habit of patrolling the Jewish quarter by motorcycle, trying to grab bearded Jews and bring them to a barber shop to have their beards shaved and their *peyos* cut. One time he ran into me, pulling up near me with his motorcycle, ready to snatch me. Before he got hold of me, I managed to escape. He tried to run after me, but I gave him the slip. Occasionally, I was snatched off the street to work in a labor detail. Yet, all this did not stop me from going out into the streets.

I was scrupulous not to miss *davening* with a *minyan* in the morning and in the evening. Prayer sessions were held in private homes rather than in a *shul*. (In the Bochnia ghetto, on the night before the first deportation, I still managed to

celebrate *Rosh Chodesh* with a modest meal amid a circle of friends, and during the final deportation of the Jews of Bochnia, early in the month of *Elul*, we *davened* with a *minyan* and sounded the *shofar* until the issuance of the fatal decree of the total liquidation of the ghetto.)

With the start of the war, my mother was forced to give up her herring and appetizing business, since the various fish she sold were imported and with the war all foreign trade came to an abrupt halt. My mother, therefore, sold her entire stock, giving the proceeds of the sale to my brother Yosef with the idea that he should try his hand at doing business. He began trading in foreign currencies. This was against the law, but it was the only line of business open to Jews. Being adept at making financial deals, he became quite prosperous. Regrettably, there were people who made a living at an altogether different kind of business, that of denouncing their fellow Jews to the Germans.

The Jews tried to keep these informers at arm's length, particularly avoiding any business contacts with them, but in the small area where everyone was concentrated, it was virtually impossible to be safe from them.

One evening, my two brothers came over to my house.

"What happened?" I asked. "Why are you coming here so late in the evening?"

"There is a rumor circulating, based on a Judenrat source," they said, "that the Germans are getting ready to make an *Aktion* to abduct people and send them to the Pustkov concentration camp. And since you have a bunker, we came to spend the night here until the storm blows over. We left Shimon at home. We figured the Germans are looking for workers, so they won't take him, seeing that he is disabled."

We had a restful night, but towards morning, there was a knock at the door.

"Who is it?" I asked.

"It's me!" Mother said, her voice quivering with fear.

I opened the door. Mother, pale as a ghost and shaking uncontrollably, came in and told her story.

"It's a miracle!" she began. "In the middle of the night, there was a knock at our door. '*Aufmachen! Aufmachen!*' they screamed. 'Open up! Open up!' When I opened the door, I saw that there were three of them.

"'Does Joseph Friedman live here?' they asked.

"'Yes.'

"'Where is he?' they asked furiously.

"'I don't know.'

"They made a thorough search, beginning with my bed which they turned over, hoping to find hidden money. Evidently, the informer had told them they would find a fortune. From there, they went into the next room, overturning the bookcase, carefully inspecting each book, then throwing it on the floor. From room to room they went, searching for hours, coming up empty-handed."

As we learned later, the leader of the raiding party was Handtke, chief of the Bureau of Foreign Trade, a rabid Jew-hater. The two other men were his assistants. Finding nothing, they ordered my brother Shimon to get dressed and follow them into their car, which left for an unknown destination.

Sobbing bitterly, my mother concluded her account, deeply troubled about the fate of her sons Shimon and Yosef. I tried to allay her fears, telling her that Shimon, being totally innocent, surely would be set free in the near future and, with Hashem's help, Yosef, too, would be safe.

Sitting around the table, we tried to devise a plan for Yosef. Something had to be done; we could not rely on miracles to happen. We agreed that he should leave Cracow until the storm abated. He would stay with my brother-in-law in the village of Svashovitz until we would notify him that the coast was clear.

He left according to our plan, staying until after *Shabbos*. The Germans did not come for him again. They must have thought that if he slipped through their net the first time, he surely would be on guard now not to get caught.

What concerned us most was the fate of Shimon. A few days went by without any news. We tried various approaches, even using attorneys who had connections with the authorities as intermediaries, but it was fruitless. I decided, therefore, to write a handwritten letter to the Bureau of Foreign Trade, stating that since my brother was being detained for a crime he did not commit, I was asking them respectfully to release him from detention. After a week of anxious waiting, the door suddenly opened, and there was Shimon. Our joy knew no bounds. He told us that during the entire period of his imprisonment they never once interrogated him.

Yosef continued to do business as he did before. This time, the betrayal of the informers had not succeeded, but life in general was becoming more untenable by the day.

CHAPTER 5

Expulsion from Cracow

IT HAPPENED DURING THE SUMMER, ABOUT ONE YEAR AFTER the German invasion. Yellow posters, harbingers of new evil Nazi decrees, appeared all over the city. What would it be this time? Horror-stricken, the Cracow Jews read the ominous lines. Not in their worst nightmares could they have thought of this. The proclamation, signed by Governor General Frank, stated that Cracow was to be rendered *Judenrein*, free of Jews, with the exception of the Padgursz district where a ghetto was to be erected to hold no more than ten thousand Jews. No date was set for the implementation of the directive.

Immediately, overtures were made to have the decree rescinded, but it was to no avail. There were Jews who had influence with the Gestapo, but Governor-General Frank was

inaccessible. He despised the Jews and would not allow a Jew to get near him. The Jews of Cracow were despondent; sixty thousand people were to be exiled to an unknown destination, forced to leave behind their homes, their businesses, their possessions.

The summer went by, and the expulsion order was not carried out. However, early in the winter of 1941 the Germans turned to the Judenrat, instructing it to set the operation into motion. The members of the Judenrat diligently set out to do their job. As an initial step they sent notices to all Cracow Jews notifying them that by a certain date they were to leave the city. Any non-compliance would be dealt with severely.

Of course, at the top of the expulsion list were the poor and members of the middle class. Since only ten thousand Jews were permitted to remain in the ghetto, priority went to members of the Judenrat and their families. Next in line were the rich who paid huge sums of money for the "privilege" of remaining in the ghetto. The whole affair turned into an enormous financial windfall for the leaders of the Judenrat, who selfishly considered only the profits that could be realized from this expulsion.

Since the expelled Jews were not overly anxious to comply with the expulsion order, the Judenrat and the Jewish police began to use harsh measures to enforce it, entering homes and carting off the inhabitants by brute force.

Like all Cracow Jews, my mother and my older brother Pesachyah who lived with her also received eviction notices. Afraid that they might come and drag her out of bed in the middle of the night, she came to sleep in my house. It was just around that time that my wife gave birth to a baby girl. I wrote a letter to the Judenrat, requesting a postponement of my

departure date, since it would be impossible to travel with a newborn infant during the cold winter months. Granting my request, they gave me an extension for one month. The days flew by, and fearing that they might evict me by force, I moved into my mother's apartment hoping to be safe there, since her house had not been raided for a long time. I continually stayed on the move, trying to evade them, but I miscalculated badly. The Judenrat had ways of dealing with the situation.

Noting that the Jews were in no hurry to carry out the eviction order, they announced that those who left voluntarily after receiving an eviction order, as a special favor, would be sent to Tarnow which is only a short distance from Cracow, while those who did not comply with the order would be shipped to distant places. The announcement had the desired effect. Thousands of families reported for expulsion.

Our family also gave the announcement serious thought and decided that my brother Pesachyah, his wife and their two children—a three-year-old girl and a two-year-old boy—should report for expulsion, in order to be sent to Tarnow where most of our family lived. This would make it easy for us to stay in touch with them and help them with food and other necessities.

Upon reporting for expulsion, they were taken to an assembly point to join thousands of other families who preferred being transferred to Tarnow to being shipped off to faraway places.

However, as always, the Judenrat, in cooperation with the Germans, double-crossed the Jews. Instead of being sent to nearby Tarnow, they were transported to the Lublin district, one hundred and fifty miles northeast of Cracow where they were released. The Germans knew full well that none of them

would be able to return to Cracow without money or special travel permits.

Pesachyah settled his family in Savin, a small village near Lublin. A good-hearted Jew provided them with a separate room in his house, and we regularly sent them food packages. We were pleased that at least he had found a safe haven where he could stay until Hashem would save us from our enemies. At the same time, we held firmly to our decision not to leave the city until we were forced to do so. The longer we could postpone going into exile the better.

At times such as these, there was no shortage of needy families, people who did not know from where their next meal was coming. Seeing their misery, I took it upon myself to raise money for these destitute families. I knew the ideal place for collecting contributions would be the black market on Augustianska Street. Together with my good friend, the well-known communal activist Shmuel Abraham, we made the rounds among the dealers and traders, unaware that the Jewish police had been ordered by the Judenrat to put an end to all black market activities.

One day, as we were collecting donations in the black market area, we were stopped by two Jewish policemen who demanded payment of a fine for violating the law against doing business on the street.

My friend Shmuel paid the fine on the spot, but I refused, arguing that we were not dealers but were only collecting donations. They refused to listen to me and ordered me to come with them to the police station. When I resisted, they called in help to subdue me and paraded me through the neighborhood to the community building which housed the offices of the Judenrat and the Jewish police.

There I was presented to the Chief of Police, a Jew by the

name of Patzanover, a known Nazi collaborator. I stood silently as the two arresting officers reported my "crimes." Patzanover's face had a serious expression. Resisting arrest by a Jewish "officer of the law" was no trivial matter. After reflecting for a brief moment, he pronounced his verdict. In view of the seriousness of my offense, I was to be expelled from the city of Cracow. I pleaded, I implored, but it was no use. The expulsion order remained in force.

I was in big trouble, placed under heavy guard until the expulsion order was carried out. As a last resort, I sent a message to my friend Yaakov Yehoshua Korngold, one of the prominent officials in the Cracow community since before the war, informing him of my unhappy situation. He immediately went to Patzanover to intervene on my behalf, and after protracted negotiations, Patzanover agreed to let me go after payment of a fine of fifty *zlotys*, a considerable amount in those days. I borrowed the money from Korngold, paid the fine and was free to go home.

In the meantime, the expulsions were not proceeding rapidly enough to satisfy the Germans. The Judenrat and the Jewish police were not tough enough. The Germans therefore recruited Polish policemen to assist in the expulsion, and these did the job with top efficiency. As a first step, they stopped every Jew in the street to see whether he had a stamped residency permit. Those caught without a permit were shipped off to distant places. Understandably, it became very difficult to venture out into the street.

Once as I was walking down the street, a Polish policeman, who had been hiding in a corner, jumped out in front of me.

"Let me take a look at your briefcase!" he demanded.

Inside, he found some fresh, warm bread rolls. It was a

serious crime to bake bread or pastries made of white flour, since this was commandeered to be used by the German army. I was in trouble.

"Where did you get these rolls?" he asked.

"They're home-baked," I replied instantly. At least that was not as serious as having a bakery. His Polish brain would never think of searching my house where he would find a cold stove.

"If you'll tell me the name of the bakery, I'll let you go," he persisted. "If you don't, I'll book you and take you in to the station."

Of course, I had no intention of revealing to him the name of the bakery, which belonged to my brother-in-law Avraham Dershowitz.

He brought me to the police inspector, placing the briefcase containing the rolls on his desk. I asked him to return the briefcase to me, but he refused.

I thought that after taking my briefcase, the inspector would let me off the hook, but he called over two policemen.

"Take him to German headquarters," he snapped.

En route, I asked a passing Jew to tell my family what was happening to me and not to worry too much. When the policemen heard me speak to him, they told him to come along to headquarters, although he had a valid permit.

I don't know what happened to that Jew because we were placed in separate rooms, but the thought that an innocent Jew suffered because of me caused me a great deal of heartache. On the other hand, how could I have assessed the depth of their depravity?

The Germans interrogated me more thoroughly. They insisted that I tell them the name of the bakery where I had bought the rolls. No matter what they'll do, I resolved, I won't

reveal the name of the bakery. How can I get other people into trouble? I knew I could be facing the death penalty, but I did not waver.

They wrote a detailed report, frisked me, but found nothing but five *zlotys* which they confiscated. Originally, I had been carrying a substantial amount of money. However, on the way I managed to hide the bills in some small hole. The Germans handed the report to the two Polish policemen who took me with them into a streetcar. Where are they taking me? I wondered anxiously.

After a long ride, we got off at a stop named Lubitch. They ordered me to follow them and led me into an enormous courtyard surrounded by police. In this place, I met hundreds of Jews who told me that this was an *Aussiedlungslager*, an expulsion camp.

"Those being held here," one of them explained, "are people arrested for staying in Cracow without a permit. Everyone receives three meals a day. For breakfast and supper, two hundred grams of bread, for lunch only a plate of soup. There are separate sleeping quarters for men and women. Everyone sleeps on loose straw that is spread on the floor."

"We may be shipped out today," another added, "but no one knows whether we'll be going to Lublin or Tarnow."

Within an hour, to my utter surprise, someone brought me food that had been sent to me from home. I asked how my family had found out my whereabouts so soon. It turned out that one of the salesmen of a company I had been dealing with had observed me being taken into custody. Unknown to me, he also boarded the streetcar and followed me all the way to the compound. I sent a message to my family not to send any more food as I would be shipped out shortly, but I hoped

to be back before long with Hashem's help.

The following morning, an SS man entered the hall.

"*Alle manner zur arbeit!*" he bellowed. "All men must go to work!"

I hunkered down behind a pile of boxes and escaped being sent to work. Returning at night, the others told about the backbreaking work they were forced to do and the beatings they had endured. Before anyone had time to relax, another SS man entered.

"Whoever has any kind of money, hand it over to me right now," he announced. "You'll all be x-rayed, and anyone found with money on his person will be sent to Auschwitz forthwith!" By that time, everyone already knew what Auschwitz meant, and the mere mention of the word sent shivers up our spines. But the money remained concealed nevertheless.

As the day progressed, more and more Jews arrived at the compound. In the evening, the people were separated into two groups. According to the Germans, one group was to be shipped to nearby Tarnow, the other to Lublin. I was holding my breath, hoping I would not be assigned to the Lublin transport. We had heard frightening reports about the terrible conditions prevailing there, reports of overcrowding, famine and disease. The unsanitary conditions were said to have sparked an outbreak of typhoid fever among the deportees. Among those felled by the disease was my brother Pesachyah's wife, as we found out later. She was buried in the village of Savin.

Eventually, the Germans ordered everyone into the courtyard where they separated the people into two groups. It was done without a semblance of planning or order, completely at random. "You to Tarnow. You to Lublin."

Fortunately, I was assigned to the Tarnow transport. We were ordered to line up five abreast, in army-style columns. As I stood there, I noticed in the other column an old friend of mine, Pesachyah Kaminker, the *gabbai* of the Zlatopoler Rebbe. He had been shopping when the Germans picked him off the street and put him on the transport. Knowing that he was penniless, I sneaked out of my column to collect some money for him from people I knew and handed it to him.

The aged and infirm were loaded on wagons. All others had to walk under heavy guard to the station, where a number of wagons had been attached to the regularly scheduled train to Tarnow.

The confusion at the station presented the perfect opportunity for escape. However, fearing that others would be made to suffer German retribution I gave up the idea, placing my trust in Hashem to deliver me from their grip.

At eleven o'clock in the evening, we arrived in Tarnow, where we were ordered to wait on the outdoor platform in the bitter cold. Chilled to the bone after a two-hour wait, we were finally allowed to enter the hall of the waiting room. We sat down on the floor under the watchful eyes of our guards, who assured us that by morning we would be set free.

The morning came, but with no change in our status. We heard through the grapevine that the guards were consulting Lublin on whether to transfer us to the Pustkov concentration camp or to release us. Understandably, the mere mention of the dreaded Pustkov camp made us quiver with fear.

Meanwhile, the Judenrat, having learned of a group of Jews being held at the station, sent over a large sack full of bread, a container of jam and a large kettle of hot tea. More than anything else, the tea helped revive us, warming our frozen hands and shivering bodies.

Tension mounted with each passing hour. Where were we going to end up? Finally, at eleven o'clock in the morning, the inspector made the announcement.

To our indescribable joy, he said, "All right, you're free to go!"

We all went into town where we were greeted by representatives of the Judenrat who had provided lodging for *Shabbos* with various local families. I myself spent the *Shabbos* at the home of my uncle Shimon Yaakov Friedman.

The first thing I did on entering Tarnow was to send a telegram to my family informing them of my whereabouts, and as early as Sunday morning, my brother Yosef showed up bringing me a travel permit. Not wasting a moment, I returned home to an emotional reunion with my family.

It suddenly dawned on me that the entire painful episode had a bright side. Since my travel permit certified that I had arrived from out-of-town, I was legally a non-resident of Cracow and as such could walk the streets without fear of being grabbed off the street. The decree clearly stated that only residents of Cracow were required to leave town; out-of-towners were permitted to stay. And indeed, whenever I was stopped and asked for my identification this travel permit satisfied the Polish policemen.

Relieved for the time being of the fear of deportation, my thoughts turned to finding ways of earning a living. I traded, bought and sold, taking advantage of every opportunity that came my way, even doing business with German soldiers. But new obstacles arose constantly.

For one, there was the weather. The cold was raw and piercing. A thick blanket of snow covered the highways, bringing traffic to a virtual standstill, throwing German troop and supply movements into total chaos. Of course, it was the

Jews who were assigned the job of clearing the roads. But what Jew in his right mind would be willing to work all day in sub-zero weather? The Germans delegated the Judenrat to recruit Jewish laborers, fully confident that these lackeys would find effective ways of handling the problem. The Judenrat would not let them down.

A proclamation was issued stating that anyone volunteering for snow removal would receive one special stamp for each day of work. Those accumulating twelve stamps would receive a residency permit entitling them to remain in the Cracow ghetto. Not surprisingly, a good many people flocked to volunteer for the grueling job.

I was not taken in by their promises.

"Why don't you join the snow removal brigade?" the chief recruitment officer asked me one day.

"I think your promises are nothing but a pack of lies," I replied.

Nevertheless, among the Jews the sole topic of conversation was, "How many stamps did you collect?" Those who had gathered all twelve stamps were congratulated. People thought I was crazy for passing up a wonderful opportunity like this. In the end, they realized they had been the victims of a cruel hoax, for when the deportations began the stamps were not worth the paper on which they were printed.

CHAPTER 6

The Yoke of Oppression

WITH THE PASSAGE OF TIME, GOVERNOR-GENERAL Frank recognized that the Jews were not about to leave Cracow voluntarily and that the Judenrat was carrying out the expulsion at a snail's pace. To speed things up he transferred the entire program to the Polish police.

Overnight, the situation worsened. Just going out to buy bread was fraught with danger, since behind every corner there lurked a Polish policeman, ready to pounce on an unsuspecting Jew. We decided the time had come for us to leave Cracow.

Our idea was to relocate to Bochnia. Our plan called for me to load our belongings on a wagon, take it to Bochnia, come back to Cracow to liquidate my business and, finally, to

move the entire family to Bochnia by train.

Those who had permits to live in the Cracow ghetto gradually began to move into the ghetto area which was quite small and promised to be heavily overcrowded. Notwithstanding, people preferred moving there to being expelled to a remote location.

The ghetto was intended to house a population of ten thousand, but in actuality, twenty thousand people squeezed into its confines, some by paying bribes to the Judenrat, others by taking up residence without a permit. No one gave any thought to the eventual outcome of this untenable situation.

The deadline for all Jews to be out of Cracow was set for the day after *Purim*, but even well before this target date, most Jews had already left the city. Not everyone departed unscathed. Many people were arrested by Polish police or German patrols as they were making their way out of the city. The argument that they were leaving fell on deaf ears.

Not wanting to place ourselves in jeopardy, we decided to leave at night under cover of darkness, and on the night of *Shushan Purim* we left our home. Sadly, we recalled how in happier years we used to spend this night feasting in the company of family and friends.

A short train ride brought us to Bochnia. As the train pulled into the station we were greeted by an ominous sight. The platform was filled with local policemen checking the passengers' identity papers. Local residents were permitted to proceed, while non-residents were told to line up on the side of the platform. After the usual interrogation, we were led into the waiting room, and when the coast was clear, we sneaked out the back door. With bated breath, we tiptoed through the deserted streets of Bochnia. It was past midnight

when we knocked on the door of our cousin Eliyahu Klapholz's apartment, to be welcomed with open arms and a tasty meal. Tired and emotionally drained after the exhausting day, we bedded down in his small apartment as best as we could.

In the morning, our thoughts turned to finding a place to live. This was not an easy task, since the Judenrat, which was in charge of assigning apartments, refused to consider out-of-town applicants. The town was filled to capacity; there simply were no vacant apartments to be had. Since it was Friday we stayed with our cousins for the time being.

On Friday afternoon, after all the preparations for *Shabbos* had been made, a committee representing City Hall suddenly appeared, ordering all of us, my cousin's family included, to vacate the apartment immediately. It turned out that the pastry shop owned by my cousin had been closed down earlier as a result of false charges, and now, as further reprisal, the entire house was to be vacated and sealed. Thus, we all found ourselves helpless, without a roof over our heads, our belongings locked inside the house. But Hashem rescued us. Several hours later, for no apparent reason and without any explanation, the City Hall people returned, unlocked the door and allowed us back into the house to enjoy a truly uplifting *Shabbos*.

Recognizing that finding an apartment was out of the question, we decided to move into my cousin's pastry shop, which was no longer in operation. The pastry shop was located in the basement and consisted of several rooms. A small grated window provided light and air, suggesting a jail-like atmosphere. To us, however, it was a palace. There were eight of us—my wife and I and our little daughter; my mother; my brother Yitzchak and his wife; and my two younger brothers Shimon and Yosef. We settled down, making the

best of a difficult situation, but it was not to last.

A few days later, several Judenrat people made their appearance, led by Dr. Rosen, the chief of the Jewish police, a corrupt man with a reputation of being a big fool. Dr. Rosen asked us a number of questions, then he pulled out an official order stating that we had twenty-four hours to leave Bochnia. If we did not comply, we would be forcibly ejected by the German police. We looked at each other, stunned and dumfounded. What were we to do? After many inquiries, we approached a number of channels in an attempt to influence the Judenrat and succeeded in obtaining a residency permit allowing us to stay in our subterranean abode. The next problem we faced was finding a source of income. We placed our trust in Hashem who had helped us until now and would continue to watch over us.

Life under German occupation was extremely difficult but Jewish faith, stamina and ingenuity helped make it somehow bearable.

In every war, the conquering power appropriates all sources of energy, using them for its own war effort. The mines of western Poland produce a rich supply of coal, while eastern Galicia is known for its numerous oil wells. The Germans immediately took possession of these natural resources, creating serious shortages for the local population and for the Jews in particular.

We were forced to improvise. We illuminated our homes with carbide, white crystals that would produce fumes when water was poured over them. These crystals were placed in tin cans, and a thin pipe was inserted through the cover. When the stones were seething, fumes emerged from the pipe which, when lit, illuminated the entire apartment. Occasionally, the can would explode, but generally it was an efficient

and inexpensive way of providing light.

Heat was produced by an ingenious method. We would prepare a round tin kettle with a small opening on the side through which we ignited the fire. We would insert damp wood shavings into the kettle which produced comfortable heat, while the smoke escaped through a chimney valve on top. This kettle could also be used to warm up food. But starting the fire took a great deal of skill. If the wood shavings were either too dry or too damp they would not ignite at all. The main problem arose on *Shabbos*. If the kettle was not properly kindled, we could spend the entire *Shabbos* in the cold, eating cold food, and when occasionally the lighting device malfunctioned, we would be forced to sit in the dark as well. At least there was no shortage of wood shavings; for a small amount of money the lumberyard would deliver an entire wagonload of shavings.

Under normal circumstances, our basement would have been unfit to live in, but to us it was a life saver. Each of us found a way to earn a living; my cousin Eliyahu Klapholz taught me to become a pastry chef, which became my new profession. If only we could survive the war years under the present conditions, we mused, things would not be too bad. But it was all just wishful thinking.

On *Chol Hamoed Sukkos* of 1942, the head of the Labor Department turned to the Judenrat demanding a call-up of one thousand laborers to work at the weapons and ammunition supply dump at the outskirts of the village of Klai. As usual, the Judenrat was eager to comply, rounding up all the young men. My brother Yitzchak and I were among the inductees, whereas my brother Yosef managed to elude them. Some jobs entailed very heavy labor, while other jobs were quite easy. People were assigned to do those particular

jobs to which they were physically best suited.

We were instructed to appear for work in two days, but the two-day breather gave us little comfort. We dreaded working for the Germans and worried about our lost income. We tried all kinds of intervention, even bribery, but to no avail. We had to swallow the bitter pill and accept our fate.

We rose early to catch the train taking us to work, travelling under the supervision of our foreman, a Jew from Bochnia. The labor camp was located deep in the heart of a forest. It consisted of wooden barracks stocked with various German army weapons and ammunition. It was our job to inspect the crates to determine if the arms had been manufactured according to specifications. Sometimes, we had to move the crates or carry them from one barrack to another, a job that made no sense at all to us. Tracks had been laid over which to move wagons loaded with weapons from one storage shed to another. We started work early in the morning, ending at night, with a break for lunch. Bringing our own food, we had lunch in a separate room, away from the German workmen. At the gate, we were checked by German guards who made certain that all men had come to work. No Poles were drafted for this kind of work for fear that they might commit sabotage—one single match could blow the entire facility to smithereens.

The festivals of *Shemini Atzeres* and *Simchas Torah* were rapidly approaching, days of rejoicing but which we were to spend this year loading crates of guns and ammunition. What should we do on the forthcoming *Yom Tov*? Jeopardize our lives by staying away from work? Aside from evading the German guards, we would also have to deal with the Judenrat, who would probably come down on us even harder. Throwing caution to the winds, we decided to celebrate the *Yom Tov*

days in the *bais midrash*, taking part in the joyous festivities.

Apparently, we were not alone in calculating that the Germans would not notice if one lone individual was missing. It brought to mind the story of the two partners who acquired a barrel of wine, each one taking only one little sip for a *lechayim*, thinking the other would not notice it. One drink led to another, until the barrel was empty. In the same way, when *Yom Tov* arrived, there was a large number of absentees, and unknown to us, the foreman complained about the matter to the Germans.

The night of *Simchas Torah* found us in the circle of our family gathered around the festive table, rejoicing, singing *Yom Tov* songs. Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. It could only mean an unwelcome visit by the Jewish police. The two of us slid into the bunker that had been prepared for occasions just like this. Meanwhile, my mother opened the door to the policeman who presented a summons demanding our immediate appearance at the Judenrat office.

"They're not here," my mother said, her voice aquiver.

"If they don't show up, they risk being shot by the labor boss," the policeman replied.

Having no alternative, we emerged from our hiding place and followed the policeman to the Judenrat office. There we encountered a large number of other people who had been arrested, some of them parents, brothers and sisters of workers who had not appeared for work and had gone into hiding. They were being held as hostages to force their relatives to come out of hiding, as indeed they did. Meanwhile, the Judenrat went into session, presided over by Dr. Weiss and Police Commissioner Dr. Rosen.

It was close to noon when the raid was completed, and the labor boss entered.

"Did we catch all of them?" he asked, a cynical smile on his face. His eyes skimmed over the list of names. "Sure enough, they're all accounted for."

Thereupon, he asked each person individually, "Why didn't you show up for work today?"

He received a different excuse from everyone.

"My pants were torn," one fellow claimed.

"My shoes were at the shoemaker's," another ventured.

A third pointed to some injury that prevented him from coming to work.

It did not take long for the German to see through their cover stories. Venting his rage, he slapped and beat the hapless fellows.

"Don't you ever do that again!" he warned them.

Now it was my turn. I had also prepared an excuse which had, in fact, a basis in truth.

"My mother is seriously ill with a case of double pneumonia," I told him, "and I had to stay at home to take care of her."

He tried unsuccessfully to trick me into confessing that I was lying. In any event, he claimed, my excuse was not good enough, since one of us could have stayed at home to take care of her while the other could have come to work.

After whispering to the others, he issued his command. Both of us were to shave our beards and cut our *peyos* immediately—on *Yom Tov*—and go to the labor camp right away. I learned later that, in his view, cutting beards and *peyos* was a more severe punishment than any beating could have been.

The charade continued until at last he let us go.

"You'd better show up for work tomorrow," he warned us, "or else . . ."

My brother and I made up our minds that, in spite of

everything, we were going to join our friends at the *Yom Tov* festivities in progress at the *bais midrash*. The thought of cutting our beards and *peyos* on *Yom Tov* never even entered our minds.

Going to the *bais midrash*, we encountered several Jewish policemen who wasted no time informing the Judenrat that the Friedman brothers had the audacity to disobey the order and had not cut their beards and *peyos*.

On the night after *Yom Tov*, there was a knock at the door.

"Who's there?" I asked.

"It's me, Horowitz, the Deputy Police Commissioner."

He had been sent by the labor boss to verify if indeed we had not cut our beards and *peyos*.

"I'm taking you in," he said. "The German labor boss will know how to deal with you."

We realized this was serious and that the German might even shoot and kill us on the spot as he had done many times before for lesser infractions. We quickly shaved off our beards and *peyos*, and we appeared for work regularly every morning.

Working for the Germans was not easy. On the train to work, we were always surrounded by Nazis staring at us with hate-filled eyes. At work, we were constantly in danger of being blown to bits by an explosion, the result of an accident or sabotage. Worst of all, we were forced to work outdoors all day in the numbing winter cold.

Initially, the German overseers did not display any signs of anti-Semitism, but as time went by, they began to show their true colors. A small building within the labor camp was set aside to serve as a prison where one could be locked up for the slightest infraction of the rules. Once I had a taste of this prison for nothing more than being late for work.

Gradually, life in the labor camp was wearing me down. Working conditions became harder by the day, the penetrating cold chilled my bones, and I knew I could not stand the heavy labor much longer. I tried, without success, to find a way of obtaining a release. The work project was run by the SS, and the SS would not dream of dispensing with even one Jew.

During the entire period of my work there, in spite of the strict scrutiny of the labor boss, I never appeared for work on Friday and *Shabbos*, because on Friday I would have to travel home after sunset. There was a sizable group of *Shabbos* observers, and the foreman would announce every Friday before leaving work, "Let no one dare take off from work on *Shabbos*. You'll be shot if you do."

In spite of his threat, I stayed home every week on these days, thinking that since all the others heeded the warning and did appear for work, my absence would go unnoticed.

One Friday, the overseer made a speech that had the ring of unusual urgency. He warned us that inasmuch as on Saturday a delegation of top level SS officers was going to make an inspection tour of the facilities, under no circumstances should anyone be absent, no matter what.

I thought I had better not overdo it, and this *Shabbos* I showed up for work. The delegation duly arrived; we could tell by the red insignia on their uniform that they were members of the death squad.

At noon on *Shabbos*, everyone gathered in the dining room for the meal. We, the group of Orthodox Jews, seated ourselves around a separate table where we celebrated a traditional *Shabbos* meal with *zemiros* and spirited discussions of Torah themes, oblivious to the misery surrounding us. At the sound of our singing, the German soldiers came to see

what was the source of all this happiness. We explained to them that it was our way of celebrating the Sabbath day. They stood there impassively but continued to listen with obvious wonderment.

CHAPTER 7

Puppets of the Nazis

ONE OF THE MOST HEARTBREAKING THINGS FOR ME WAS to observe how the members of the Judenrat had become totally subservient to the Nazis, willing instruments in the hands of the German oppressors. They obediently carried out their nefarious decrees, using the Jewish police force as their henchmen. Every *Aktion* of expulsion was carried out through them; it was their task to drag the people from their homes, ferret them out of their hiding places in bunkers and deliver them to the Nazis.

The members of the Judenrat were quite adept at making huge fortunes from the misery of the Jewish people. Jews who had escaped from other places and were seeking refuge in the ghetto were detained at the gate by the Jewish police and locked up in the building of the Jewish community. From

wealthy detainees the Judenrat extorted large sums of money before issuing a permit for residency in the ghetto. The Judenrat also had jurisdiction over the allocation of apartments in the ghetto. The assignment, size and location of an apartment was determined by the size of the bribe they received. In addition, they were in charge of filling the quota for workers in the *Baudienst*, a construction crew established by Mueller, the *Kommandant* of the ghetto. Hundreds of Jews, under the illusion that a job in the *Baudienst* would protect them from being sent to the extermination camps, paid huge sums of money to the Judenrat for the "privilege" of working on the construction crew.

Generally, most Jews working on German industrial projects harbored the misguided belief of being shielded from annihilation. Relying on their innate Jewish optimism and misjudging German venality caused them to neglect seeking other avenues of rescue.

Cracow—a city famous for its charitable institutions and its numerous Torah-observant, humble and compassionate Jews—was transformed into something resembling Sedom and Amorah. Its streets were plunged into an atmosphere of bloodshed perpetrated by our own brethren, emulating the Germans.

Most infamous for his malice and shameful conduct was the chief of the Jewish police force Simchah Shapiro. I knew him well. Before the war he had made a modest living as an ordinary house painter. When the war broke out and his source of income dried up entirely, he found employment as a doorman at the building of the Jewish community. Having a strong physique, he was appointed to the Jewish police force and gradually advanced to the position of Police Commissioner of Cracow and, subsequently, of the entire

surrounding district. In the process, he established contacts with the German police and the Gestapo which he used to advance his career. Before his rise to prominence, he was known as a quiet and obliging sort of person. However, his new post turned him into a barbaric butcher.

His main responsibility was rounding up Jews. On the orders of Governor-General Frank, the Cracow ghetto was to accommodate a maximum of ten thousand Jews who were to receive residency permits for that purpose. However, since a population twice that number had found shelter in the ghetto, Shapiro decided to take matters into his own hands. Upon his personal orders, the Jewish police fanned out into the ghetto, forcibly arresting all residents unable to produce a residency permit. These unfortunate people were handed over to the Germans who loaded them on waiting trucks to be transported to places from which no one ever returned. Everyone knew that being caught by the Jewish police was tantamount to a death sentence.

Shapiro's appalling callousness was matched only by his sanctimonious hypocrisy. During the *Yamim Nora'im*, he organized religious services in the Jewish community building, where he officiated as *chazzan*. He had served as *chazzan* even before the war, and now, he exploited his official position to satisfy this craving. He even had the gall to present a *kvittel* to the Belzer Rebbe on *Erev Rosh Hashanah*, when the Rebbe was still living in the Cracow ghetto. I was the one who wrote the *kvittel* for him, and I was present when Shapiro came to listen to the sounding of the *shofar* by the Belzer Rebbe. It is simply incomprehensible how a human being can turn into a hypocritical, bloodthirsty beast.

Aside from the Judenrat and the Jewish police force, the ghetto swarmed with hundreds of Jewish informers who

were in close contact with the heads of the Gestapo. Men without a trace of morality, they were convinced that by means of their perfidy they would survive the war. They reasoned that Hitler would win the war and all Jews would be exterminated, while they themselves would receive a medal of honor from the Germans for their treachery and retain the wealth they acquired during the war. Heaven decreed otherwise, as I will relate in the coming pages.

The following persons distinguished themselves for their unspeakable cruelty:

First is the abovementioned Simchah Shapiro. Several hundred men and women were shot to death by him and his Jewish police underlings. His life ended in tragedy. One day, out of the blue, the Nazis set fire to the building of the Jewish police force where Shapiro and his family were living. All perished in the flames. Rumor had it that the fire resulted from a rivalry that existed between Shapiro's German superior and other officers who envied him. Thus, Shapiro became the victim of one German trying to undermine another German's authority.

Second and equally depraved was Shmuel Brodman of Cracow. Although a descendant of a highly respected family, he grew up to be a good-for-nothing. Even before the war, he gained notoriety as an informer for the Tax Collector's Office. Wearing the garb of an Orthodox Jew he gained access to all circles and gathered confidential information which he promptly communicated to the tax collector. People did not suspect him then, but during the war years his loathsome character traits came into full bloom when he became officially attached to the Foreign Exchange Control Office, headed by the notorious Nazis Dr. Handtke and Dr. Werner. Brodman would make the rounds of the ghettos of

Cracow and Bochnia, trying to sniff out the names of people dealing in foreign currencies, which he would then report to the German authorities. The Germans would raid the home of the dealer, make a thorough search and take anything their hearts desired. The poor fellow would be thrown into jail and tortured to make him divulge the names of other dealers. Werner, in particular, was proficient at tormenting his victims (something I would soon discover firsthand). Having been beaten to a pulp, the pathetic man would be thrown into a dungeon, never to return.

The blood of hundreds of people was on Brodman's hands. Like Shapiro, his life, too, came to a tragic and violent end. After the close of the ghettos of Cracow and Bochnia, seeing his source of income vanish, he decided to flee to Hungary with his wife and two children. He also realized that without the ghettos, the Germans had no incentive to keep him alive. To carry out his plan of escape, he hired Dr. Werner's private chauffeur to take him across the border into Czechoslovakia, paying him liberally for his services. The chauffeur invited the family to take their seats in the car, locked the doors, but instead of taking them across the border he drove them straight to Dr. Werner's office. "I've got a shipment of very special merchandise," he announced to the guard.

Werner allowed Brodman's wife and children to go free. Brodman himself, however, was thrown into the same dungeon where hundreds of Jews had died as a result of his betrayal. It is not clear how he met his end, but no one ever saw him alive again.

The third link in the chain of death was a fellow named Shimon Spitz. He came from Dibetzk, a small town in eastern Galicia. He was a man in his fifties, with the hideous looks of

a killer. People did not know him personally and kept their distance; the mere sight of him was enough to frighten one out of one's wits. He was employed by the political department of the Gestapo, delivering lists of perpetrators of political crimes, Jewish and Polish alike, turning over to the Nazis scores of innocent Jews who had no involvement with politics at all.

Besides this position, he also served as representative of the Gestapo in the expulsion raids. In advance of every *Aktion* of this kind in the Cracow district, he negotiated with the Judenrat on behalf of the Gestapo regarding the implementation of the expulsion. Whenever Spitz appeared in a town, people knew their doom was sealed.

Later on, he apparently tried to repent of his misdeeds by doing favors for people. I find it difficult to put in a good word for this man; I will simply place the facts on record. He procured a residency permit from the Gestapo for anyone needing one. It seems that the Belzer Rebbe, who lived in the ghetto at that time, summoned him to appear before him, and in the course of their conversation, the Rebbe asked him to desist from denouncing his fellow Jews. After that, he did indeed stop his activities, and as a matter of fact, he worked hard to alleviate their lot. Each day, he would come to the Rebbe's house for *Minchah* and inquire as to who was in the ghetto illegally. The next day, he would return with official residency permits for these people, signed and sealed by the Gestapo.

Spitz also came to a violent end, shot to death by unknown assailants while on his way to conduct his customary negotiations with the Judenrat in preparation for an expulsion raid. Regarding his murder, there are three theories—one, that the Germans, in the wake of internal rivalries,

eliminated him; two, that the Poles killed him in retribution for the numerous compatriots he denounced to the Gestapo; and three, that he was killed by Jewish partisans avenging the blood of their brothers. At any rate, the Jews only regretted that this threesome was not struck dead many years earlier, since the lives of many hundreds would have been spared.

CHAPTER 8

Rescue Plans

PREMYSZLAN IS A TOWN SITUATED IN EASTERN POLAND IN the territory that was occupied by Russia before the start of the German offensive against the Soviet Union. It was there that the Belzer Rebbe fled on the night of *Simchas Torah*, as the German *Wehrmacht* advanced on the town of Belz.

The German *blitzkrieg* against Russia took everyone by complete surprise. It was undertaken in flagrant violation of the solemn treaty signed by Germany's foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop and his Soviet counterpart Vyacheslav Molotov. Until the German onslaught, Jewish life in Premyszlan continued in its usual routine. Although the Russians banished thousands of Jews to Siberia, they allowed the Belzer Rebbe to remain, and thousands of *chassidim*

continued to flock there every *Yom Tov* to be heartened by the inspiring words of the holy man.

The German invasion of Russia brought an end to all this. The *Wehrmacht* routed the Red Army, driving its shattered forces out of Poland, deep into the heart of the Russian motherland. In the process, Premyszlan was occupied by the Germans. For the Jews, this meant the beginning of a litany of pain and oppression. The local Ukrainians, age-old mortal enemies of the Jews, gleefully joined forces with their German conquerors.

On a bright Friday morning, without any warning, the Ukrainians suddenly attacked the Jewish quarter, unleashing a savage pogrom against the thousands of Jews living there, among whom were counted the elite of Russian Jewry. They began by pillaging Jewish homes and setting scores of buildings on fire, including the *shul* and the *bais midrash*. Not content with this, they ran from house to house, dragging out the inhabitants, throwing them alive into the blazing inferno. Among their victims were the oldest son of the Belzer Rebbe, along with numerous prominent *chassidim* who were cast into the flames of the burning *shul*. It was only through a miracle that the Rebbe's life was saved. The reports of the pogrom plunged the entire Jewish community into deep sorrow and distress.

When I received the sad news, I thought, Who can tell what the future holds? The Ukrainians may organize another pogrom tomorrow. The Rebbe's life is in serious jeopardy; we must get him out of this hell-hole as soon as possible.

Of course, this would not be an easy thing to do. According to German martial law, anyone arriving from occupied Russian territory was considered a communist and summarily executed by hanging. Such executions were the order

of the day. A rescue plan would have to wait. However, I made up my mind that as soon as my own situation would allow it, I would move heaven and earth to get the Rebbe out of Premyszlan.

After asking around and questioning many people, I learned that the most suitable haven for the Rebbe would be the hamlet of Vizhnitz (not be confused with the Vizhnitz near the northern border of Romania). Although it was only about five miles from Bochnia, Vizhnitz had not been touched by the war; not a trace of a German soldier could be seen there. Except for the yellow patch that Jews were wearing, life went on as serenely as it had before the war. This was probably because the village had no railroad station and could only be reached by horse-drawn carriage.

I decided to suggest this small town to the Rebbe as a suitable refuge. He could live there in peace and tranquility until, with Hashem's help, the war would end. Or so it seemed to me.

I wrote a letter to the Belzer Rebbe, addressed it to Yechezkel Halberstam, the grandson of the Rebbe of Bochnia, and within a few days, I received the Rebbe's affirmative reply.

Much later, I found out that young Yechezkel had shown my letter to the Rebbe's two closest confidants, Reb Yeshayah Rawer and Reb Yossele Yartchiver, the Rebbe's "ministers of internal and external affairs." Both opposed the plan, thinking that the Rebbe would never leave his family to move to Vizhnitz. Nevertheless, they presented the plan to the Rebbe, and to their surprise, he immediately agreed.

Other *chassidim* were consulted regarding the plan, and a scenario for safely moving the Rebbe was drawn up. Safety was of paramount importance since Premyszlan was in former

Russian-occupied territory. They agreed unanimously that Vizhnitz was the ideal refuge for the Rebbe.

But how was the plan to be implemented?

In Bochnia there lived a Jew by the name of Sala (Shlomo) Grayver, son of Reb Hershel Grayver. Sala Grayver had close connections with the *Wehrmacht* people in Cracow. It should be understood that the *Wehrmacht* comprised the German army, separate and distinct from the SS, sometimes called Gestapo. The SS was the political arm of the German forces, known by the death's head insignia on their caps, which was indicative of their murderous assignment. Grayver had established a workshop in which he employed some two thousand Jews, manufacturing various products for the Germans from raw material taken from Jewish factories confiscated by the Germans. In this way, Grayver had established contacts with the *Wehrmacht.*

My idea was to use Grayver to rescue the Rebbe. I knew that Grayver would often accompany the Germans on their forays into territories formerly held by the Russians to plunder the few remaining Jewish possessions. Could not Grayver be the one to bring the Rebbe out safely as a passenger in his own car?

Being a stranger in Bochnia, I had no personal contact with Grayver. Moreover, the man was a secular Jew who had no concept of what a rabbi meant, much less of what the Belzer Rebbe stood for.

I discussed my predicament with Reb Ben Zion, son-in-law of the Rebbe of Vielipoli, who had had a close relationship with Sala's father Reb Hershel Grayver. I asked him to persuade Sala to go to Premyszlan on his next trip into the former Russian zone and to bring out the Belzer Rebbe as a passenger in his car. Grayver agreed, but at the last minute,

he lost heart and changed his mind. A different plan had to be concocted.

Many ingenious ideas were proposed.

"How about sending a Red Cross ambulance with a doctor from Bochnia, ostensibly to transport a seriously ill patient, as a cover for bringing out the Rebbe?"

"But if the border guards would inspect the ambulance, the Rebbe's life would be in grave danger."

"Let's offer a bribe to two German policemen to bring the Rebbe in their police car."

"How can you trust Germans to transport the Rebbe? When they realize their passenger is a prominent Jewish personality, there's no telling what they might do!"

We finally agreed on a plan to hire the Pole who carried the mail every day to bring the Rebbe in his truck. The border guards who knew him well were not likely to stop and search his truck. After a long debate, we agreed to offer him ten thousand *zlotys*. But how were we to raise this huge sum of money? Most Jews had been inducted into labor battalions and did not even have the means to support their own families.

In the Bochnia ghetto there lived a *chassid* of Belz named Moshe Stern, who in the past had outdone himself raising funds on behalf of the Rebbe's institutions. He now wrote letters to all known *chassidim* of Belz, urging them to send financial help to rescue the Rebbe. But although the response was gratifying, we were still far from reaching our goal.

CHAPTER 9

Unexpected Visitors

ONE DAY, QUITE UNEXPECTEDLY, WE RECEIVED A VISIT from my brother Pesachyah and his children, a four-year-old daughter and two boys, one a two-year-old, the other a one-year-old baby. We were very happy to see them, but when we inquired about his wife, he told us the sad news that she had fallen victim to typhoid fever and died in Savin, the town to which they had been expelled.

"As a matter of fact," he concluded his sorrowful story, "that is the reason we came to Bochnia."

It was difficult for us to absorb the painful reality; she was the first fatality in our family, a direct result of the German expulsion program. We made room for them in our "apartment"—if that is what one could call our lowly cellar. Even before their arrival, our cellar did not offer too much elbow

room, but now we were cramped like sardines in a can.

No sooner had my brother settled down than he began to complain of weakness and pain.

"Just rest up from your trip," we told him, "and you'll feel better."

However, when after a few days his condition did not improve we summoned a doctor who diagnosed him on the spot as suffering from typhoid fever, which he had evidently caught from his wife. The doctor also discovered that one of his children was stricken with the same disease.

The doctor had come during the daytime, and when we returned from work at night, we were shocked to find our house under quarantine, guarded by a Jewish policeman who allowed us to enter. Inside, we learned that Pesachyah and the child had been taken to the hospital and that afterwards the entire house had been decontaminated on doctor's orders. It did not take long for the disease to claim its next victim. My mother, already weakened by pneumonia, caught the dreaded sickness.

Of course, we did all in our power to save her. We arranged for the doctor to visit her twice a day. Day and night, I stayed at her bedside. At first, my wife and my sister-in-law relieved me, but then they too fell ill with the fever. Now the entire responsibility for the household rested on my shoulders; I did the cooking and the cleaning, not to mention taking care of the patients, and in particular my mother whose condition was critical. In spite of that, I did not get tired, nor did I lose hope that they would soon recover.

Finally, my mother reached a crisis which she overcame, and from that moment on, her condition improved from day to day until she made a complete recovery. My brother Pesachyah was sent home from the hospital. His condition

improved gradually, but my wife and sister-in-law were still seriously ill.

Reviewing my present condition, I concluded that it offered me the perfect opportunity to be released from work at the Klai labor camp. With that in mind, I approached my foreman asking him to explain to the supervisor that since my household was infected with typhoid fever, and there was a good chance that I would catch it, too, it would be advisable to release me and my brother before we jeopardized the health of the hundreds of laborers. Of course, I promised him a generous reward. A few days later, he showed me our names on the roster of laborers crossed out with red ink, a sign that we were freed from work. I was glad to pay him his reward. Good riddance, I thought, hoping never to see him again.

My joy was dampened, however, when my young daughter was struck down with typhoid fever. Our physician Dr. Lemansdorf recommended that she be hospitalized. Since the nearest hospital with a children's ward was in Cracow, I decided to take her there although I had no travel permit. I was sure the doctor's note with his diagnosis of typhoid fever would get her into the hospital.

Early in the morning, I took her to the station wrapped in heavy blankets, sneaking unnoticed past the Jewish police guards.

Hashem was on my side, for the entire trip to Cracow passed without one German inspection. Getting off at the suburban Prokatzim station rather than at the busy main station, I was forced to walk a distance of several miles, carrying her to the hospital.

But there was still another hurdle to clear. At the gate, I had to obtain a two-day pass admitting me to the ghetto. But

what if the guard demanded to see my travel permit? That would be the end of me. I walked back and forth in the bitter cold, unable to make up my mind. At last, I decided to go forward, placing my trust in Hashem.

Entering the gatehouse, I joined the long line of people waiting to obtain a pass. When it was my turn, the guard listened to my story, lifted the cover off the child, took one look at the sick child and gave me my pass.

After having the child admitted to the hospital, I visited my sister-in-law, asking her to look in on the child and keep us informed about her condition.

Now my problem was how to get back to Bochnia without a travel permit. I certainly could not stay in Cracow with an expired pass, and besides, my relatives at home were sick in bed, and I was the only one capable of caring for them. I found myself in a quandary, not knowing what to do. Before I knew it, the two days passed and my pass had expired. Now I was in danger of being arrested as an illegal resident. As if this was not enough, on *Shabbos* morning I woke up with a high fever, feeling a paralyzing weakness in all my limbs. I realized that I could not afford the luxury of staying in bed while my family needed me by their side. All I could think of was finding a way to leave the ghetto and return to Bochnia.

Through a friend who was travelling to Bochnia, I sent a message to my brother Shimon, the only member of the family who was not stricken with typhoid fever, asking him to send me a travel permit as fast as possible.

It was not very difficult to obtain such a permit. A Jew from Bochnia named Yosef Gurgel was involved with certain Poles in Cracow who reproduced permits that were perfect replicas of the German document. These counterfeit permits could be had at the right price, and hundreds of Jews bought

them for business use and as an escape ticket in the event of an imminent expulsion *Aktion*.

It was amazing that the Jewish informers never tipped off the Germans about this counterfeit operation. They evidently used it themselves for business purposes, since these travel permits were needed mainly for business travel which involved the illegal trading in foreign currencies. The exchange rates of the various foreign currencies differed substantially from region to region, thus, by buying currencies in one locality and selling them in another, handsome profits could be made. There was vigorous trading in American dollars, British pounds sterling, Austrian gold coins and Russian gold rubles. The money was usually carried in the false bottom of a suitcase, and although many Jews were arrested for a variety of "crimes," the Germans never detected the secret of the false-bottomed suitcases.

My two brothers and I, having no alternative means of earning a living, became involved in this business. Initially, when I arrived in Bochnia, I tried my hand at producing pastry, but my shop was requisitioned by the Germans. There was nothing left for me to do but to turn to black marketeering. Every day, I would travel to Tarnow to visit the main black market. Going there involved great risks, since the Tarnow SS was reputed to be extremely ruthless; no one caught in their net ever escaped alive. More than once, I was stopped and searched by the SS. However, since the false bottom of my suitcase was well-concealed, they only found some personal items, toiletries and some food.

At the Tarnow railroad station, a Polish policeman checked all Jews for travel permits, searching their baggage for contraband and demanding a heavy fine for the slightest infraction of the rules. Because of all these obstacles many Jews tried

their best to stay away from Tarnow.

My brother Yossel thought of a clever scheme to bribe this Polish guard. Once, when he was alone in the room with the guard, he approached him.

"Hey, buddy," he said. "Tell me, what nice gift can I get you?"

"I sure could use a nice pair of officer's boots," he replied, giving Yossel a meaningful wink.

Yossel knew it would be difficult to obtain such boots, but at the next opportunity, he brought him a pair of shiny black leather high boots.

"Okay, so who else do you want me to pass without inspection?" the Pole asked with undisguised glee.

Yossel gave him my name and that of another member of our family, and from that day on, he did not give me any more trouble.

As it was, I was waiting impatiently in Cracow for the travel permit, when at last, two days later, Shimon showed up holding the document. Without wasting a minute, I caught the next train to Bochnia. On my way home, I stopped at the hospital and found my relatives much improved. They had been cured of the disease, but due to their overall frail condition, they were forced to stay in the hospital a few days longer. I, on the other hand, felt simply terrible. My temperature was still very high, but I had no time to stay in bed. There was work to be done.

Leaving my daughter in the good care of the hospital staff, I proceeded to Moshe Stern to discuss the fundraising campaign for the rescue of the Belzer Rebbe.

"We'll never reach our goal through a letter-writing campaign," I suggested. "I'll have to call on the *chassidim* in person. There's nothing like a face-to-face talk."

It was decided that my trip would be well worth the five hundred *zlotys* a forged travel document would cost. Within a few days, my brother in Bochnia procured a travel document stamped and signed by the SS, manufactured by Yosef Gurgel, the expert at producing counterfeit credentials.

Whether I liked it or not, my journey on behalf of the Rebbe could not last for more than two weeks, since my travel permit was due to expire by that time. The Germans never issued permits to run past December 31, and consequently, the counterfeit permits were not valid past this date either. Since it was only two weeks until the end of the year, that was all the travel time I had. I estimated that in spite of my fever I would be able to withstand the rigors of the trip. I told my wife that I was going away on business and left the same day.

Although most people I called on had already mailed in a contribution, I managed to collect three thousand *zlotys*, which nearly covered our entire shortfall. My mission successfully accomplished, I returned home in good health to find my family completely recovered.

CHAPTER 10

The Belzer Rebbe Escapes

MEANWHILE, AS I WAS RAISING THE NECESSARY FUNDS, the *chassidim* in Cracow were working out the technical details of the Rebbe's escape. Finally, a suitable date for the Rebbe's trip was selected.

On the whole, the journey was uneventful. The Rebbe was accompanied by his brother, the Rebbe of Bilgoray, and two close assistants, Reb David Getzels and Reb Nachman Hirsch. Everything went smoothly until shortly before reaching Tarnow they met with a serious accident. The car ran into a ditch and turned over. The door of the car jammed, and only after working for more than an hour was the driver able to release the trapped passengers. All were injured, especially the Rebbe, who had bruises all over his body. The Polish driver went into town to notify Reb Shmuel Gelbwachs, a

chassid of Belz. Reb Shmuel rushed to the scene along with a doctor to attend to the injured men who were waiting on the highway, while German cars and trucks were whizzing by constantly. It was a miracle they were not arrested.

Having received first aid they continued on their journey to Vizhnitz in a rented car, where they were greeted by *chassidim* whose anxiety had been growing with the passing hours. Their fear turned to gladness when at long last the Rebbe appeared. For a long time afterwards, the Rebbe suffered from the aftereffects of the accident until gradually the pain subsided.

Once, when I visited the Rebbe while he was still in pain, his *gabbai* Reb David introduced me, "This is Chaim Shlomo Friedman, who brought the Rebbe here."

"Yes," responded the Rebbe. "I know, I know."

He offered me a heartfelt *shalom aleichem*, thanking me for my efforts in rescuing him from the valley of death in Premyszlan and expressing the hope that soon we would live to see the salvation of the Jewish people.

After the Rebbe was settled in Vizhnitz, I remained in close contact with his household, making certain that his life was not in danger. Rumors were making the rounds that an *Aktion*, an extermination raid was being planned against the Vizhnitz Jews.

One day, I was summoned to come to see the Rebbe.

"Since I have heard rumors about a forthcoming extermination *Aktion*," the Rebbe told me, "and since the situation is unpredictable, please obtain a travel permit for me. Just in case."

Although he did have genuine Turkish citizenship papers, and foreigners were exempt from anti-Jewish decrees, he did not want to rely on these papers, since during an *Aktion*

the Germans would pay scant attention to such documents. They would kill first, ask questions later.

Complying with the Rebbe's request, I procured a travel document for him which was deposited with a reliable *chassid* to be used should the need arise.

In addition to the Turkish papers and the travel documents, we prepared a third escape route. We knew of many instances when people who had legitimate documents were taken to extermination camps or shot to death on the spot during an *Aktion*.

We therefore decided to prepare a bunker where the Rebbe could stay while the *Aktion* was raging, which usually lasted no more than two or three days, and then he would be moved to a safer place.

For seven months, the Rebbe lived in Vizhnitz in tranquility and without fear. When stories began to crop up regarding an imminent *Aktion*, the Rebbe fled to Bochnia where he stayed only one night, because there, too, there was talk of an impending *Aktion*, which did indeed take place a few days later. He then moved to Cracow, staying in the Podgursz ghetto for about five months. When plans for the liquidation of the ghetto were under preparation, he returned to Bochnia. The German commandant of the Bochnia ghetto, SS *Obersturmfuehrer* Mueller, who was aware that the Rebbe was a *Wunderrabbiner*, a miracle-working rabbi, supplied him with an identity card designating him as a tailor, which in effect exempted him from any work. Once on a *Shabbos* morning, Mueller took a notion to call on the Rebbe. They were closeted for more than an hour discussing a variety of subjects. (After the war, Mueller was tried as a war criminal and received a life sentence.) Five months later, the Rebbe escaped from Bochnia, fleeing across the border to Hungary

from where he emigrated legally to Eretz Yisrael. Until his dying day, he never left the Holy Land.

I wrote a detailed account of all the events relating to the various phases of the Rebbe's escape. To this day, I have kept the manuscript to myself, and it remains unpublished. During the last year of his life, I visited the Belzer Rebbe in Tel Aviv to ask his permission to publish the memoirs of his miraculous escape. He was adamantly opposed to it. "First, according to Rashi, it is forbidden to publicize personal miracles," he explained, probably a reference to *Melachim II* 4:29. "Second, there are specific incidents in the chain of events I don't want the world to know about. Third, I have my own personal reasons which I cannot reveal." In view of the Rebbe's unequivocal opposition, I decided to abide by his wish, and the manuscript remains with me. I have also rejected the pleadings of certain authors to relate to them certain details about the escape. However, I can reveal a few particulars concerning the Rebbe's escape from Poland to Hungary. I can do so because the Rebbe himself used to recount them annually on the ninth of *Shevat*, amid a circle of *chassidim* celebrating the anniversary of the day he reached the shores of Eretz Yisrael.

In the car driving the Rebbe to Hungary, he was accompanied by his brother, the Rebbe of Bilgoray, and Reb David Shapiro. Also sitting in the car were the driver and the Hungarian officer who helped them cross the border. The entire rescue project was organized by the *chassidim* of Belz in Hungary, under the leadership of Reb Moshe David Hollander (a brother of the well-known Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Hollander of New York) who labored day and night with selfless dedication. For months on end, he stayed in Budapest, away from his family, single-mindedly working on

the rescue effort on behalf of the Belzer Rebbe. It was Hollander who established the connection with the Hungarian officer who undertook the mission of bringing the Rebbe to Hungary, and jointly, they worked out the strategy for bringing it about.

The officer forged a letter written on official Hungarian government stationery, bearing the signatures of high Hungarian ministry officials. The letter to which the photographs of the passengers had been attached read as follows: "The bearers of this document are three Hungarian officers who have been stationed in Warsaw since the close of World War I. At the present time, their presence in Budapest is required so that they can furnish information to the Hungarian Defense Department concerning important military intelligence operations. The Defense Department of the Republic of Hungary requests the cooperation of all authorities in facilitating their journey."

"We had already crossed into Hungary, when suddenly the border guards realized that the three 'Hungarian officers' looked suspicious," the Rebbe would tell his *chassidim*. "They stopped the car, motioning the passengers to step outside. They pulled out their guns, ready to shoot. Believe me, they had every reason to shoot. We certainly did not look like Hungarian officers. I refused to budge, telling my companions also to remain in their seats. The guards kept shouting, 'Get out of the car! Get out! Get out!' No one moved. Suddenly, out of nowhere, there appeared three Hungarian generals riding on horseback, waving the guards away. The startled guards withdrew, and the car continued on its way into the interior of Hungary.

"Who were these three generals? To this day, I don't know. It was a miracle."

The Rebbe then would invite all his *chassidim* to partake of a *seudah*.

Of course, there is much more to tell about things that happened on this trip, as well as before and after. However, in compliance with the Rebbe's wish, I permitted myself to write only the things he himself related.

CHAPTER 11

Torah and Chessed in Bochnia

DESPITE THE APPALLING LIVING CONDITIONS IN THE Bochnia ghetto and the constant fear that pervaded the atmosphere, the sound of Torah study reverberated through its streets and alleys. There were twenty or so young men who studied Torah without letup in the Sanzer *klaus* (a room dedicated to prayer and study) under the supervision of the young Reb Nechemiah, the son of the *dayan* Rabbi Ben Zion. Although he was barely twenty years old, Reb Nechemiah was chosen to lead the study group in recognition of his proficiency in the Talmud.

Once, while sitting in the *bais midrash*, I was approached by the *dayan* who asked me to undertake the task of underwriting the financial maintenance of the *yeshivah*. He placed me in a dilemma, for what he was asking was no small thing.

People had enough trouble supporting their own families, not to mention the general anxiety about the German expulsions and persecutions. But witnessing the self-sacrifice of the young scholars and their magnificent dedication to Torah study, I was unable to turn him down, and I accepted the responsibility. Until now the students sustained themselves by going door-to-door carrying a basket in which they collected pieces of bread. Sometimes, the *dayan's* children made the collection. I persuaded my friend Rabbi Abba Rosenzweig, an eminent Torah scholar, to take an interest in the students and to arrange exams for them. The *yeshivah* remained in operation until the first expulsion.

I remember an interesting incident from that period. A new SS commandant, a man named Schoenburg, had recently arrived in Bochnia. He was a sixty-year-old German who did not display any particular signs of anti-Semitism and would even, on occasion, do favors for Jews. But he could not be considered a friend of the Jews either, as he eventually showed during the final *Aktion* in Bochnia.

One day, this commandant decided to drop in on the Sanzer *klaus*. The students, seeing him coming down the street, panicked and went into a wild stampede, climbing on chairs and jumping on tables as they tried to escape through the windows. Just at that moment, Schoenburg entered and witnessed the tumultuous scene, the tables crashing under the weight of the students, the window panes shattering.

Thinking he had happened on a secret meeting of a cell of underground revolutionaries, he drew his revolver, aimed at the escaping students and pulled the trigger. But wonder of wonders, the trigger jammed. Much as he tried, it simply would not fire. Meanwhile, the Judenrat was notified, and within seconds, several members appeared to reassure the

commandant that the disturbance had been nothing but a group of students frightened by his sudden appearance.

The German accepted the explanation. "You were lucky that my trigger stuck," he commented. "Otherwise, there would have been quite a few casualties." The truth, of course, was that the merit of their Torah study had protected them from certain death.

In addition to the *yeshivah*, there was also an elementary Talmud Torah for small children, headed by the well-known communal leader Reb Mottel Aaron from Cracow, a Torah scholar and a devoted *chassid* of Belz. But with the first expulsion, everything was wiped out.

Although living conditions in Bochnia in western Poland were quite intolerable, they were far worse in the eastern zone which had been under Soviet occupation until the German drive eastward.

This was also true of Premyszlan where the Belzer Rebbe's family and hundreds of his *chassidim* remained after his departure for Vizhnitz. We received countless desperate letters from the Premyszlan Jews telling of grinding poverty and grave food shortages. They pleaded with us to send them food packages, as otherwise they would starve to death, and they included in their letters a list of names to whom the parcels should be sent. The law permitted shipping packages of food and clothing weighing no more than one kilogram (2.2 pounds) from one zone to another.

I immediately organized a drive, and with the money we collected, we bought several large sacks of food supplies. It was not easy to secure the provisions, but thanks to my friend Aussenberg, a *chassid* of Belz, I managed to obtain everything I needed. Being a long-time Bochnia resident, Aussenberg had good connections with some non-Jews who furnished

him with any quantity he ordered—charging exorbitant prices, of course. We packaged the supplies in parcels of one kilogram each and sent them to the addresses on the list. Even shipping the parcels required bribing. The parcels were mailed at the ghetto post office, to be transferred to the main post office for delivery to the addressee. Through my friend David Shapiro, we bribed the post office workers to give our parcels preferential handling.

Soon, we received a torrent of requests for parcels, as well as letters from those who had already received them and were at a loss for words to express their sincere gratitude. To them the parcels meant the difference between survival and death. We continued to send such parcels until September, 1942, when the Bochnia ghetto was completely eliminated.

CHAPTER 12

Disappearance and Cover Up

AFTER THE REBBE'S SUCCESSFUL ESCAPE FROM THE Bochnia ghetto, we were concerned as to what might happen to him if Commandant Mueller were to find out about his disappearance. Since we were not sure whether the Rebbe had crossed the Hungarian border as yet, we had to devise a plan to cover up his escape so that the Germans would not pursue him. As I pondered the problem, I was struck by a marvelous idea, and without delay I began to put it into action. I instructed my friend Reuven Walkin to go into the Rebbe's private chamber, put on the Rebbe's garments as well as his *tallis* and *tefillin* and sit in the Rebbe's chair. He followed my instructions, despite his fears that the Germans might see through the ploy. There simply was no other way to ensure the success of the Rebbe's escape.

As a matter of fact, a short while after the Rebbe's departure the ghetto was buzzing with rumors. A few people reported that they had recognized him when he boarded a coach early in the morning, leaving for an unknown destination. This was true, for he did travel by coach to Butchkov where the Hungarian officer was waiting for him with his car. Although everything was done in the strictest secrecy, some breaches in security could not be prevented.

The Judenrat and the men of the Jewish police, in an effort to investigate the rumor, sent agents to ascertain whether the Rebbe was in his chamber. Pacing the floor of the waiting room, they tried to steal a quick glance into the Rebbe's chamber. Was he in there?

As usual, the waiting room was filled with *chassidim* who passed the time studying or having a glass of tea. These *chassidim* belonged to the Rebbe's inner circle; yet, even they did not know the secret that the one sitting on the chair was not really the Rebbe. We knew that a secret is safe only if no one, not even the most intimate friend, knows about it. Two young men who served the Rebbe marched back and forth as they always did, and those who dared come close to the door could even hear the voice of the Rebbe, praying and studying. Everything went like clockwork. People who handed the *shamash* their written prayer requests could clearly hear the Rebbe wish them success in all their undertakings. Of course, they were not permitted to enter the chamber, but this had happened many times before.

By now, everyone was convinced—even the Judenrat and the Jewish police—that the Rebbe was still here. After all, there were witnesses who had seen him and heard his voice. Reuven was an accomplished actor, and he impersonated the Rebbe faultlessly.

Driven by curiosity, a larger than usual crowd appeared for the *Minchah-Maariv* service, since the Rebbe always joined the congregation for *Maariv* and *Sefiras Haomer*. But we had anticipated this. The *shamash* announced that the Rebbe was not yet ready to pray, something that was not unusual. The hour of nine was approaching; before long it would be curfew time. Unable to wait any longer, the congregants prayed without the Rebbe and went home. Still, doubt was creeping into everyone's mind. Was the rumor true or false?

The next morning, rumors that the Rebbe had, in fact, escaped from the ghetto were flying again. As we were closeted in the Rebbe's chamber, discussing our plans, we were suddenly warned that the commandant—in the company of the head of the Judenrat Weiss and the chief of the Jewish police Dr. Rosen—were in the building, ostensibly to see if everyone was at work but really to discover if the Rebbe was present. Reuven quickly took off his vestments, and we all made a speedy getaway, leaving just one *shamash*.

The delegation arrived, and the commandant, resplendent in his tight-fitting uniform, went straight into the Rebbe's chamber.

"*Wo ist der Rabbiner?*" he barked at the *shamash*. "Where is the rabbi?"

Without waiting for an answer, he grabbed the young man and took him to the Judenrat building for interrogation. There he gave him a savage beating to make him reveal the Rebbe's whereabouts and the identity of the people who had helped him escape. The *shamash* denied any knowledge.

"All I know is that when I got up this morning, the Rebbe was gone," he stated timidly.

"Who played the part of the *Rabbiner*?" asked the commandant.

"I did."

"But you were outside in the waiting room!" the commandant angrily shot back.

"That's right. Both I and my partner played the part of the rabbi. We received orders from the *Rabbiner* that in case he would disappear, we were to play his part."

The commandant then demanded that the other *shamash* be taken into custody to be questioned. Being assured that no harm would come to him, the *shamash* gave himself up. The commandant kept his word. After administering a sound thrashing, he let both of them go.

For two days, we held our breath, afraid that the commandant might arrest all the people that would frequent the Rebbe's house. We kept a low profile until we were told that the matter had been laid to rest. Subsequently, we learned that covering up the Rebbe's escape proved to be of crucial importance, since the Rebbe needed to remain in Bochnia for two days before setting out on his journey. Discovery of the secret might have imperiled the entire operation.

CHAPTER 13

A Helpful Gestapo Chief

STRANGE AS IT MAY SEEM, SCHOENBURG, THE GESTAPO chief in Bochnia, exhibited a surprisingly humane attitude toward Jews. He showed his understanding when he readily affixed the official German government seal to any document declaring the bearer to be a foreign national. Under the German law of occupation, Jewish citizens of a foreign country were exempt from anti-Jewish decrees; included in this exempted category were citizens of occupied countries such as Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Romania.

Understandably, everyone tried to procure citizenship papers or passports of these or other foreign countries. Holders of such documents were free to travel, enabling them to leave the ghetto at the very first rumor of an impending *Aktion*. Unimpeded travel was helpful also for

doing business, as the fluctuating currency exchange rates in the various zones presented fabulous opportunities for earning sizable profits.

Additionally, if one held citizenship in a certain country, the members of one's family were automatically considered citizens of that country as well and were exempt of all persecutions.

A person who was not a foreign national would try to obtain from relatives abroad a spurious "document" stating that he was a citizen of a foreign country. He would then take this "document" to Chief of the Gestapo Schoenburg, who would authenticate the "document" by placing the SS seal and his own signature on it. In effect, he thereby exempted the bearer from any harassment and persecution. The news of Schoenburg's good-will spread rapidly, and before long, people from other towns brought him bogus foreign "citizenship papers," and to everyone's surprise, he signed all of them without exception, even though some of them were blatant forgeries.

Although Schoenburg's certifications were very helpful, they sometimes resulted in tragedy. Occasionally, people from Gestapo Headquarters in Cracow would check the validity of these documents and arrest the bearers of fraudulent papers. Furthermore, the Gestapo ruled that all foreign nationals would be placed under its "protection." For that purpose, they were transported to Germany to be interned in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp where they were interrogated about their vital data and the manner in which they had attained their citizenship. Of course, there were not many who could give satisfactory answers, since most of the papers were illegitimate.

Schoenburg's uncharacteristically benign attitude toward

Jews came to the fore in his frequent visits to the Sanzer *klaus*, the only *shul* in the ghetto. Whenever he had guests, he would bring them to the *klaus*.

No one understood the strange fascination the *klaus* held over him, making him come back again and again. I met him quite a few times when I was sitting outside in the cool hallway, studying regularly every night after coming home from work. Of course, each time I saw him, I jumped from my seat and stood at attention, but with a wave of his hand, he would motion to me to sit down. Although his first appearance in the *klaus* left us all in a rattled frame of mind, his subsequent visits were very congenial.

At a later date, the Gestapo ordered Schoenburg to stop issuing further endorsements of any citizenship papers. They obviously had been swamped with documents of this kind, and they also wanted to stop the steady stream of Jews entering and leaving Gestapo Headquarters to apply for such endorsements.

It was then that Jews turned to forging SS endorsements.

A personal friend of mine, a man named Avraham Mehr, originally from Tarnow, was an outstanding Torah scholar, an enthusiastic *chassid*—and an accomplished counterfeiter. His forged signatures could not be distinguished from the real ones. I urged him a number of times to sneak off to Hungary, but he did not want to give up his lucrative counterfeit business of issuing "endorsements," for which he was paid handsomely. Sad to say, during the last expulsion *Aktion* he disappeared without leaving a trace, along with all the other Jews of Bochnia.

By contrast, there were others who sought to procure genuine citizenship papers. A friend of mine, Nassan Singer from Yaroslav, bought Turkish citizenship for the unheard of

sum of twenty thousand *zlotys*. While most of the holders of bogus papers were shot to death by the SS, he and his family passed inspection and were interned in Bergen-Belsen, from where they emigrated to the United States after the end of the war.

CHAPTER 14

Hazardous Travels

LOOKING BACK AT MY NUMEROUS TRAVELS DURING THAT time, many harrowing experiences come to mind. Once, while on the platform of the Tarnow station I found myself surrounded by several hundred Poles who, like myself, were waiting for the next train. For the most part they were salesmen who were raking in huge profits, taking advantage of the inability of Jews to travel freely.

Just then, an express train was approaching. Since I knew this train would not stop for more than one minute, I elbowed my way through the crowd and jumped on the train, while most of the Poles were left standing on the platform. The train was packed, so that I only found space near the door.

Presently, the German conductor appeared. Spotting me, his face turned red.

"The Poles were left back on the platform, while you, Jew, got on?" he bellowed as he flung open the door. "*Heraus! Heraus!* Get out! Get out!"

My life was hanging by a thread; the German was ready to push me off the speeding train. I said nothing, but I made up my mind that if he tried to throw me off the train I would pull him along with me. Let him be my *kapparah.*

I remained standing there motionless while he continued shrieking, "*Heraus, 'raus!*" Finally relenting, he hurled his parting shot at me, "You'd better get off at the next stop!"

I did not need his order, since the next stop was Bochnia, my final destination.

On another occasion, I happened to be waiting for a train at the Tarnow station. The train, which was scheduled to arrive at seven in the evening, was delayed. I wanted to sit down in the waiting room, but a sign on the door warned, "*Fur Juden ist eintritt verboten.* No admission for Jews." Since I had a long wait ahead of me, I took a risk and entered the waiting room, unobtrusively taking a seat in the corner. The hours went by without incident, but with no train in sight either.

Growing impatient, I went up to the platform where I noticed a freight train pulling in on the Bochnia tracks. It was merely slowing down without coming to a complete halt. Quickly, I jumped on one of the wagons.

Just as I was gaining a foothold on the steps, I heard the voice of a German soldier who must have noticed I was a Jew by the yellow star on my sleeve.

"*Herunter! Herunter!*" he yelled from up above. "Get off! Get off!"

At first, I pretended not to hear him, thinking that as the train gained speed he would leave me alone. But when I saw

him point his gun at me, I wasted no time in jumping off the racing train. Thank Heaven, I landed without a scratch.

One day, while travelling from Tarnow to Bochnia on a train crowded with Poles returning from work, I had no choice but to stand on the outside steps. The Poles began to harass me, heckling me with curses and anti-Semitic slogans. None of this bothered me, but when I heard them whisper that when the train passed over the bridge they were going to throw me into the river, I began to worry. The train was drawing nearer and nearer to the bridge; I could see its arching span up ahead. Silently, I prayed to Hashem that He save me. My prayer was answered. The Poles vented their hatred by pelting me with eggs. Jeering and laughing raucously, they savored the pathetic sight of the "dirty *zhid*" . . . while I was delighted merely to be alive.

Once when I was in Tarnow, a fellow I knew asked me to do him a "favor" and deliver a package of old clothes for him. Why not? I was glad do him a favor. On the train, a German inspector came around to examine the passengers' bags and luggage.

"What is in the package?" he asked me.

"Just used clothing," I replied.

He glanced at me suspiciously. "Why don't we have a look?" he said. "If I catch you telling a lie, I'm going to shoot you on the spot."

He pulled out a pocket knife and opened the parcel. I nearly fainted when I saw that wrapped inside the old clothes was a bundle of letters that dealt with black market transactions.

Woe is me, I thought. Now I'm in real trouble. It'll take a major miracle to get me out of this predicament.

However, to my complete surprise, he closed the package

without examining it more closely, and without saying a word, he walked away. Clearly, he had not noticed the incriminating papers. To me, it was plain as day that Hashem had shielded them from the German's eyes.

BOOK TWO

The Winter of 1942

CHAPTER 15

In Beck's Clutches

THE PREVAILING ATTITUDE AMONG THE GHETTO POPULATION was that in order to remain alive one needed employment of some sort, that without a "work assignment card" chances for survival were minimal. The assumption was that bearers of a work assignment card would not be deported, while those without a job would be shipped to "you know where." And so, industrial concerns producing goods for the German Reich sprung up like mushrooms, giving employment to thousands of Jews.

In Bochnia, too, an industrial workshop was established, headed by the aforementioned Sala (Shlomo) Grayver, a man with close ties to the Germans in general and to the Cracow Gestapo in particular. Although there were two thousand job openings in Grayver's shop, it was not easy to get work there.

The Bochnia ghetto held many thousands of Jews, all of them eager to work in Grayver's shop, but the only ones who got jobs in his "factory" were his close acquaintances or those capable of paying a sizable amount of money for the privilege. My family and I also registered for jobs, but I was not about to make any sacrifices in this regard, for I placed very little credence in German promises. I decided to seek a different source of income.

Since it was nearly impossible to earn a livelihood in Bochnia itself, I decided to spend a few hundred *zlotys* on a counterfeit travel permit, which was valid for two months. The Germans honored these specious permits, and I used mine, as I mentioned earlier, to trade in foreign currencies and gold coins. My business took me to Tarnow each day, a dangerous environment where scores of Jews were arrested daily. I was frequently stopped by the police or the SS, but with Hashem's help I always emerged alive.

Aside from the purpose of earning a livelihood, I had another reason for wanting a travel permit. I felt that in case of an impending liquidation *Aktion* I would be able to extricate my family with the help of this permit. I was not sure it would work, but a man must try everything. If it had not been for this I would not have entered into such a hazardous business, for it was as a result of my business that I almost was caught in a killing raid.

Rising one morning in the pre-dawn hours in preparation for my daily trip to Tarnow, I arrived at the railroad station only to find that I had missed the train. I was quite upset, for this was the first time this had happened. But since there was nothing I could do about it I turned back and went to *shul* to *daven Shacharis*. On the way, I encountered clusters of people with worried expressions, huddled in serious conversation.

"Haven't you heard?" one man said in response to my inquiry. "The newly formed mobile killing squads, the so-called *Einsatzgruppen*, have started their deadly operations on a broad scale. They were going from house to house, murdering every Jew they come across. At this very moment, they are on a murderous spree in sixty-five towns and villages in our area."

The news threw everyone into panic. Was our town going to be included in the campaign? Would we be next to be killed? Who could tell? No one knew.

Only then did I fathom the full extent of the miracle that had happened to me when I missed the train. The killings had been concentrated exactly on the route I had meant to travel. Jews had been pulled from the trains and brutally murdered, and the same had happened to the Jews waiting at the stations. However, if a Jew is destined to live, Hashem has many ways to make him survive. With my own eyes, I saw how Hashem in His goodness had granted me the gift of life in a miraculous way.

Meanwhile, our town remained quiet. No one could tell what tomorrow held in store. All we could do was hope for the best. I came home, finding my family deeply troubled, their faces reflecting an ominous premonition.

After breakfast, I went out into the street to hear if there was any news. Hardly had I left the courtyard when a young German hoodlum, about twenty years of age and dressed in civilian clothes, came up to me. He grabbed me roughly by my hand.

"Come along with me!" he snarled.

I was terrified. What was the meaning of this?

He led me back into the courtyard, pulled a gun from his pocket and placed it against my temple.

"Tell me the truth!" he said. "Where is the boy who ran into the house? You showed him how to escape."

I had indeed seen a boy run into one side of the house and out the other, but I had no idea what he was running from.

"I don't know the boy," I replied. "I have no idea where he is."

Angrily, he demanded that I give him the boy's address.

"I don't know where he lives," I replied.

"But you saw which way he was running, didn't you?"

"No, I did not."

He hit me with the butt of his gun, threatening to kill me if I did not tell him the truth. When he finished beating me, he said, "You're under arrest!"

He searched the house without letting me out of his sight. Of course, he did not find the boy who had escaped long before. I wondered who this creature was. Obviously, he was not just an ordinary gunman.

Next, he led me beyond the city limits. Unable to control myself, I asked him where he was taking me.

"You'll soon find out," he replied tersely.

In the distance, I spotted a large building marked *Deutsche Reichspolizei*—German Police Department. This gave me a sense of relief, since I had thought he was taking me outside of town in order to shoot me.

In a special room inside the building, I was again subjected to his interrogation—and another savage beating. I steadfastly maintained that I did not know the boy. Thereupon, he dragged me into the next room to face the police inspector. Seeing that the young thug was not making any headway with me, the inspector looked impatiently at his watch.

"You've got five minutes to come up with the truth," he

said. "If you don't . . ." He let his voice trail off without finishing the sentence, and he merely pointed at the gun lying on the table.

For the next five minutes, the younger German continued whipping, punching and kicking me.

"Well, are you going to tell the truth or not?" the inspector asked me.

"I told you before that I don't know the boy," I replied with feigned indifference. "Go ahead and do whatever you want to do."

The answer was another violent thrashing by the young hoodlum, who ripped my clothes, throwing me like a rag from one corner of the room into the other. Then he took me into the basement and locked me up in a dark cell.

My doom is sealed, I thought to myself.

Barely conscious, I dropped down on the pile of straw, falling into a fitful sleep as agonizing thoughts raced through my mind. Would I ever see the light of day again?

After a while, I heard footsteps coming down the hall. It was the same young Nazi, dressed in a police officer's uniform. This time, he took me back into town to be locked up in solitary confinement in the municipal jail. I surveyed the cell to see if there was a way to escape. The small window was barricaded with heavy steel bars; there was no chance of breaking out. Hunger, thirst, fatigue and pain were taking their toll, but what concerned me most was the thought of the sentence hanging over my head. Engrossed in thought, I paced the floor of my cell, singing in a hushed voice parts of the *tefillos* of *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, as I reviewed my life—my good deeds and my failings.

The hours went by. Twilight approached and still not a morsel of food, not a drop of water, no one to offer me a word

of consolation. Why doesn't my brother Yossel come to me? I couldn't understand it, especially since I knew it was not all that difficult to obtain a release from the German police. There were people with good connections. Couldn't Grayver use his influence to get me out?

It was getting dark, and with it came the cold fingers of despair. But no! I must not give up hope. Hashem can help at any time. I decided that if I was not set free by nine o'clock I would assume that I wouldn't come out of this alive and begin to prepare myself for the end.

The clock in the bell tower of the municipal building rang the hours; the bell sounded nine rings. My life was running out. I sat down on the wooden bench, took a scrap of paper and a pencil I happened to have on me and began writing my last will and testament.

I started by listing the people to whom I owed money and those who owed money to me. Then I formulated the main part of my will, as follows: "I ask my mother, my wife and the other members of my family not to mourn and weep excessively over my passing. We must have faith, believing that everything is Hashem's will. Evidently, in His infinite wisdom He decreed that through my death I redeem the Jews of Bochnia. My older brother Pesachyah should observe my *yahrzeit* and recite the *Kaddish* until my daughter Shaindel will be married, at which time her husband should observe the *yahrzeit*. May you all be blessed with good health and the best of everything."

I lay down on the hard bench, my nerves on edge, imagining at the slightest sound that they were coming to get me. And so the night wore on, a night that seemed endless. Finally, a faint ray of light penetrated the small window. My anxiety began to wane, supplanted by hope. If Hashem has

helped me thus far, I thought, then He will surely continue to be at my side.

A few hours later, the door opened and a friend of mine entered. I thought he had come to bid me a last farewell, but to my surprise he told me, "Don't worry, people are working for you, trying to get you out."

He handed me a sandwich he had prepared for his own lunch. He virtually revived me with it, since I had not had a bite to eat for twenty-four hours, and my body was wracked with pain from the beatings I had endured. Yet, I wondered, why hasn't my brother Yossel come to see me? Isn't he concerned about me?

A while later, I received another visitor. This time it was Yossel. Our happiness was indescribable. In a tear-choked voice, he told me that within the hour I would be freed. The good news left me strangely unaffected; after the ordeal, I was emotionally drained. He brought me a sumptuous meal, but I was too excited to eat anything, waiting impatiently for the hoped-for moment of my release.

At long last, towards noon, my cell door opened, and there he was, my nemesis, the German who had arrested me.

"Well, are you going to tell me the truth?" he started again.

I repeated my earlier statement.

"Okay, you're free to go now," he said lamely.

On my way home, people stopped me in the street, staring at me in utter disbelief.

"What happened?" they questioned. "They let you go?"

My release was the talk of town. Wherever I went, people would point at me and whisper, "Look, that's him."

Afterwards, I discovered the real story behind the developments that led to my release. Since just around that time

the killing raid by the *Einsatzgruppen* was coming to a climax, the Jews of Bochnia were paralyzed with fear. Even Grayver, the "big wheel," had been afraid to intervene on my behalf, particularly since Officer Beck, the Nazi who arrested me, was involved. It was Beck who had carried out all the executions of prisoners in Bochnia. A rabid Jew-hater, he had been overheard to boast, "To me, killing a Jew is more fun than earning ten thousand *zlotys*." Only on the following day, after the shootings had died down, did Grayver make an attempt to have me released. The police insisted that the boy who had run away must be handed over to them, but they promised that no harm would come to the boy. When the boy was brought in, Beck slapped his face. Aside from that, all Beck did was fine the boy fifty *zlotys*, which I paid immediately out of my own pocket.

At the same time, I also learned why my brother had not come to see me during my imprisonment. As soon as he heard that I had fallen into Beck's clutches, he tried to enlist the help of people with Nazi connections who could lobby on my behalf, but in light of the ominous situation, no one dared approach the Germans. In desperation, he decided to travel to Vizhnitz to call on the Belzer Rebbe. He told the Rebbe about my arrest and the grave danger I was facing. The Rebbe assured him that I would be released soon.

Towards evening, Yossel returned to Bochnia, where he resumed his efforts on my behalf and did not give up until, with Hashem's help, he succeeded in arranging my release.

At home, my family was overjoyed with my return. They had just about given up hope of ever seeing me again.

CHAPTER 16

The Demise of Tarnow

DURING THE SUMMER MONTHS OF 1942, THE SYSTEMATIC extermination program in the towns and villages began to take shape. The Germans followed a well-prepared program. Execution squads, the so-called *Einsatzgruppen*, numbering several hundred German SS and *Wehrmacht* troops, would suddenly descend on a ghetto. While one unit would surround the ghetto with machine guns, ready to shoot any would-be escapee, another unit would charge from house to house, dragging the inhabitants, young and old, into the street. Those unwilling or unable to obey were summarily shot. The Jews were then marched into an open space where they were divided into two groups.

Children, the aged and sick were sent to one side, marked for death. Sometimes, they were shot on the spot. On

occasion, they would be hauled in waiting trucks to a nearby forest to be mowed down by machine guns. It all depended on the whim of the German commander.

The able-bodied were ordered to line up in columns, five abreast. Anyone stepping out of line was instantly shot by the guards. Everyone was allowed to take along a minimal quantity of food.

They were then marched to the railroad station to be crammed into waiting boxcars, eighty to one hundred persons to a car. Under these conditions, they would be made to wait several days before the transport got underway. Standing there in the stifling heat, packed like sardines, was simply unbearable. The air was filled with the heart-rending cries of those unfortunate people dying of thirst, particularly the cries of the little children some people managed to smuggle with them in their knapsacks. When the people of the Judenrat tried to relieve their plight by bringing them some water, they were turned back at gunpoint by the Germans. Many died even before the transport started moving.

As the tragic journey continued for several days and nights, many of the hapless deportees, unable to endure the agony, found relief in a merciful death. Every so often, the transport was brought to a halt and the bodies, which had begun to decompose and were giving off an appalling odor, were thrown out.

In the cities and towns, no one had the slightest inkling of where these trains, with their human cargo of thousands of deportees, were going. The Germans made it a point to reassure the remaining Jews that they were being taken to a labor camp to be put to work, but the fact that none of the deportees was ever seen or heard from again belied their story. Nevertheless, as long as we had no proof to the

contrary, we tried to console ourselves with the thought that they had indeed been recruited into labor battalions. Only much later did reports begin to seep through about gas chambers and crematoria in which every last one of the Jews was being gassed, in keeping with the program of extermination of the Jews laid out in Hitler's *Mein Kampf.*

When these reports began to surface, some Jews invested a great deal of effort and money in an attempt to learn the fate of the deportees from SS officers, but it was no use. The Germans gave them double-talk, never offering a clear answer.

In Bochnia there lived a certain Eliezer Landau who had ties to the SS commanders in charge of the expulsions in the Cracow district—Colonel Hase, Colonel Heinrich and Colonel Kunde. On one occasion, he asked them point blank whether there was any truth to the stories about the extermination of the Jews.

"We can't give you any guarantees about the fate of children and old folks," they told him, "but all the able-bodied are being sent off to work."

Later on, after a few deportees managed to make a miraculous narrow escape from the hell of Auschwitz, the entire picture was revealed in gruesome detail. This is what they reported:

"For days on end, without letup, transports carrying tens of thousands of Jews from all the German-occupied countries in Europe would arrive—from Poland, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Holland, France and others. The boxcars packed with Jews would be moved on specially constructed railroad tracks into a thick forest where the Jews were greeted with the hellish screams of German guards amidst a rain of clubbing and pistol-whipping to quell any potential opposition from

the traumatized victims. Thereupon, they were marched deep into the forest and ordered to undress, and their clothes were examined for hidden jewels and valuables. Naked and barefoot, they were given the command, 'Start running!' The Germans had spread sharp-edged gravel on the path, and after being forced to run for several hours, their feet were a mass of bloody pulp. Those who fell to the ground were shot instantly.

At last, they were led into a 'bath house,' ostensibly to take a bath before going off to work . . . Several hundred people were pushed into the chamber in which shower heads had been installed along the walls. The shower heads were opened, but instead of water, a stream of poison gas emerged, killing everybody by asphyxiation within a few minutes. The bodies were removed through a door on the far side of the gas chamber and taken to the crematoria, while those standing in line in front of the 'bath house' had not the slightest inkling of what had transpired. When the first group was processed, the next one was brought in, and so on and so on, until every last one of the deportees was murdered. There were many extermination camps, and each camp employed a different method. The one thing they had in common was the aim to destroy the Jewish people, an assignment they accomplished with great success."

The only way to escape expulsion, or so people thought, was to be employed in productive work to benefit the German Reich. As the reports of the escapees from the "labor camps" became publicized, there was a mad rush to obtain employment in the industrial workshop in Bochnia, which stood under the management of Grayver, as mentioned earlier. Grayver appointed a special committee to decide who was to be admitted and who rejected. My family and I knew

that for people like us there would be no openings in this shop, which only registered people who either had a lot of money or who had close ties to Grayver and his underlings, as was also mentioned earlier. We were disqualified on both counts.

One day, as my brother Yossel and I were walking along the street, we noticed a group of people studying a new list of registered workers that had just been published and posted. Everyone was curious to see if his name appeared in the "Book of Life."

We did not pay any attention to the list. After all, we had only gone through the motions of registering, not expecting to be chosen. To our great surprise, one of the people called me over and showed me that both my name and my brother's name were on the workers list. We considered it a sign from Heaven, and from that day on, we went to work at the plant every day, working from eight in the morning until six in the evening, with a two-hour break for lunch. Still, I did not delude myself into believing that working at Grayver's place was a ticket to survival. On the other hand, I did not want to swim against the current either, all the more so since acquiring the job had been so easy.

This development actually came at a very opportune time for us, because we were no longer able to travel to Tarnow on business. A short time before, while my brother Yossel and I were in Tarnow on business, we were warned that no railway tickets were being sold to Jews, not even to people with special permits. I broke out in a cold sweat; something was amiss. A little later, we heard that all Jews who had appeared at the station wishing to buy tickets had been shot to death at once. Now we understood that a killing *Aktion* was in the offing. In spite of the signs indicating an imminent *Aktion*,

there was no panic among the Tarnow Jews. In their innate Jewish optimism, they refused to believe that their days on earth were numbered. Our main concern for the moment was how to sneak out of this impending inferno before it was too late.

Knowing the Nazi tactics, we realized that they were likely to begin surrounding the ghetto at any moment and then our lives would be lost. Going to the station was out of the question, since we would surely be shot. Time was of the essence; every minute counted. Thus, we decided to reach a nearby railroad station and catch the train there.

We hired a horse-drawn carriage to take us to the Mashtzisk station, a few miles west of Tarnow. The driver was delighted to take us, especially since we did not haggle about the fare. We asked him to lower the roof in order to make it appear that the carriage was empty. The driver was surprised that on a hot summer day anyone would want to ride in a closed carriage, but why should he care? It was none of his business. We rode with bated breath until we reached the station. We had to wait for fifteen minutes until the train arrived. With a sinking sensation, we made the familiar train ride, fearful of what might happen, but with Hashem's help, we arrived home safely.

A few days afterwards, people who escaped the massacre reported that during the *Aktion*, immediately after we left the ghetto, several hundred SS and *Wehrmacht* troops surrounded the ghetto. A half hour after we departed, the Mashtzisk station was surrounded and all the Jews trying to escape through there were killed. The killing *Aktion* lasted for three days during which time about ten thousand Jews were murdered. All the streets were filled with the bodies of the victims. About twenty thousand Jews were sent off to the

crematoria of the Belzec extermination camp. This was the tragic end of Tarnow, one of the outstanding Jewish communities of Poland. Tarnow had become *Judenrein*, "cleansed of Jews."

CHAPTER 17

Preparing for the Worst

WITH GROWING HORROR, WE LISTENED TO THE DAILY reports of the extermination squads relentlessly doing their murderous work in the cities and towns of our region. We realized that, sooner or later, the same fate would befall the Jews of Bochnia. We certainly did not want to rely on the assurances of Sala Grayver, the manager of the industrial plant, who had promised, "As long as I'm alive no harm will come to any of the Jews in the ghetto." He based his pledge on the assumption that the work done by the Jews of the Bochnia ghetto in the factory he headed was essential to the German war effort. But we, that is to say, I and the other people living in our house, were considering a more dependable way of saving our lives. We were thinking of building a bunker, an underground shelter

in which we would wait out the storm which was sure to arrive. The plans were drawn up, the necessary preparations made, and since we were pressed for time, we got the work under way without delay.

We went full steam ahead. However, the work could be done only in the late afternoon, since during the day everyone worked and in the quiet of the night the sounds of pounding or scraping would instantly betray our secret.

The site of the bunker was a large room in the cellar of our building. We closed off the cellar door with bricks, coating the outside with a thick layer of dirty plaster to give it a shabby, old appearance, in the hope that no one would be able to tell there had ever been a door.

Beneath the staircase, we cut out a man-size opening through which a person could lower himself into the bunker. Being covered by the staircase, the hole was not discernible. For further protection, we fashioned a board to fit the hole. When the last person had lowered himself into the bunker, he was to place the board into the opening, closing it from the inside and making it virtually invisible. We installed electric lighting, running water, toilet facilities and benches on which to sit or stretch out, all designed to provide adequate shelter for a stay of a few days.

Generally, Jews received advance warning of an impending killing *Aktion* from local people who had connections with the German SS. It was our plan to round up all thirty-five occupants of the house at the first word of an imminent raid, assemble in the bunker and remain there until the coast was clear. The actual preparations were kept tightly under wraps; the more people who knew of our secret the greater the risk of informers and betrayal.

The Germans proceeded with their deportations at a

feverish pace, emptying town after town of the Jewish populace, until it was Bochnia's turn to suffer the whirlwind of their evil wrath. Posters appeared on the streets announcing that the Judenrat was summoning all the Jews of the Bochnia ghetto to assemble on a certain date at a certain place in the ghetto. At the appointed time, all members of the Judenrat were present, as well as the industry boss Grayver. Several speeches were made, all with the same message: "The fate of deportation that has befallen our neighboring towns is now hanging over our heads. There exists, however, one single route to escape from this disaster. The German authorities demand payment of a quarter million *zlotys*. In return, they assure us, there is the possibility that the deportation decree will be rescinded."

Of course, everyone was ready to part with his last penny to save his life and the community. The money poured in. The wealthy gave large sums, the poor gave modest amounts, and within only a few days, the entire amount—an enormous fortune in those days—was raised. The Judenrat dutifully delivered it to the German Gestapo.

It was quite obvious to many people that this was nothing but a German ploy to extract with ease the last money the Jews still had in their possession. Thus, there were many who thought of various ways of escaping, either by excavating bunkers or by going into hiding with non-Jewish friends outside the ghetto walls. The second course of action was nothing more than an impossible dream, since during round-ups and deportations, the walls of the ghetto were very heavily guarded. There simply was no way out.

Bochnia was bewildered. Gloom and desperation filled the hearts of its people. A few more days to live, and then what? Rumor had it that a special train for the Jews of Bochnia

had pulled into the station. No doubt, our worst fears were about to be realized! There were some who still believed in Grayver's promise. Drowning men grasping at straws! During a raid, the killing of all Jews is sanctioned. The SS makes no distinction between one victim and another. Like mad dogs smelling blood, nothing can stop a German who has been granted permission to murder. There could be no doubt that a raid was in the offing. The feverish preparations around us clearly pointed to it.

We began to make concrete plans to deal with the dangerous situation. The best alternative, we thought, would be to escape from the ghetto. It certainly was preferable to sitting in a bunker. There was only one problem—how to obtain a travel permit. My brother Shimon and his wife, along with my mother and my little daughter Shaindel, had left Bochnia the preceding Friday, since I knew it would be impossible to keep a two-year-old child in a bunker; her slightest whimper might betray the entire bunker population. They travelled to Briegel, a town not far from Bochnia, where we hoped to join them after procuring travel permits to replace our recently expired documents.

To our deep disappointment, the contact arrived from Cracow and told us that no travel permits could be had for all the money in the world. Just now, when we needed the permits to save our lives, it was impossible to obtain them! And we always kept them updated, just for such an occasion. What a terrible tragedy! No, we told ourselves, let's not despair. Let's take heart. *Gam zu letovah*—this too is for the good. Having no alternative, we decided that we—that is to say, myself, my wife, my brother Yossel, my brother Pesachyah and his three children—would remain in the bunker.

Tension and fear pervaded the atmosphere. The entire

ghetto was in an uproar, Jews running in all directions.

"Do you know of a way out?"

"Do you have a good bunker?"

Thoughts such as these were on everyone's mind. Yes, that was to be our *oneg Shabbos*.

Early Friday morning, a long convoy of horse-drawn wagons approached Bochnia from the direction of Vizhnitz. The wagons were loaded with Jews—men, women, children, old and sick people—and their meager possessions. They were coming to settle, of all places, in the Bochnia ghetto. A few days earlier, they had received instructions to move to Bochnia before *Shabbos*, where they were to be housed in apartments. Similar instructions had been issued to the Jews of the other towns in the Bochnia district, and now they were all flocking to Bochnia in one mass influx.

The wagons clogged the narrow streets, creating sheer pandemonium, and were directed to the railroad station by Polish policemen. There, the people were put up in large barracks where they would stay—so they were told—until adequate housing could be prepared for them.

It dawned on a few people that they were the victims of a cruel German hoax. Realizing that they were being led like sheep to slaughter, they jumped off the wagons, oblivious to the guards surrounding the convoy. They knew that by jumping off the wagons they had nothing to lose. The "jumpers" quickly blended into the ghetto crowds, finding shelter with relatives and friends. I myself saved a number of my acquaintances on the wagons, signaling to them that they had better jump while they still had the opportunity. As a result of admitting these refugees, however, our bunker became very overcrowded. Still, we felt it was our moral duty to help these people as they were in far greater peril than we

were. At that time, we still lived under the illusion that the Germans were interested only in deporting the Jews of the surrounding area. We still believed that Bochnia would be spared, for hadn't Grayver given us his word?

On *Shabbos* morning, our bunker was filled far beyond capacity. We had designed it to house thirty-five occupants, and now it held one hundred fifty persons! The air was stifling, the heat unbearably oppressive. Moreover, because of the many refugees, the existence of the bunker became known throughout the ghetto. The secret was out, thus it no longer made sense to hide in the bunker.

After pondering the problem, I decided not to use the bunker. In the wake of the publicity our bunker had received, its eventual discovery was a foregone conclusion. Besides, as a result of the overcrowding, one could not possibly stay there for more than a few days at the most. A new bunker had to be found.

Time was running out. The atmosphere was tense, charged with anxiety. I recalled that our *mechutan* had prepared a bunker for his family. We approached him, but after taking one look at his bunker, we realized that it would be impossible for us to stay there. It was far too small; there was barely enough space to accomodate his own family.

The final hour was approaching rapidly. We had no choice. We had to find a solution. We decided to divide the family into two groups. Pesachyah and his three children would remain in the large bunker. There were other children there already, so a few additional youngsters would make no difference. On the other hand, the bunker of our *mechutan* held adults only. We squeezed my wife and my sister-in-law (my brother Yitzchak's wife) into it. For my brother Yossel and me there was no alternative but to leave town. To be sure,

we had no travel permits, but seeing no other way out, we placed our faith in *Hashem Yisbarach* and decided to head for Briegel.

Happily, we had no reason at all to be concerned about our brother Yitzchak. As we saw it, he was fortunate enough to be in a location where he was fully protected. Two weeks earlier, while working at his job in the carpentry shop of the German labor battalion, his hand had gotten caught in the power saw, and two of his fingers were badly mangled. He was taken to a hospital outside the ghetto where the two fingers were amputated. Subsequently, he developed various complications requiring further surgery. The state of his general health deteriorated markedly, something we considered a stroke of luck, as until that time the Germans had never harmed hospitalized patients. As a matter of fact, Jews were known to pay considerable sums of money to be admitted to a Jewish hospital. Consequently, we did not worry about Yitzchak at all. He was certain to survive.

For a few days, the kitchen of our house was astir as though there were a wedding just ahead. The baking and cooking were in full swing to prepare the food for the days the family would be underground until the *Einsatzgruppen* squad left town. We hid our clothes away in a safe place, where the Germans would not find them. After all, we hoped to come back and use the clothes again.

The time had arrived to put our plan into action. There was no more time for daydreaming, no more time for wishful thinking. At any moment, the Germans were likely to come and surround the ghetto, and then we'd be trapped. With a heavy heart, my wife consented to our parting. She understood all too well that, sadly, this was what had to be done under the present circumstances. I handed her a large

amount of money should the need ever arise to ransom herself. Silently, we looked into each other's eyes. She wept bitterly, as though deep in her heart she knew we would never see each other again.

CHAPTER 18

Bochnia Besieged

THREE OF US HEADED FOR BRIEGEL, MY BROTHER YOSSEL, our friend Reuven Walkin and I. We did not know exactly how to get there and were afraid to use the highway which was patrolled by the SS. We were forced to walk through the fields in the general direction of Briegel.

We were about a mile and a half outside Bochnia when we noticed a German cyclist gaining on us. He was one of the so-called *Volksdeutsche*, Polish citizens of German extraction, who were recruited as auxiliaries to the German police force and who enthusiastically participated in all persecutions. In his black uniform, he was a fearsome sight. He stopped us, asking to see our papers. When we showed him our identification documents, he confiscated them and put them in his pocket.

"Where are you heading?" he demanded.

Ordinarily, we didn't frighten easily, but this question scared the life out of us. We realized at once its dangerous implication.

"Both of my children disappeared this morning," I told him, looking him straight in the eye. "Some people saw them walk off in this direction, so we're trying to track them down." To give my answer added credibility, I continued, "Won't you please help us find them? You can ride ahead of us, and we will follow you."

"First, you'll come with me into town," he replied. "There we'll look into the matter."

Things looked bad. We would actually be walking straight into the lion's den. Before we left Bochnia, we had heard of several cases where Jews walking in the street had been shot to death, and surely now that we had been caught in the act of committing the serious crime of leaving the ghetto we were doomed. We pleaded with him to give us back our important papers, mainly the worker's certificate which the Germans respected to a degree, but he insisted that we come along with him. Meanwhile, he entered a village, inspecting all the farmsteads to see if there were any Jews hiding out. And we followed him, urging him to return our documents, but he callously turned down our requests and insisted on taking us in. We had our backs to the wall. How could we break loose?

While he made his search in the village, we made plans to save our lives. I suggested we ask once more for our papers, and if he still refused, we would have to get rough. "Why should we lose our young lives?" I exclaimed. "Instead, let's finish him off, and that will be the end of that."

The others were shocked at my suggestion, looking at me with wide-open eyes, as if to say, "What? Kill a man? Since

when does a Jew use the tactics of Esav?"

I repeated to them the saying of our Sages, "If someone wants to kill you, be quick and kill him first." Since going back to the ghetto meant certain death for us, it was our obligation to fulfill this command.

They reluctantly agreed. However, they insisted that I first make a final attempt to plead with him. I decided to propose a deal.

"How much is it worth to you to let us go?" I asked.

The German was confused, and after brooding over it for a while, he said, "I want three hundred *zlotys*."

It was a substantial amount, but without hesitating, I took out the money and pressed it into his hand. Thanking us for the money, he returned the papers and accompanied us part of the way, giving us directions to Briegel. On the way, he caught another prize. He found a Jewish woman, whom we did not know, hiding out in the tall grass. We quickly came to her help, negotiating with him for her release, and for an additional fifty *zlotys*, he let her go and went on his way.

Having benefitted from one miracle, we now needed another miracle. We were about to enter the town of Briegel, the home of a German policeman named Lapsch who was known to grab every Jew who crossed his path and shoot him to death without compunction. We could only hope and pray to Hashem that He would protect us from falling into this monster's hands.

Plodding through fields and forests, blundering about without food or drink, the sun beating down on us mercilessly, we finally reached the town of Briegel. It was *Shabbos*, but there was not one Jew to be seen in the street. Arriving in the Jewish quarter, we were surprised to find it fenced in with wooden boards; as far as we knew the Jews of Briegel had not

been confined to a ghetto. We entered through a crack in the fence, happy to have eluded the Germans.

Shabbos afternoon, towards twilight, the cooler air brought people out into the ghetto streets for a refreshing walk, as if nothing had happened. These people have no idea of what has occurred just a short distance away, I thought.

Our arrival created quite a commotion; scores of people surrounded us, bombarding us with questions about events in Bochnia. Our relatives were happy to see us, but on the other hand, everyone was beset with worry about the fate of loved ones in Bochnia. After hearing our reports, the Judenrat people tried to get in touch with Bochnia. No response, nothing at all.

We knew this was an ominous sign. The worst was undoubtedly happening. After several unbearably anxious days, a messenger brought a letter from Pesachyah telling us that at least he and his three children had survived the massacre, notwithstanding that they had been hiding in an "unsafe" bunker. On the other hand, my wife and my brother Yitzchak's wife had been caught and shipped off on a transport. The report plunged us into bitter grief. We knew with certainty that we would never see them again.

The murderous *Aktion* had subsided, and we began to think about returning to Bochnia. My brother Yossel and I rented a carriage and returned safely. That we were not stopped even once en route was in itself a miracle.

Entering Bochnia, we were greeted by a sight so infernally hideous and appalling as to defy description. The streets were deserted, the few remaining Jews walked about in a daze, their parents and relatives having been shot dead in front of their eyes, the others sent to the Auschwitz gas chambers. The house where I lived presented a scene of

unspeakable horror. The building looked like a slaughterhouse. The walls splattered with the blood of our martyred ones bore silent witness to the carnage. Whoever had been found in the bunker was shot to death, every last one.

"These bloodstains will never be wiped away," I said to myself, "until the day the Almighty avenges the blood of the innocent victims of these vile murderers."

I was told that the Germans had rounded up all the rabbis of the ghetto into one courtyard, made them lie on the ground and taunted and ridiculed them for a long time before cutting them to ribbons with their machine guns. Dozens of torn *talleisim* and ripped garments littered the streets. We went home, but horror of horrors, we found the doors smashed and total wrack and ruin inside. We went down into our basement apartment.

Eerie silence. Not a soul. Nobody, nothing. Emptiness and desolation. They've all been gassed, I thought. Gone up in smoke.

Next, we went to the hospital to see our brother Yitzchak, taking some food with us. Entering the room where his bed used to be, our hearts stood still.

"Where is my brother?" I asked.

Instead of answering, the other patients directed us to the office. "You'll find out from them."

Sadly, we were told that he was not alive anymore. During the *Aktion*, a company of Jewish police came with wagons onto which they loaded all Jewish patients, ostensibly to transfer them to the Jewish hospital. They were, in fact, brought to a number of waiting trucks into which they were flung like sacks of potatoes and taken to the village of Botchkov. On arrival, they were shot dead and thrown into a pit that had been dug for this purpose, many of them buried

while still alive. At the same time, scores of elderly people, women and children were mowed down in the same manner. Twelve hundred Jews, my brother Yitzchak among them, as well as my uncle and cousin, are buried in this mass grave. My cousin had received a SS permit to remain in the ghetto, but when he came to accompany his father, he, too, was grabbed and killed.

Our pain was too great to bear, but we decided not to disclose everything to our mother, who had returned from Briegel. What she did know was more than enough. Our family had paid a heavy price in the *Aktion*, but we encouraged each other to accept this Heavenly decree with love. A Jew must find strength in his faith and believe that at least those who escaped the flames would survive the war. Unable to bear the thought of staying in the basement, whose walls reminded us of our dear ones who were no more, we moved into a different apartment. There was no longer a shortage of apartments; of eight thousand Jews only seven hundred remained alive. Nevertheless, the Judenrat took the opportunity to cause us a great deal of trouble for moving without their permission. We settled the matter by paying them off. Life began to take on a semblance of normalcy when we took into our household a little orphan, a nephew of mine whose mother had brought him to Briegel and whose parents had both been shot to death.

We wanted to out find why all the occupants of our bunker had gone voluntarily to the deportation train in spite of our warning that under no circumstances should they do this, not even under the threat of death. We had explained to them that the trains would take them to the gas chambers to suffer a slow and agonizing death. After making inquiries, we learned that they had been tricked by the Jewish police who

had announced, "Anyone coming to the train voluntarily will only be sent to a labor camp. Anyone caught afterwards will be executed." Many people fell for this ruse, preferring to be shipped off to work, as long as they would stay alive. They could have saved themselves if they had not been seduced by this promise. Indeed, those who remained steadfast were saved and stayed alive.

The Germans themselves did not believe that it would take only three days for them to empty the ghetto. They had the Judenrat to thank for their faithful service. The feelings of the Judenrat people had become dulled to such an extent that they did not hesitate personally to bring to the death train their own parents and family members. With respect to assisting the Germans, the Judenrat members of the Bochnia ghetto outperformed all other ghettos. It was only after the *Aktion* had ended that some of the members realized the enormity of their crime. By then it was too late; the smoke of the burning Jewish bodies was already rising from the smokestacks of Auschwitz.

Difficult though it may be, we realized that we had to attempt to banish from our thoughts the overwhelming pain of the past. The German killers had not yet laid down their arms, and we had to find ways and means of staying alive. Employment in Grayver's plant was no insurance for survival. I and a few other workers were still licensed by the Gestapo, but the majority had been deported along with everyone else.

Sala Grayver met the same tragic death as the Jews whom he meant to shelter under his protection. On the very first day of the *Aktion*, he was shot to death by the SS. He did enjoy the respect of the *Wehrmacht* people in Cracow, but the SS held him in contempt. (A deep hatred divided these two branches of the German armed forces, and generally, the SS, being the

political branch, held the upper hand. The SS, taking advantage of every opportunity to humiliate its rival, was delighted to dispose of the *Wehrmacht's* Jewish protege Grayver.)

The German Chief of Labor in Bochnia was an SS man, but Grayver paid scant attention to him. He relied on the fact that he employed in his industrial plant two thousand Jews producing goods for the *Wehrmacht*, whereas the SS was not concerned with industrial production at all. While the *Aktion* was raging, and ninety percent of the Jews of the Bochnia ghetto were being deported to Auschwitz, the Chief of Labor leveled a series of false charges against Grayver. The *Wehrmacht* was unable to protect him, because during an *Aktion* everything is under SS control. The Chief of Labor arrested Grayver, beating him to a pulp and, according to some reports, finally drowning him. People had warned Grayver to go into hiding during the *Aktion*, as the Labor Chief undoubtedly would want to get even with him, but Grayver was too arrogant to take the advice. In the final analysis, it was his haughtiness that led to his tragic downfall. Grayver failed to understand that in spite of his prestigious position he was still a *Jude*, and when the chips were down, he was no different from any other Jew.

CHAPTER 19

The Rakowitz Labor Camp

ONE DAY, MY MOTHER, YOSSEL AND I WERE GATHERED around the table for lunch when two Jewish policemen, Shomo and Yoske Greiber, suddenly entered, and demanded to see our papers. I got up and showed them my worker's permit.

"Okay, that's fine," they said.

Yossel, however, had no such permit, and the policemen insisted that he come along with them to the station. I knew right away that there was trouble afoot; there was probably another *Aktion* brewing.

Yossel pleaded with them at least to allow him to finish lunch. They agreed to wait for him, but since the room was very crowded they went out into the hall. Of course, Yossel's mind was not at all on his meal. He was looking for a way to

escape, and when he saw that the coast was clear, he sneaked out through the courtyard, making a quick getaway. The policemen, wondering why it was taking us so long to finish the meal, came back in and were taken aback to see that Yossel had eluded them.

"Where did he go?" they shouted at me, livid with rage.

"How should I know?" I shot back. "It was your job to watch him."

"If that's the game you want to play," retorted Shlomo Greiber, "we'll take you in instead of your brother."

"Oh no, I won't go. You won't use me to cover up your mistake. And besides, you have no right to arrest me. I hold an official worker's permit."

He grabbed for me, and I shoved him. He punched me, and I struck him. We were getting into an all-out fist fight until he reached for his rubber nightstick and savagely beat me over the head with it. Still, I refused to go. Knowing the callousness of Dr. Rosen, the head of the Jewish police, and Simchah Weiss, the boss of the Judenrat, I was convinced that at the Judenrat I would not stand a chance, in spite of my worker's permit.

In the aftermath of the brawl, a crowd gathered in front of our house. Several policemen burst into the apartment to help their beleaguered comrades. With all my strength, I tried to resist them, but realizing I was fighting a losing battle, I gave up and was taken to the Judenrat building. After listening to Greiber's report, all members decided unanimously that I should be held in custody in my brother's place. Hoping to change their mind, I pulled out my worker's permit, but Horowitz, the Deputy Chief of Police, tore it into shreds and slapped my face for having the audacity to speak up.

Next, I was locked up in the basement jail where I met a large number of other Jews who had been arrested, waiting to be shipped to a labor camp. On orders of the Germans, one hundred workers had to be recruited, and with new men joining us in the cell constantly, it was not long before the quota was filled.

Toward evening, we were taken to the large hall of the Judenrat building where we spent the night sitting on the floor, trying to doze off. I surveyed the scene, looking for a way to escape, but we were guarded so heavily that I quickly abandoned any such thoughts. At the same time, I still kept hoping that my worker's permit would get me off, thinking that it would be an insult to the German Labor Department if one of their licensed workers had been arrested. My mother asked the plant manager to intervene on my behalf, but Simchah Weiss could not be dissuaded.

In the morning, we were made to line up in the courtyard, while the Judenrat people gleefully watched their catch. The German inspector, a notorious Jew-hater, checked off the prisoners list.

"*Alles in ordnung,*" he said, with a sadistic smile. "Everything is in order."

Now we were waiting for the trucks to take us to work. But to which camp?

"To the labor camp near Plashow," we were told. "Not far from Cracow."

The name Plashow did not alarm me, since as far as I knew this camp was not kept under heavy guard. I had heard that on occasion the workers would be brought to the Cracow ghetto to take a bath, and once in the ghetto, I would do my best to stay there. The way I figured it, being sent to Plashow could turn out to be a blessing in disguise, since I had meant

to spend *Sukkos* with the Belzer Rebbe in Cracow. It looked as if everything would work out just according to plan. The truck would take me to Plashow, and from there it would be only fifteen minutes to the ghetto and the Belzer Rebbe. I had been preparing for my escape even while I was still in the basement jail of the Judenrat, pasting together the torn pieces of my worker's permit until I again had a valid identification document.

It was noon, the day before *Sukkos*. Two trucks guarded by Jewish policemen were waiting to transport us to our destination. Under the eagle-eyed supervision of the SS camp commandant, we boarded the trucks while each of us received three cigarettes and a piece of dark bread in honor of *Yom Tov*, courtesy of the Judenrat. Now we were told that instead of Plashow we were going to an airfield at the outskirts of Rakowitz, which is also not far from Cracow. I was unfamiliar with the conditions of this camp. Well, I'll probably be able to escape from that camp, too, I thought to myself.

The convoy began to move. People waved good-bye, wishing us a speedy return. Passing through my street, I saw people lining the sidewalk, calling out their good wishes. My mother was standing in front of our house wringing her hands in despair; this was not the kind of *Yom Tov* she had expected. The horrors of the recent past were still fresh in her mind, and now this. Who knew if she would ever see me alive again? The mere mention of the hideous word *lager* (camp) was enough to evoke shudders of terror and anguish.

I tried to cheer her up by calling out, "Don't worry, Mother. I'll be back very soon!" As an additional sign of my confidence I tossed my food ration over to her. "I won't need this any longer," I shouted. "I'll be in Cracow for *Yom Tov*, and

there I'll have all the food I want."

The other prisoners looked at me with raised eyebrows. What is he so happy about? Where does he get his self-assurance? Their skeptical looks did not faze me. I firmly believed I would not work in this camp and that before long I would be back home.

After an hour's ride, the gate of the camp emerged in the distance. The truck came to a halt to pass German inspection. The driver shows his documents. Everything was in order. No problems.

The gates opened wide, and we found ourselves inside the camp. Looking around, I noticed that the camp was surrounded by a barbed wire fence. Not exactly what I had expected, it was a heavily guarded military airfield. Even before getting off the truck I realized that my only hope for escape was to take advantage of the procedure whereby all newly arrived workers were driven to the ghetto to take a bath.

After a short ride through the camp, the truck stopped on a large field where we were told to get off. A group of German engineers was waiting to screen the new slave laborers. The work to be done included construction, sewerage, building a concrete runway and other hard labor jobs. The engineers assigned the various jobs according to physical strength. Everyone tried to be designated to the toughest work, since the prevalent thinking was that those working at easier jobs would be killed off. I followed the rule I had set for myself never to volunteer for any work; whatever will be, will be.

This time my policy proved to be right. Those doing the hard jobs suffered gravely. Doing their backbreaking work, they received endless lashings and clubbings, and when they asked to be transferred to lighter jobs, it could not be done.

At noon, the current workers showed up for lunch which consisted of soup that looked more like pieces of garbage floating in muddy water. The Germans told us that we were not really entitled to this food because we had not done any work, but out of the goodness of their hearts, they would let us have some soup. Just looking at it was enough to make you throw up.

Having received this gracious welcome, we were curious to see what our lodgings would be like. After supper, we joined the other workers on their way to the barracks, *davening Minchah* as we marched. Among the marchers, I met a number of friends who brought me up to date on the conditions of the camp. But why should I care? I did not intend to stay here for more than a couple of days at the most!

As we marched, I focused on the activities going on around me, the deafening noise of the planes taking off and landing, the flashing red guiding lights all along the runway.

"This is where we sleep," the other workers told us.

Entering the barbed wire enclosure, we were counted by a German guard.

"Who lives in the small barracks over there in the back?" I asked.

"This is for the camp police," I was told. "Poles in black uniforms whose job it is to keep order and prevent anyone from escaping. They give you the treatment for the slightest infraction of the rules."

Our barracks, which used to be a cattle barn, had a concrete floor and small steel barred windows spaced far apart. The air was stifling. There was no electric light; it was pitch-dark. Someone produced a small petroleum lamp that produced enough light for me to discern our sleeping accomodations. All along the floor of the barracks, arranged

in four straight rows, there were burlap bags filled with wood shavings. Between the rows there was space for people to pass. There were no blankets; you used your clothes for covers and pillows. After sleeping on the hills and valleys of these mattresses, everyone woke up with a backache.

In spite of everything, I did not forget that tonight was *Yom Tov*, and neither did the many other religious prisoners. We numbered several *minyanim* as we proceeded to *daven* the *Maariv* of *Yom Tov*, each one of us pouring out his heart through the words of the prayer, sung to the familiar festive melody with mournful undertones. In our thoughts, we relived the past. We saw ourselves going to the brightly lit *shul* wearing our festive garments. We heard the *chazzan* intone the ancient chants that would elevate us into a higher world. We saw our homes, how they sparkled with cleanliness, as the fragrant aroma of the delectable *Yom Tov* dishes emanated from the kitchen. In our mind's eye, we entered the beautiful *sukkah*, its walls adorned with decorative paintings and artistic designs, the *sechach* festooned with fruits and colorful paper chains. We could see the entire family gathered around the *Yom Tov* table, set with ornate china and silverware, as the warm sounds of the harmonious *Yom Tov niggunim* resounded throughout the neighborhood. Ah, the true spiritual joy of *Yom Tov*!

Tears blurred my eyes, and my heart suffered in silence. Gone was all this glory, vanished into oblivion. Here it is *Sukkos*, and I am praying in the black darkness of the German hell—a world where *Yom Tov* does not exist, where joy is banished. Smiling through our tears, we encouraged each other.

"Keep your chin up!"

"Hashem will help us."

"Everything will turn out all right"

"Soon we'll celebrate *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov* again, just as we did before."

"No, even better than before!"

"Take heart!"

"Hang in there!"

We made *Kiddush* over the piece of dark bread, which also served as our *Yom Tov* meal; sadly, the *berachah* over the *sukkah* was omitted. With broken hearts, we sat down on the floor to eat the dark bread and wash it down with a cup of water. This concluded the meal.

Before going to sleep, we continued to comfort each other, but as we were talking, a guard appeared.

"Everybody in bed in five minutes!" he shouted.

It was nine o'clock in the evening, and at five in the morning, we had to get up for work. Everyone found his mattress and lay down. Unable to find a vessel to use for hand-washing in the morning, we filled a few bottles with water and lay down to sleep.

Tired and exhausted, I fell into a deep sleep, but before I knew it I heard the wake-up call, "Time to get up!"

I did not feel like getting up. It was *Yom Tov* today. But there was no time for memories. The Jewish policemen were hounding us.

"Get up, get up," they yelled. "*Schnell, schnell.* Hurry up! Hurry up!"

We washed our hands with the water in the bottles we had prepared and tried to catch a hasty *Yom Tov Shacharis*, but before we could end the service, the black uniformed Polish guards burst in, clubbing indiscriminately with their truncheons, left and right, on the head, the shoulder or any part of the body. Throwing off our *talleisim*, *siddurim* still in hand,

we ran out to the *appell*, the roll call. We were told to line up in column formations of five abreast. Then we were marched to the gate, where we were counted like cattle before proceeding to work.

The gates opened wide, and after a half-hour march under the watchful eyes of Jewish guards, we arrived at the work site. Everyone received his tools, and the work began. We dug, chopped, shovelled and scraped, while our minds were filled with the thought that it was *Yom Tov* and we were desecrating the holy day!

After a few hours of work, we received some black coffee; this was our breakfast. And by the time the coffee arrived from the kitchen, it was already cold.

At twelve o'clock, we had an hour-long lunch break. The religious Jews decided to remain at the work site and use the hour to complete the prayers. We recited the *Hallel* with loud voices but bleeding hearts, mindful that we were at the mercy of our oppressors who could do with us as they pleased. We prayed out in the open, but when we noticed a German approaching in the distance, we went into the pit we had just dug and completed our prayers there. The *Yom Tov* meal was no different from the previous day's meal—a slice of dry bread and water.

Returning from work in the evening, we *davened* and ate again, and this is how we spent the *Yom Tov*, without a *sukkah*, without a *lulav*, without an *esrog*. But *baruch Hashem*, we made it through the day.

My plan of escaping on the way to the bathhouse in the Cracow ghetto had to be shelved, because we were never taken there. Thinking of an alternative, I dreamed up what I thought was a clever scheme. It was camp policy that prisoners who were not feeling well were directed to the Jewish

camp doctor. If he found them to be seriously ill he turned them over to Jewish policemen for transfer to the German Medical Director of the camp. If the Director concluded that the patient required hospitalization, he would issue a transfer card whereupon the Jewish police would take him to the local hospital. I picked a disease that would surely land me in the city hospital, and once I would be outside the prison walls—in my fertile imagination—I saw myself free as a bird.

Thus, grimacing with pain and complaining of my ailment, I went to the Jewish doctor, who readily diagnosed that I was seriously ill, directing the policemen to have me examined by the German Medical Director. My instructions were to present myself at a certain place at half past nine in the morning from where the Jewish policemen would escort me to the Medical Director's office for an examination. Anxiously, I awaited the hoped-for hour, thinking that freedom was just around the corner. I showed up at exactly nine-thirty, but to my disappointment, I found no one there. I surmised that the Jewish policemen had left early intentionally, since they suspected me of wanting to escape and did not want to bear any of the responsibility.

I faced a dilemma. What was I to do? To go and see the doctor by myself was no simple matter. First, walking the camp grounds without a permit was strictly forbidden. Second, by the time I would find the doctor's office, which was quite far away, it would be past the twelve o'clock closing time of his office. Third, I was not on the sick list, thus the doctor surely would not want to see me. After mulling it over for a long time I decided to go to see the German doctor on my own. I had nothing to lose. Who knows? Maybe I'd be successful. In order to win, one had to take a chance.

I started walking, asking people for some directions, and

without being stopped even once, I arrived at the doctor's office well before the noon closing hour. After giving me a cursory examination, the doctor issued an admission card to the municipal hospital. I was elated; I considered myself the luckiest man alive.

I went back to work, and when a few days passed and nothing happened, I approached the Jewish police inspector Silberman, whom I knew from Vizhnitz.

"Since I have an official admission order, why wasn't I transferred to the hospital?" I asked him.

"The camp commandant has to countersign the admission order, and somehow he forgot to sign yours."

I recognized that something was amiss but kept quiet. For the next few days, Silberman tried to placate me, offering me various excuses, but I never saw the admission card again.

I had no choice but to go directly to the camp commandant. It was a dangerous undertaking, but I went anyway. At the entrance to the commandant's office, I was stopped by a German guard.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I want to see the camp commandant."

He showed me in. The commandant, a tall, heavy-set man in an SS uniform, gave me a stern look.

"Why did you come to see me?" he asked.

I told him about the doctor's admission card. "Would you please let me have it so that I can go the hospital?"

"I signed that card a few days ago and gave it to Silberman," he told me.

Now I knew it was Silberman who was spoiling my chances for success. Nevertheless, I decided not to confront him with the facts, since it would serve no useful purpose. Clearly, he was a thoroughly evil person.

I spoke with another policeman I knew from Vizhnitz, a man named Yafek who was in charge of transporting the patients to the city hospital. I pleaded with him to try to do something for me to enable me to leave, and I promised him a decent reward for his efforts. Two days later, he came to me.

"You can go today," he said. "You'll use the name of a fellow who didn't show up for his scheduled doctor's examination."

I did not mind doing that, as long as it would get me outside the camp. I went to the location he indicated where I joined a group of sick people ready to go to the camp commandant's office to receive their admission cards to the hospital. Silberman was there to accompany us.

Throughout our march to the commandant's office, he did not say a word, but as we reached the building housing the office, he turned to me.

"Under no circumstances," he said, "will I let you go under an assumed name."

I begged him, I implored him to let me go in, but it was no use. Disillusioned and frustrated, I returned to work. My second escape attempt had turned sour.

CHAPTER 20

More Escape Attempts

ALTHOUGH MY FIRST TWO PLANS ENDED IN FAILURE, I did not give up inventing new schemes for getting out of this hell. I couldn't just sit idly by and allow myself to be swept away by the Germans' diabolic designs; one must try to outwit one's enemies. It so happened that I found out that the prisoners in the adjacent barracks were going into town for the bath they should have had on their arrival. Here was my opportunity!

In the morning, when everybody streamed out of the barracks for roll-call, I hid in a corner in total disregard of the danger of getting caught, and *baruch Hashem*, no one came looking for me. Unobtrusively, I mingled with the prisoners of the other barracks who had not gone to work because of their scheduled trip into town. They were going to be taken

there by truck at noon. I waited and waited. It was already well past twelve o'clock, with no truck in sight. The day went by, but the truck never showed up.

Again I had failed. But imagine my disappointment when in the evening the people of my barracks returned telling me that they were coming back from the Cracow ghetto . . . where they had been taken to have a bath! No doubt about it, this must have been Silberman's doing. Noticing that I had not shown up for work, he must have read my mind and switched the group going to the ghetto. Once again, he had gotten the better of me.

Still, I was not ready to concede defeat. I continued to concoct plans, waiting for the right opportunity, which was not long in coming. I learned that a certain group of Jewish workers was trucked from the ghetto into our camp each day and returned in the evening. Evidently, the Germans did this to save food and sleeping space.

"Since the guards at the gate know these workers," my informant added, "they don't check them at all."

That was all I needed to hear. If I would join this group, no one would notice me. Here was my ticket to freedom. "Silberman, this time I'm going to outsmart you!" I said to myself, half aloud. "This time you won't clip my wings."

It was the day before *Hoshannah Rabbah.*

That evening, I boarded the truck, blending in among the returning workers. My heart beat in joyous anticipation. Only thirty minutes more and my troubles would be over.

Sad to say, my joy was premature. Silberman must have gotten wind of my plan. When the truck reached the gate, instead of being waved through as usual, it was stopped. Looking outside, I saw a group of unfamiliar Germans. I found out later that they were the officers in the camp

administration. My heart sank. Now I've had it, I thought.

Soon, I heard the familiar German command, "*Alle herunter!* Everyone, get out!"

Those with papers proving that they were living in the Cracow ghetto were lined up on the right, those without papers to the left. Apparently, there were others who had the same idea I had. The documented workers were released and continued on to the ghetto, while the rest were interrogated. Each man had a different excuse.

"My shoes needed repair."

"I wanted to take my clothes to the laundry."

And so forth.

While the Germans were busy questioning people, I sneaked away toward the camp. Unfortunately, one of the Germans noticed me in the distance and came chasing after me.

"Where do you think you're going?" he shouted furiously as he grabbed me.

"I forgot my identification card proving that I live in the ghetto," I answered defensively. "I just went to get it."

The German, seeing through my transparent lie, gave me a ringing slap in the face and dragged me back to the interrogation, where we were told to present ourselves at the office of the camp commandant the next morning at eight o'clock.

Needless to say, I did not sleep a wink that night. Promptly at eight, we were all assembled in front of the commandant's building where we had been taken under the supervision of Jewish guards led by Silberman. Silberman reported to the commandant that he was bringing in twelve attempted escapees. Two Polish guards in black uniforms emerged, guns strapped to their belts. One positioned himself in front of us,

the other behind us. Then the commandant himself appeared.

With a quick wave of his thumb, he gave the command, "March!"

We followed the Polish guards, with the commandant trailing behind us on his bicycle. Panic-stricken, we whispered to each other, "They're going to shoot us. We've had it."

Conflicting thoughts raced through my mind. Is there still a chance of escaping? Forget it, I told myself. Just take one look at the armed guards surrounding you!

Our legs were shaking as we marched further and further away from the camp, the Angel of Death staring us in our faces. This is the end, I thought. No doubt about it.

Each of us reviewed his life, repented of his wrongdoings and prepared for the inevitable. We were still young. Some of us had wives and children. We had to accept Hashem's will with love.

At last, the command rang out, "Stop!"

The commandant ordered us to line up. He stepped out in front of us and thrust his hands in his pocket.

"You've tried to escape from this camp," he addressed us in cold, clipped words. "This is a serious crime. For this you deserve the death penalty."

I must admit I was scared. Soon, he'll squeeze the trigger, I thought, and the first victim will fall. Silently, I recited the words of the *Viduy* confession of sins. If only I wouldn't have to suffer much. I wondered when he was going to pull out his gun and start the execution. Then, thunderstruck and with wide-eyed surprise, we noticed that instead of a gun he pulled out a leather horsewhip. They weren't going to shoot us after all!

"Each of you will get twenty-five lashes!" the commandant continued.

He pulled the first man out of the line-up. The man began to stammer his lame excuses.

"Come on, bend over!" the German shouted.

With sadistic delight, he began flogging his defenseless victim. One . . . two . . . three . . . The poor fellow fell to the ground, writhing with pain. His heartrending screams stirred the commandant's thirst for blood, and he cracked his whip again, striking the man wildly on the head and face. When the commandant grew tired, the three Polish guards took over with visible relish.

Watching the spectacle, I was struck by the sheer inhumanity of it. But then I reasoned that it was a whole lot better than being shot to death. Still, it takes unusual toughness and fortitude to bear up under this kind of punishment. Figuring that the three goons would gradually grow tired, I slowly changed places, gradually moving further down the line until I ended up in the last position. But if Heaven has decreed something, there is no escape. Moving down the line, the brutal threesome did indeed become weary from administering the continuous beatings. But just as they were ready to slow down, out of nowhere there appeared a muscular, gorilla-like German hoodlum, strong as an ox, with a face reflecting sheer viciousness. Noting his comrades' fatigue, he volunteered to take over.

"Why don't you let me finish the job," he said, taking the horsewhip from their hands. "You fellows go and take a breather."

It just happened to be my turn to be whipped. Releasing all his pent-up sadism, he went to work on me, showing off his prowess to his exhausted buddies. I felt as though my skin was

being peeled off; my body was on fire. He whipped me with such force that he could not complete the twenty-five lashes, giving up at seventeen, completely out of breath. Throughout the ordeal I suppressed my cries, not uttering a sound, which made him livid with rage.

"*Er schreit doch gar nicht!*" he angrily halled out. "He isn't screaming!"

When it was all over, they ordered us back to work. I don't know how I made it through the rest of the day. Still, I was happy to be alive.

In spite of the painful outcome of my last escape attempt, I lost neither courage nor faith in Hashem. I was determined to find a way to break loose, in one way or another.

Living conditions in the camp deteriorated from day to day, especially with regard to the food. My brother Yossel would send me food parcels, mainly bread, but often he could not find people who would bring in the parcels from the ghetto. In addition, the overcrowding and intermingling of different kinds of people fostered unsanitary conditions which resulted in a loathsome plague of lice. It was this scourge, more than anything else, that drove me to do my utmost to find a way out of this filth.

I devised the following plan. A short time before, a friend of mine had been released from the hospital, and he still had the admission card issued by the camp doctor. I decided to use this card for my escape. The prospects for success were not good, since even a card-holder was not permitted to move about freely in the camp without a guard watching him, but it was better than nothing at all. I reasoned that most of the German and Polish guards were unfamiliar with these regulations and the same held true for the guards at the entrance gate. I counted on being able to pass their inspection without

too much difficulty. I took into account that staying in the camp held far greater risk.

The main problem, it seemed, was to get past the barbed wire enclosure, for there was one thing the camp guards knew very well—that no prisoner was to leave the camp grounds without a guard by his side.

I had a solution for this problem, too. In the labor camp, there was a special detail that worked outside the confines of the camp. Every day, the workers were driven to the work site accompanied by a Jewish guard named Kruger, whom I knew from Vizhnitz. I proposed to him that he take me along to work with his detail, reassuring him that even in the event I did not return, nothing would happen to him since all the men of his detail would be accounted for. I had in mind that once outside the camp I would catch the train to Cracow, since my bogus travel permit was still valid. I promised him a substantial reward for his cooperation, and he accepted the deal.

In the pre-dawn darkness, at wake-up time, I felt exhilarated. Today, I was going to be liberated! I joined Kruger's work detail, and went to the gate to be counted by the guards. One more minute and the gate would swing open. Suddenly, a Jewish guard named Gruenberg showed up.

"Hold it! Don't open the gate!" he told the gatekeeper. He shone his flashlight into everyone's face until he reached me. "Stop! Hold it right there! It's you I'm looking for."

I could not imagine how he had found out about my plan. I had kept it a deep secret, and except for my friend whose card I was using, no one had the slightest inkling of my plan. Could it be that Silberman, my arch-enemy, had been following me around? Had Kruger betrayed me?

Be that as it may, I was trapped once again. He'll probably

hand me over to the camp commandant who is surely going to shoot me dead, I thought, since he already spared my life once before. But even if he turned me over to the "black" Polish guards I would be beaten to within an inch of my life. Worst of all, I realized I was being pursued by bad luck; this was already my fifth failed escape attempt. Would I ever see an end to my troubles?

Now is not the time for self-pity, I admonished myself. I must *do* something. I made my move when Gruenberg, seeing that he had caught one fish, went to look for more would-be escapees. I slowly moved away from the work detail. But where should I go? Back to the barracks? Impossible! They'd find me within minutes. What should I do? I began to twitch like a chicken without a head.

Instinctively, I decided that I simply *had* to get out of this hell-hole, come what may. Either way I was a goner. I started running to the gate. The guards were busy checking all the work details rushing to work. Undetected, I sneaked to the barbed wire fence and scaled the wire, ripping my clothes and lacerating my legs. Blood ran down my legs, but I didn't even notice. As if possessed by a demon, I jumped down the other side. Down the road, I saw a group of workers marching in formation. It had to be Kruger's detail. I ran to catch up with them. They had only one more gate to pass through. When the workers noticed that a stranger had joined them they told Kruger about it. He came over to me.

"Sorry, I can't take you along," he said. "If I do, chances are that one of the workers will blow the whistle on me."

My voice shaking, I tried once more. "Come on, won't you let me come along anyhow?"

"Nothing doing!" he replied, lowering his eyes. "You've got to go back to the camp!"

I was cornered. Where could I turn? Back into the camp? A thousand times no. My mind was made up. I had to get out of this misery. I walked toward the outer barbed wire fence, the one that surrounded the entire camp, climbed it with my last ounce of strength, blood gushing from my wounds. I reached the top. I could smell the air of freedom, but I was not yet in the clear. Patrols of "black" guards circling the camp could shoot me on sight.

More thoughts raced through my head. If only I could get to a highway or any road at all. In front of me, I saw nothing but fields and pastures. My heart was pounding, my legs buckling. I was overcome with fright, as my lips repeated over and over, "*Ribono Shel Olam!* Please lead me on the right path and save me!"

Trudging laboriously through the freshly plowed fields, step by step, I finally came to a highway. But which way to turn, left or right? A mistake would land me right back in the camp again, for soon it would be daybreak and the guards would be able to spot me from a mile away. In the distance, I could make out a sprinkling of flickering lights. That must be Cracow.

Quickening my pace to get as far away as possible from the camp under the cover of night, I must have marched a mile or two, when suddenly I heard the clopping sound of horses pulling an approaching wagon. I went off the road, and peering into the carriage, I saw that the passenger was a well-dressed Polish gentleman.

"Sir, would you be good enough to give me a ride into the city?" I asked humbly.

"All right, hop in," the gentleman replied. He was truly an angel sent from Heaven.

On the way, we passed the main gate of the camp. I held

my breath, afraid that the guard might stop us to ask questions, but *baruch Hashem*, we passed without incident. Imagine, if this guard had suspected a Jew was passing him in this carriage, and an escaped Jew at that! For added insurance, since the sun was beginning to rise, I covered up my *Judenstern*, the yellow Jewish star on my jacket.

The Polish gentleman evidently had correctly assessed my situation.

"How come you're not afraid to travel around like this?" he asked me with unconcealed amazement.

I did not want to reveal my secret, fearing that he might report me to the police. I showed him my hospital admission card, and that ended the conversation.

After a thirty-minute ride, we arrived in downtown Cracow, where he suggested I get off since he was going in a different direction. I offered to pay him, but he graciously refused to accept payment. After thanking him from the bottom of my heart, I continued on my way.

The sun was already high in the sky, and I still had a long way to go. He had let me off on Lubitch Street, a distance of several miles from the ghetto. I was faced with a serious dilemma. Jews living in the ghetto were not permitted to be seen outside the ghetto except as members of a work detail under supervision of German or Polish guards, and here I was walking the Cracow streets all by myself, liable to be stopped and interrogated by any passing German or Pole which would mean certain death. I prayed to Hashem that He should help me to reach the ghetto safely.

Walking confidently so as not to arouse any suspicion, I reached the ghetto without encountering any obstacles. Now I faced my last hurdle before entering the ghetto—passing the checkpoint at the main gate. The guard there knew that

without a special permit, no Jew was allowed to walk around alone outside the ghetto.

Approaching the main gate at Zgadi Square, I noticed two Polish guards, a sight that made my hair stand on edge. My life hung in the balance. I'll need Hashem's protection so that they won't ask me too many questions, I thought tremulously, for if they catch me, my next stop will be the Auschwitz death factory. With a self-assured gait, I started to walk toward the checkpoint, holding the crumpled note I had received from my friend, ready to show it. Seeing me step forward so confidently, they assumed I must have a special permit. When I reached the gate and waved the permit in their faces, they did not even bother to look at it but motioned me to go on in. To me, it was truly a miracle.

At long last, I found myself inside the ghetto walls. It was seven-thirty in the morning. The square was swarming with people assembled for work details. Among the workers, I recognized the detail that came to work in our camp every day. Approaching them, I told them about my escape and handed one of them the permit, asking him to return it to my friend.

They, in turn, related to me what had happened in camp after my disappearance. Gruenberg, who arrested me at the gate during my escape attempt, gleefully reported the news to his boss Silberman. But when they came looking for me, they found that I had disappeared. All guards were sent on a search, but they came back empty-handed. On the assumption that I surely must be hiding somewhere on the camp grounds, they turned over the entire camp in an attempt to catch me. Ironically, while they were searching, I was having breakfast in the ghetto.

Silberman and Gruenberg could not get over the

disappointment of having their prey get away; it was beneath their dignity to admit such blatant failure. Trying to save face, they spread the rumor that I had been arrested by the camp guards and that I was already in the custody of the German police. My friends were deeply depressed; they knew only too well the meaning of this. However, during the lunch break, their sadness turned to joy when they learned the truth from the workers I had met in the ghetto. Here was tangible proof of the lies and deceptions Silberman was trying to foist on them in an attempt to cool his anger and save his reputation.

From Zgadi Square I went straight to my brother Yossel's apartment. He was staying in the ghetto for the sole purpose of helping me while I was in the camp. I lack the words to describe our happiness when we met; after so many fruitless attempts, I had lived to be reunited with him. I sent a telegram to my mother in Bochnia, letting her know about my escape. Of course, I could not go there, since the Bochnia apartment was the first place the police would come looking for me.

Staying in the ghetto was also fraught with danger. I was likely to be arrested before long, since I had no residency permit. The Jewish police often conducted searches, since many escapees were hiding out with relatives. Besides, the camp guards occasionally visited the ghetto, and they might find me.

I had some pull with Shimon Spitz, the well-known official who worked for the Gestapo. Spitz had sent thousands of Jews to their deaths, but he had recently wanted to make amends. He arranged to have a Gestapo seal placed on my Bochnia residency paper which made it legal for me to stay in the Cracow ghetto.

The next several weeks, I stayed in Cracow, until one day I received a telegram from my mother urging me to come

home. Concerned about her well-being, I left immediately. However, the telegram turned out to be merely a mother's ploy to bring her son home. Noting that lately no one had come to look for me, and since generally things were more quiet in Bochnia, she had sent the telegram to induce me to return there.

Back in the labor camp, Silberman continued his ruthless regime, but not for long. His best friends informed against him, reporting that he traded in foreign currencies, which happened to be true. On his frequent visits to Cracow, he engaged in this kind of business, amassing a great deal of money in the process. The camp commandant launched an investigation, and in a search of Silberman's living quarters, incriminating evidence was found. The Germans put him on trial and executed him. Soon thereafter, the camp itself was dissolved, and all inmates were sent to Auschwitz.

A short time after the Belzer Rebbe's escape from the Cracow ghetto, the Germans issued a decree ordering the entire ghetto population, young and old, without exception, to leave the ghetto. Included were also the members of the Jewish police and the Jewish Gestapo lackeys. Cracow was to become *Judenrein*, free of Jews. The Jews were to be housed in the wooden barracks that had been erected at the outskirts of the city. People were directed to present themselves at the main gate at the appointed time where they found Jewish, German and Polish policemen waiting for them. After being loaded on trucks, they were transported to the barracks of a camp, cynically called Jerusalemska. Adding insult to injury, the Germans erected the majority of the barracks on the grounds of the new Jewish cemetery after removing the gravestones.

On the day of the expulsion, the only thing the Jews were permitted to take with them was a knapsack with some food. The knapsacks were carefully examined to make sure no children were hidden in them. The camp was meant only for able-bodied people who could be put to work. Children had to be left back on the road, where they were gathered up by the Germans. The scene of parents forced to leave their small children behind was heartrending; they knew that their little ones were doomed to die. The wailing and shrieking of the fathers and mothers could make one's heart bleed, but not the hearts of the bloodthirsty German beasts. There were those who refused to be separated; they were killed along with their children. My sister-in-law, unable to part from her only child, placed herself among the children and was shot together with the children.

On this fateful day, the once proud Jewish community of Cracow came to an end. For many hundreds of years, it had been a vibrant center of Torah study, charity and acts of kindness. It vanished without leaving a trace. Twenty thousand Jews were transferred to this camp where their number dwindled from day to day at the hand of the *Lagerfuhrer*, Commandant Goett, a sadistic monster who was eventually tried as a war criminal and hanged. The remaining Jews in the camp were taken to the gas chambers in Auschwitz.

CHAPTER 21

Trouble upon Trouble

NOW THAT I WAS BACK IN BOCHNIA, I LIVED IN CONSTANT fear of being caught and sent back to the camp. The members of the Judenrat and the Jewish police were well aware that I had been carried off to a labor camp, and seeing me here in the ghetto would undoubtedly arouse their suspicion. But I learned to live with anxiety, and with the hope that everything would somehow turn out well in the end.

Just when things seemed to settle down somewhat, disaster struck again. A few days after my arrival in Bochnia, we heard from Binyamin Landau, a friend of the family, that someone had tipped off the Germans that Yossel was dealing in foreign currencies—which in fact was true. The informer was the notorious Shmuel Brodman, whose denunciations

had caused the deaths of thousands of people. Brodman held an official position with the *Devisenstelle*, the Bureau of Trade in Foreign Exchange in Cracow, and as was so common among betrayers of his kind, he eventually met his violent end when he was shot by a German officer whom he had served faithfully for a number of years.

From our sources, we learned the exact time Herr Werner, the head of this Bureau, was due to arrive in Bochnia to arrest Yossel. It was to be on Friday. Anticipating his imminent arrival, we decided to eat our *Shabbos* meal during the day. We had hardly seated ourselves around the table when we saw Werner's car pass our house on its way to the Judenrat building. Any moment now, the Jewish police would come barging in. It was time for us to make a quick exit.

We left our table, and without losing a second, we were outside. They were actually coming only to get Yossel. From my own experience, however, I knew that if they didn't take Yossel they were likely to take me in his place, so I was forced to join him in flight. We reasoned that they would not take our mother, an elderly lady, and leave my two-year-old daughter unattended in the house.

We ran silently through the lengthening shadows, giving a wide berth to the Judenrat building which was close by. According to plan, we headed straight for the home of Abba Rosenzweig, a childhood friend of mine who lived nearby, where we would hide out until we found a way to escape from their clutches. Abba and his wife welcomed us graciously and offered us the room in the back of the house.

Meanwhile, the sun began to set, *Shabbos* drew near, and we prepared to *daven Minchah*. Just as we concluded the *tefillah*, Mrs. Rosenzweig entered and told us that she had just received a visit from Dr. Rosen, the chief of the Jewish police,

accompanied by a Jewish policeman named Feder.

"Is Friedman in your house, by any chance?" Dr. Rosen had asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she had replied calmly, without blinking an eye. "He's not here."

They had evidently believed her, because they left without searching the house. Somehow, however, they had made the connection between us and Rosenzweig, and there was a real possibility that they might return. We decided to move down into the cellar, thinking that they would not search there.

In the cold and dark cellar, we sang *Kabbalas Shabbos*, after which we ate the savory meal our hostess brought down for us. Spending *Shabbos* as fugitives hiding underground added a bitter taste and dampened our spirits considerably. We stretched out on a few boards and tried to get some sleep, but suddenly, there was a scraping sound and Mrs. Rosenzweig came down the stairs.

"I'm afraid they'll come back, and if they find you we'll all be killed," she whispered in a trembling voice. "Please understand, I'm asking you to have mercy on us and leave. The Judenrat people know you are a good friend of ours, and they are sure to come and search our house."

We assured her that we understood completely, and then we slipped out of the cellar. For a while, we just sat in a darkened corner of the courtyard, not knowing where to turn. We climbed across the fence into the adjacent courtyard hoping to spot a hiding place there, but all we could find was an outhouse, which was liable to be used at any time—not a good hiding place. But as we drew closer, we noticed a small crawl space above the outhouse, and we squeezed into it. The cold was bone-chilling. To make matters worse, a sudden

downpour soaked us to the skin. What would become of us? We surely could not stay there after daybreak. We had no alternative but to ask to be allowed back into the dark cellar.

The night went by peacefully. In the morning, after we stretched our aching limbs, my friend Rosenzweig appeared and told us that all through the night the police, on orders from Werner, had searched the homes of all our friends and relatives. My mother and my brother Shimon had been taken hostage, notwithstanding that the little child was left alone in the house and Shimon was an amputee. How could they do a thing like this? We were dumfounded and completely unnerved by the news. How could Mother withstand all the torment? Also, the thought that they had made an all-out effort to catch us struck a deep fear in our hearts.

I got in touch with Moshe Schoenfeld, a man we could trust, and he kept us abreast of the situation. At the close of *Shabbos*, Schoenfeld told us that the hunt was still in progress while at the same time, the Germans were pressuring my mother and brother to reveal our hiding place. They, of course, had no idea of where we were hiding, since we had never discussed our plans with them.

We finally decided that Yossel would go to Cracow, which at the time had not yet been liquidated. After all, how long could he hope to stay hidden in the cellar? In Cracow, on the other hand, he could easily blend into the crowds and disappear. But getting out of Bochnia would not be easy. According to Schoenfeld, a special policeman had been posted at the station to arrest me in the event that I tried to leave Bochnia by train.

Somehow, I made it back to my house to remove all our hidden valuables, gold, diamonds and foreign currency. I took the entire treasure with me to the cellar where I divided

it evenly with Yossel; so that if one of us would get caught, at least something would be saved.

In preparation for the trip, Yossel removed his yellow *Judenstern*, a "crime " punishable by death, and after a tearful good-bye, he went on his way.

A few days later, I received a letter in which he wrote that he had made it safely to Cracow. He did recognize the Jewish policeman Shlomo Greiber stationed on the platform, but since he mingled with the Poles—not wearing his Jew patch—Greiber paid no attention to him.

The Germans had good reason for selecting Greiber for this assignment. They knew that they could rely on him to do his job and not accept a bribe the way other policemen would. His cowering loyalty to the Germans bordered on insanity, to the extent that during the first extermination *Aktion* in Bochnia he personally led his sickly aged parents to the trucks to be transported to Botchkov where they were machine-gunned and hurled into a mass grave while still alive. He also placed his teen-aged son and daughter on the train to be taken to the Belzec death camp.

"It won't hurt them a bit to do a little work for the German Reich," the callous Greiber had said. "Nothing is going to happen to them." Greiber's actions convinced hundreds of Jews to voluntarily join the transports that were going to take them to "work."

I was happy to hear that Yossel was relatively safe. Now our entire family was scattered about—my mother and my brother Shimon in prison; my brother Yossel in Cracow; my infant daughter at home, being cared for by Shimon's wife; and I sitting here in the icy, dark cellar, living in constant fear, numb with cold. For the first time in my life, I was dependent on others to sustain me. It was a chastening experience to say

the least. The Rosenzweigs tried to make my stay as comfortable as possible, seeing to it that I lacked nothing. Still, the situation was precarious. We prayed for Hashem to have mercy on us.

CHAPTER 22

The Second Raid

AFTER THE FIRST EXTERMINATION *AKTION*, ONLY A FEW hundred Jews remained in Bochnia. Over the following three months, however, their number gradually increased to five thousand, due to an influx of people from other ghettos that had been liquidated. Bochnia had a reputation of being a "favorable" place; compared to other cities, its SS men were more "humane." One could talk to them, and for a price, one could get them to do favors, and even when orders for an extermination *Aktion* came straight from Berlin, the killing did not reach an unbridled climax—if they had been paid off.

Rumors to the effect that another *Aktion* was in the offing created panic among the ghetto population, and the conflicting versions were the main topic of conversation. The

wounds of the first *Aktion* were still fresh, and an atmosphere of foreboding pervaded the ghetto. I was not sure what to believe, but to be on the safe side, I decided to prepare a bunker for the Rosenzweigs and myself, for once the *Aktion* was blazing, it would be too late for that.

Building a bunker while being locked up in a dark cellar presented a problem. My solution was to build it underneath the cellar. The Rosenzweigs procured the necessary materials and tools, and I buckled down to work. During the daylight hours, I was busy excavating, while at night, the Rosenzweigs carried the dirt into the courtyard, spreading it around evenly so as not to arouse suspicion that a bunker was being constructed. Things like that were best kept secret.

Digging in the cramped cellar was not easy; nevertheless, after a few days of work the job was done. The bunker was fairly small, five and a half feet long, three feet wide and six feet deep. I left some earth along the wall to serve as a bench and installed a ladder for getting in and out. I covered the floor of the cellar with ashes from the furnace to make it look uniform. For the ceiling I used boards, leaving a man-size opening for an entrance. The boards were covered with earth and a thin layer of ashes on top to blend with the ashes on the floor of the cellar, making the bunker almost impossible to detect. A few more boards I scattered on the roof of the bunker to dampen the resonance created by walking on the hollow space of the bunker. For added safety, I built a large pile of lumber, tying a cord around it that could be pulled from inside the bunker, so that after we were in the bunker, we could yank the cord, causing the pile to come crashing down on the bunker entrance. A final test-run proved the effectiveness of the system. Although I was quite proud of my engineering feat, I gladly would have done without it.

Dark clouds were gathering; things were coming to a head. No doubt about it, the *Aktion* was imminent. My bunker gave me a semblance of security, but I could not relax knowing that my mother and Shimon were held captive in the Judenrat building and that, as a rule, prisoners were the first victims of any *Aktion*.

The ghetto was buzzing with rumors. The *Aktion* was only a few hours off. Throwing caution to the wind, I left the cellar and went to the Judenrat to try to have my mother and brother released. It was early in the morning, the streets were quiet, and except for Jewish policemen patrolling the ghetto, not a sound could be heard. I was frightened, but I kept my mind focused on saving my mother and brother.

In front of the Judenrat building, I saw workers and their dependents being loaded on a truck to be taken to safety until after the *Aktion*. They were escorted by Simchah Weiss of the Judenrat, under the watchful eyes of an SS sergeant.

I approached Weiss and tearfully implored him to have pity on my mother and brother.

"I give you my word," I promised him, "that after the *Aktion* is over they will come back voluntarily."

"Nothing doing," he answered callously, his words piercing my heart like a dagger.

As I was speaking to Weiss, Dr. Rosen, the chief of the Jewish police, suddenly emerged.

"Ah, there you are!" he pounced on me. "You're the one we've been looking for."

I trembled like a leaf. Now I'm doomed, I thought. Rosen was a vile character, but I had never believed he would stoop this low. There was no chance of escape, since the SS man standing next to him would surely grab me. Hoping against hope, I pleaded with him to let me go, not to send me to a

certain death. My supplications must have touched his heart, for unbelievable as it may sound, he let go of me and turned away.

I recognized that any attempt at saving my mother was doomed to failure. I would simply wind up in the cell along with her. Returning to the bunker, I found my sister-in-law waiting anxiously, worrying that the worst had happened to me.

We now began preparing in all seriousness, and after moving provisions, candles and blankets into the bunker, we settled down for a stay of a few days until the storm would blow over. My baby daughter received a sedative since her crying might betray us. But the thought of Mother and Shimon in prison haunted me; would I ever see them again? I had done all that was humanly possible, not hesitating to risk my life. Now Heaven had to rescue them.

The bunker was shut tightly. At first, the candles provided some light, but after a few hours, the air became so stifling that they went out, leaving us in total darkness. We went into a fit each time we heard steps outside, thinking the Germans were coming to get us.

After thirty-six hours in the bunker, we began to hear people moving about in the street, talking to each other, a sure sign that the *Aktion* had run its course. I slipped out of our hiding place and went out into the street where I saw the workers returning to their homes. Without wasting a minute, I rushed over to the Judenrat building to find, much to my surprise, that Mother and Shimon were alive, although Mother's health was in a precarious state. She was not in her cell but lying in critical condition in an adjacent building.

Slowly, I learned the details of how they had survived the ordeal of the *Aktion*. It had been a terrible *Aktion*, although

a much smaller one had been expected. People with connections to the SS had insisted that Bochnia would be spared, since it had been arranged with the SS that any *Aktion* that might be launched would be only a sham. Indeed, this may have been the reason Landau assured me on the night before the *Aktion* that no harm would come to anyone. But once the *Aktion* was under way things got out of hand. Hundreds of people were killed at random, and most of the ghetto population was carried off to the gas chambers in open freight cars. After the *Aktion* was over, the streets ran red with blood and were littered with bodies and human limbs, *yarmulkas, tzitzis* and personal effects. It was a ghastly sight. And this was supposed to be a "mild" *Aktion*, compared to the first one.

When Shimon heard of the impending *Aktion*, he did not sit still but built something like a bunker right there in the basement where they were locked up. He found a pile of heavy boards which he stacked up against a wall, leaving an empty space underneath. With his one good hand, he then proceeded to break all the door locks, making it appear as though they had broken out, so that the Germans would not look for them inside. The two of them survived by hiding beneath the boards for the two days of the *Aktion*. However, upon emerging from the bunker, Mother succumbed to the aftereffects of two days of sheer terror without food or drink and fell into a coma, hovering between life and death. Since there was no decent bed in the basement jail, the police agreed to have her transferred to a neighboring house.

My brother Pesachyah and his three children survived by hiding in the same bunker they had used during the first *Aktion*. We were elated that, unlike during the previous *Aktion*, this time our entire family had lived through the

deadly raid. After recovering somewhat, Mother was returned to the prison.

However, our happiness was shortlived; in fact, it lasted no more than one day.

Since Shimon had broken all the locks he could not be kept in the Judenrat cellar for fear that he might escape. Instead, they kept him in an office under constant police guard. During the night, other people who had been taken into custody were brought into this office. Among them were two teenage boys who had been working for the Gestapo in Cracow. These boys burglarized the cabinet of the Judenrat office, carrying off all the treasures that were kept there, such as tea, coffee, sugar, cocoa and wine. In the morning, when Dr. Weiss, the Judenrat boss, discovered the burglary, he ordered an investigation. All the people being held in the office were severely beaten, but no one confessed to the crime. Shimon's defense of having been under constant police guard did not convince them. Weiss was furious. He sentenced the two boys from the Gestapo to be shot to death, insisting that it was only they who could have pulled off the burglary. Fuming with rage, he included Shimon with the burglars, condemning him to death as well.

I did not know what had transpired, but Binyamin Landau, our family friend, told me that Shimon had been sentenced to death. I refused to believe it; I could not imagine why he deserved to be shot. However, in the afternoon, when I brought their meals, the reality struck me with full force.

"Shimon has been taken away," Mother informed me. "I don't know where they've taken him or why he was moved."

I didn't tell Mother what I had heard, but my thoughts were in a turmoil. What could I do to save Shimon?

On my way home, I saw Dr. Rosen, escorted by two

policemen. The policemen approached me.

"We have orders from Dr. Rosen to arrest you," they said.

I had no choice but to come along. In the courtyard of the Judenrat building, I met Binyamin Landau.

"Could you find out why they're holding me?" I asked him. "And please try to get me out of this mess."

"Don't worry," he replied. "It doesn't mean a thing."

Before long I found myself in the same cellar with Mother.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I wish I knew," I answered, sighing.

Shimon was not there any more, but I could hear him screaming with pain from the brutal thrashing he was getting at the hands of a Jewish guard from the Plashow camp who just happened to be in the ghetto. His shrieks were heartrending. The situation was desperate. Who was there to intervene for me, Mother or Shimon? Who was going to take care of my little daughter? What if they included me with the burglary suspects? I was caught in a trap; there was nothing I could do.

A short while later, Dr. Rosen entered and scrutinized the twenty or so prisoners. He stopped in front of me.

"Go on home," he said. "I don't want to have you on my conscience."

These words gave me an indication that I had been slated for execution along with the others. I said an aching good-bye to Mother and went home. Only then did I find out what had transpired.

After my arrest, Shimon's wife had hurried over to Binyamin Landau and told him about my capture. Knowing of the planned shootings, he gathered why I had been arrested. He rushed over to the Judenrat and explained to the

officials that I was completely innocent of any wrongdoing. Since he was on good terms with them, his intercession worked, and Rosen let me go. Thus did Landau save my life. (Unfortunately, this compassionate and kindhearted person eventually perished in the concentration camps.)

As soon as I was free, I tried to find out about Shimon's fate. The news was bad. The guards at the ghetto told me, "About half an hour ago, they led Shimon through the gate and transferred him to the German police." I felt as though someone had hit me over the head. I knew this meant death.

It was already dark, but I still tried to do something, anything at all to save his life. But it was in vain; no one was willing to help me. It was almost midnight when I met Landau. I pleaded with him to have mercy on Shimon and his expectant wife. He promised to do all he could, and I stayed home hoping for good news. An hour later, Landau came back empty-handed. He had tried everything, but the Germans absolutely refused to release Shimon. My brother's fate was sealed.

The following morning—it was Friday, the 4th of Shevat, 1943—the Germans took Shimon to the cemetery where they murdered him. I simply could not bring myself to convey the appalling news to my mother and his wife, but they found out somehow. Mother was devastated but accepted his death as a divine decree and sat *shivah* in the Judenrat prison.

Gradually, Mother's health improved, but there was no chance of getting her released, no matter how hard I tried. The officials at the Judenrat argued that if Werner had personally ordered her arrest only he could order her release. Not until six weeks later was she released.

CHAPTER 23

Yossel Is Arrested

WHEN MOTHER CAME HOME FROM PRISON, I WAS jubilant. Our joy was all the greater since it seemed the police also had dropped the case against Yossel. But our joy was premature. Early one Friday morning before breakfast, we received a visit from Guter, the messenger of the Judenrat.

"You are to come along with me to the Judenrat," he ordered.

When I entered the office of Judenrat Chief Weiss, I found him relaxing on his couch over a breakfast consisting of fresh buttered rolls and a steaming cup of hot chocolate, a luxurious meal during the war years. And why shouldn't he? At the expense of the tormented Jews, he could allow himself to live like a king. With Weiss was a stocky German in civilian

clothes who addressed me in a heavy Bavarian dialect.

"*Wie heisst du?*" he asked. "What's your name?"

I gave him my name.

"Where do you work?"

I went weak in the knees. Was this the camp commander of Rakowitz, the labor camp from which I had escaped? He certainly resembled him. I tried telling him that I was registered with the local labor detail. He asked Weiss to verify my answer, which, of course, he did not.

"*Warum hast du mich angelogen?*" he demanded. "Why did you lie to me?" Without waiting for an answer he slapped me good and hard to almost make me lose my balance. Then he asked, "Do you know somebody by the name of Tannenbaum?"

All of a sudden, everything became clear. Putting two and two together, I surmised that Yossel had probably been arrested, since Tannenbaum had business dealings with him.

"*Jawohl*," I replied. "Yes, I do."

"Do you know where he lives?"

"*Nein*," I replied. "No."

"How come?" the German wondered. "After all, he's a friend of yours, and he has visited your home many times."

"I've never had anything to do with him," I said.

Each question was accompanied by a dose of kicking, smacking and pounding. He was quite skilled at inflicting punishment, so much so that with his first beating he knocked out most of my teeth and sent me flying clear across the room. Witnessing the scene, aside from Weiss, were Rosen, who later was appointed head of the Judenrat, and his wife.

"If you don't tell the truth you'll be shot," they kept warning me as they stood alongside the German.

I stubbornly kept my mouth shut, knowing what would result from my disclosures; this was one thing I did not want

to have on my conscience. Seeing that he was not making any headway with me, the German instructed Rosen to have Tannenbaum brought in at once. (Apparently, he had known Tannenbaum's whereabouts all along, and he had only wanted to determine the extent of my involvement with him.) Meanwhile, the police arrested my mother and several people from Melitz, Tannenbaum's home town, for the purpose of interrogating them. When they all stated unequivocally that they did not know where Tannenbaum lived, the German ordered them put behind bars. And so my mother was back in the same prison she had left just a short while before.

Turning to me, the German asked, "Do you know where your brother Joseph is?"

"No," I said.

"Do you keep up a correspondence with him?"

"No," was my firm reply.

He then pulled out a letter written in Hebrew from his briefcase and held it under my nose.

"Tell me, who wrote this letter?" he asked.

This time I could not deny it; my signature was there to prove it, black on white.

"Yes," I said. "I wrote this letter."

"Then why did you lie?"

He went at it again, punching and kicking without letup. By now, I recognized him as Werner, the head of the *Devisenstelle*, the Bureau of Trade in Foreign Exchange, a notorious brute who with his beatings could break down the strongest man to elicit secret information concerning currency transactions. Indeed, for some of his victims, the prospect of being shot didn't scare them half as much as the prospect of being beaten and forced to reveal information that would destroy friends and family, something worse than death.

As I stood there in the middle of this hellish scene, I was filled with despair. All the beatings I had endured were nothing compared to the distress I felt on learning that Yossel had been captured and a bitter fate awaited him.

Meanwhile, Rosen entered and reported that he was bringing in Tannenbaum and his wife. I was led to the jail in the basement where I found my mother.

"Woe is to us," she moaned. "Look what became of us. Yossel has been caught by the Germans. Who knows if he's still alive?"

I knew full well that Yossel was in deep trouble, since the informer had linked him to the most prominent currency dealers. Nevertheless, I encouraged Mother, telling her that Yossel would find a way to wriggle out of it.

A few hours later, a policeman read off the names of the people who had been released by Werner. Everyone went home, including Mother. Only I had to remain in jail. I was happy that at least my mother was free, and I felt confident that some day I, too, would be delivered from this misery.

I tidied up the basement to make it a little more liveable. Mother brought me delicious food for *Shabbos*, a blanket, a *Gemara* and *Shabbos* candles. In a way, I felt I was in Gan Eden. What more could I ask for? I even had a guest for *Shabbos*, a man who was arrested for stealing. I *davened Maariv*, ate my Friday night meal and bedded down on the hard board, falling into a deep sleep, exhausted as I was from Werner's beating.

No sooner had I fallen asleep than the squeaky sound of a key opening the door lock woke me up. A few more prisoners were brought in, but because of the dark I could not tell who they were. As the night wore on, we were joined by more and more prisoners. Among the voices in the dark, I

recognized that of an acquaintance of mine, Lebovitz from Cracow.

"Hey, is that you, Lebovitz?" I asked.

"Yes."

"What brings you here?"

"Believe me, I have no idea."

Eight more prisoners were added to our cell, while several women were placed into the adjoining room. From time to time, one of the prisoners was taken out, to return after a while, his face beaten beyond recognition. Upstairs in the Judenrat, they were being interrogated in the presence of Simchah Shapiro, the Cracow district head of the Jewish police, a faithful lackey of the Germans, a man who sent thousands of Jews to their death.

As I found out later, the new prisoners were suspected of belonging to an underground partisan movement engaged in recruiting new members in the ghetto. The members were furnished Aryan papers, enabling them to escape during an *Aktion*. Shapiro, having been tipped off, arrested the members of the underground unit and interrogated them in an attempt to make them divulge the names of other members. As usual, the investigation was conducted by means of savage beatings which left the victims more dead than alive. The agonizing screams could be heard from a distance. After the interrogation, it took two policemen to drag the unfortunates back to the prison cell. Friends and relatives of the victims crowded around the small window of the basement prison, reassuring them that they were pulling strings to get them released. But the prisoners knew better, no one ever emerged alive from Shapiro's claws.

Sure enough, at eight o'clock in the morning, the voice from hell in the person of Simchah Shapiro called out.

"*Alle heraus!*" he shouted. "Everyone outside!"

This was the dreaded phrase used by the SS during the *Aktion*. Through the small window, we could see a bus waiting to take the prisoners away. Two policemen came in to lead them outside while I was trembling with fear lest they include me in the transport as well. They spared me and my first partner of the night, the suspected thief, locking the door as they left.

A few minutes later, the door opened again and a policeman summoned my cellmate to come along. He tried to resist, knowing where he was being taken, but it was useless; he had to go. Now I really got scared, realizing that they were not taking only political offenders. Only when seeing the bus depart could I breathe a little more easily. As I found out later, the prisoners were taken to Cracow where every last one of them was murdered.

And so I was all alone again. The days went by, and I saw no chance of extricating myself from the trap I was in. Mother ran from one wheeler-dealer to the other, since I was truly innocent of any wrongdoing. They put in a good word for me with Werner.

"As far as I'm concerned," Werner finally declared, "he is free to go."

And indeed, a few days later a Polish policeman entered my cell and told me, "You may go home now. You're a free man."

The joy that accompanied my release was dampened by our uncertainty about Yossel's fate. I made a concerted effort to learn his whereabouts, hoping to be able to intervene on his behalf.

After a great deal of effort, I learned that one afternoon, as Yossel was walking along the Cracow ghetto streets, a

Jewish policeman stopped him and instructed him to follow him to the police station. It seems that Brodman, the well-known informer, had betrayed him to the Germans. The Belzer Rebbe, who at that time was residing in the ghetto, was just then having a meeting with the two arch-villains Simchah Shapiro, chief of the Jewish police, and Shimon Spitz, an official in the political section of the Gestapo. The Rebbe used this meeting to intercede on Yossel's behalf.

"If you'll let him go free, I won't forget it," he told Spitz. "And I'll remember you forever."

But they turned the Rebbe down. "It's too late, nothing can be done any more," they replied harshly, implying that he was not alive any more.

This was a crude lie, for when the police led Yossel out of the ghetto to hand him over to the Germans, Shapiro personally escorted him to the gate to make sure Yossel would not slip away. During the investigation, they found that Yossel had Aryan papers, a crime far more serious than trading in foreign currencies. The beating he was subjected to went far beyond human endurance. The Bochnia and Cracow ghettos were buzzing with rumors that Yossel was no more. There were people who wanted to "cheer me up" with details of his tragic death. One version had him burned alive in a fiery furnace, another "eyewitness" reported seeing his bullet-riddled body being buried in the Cracow-Padgursz cemetery.

People deeply mourned his passing, since he was beloved by all circles for his charitable, kindhearted deeds and his honest and astute business dealings. And of course, he was an upright and pious *chassid.* I did my best to conceal these reports from Mother and to calm her and reassure her that Yossel would surely come home soon.

Personally, I did not lend much credence to the various stories, and I continued my search for his whereabouts. My efforts bore fruit, and I found out that he was being held in the most dreaded prison in Cracow, the Mantilupa fortress. Now I plunged head and shoulders into working for him, but it was useless. He was imprisoned in the political wing, which was headed by a German who could not be approached at any price. I was ready to spend a great deal of money, but nothing could be worked out.

Meanwhile, rumors about his death continued to circulate, but they were laid to rest when seven weeks later I received a letter from Yossel from Mantilupi Prison in which he asked for any kind of food and specifically for warm underwear and outer garments. The letter, which was in Yossel's handwriting, came as a complete surprise to me, for although I did not believe any of the rumors, a sense of doubt had begun to creep in that perhaps there was something to these tales after all. And now I had undeniable proof that "*od Yosef chai*," that Yossel was still alive. I quickly made a package of the desired articles and sent it with a trusted messenger to Cracow.

With documented evidence in hand that Yossel was still alive, I tried to convince all the people with the right connections to intercede for him. Unfortunately, it was futile, and except for this one letter, I never received another communication from him. After the war, I heard from a friend of Yossel's who was with him in Auschwitz that he had been assigned to an *Arbeitskommando*, a labor detail, and had worked in a coal mine, where he was killed in an unknown manner.

After Yossel's arrest, Mother was overcome with profound grief, becoming a pale shadow of her former self.

"Yossel is gone . . . Shimon is gone . . ." she would moan plaintively. This was her third child whose life had been taken by the Germans. Nevertheless, she consoled herself with the hope that she would see him again some day.

CHAPTER 24

The Ghetto of the Living

JUST WHEN IT SEEMED THAT THINGS COULD NOT GET worse, the situation deteriorated even more with the appointment of Captain Muller as the new camp commandant. Wanting to be innovative, Muller decreed that all Jews, men and women alike, would have to work. Those unable to work—the aged, infirm and children—would be separated. Workers were to live in Ghetto One, non-workers in Ghetto Two.

Without delay, a fence was erected dividing the ghetto into two sections, and guards were stationed all along the fence to prevent anyone from crossing over. One did not need to be told the meaning of Ghetto Two. Everyone knew that Germans didn't waste food on unproductive people; such people were expendable.

The new decree threw the small ghetto population into a panic. Everyone went looking for work. The general anxiety provided the Judenrat people with a wonderful opportunity to fill their coffers, and the price they charged for a job rose from day to day. Long lines would begin to form early in the morning in front of the Judenrat building. People would wait for hours on end to get any kind of job. But it was well worth it, for it meant residing in the "Ghetto of the Living."

Aside from the all-pervasive fear, the new decree created a great deal of confusion, since many people living in Ghetto One were forced to move to Ghetto Two and vice versa. On the other hand, if one family member was employed, the entire family was permitted to live in Ghetto One.

Our apartment happened to be located in Ghetto One, but since no one in the family held a job, we knew we would have to move to Ghetto Two. Needless to say, I abhorred the prospect of living there because of the ultimate fate in store for its inhabitants. Deep in my heart, I was convinced that the Germans would annihilate both ghettos, but not wanting to swim against the current, I applied for a job in order to retain the right to remain in Ghetto One. I hoped that my mother and my daughter would also be allowed to stay on my account. Ironically, I, who had always avoided any form of heavy labor, was now forced to seek it. And it was not easy to find a job. People with better connections had taken all the local jobs, and by the time my turn came, only one kind of job was left.

In the village of Domienitz near Bochnia, one hundred men were needed for a *Kommando*, a labor detail, to cut down timber. I was not too anxious to do this kind of heavy labor outdoors all day in the freezing cold. But if one has no choice one takes anything one can get—and even for this job I had to

pay a pretty penny. On the basis of my working papers, I received a residency permit for Ghetto One for myself, my mother and my daughter.

On the first day of work, we gathered at the station and received a monthly railroad ticket. We waited and waited, but there was no train. We assumed it was because there was heavy snow covering the tracks. Seeing that no train was coming, the foreman announced, "Since our work site is only about five and a half miles away from here, I suggest that anyone wanting to do so should go on foot."

Part of the group refused to walk and went home. Although diligence is not one of my outstanding qualities, I reasoned that on the first day I'd better not show myself as being lazy. We began to march. It was cold enough to make your teeth chatter, but pacing along we warmed up a bit. (This march would prove to be extremely helpful a year later when I saved my life using this route.)

Plodding through fields and forests, we arrived at our site. The foreman stepped up onto a stump and began to make a speech. "The work you are going to do in this forest is for the SS. Therefore, you must work with dedication and appear on time every morning. Be sure never to be late or miss a day's work."

A fine speech, I thought, but I don't care. I'll do what's best for me.

We were divided into teams and assigned specific tasks. Each team was made up of five men—two men to saw the tree, one man with an ax to make sure the tree fell in the right direction, one man to peel off the bark and the fifth man to measure the felled tree and mark the dimensions on it. The foreman handed out the implements, and everyone chose the tool he liked best. Since I did not like any of them, I was

in no hurry and waited until everyone had selected his tool. By then, there was no tool left for me. I joined a team of five men, and since I was carrying no tool, my presence was useless; I was "the sixth wheel," but I didn't care.

We were lined up and marched through the dense snow-covered forest. Our march took quite a long time, the biting cold freezing our hands and feet. Suddenly, we heard the sputtering sound of a motorcycle coming up behind us. Two German policemen! We were seized with deadly terror. Now it dawned on us, "That's why they brought us deep into this forest! They are going to finish us off."

The policemen ordered us to stop. They got off the motorcycle. We recognized one of them. It was Bogusch, the German who carried out all the executions in Bochnia. He has been overheard to boast, "I get my biggest kick out of killing Jews."

Seeing this monster, we gave up all hope. Everyone prepared for the worst, standing there in deathly silence. What was going to happen to us? Bogusch pulled out a sheet of paper from his briefcase and called out the name of one of the Jews.

"Is he here?" he barked.

"Yes," the foreman replied, ordering the man to step forward.

The two policemen grabbed him, placed him on their motorcycle and rode off.

Although our worst fears had not materialized, the entire incident left us in a state of shock. On our return trip, some Polish lumberjacks, who also worked in this forest, told us that in the morning two German policemen had brought a Jew along with them. They told the Jew to dig a hole, and when he was done, they told him to undress. Then they shot

him and threw his body into the hole. It seems that the Jew had given all his belongings for safekeeping to a Polish acquaintance of his. But when he needed some money and asked the Pole to give it to him, the Pole had denounced him to the Germans. The lumberjacks gave us the murdered man's clothes and showed us where he was buried. Horrified, some of us broke down in tears. Someone said *Kaddish*, and then we went home, each of us absorbed in his private thoughts.

This was my first day on the lumber *Kommando*. The following day, I did not go to work; I had had my fill from the first day. But ultimately, I had no alternative but to go back to the job, especially since the work was supervised by the SS.

The work was very tough. First, we were outdoors all day long, without even a drop of warm water to thaw our frozen limbs, and even worse, while sawing we had to get down right into the deep snow. Second, there was the ever-present danger of falling trees; it happened more than once that workers were injured by falling timber and narrowly escaped losing their lives. But worst of all was the SS guard, a barbarian with a frightfully vicious facial expression, who always circulated among the laborers, supervising their work. In the beginning, he would show people how to swing an ax or hold a planing tool, since obviously he was an expert forester. Every day, he would check to make sure that each team had cut its quota, and if he found anything not to his liking, he would vent his wrath on the workers; indeed, he was even better at giving beatings than at felling trees.

My team, too, was privileged to get a taste of his handiwork. One day, he suddenly came up behind us.

"Well, how much did you produce today?" he asked in a mean snarl.

Understandably, we did not have much to show, since no one could possibly meet his outrageous quota. One of us pointed to the trees we had managed to cut. Being an experienced woodsman, he realized at once that some of the trees had been cut the day before.

"Is that all you men have cut today?" he asked sarcastically.

Trouble was brewing; his face was contorted with anger. But I, more than anyone else, had reason to be terrified; the others at least were holding their saws and axes, but I was standing empty-handed. Quickly, he picked up a heavy branch and told all of us to bend over a fallen tree trunk. He then beat us and beat us with all his might, breaking the heavy branch on our backs until we could no longer move.

Wonder of wonders, I got off with just a few minor slaps. The German, not satisfied with the thrashing he had given us, took out his revolver, loaded it—then put it back into the holster. Evidently, he wanted only to scare us.

Incidents such as these were daily occurrences. However, since the work was what kept us alive—or so most people thought—we had no alternative. Ghetto Two was considered the home of the living dead, whose occupants had a few more days to live at the most.

Although I never did a stitch of work, and only on rare occasions did I pick up a tool to get some exercise and warm up, I could not bear the aimless life of constant fear, especially since the SS man, at his whim, could finish us off without batting an eyelash. I came to the conclusion that, come what may, I had to get away from this dangerous and cursed place.

I began by not showing up for work half of the time, not giving any thought to the German overseer's warning to

shoot anyone absent from work. I never showed up on *Shabbos* or on Fridays since we would return after sunset. Nothing at all happened to me, and I thoroughly enjoyed each day I stayed away from work.

CHAPTER 25

Tightening the Screws

ONE FRIDAY, WHILE WALKING THE GHETTO STREETS, I bumped into Dr. Rosen, the Chief of Police, who called me over to him.

"How come you're not at work today?" he angrily asked.

Before I could answer him, he grabbed me and threw me in jail, but not without first giving me a sound lashing with his whipping cane. His furious thrashing reached a point where a policeman, unable to watch it any longer, simply took away the cane from him. Rosen then confiscated my working papers—documents without which one could not exist.

"I'm going to have you shot," he said matter-of-factly. "I'll make an example of you, so people will know once and for all what will happen if they don't show up for work."

No doubt about it, he meant what he said.

I was put in jail, expecting to spend *Shabbos* there, but as soon as my mother found out, she moved heaven and earth to have me set free. She had not yet recovered from her own ordeal, and now this!

In the end, thanks to the intervention of the Belzer Rebbe, I was released. The Rebbe, who at that time was staying in the Bochnia ghetto, sent a personal emissary to Rosen demanding that I be set free, whereupon he let me go that very same Friday.

Muller, the new *Lagerfuhrer*, organized the labor force into three divisions—*Wehrmacht*, workers for the armed forces; *Rustung*, workers for the weapon's industry; and *Zwangsarbeit*, forced labor. Every worker was provided with a white patch marked with the insignia of his division—W, R or Z—and stamped with the Gestapo seal. The patch, which measured two and a half inches by two and a half inches, had to be attached on your left side, so that you were labeled twice, a yellow Jew-patch on your right and the new patch on your left.

The new white patch was a "badge of life." Wearing it identified you as a worker, giving you a chance of survival; at round-up time, this patch would protect you. Of course, you had to pay a price for the white patch. The W insignia, meaning that you worked for the *Wehrmacht*, was the most sought after. Next was the R patch, and least desirable was the Z patch for *Zwangsarbeit*, forced labor. My forestry detail was assigned a W patch, because our work in the Domienitz forest benefited the *Wehrmacht*.

Now I had to find a way to get out of the harsh forestry detail. I tried pulling strings, spending a great deal of money, but it got me nowhere. It was out of the question; the Germans in charge of the Domienitz detail did not release any of their laborers. I was stuck, forced to go to work week

after week. On our way to work, we suffered a great deal from the Poles who would often try to throw us off the speeding trains. But worst of all was working all day long in the freezing cold. It was simply unbearable. We sometimes managed to build a small fire, but it did very little to relieve the numbing, bone-chilling frost.

One icy day, we were huddled around the flickering fire, gazing into the darting flames and sadly contemplating the bleak prospects for our lives which were hanging by a thread. Then Bleicher, one of our buddies, softly began to sing the familiar tune of *Dos Stettele Brennt* (*Our Town Is on Fire*). His sweet, lilting voice touched our hearts, bringing home the gloomy reality of the lyrics. There was not a dry eye in the group.

Quite unexpectedly, we were told one day that the work in the forest was completed. That evening, before we returned home, the German supervisor called us together.

"The job is done," he curtly announced. "Don't come back tomorrow."

The work was finished, but it ended in tragedy. On our way to the train, a group of German soldiers coming from the other direction began to shoot at us. One bullet struck our Jewish foreman, critically wounding him. Our work in the forest, which had begun with bloodshed, ended in bloodshed.

Nonetheless, we were happy to be free from this back-breaking job. The drawback was that being without work we now had to move into the dreaded Ghetto Two. However, the Judenrat promised us new jobs inside the ghetto, since we had lost our jobs through no fault of our own. In the meantime, we could remain in Ghetto One. But when the *Lagerfuhrer* opened a new industrial plant, the Judenrat's

promises proved to be just so much hot air. In order to qualify for one of the one thousand job openings at the new plant you had to meet one of the following criteria: you had to be a skilled craftsman, you needed "pull" or you were required to pay either cash or furnish machinery for the plant. I did not qualify on any of these counts, and in spite of the Judenrat's solemn promises, they gave the jobs to other people. I remained unemployed.

With the opening of the plant, the *Lagerfuhrer* issued a series of new decrees for Ghetto One, which was considered a "workers' camp." Husbands and wives were not permitted to live in the same apartment. They were permitted to see each other after work, for two hours only. Also, no private cooking facilities could be used. All workers were required to use the communal dining room.

The Jewish police, who were charged with the strict enforcement of these directives, patrolled the ghetto streets, keeping an eye on the chimneys to look for telltale smoke. If you were caught you had to pay a fine or were put in jail. If, on one of his frequent ghetto tours, the *Lagerfuhrer* himself would catch someone, he would personally give them a brutal beating. Sometimes, he would suddenly appear in the evening to make sure that no couple stayed together past the time limit. Couples caught violating the curfew were given a special dose of his unbridled fury, men and women alike.

With the issuance of the new ordinances, the separation between the two ghettos was intensified. Anyone caught in the wrong ghetto was arrested. All the "unemployed" living in Ghetto One were required to move to Ghetto Two along with their families, an upheaval that drove the ghetto population into a frenzy. Mother and my little daughter, together with my brother Pesachyah and his three children, were

transferred to Ghetto Two. Luckily, they were assigned an apartment for themselves, whereas other families were forced to share the cramped living space of a tight apartment.

My situation was up in the air. I did not want to move into Ghetto Two because of the rumors regarding its probable destiny. Then again, staying in Ghetto One required a job, something I did not have. I decided to make my home in the woodshed in the courtyard of my building where I installed a bed and a small cabinet to hold my clothes and my possessions. I even had a "roommate," my friend Reuven Walkin from Oshpitzin who was in a situation similar to mine and whose company I enjoyed greatly.

During the day, we kept the shed locked up and just roamed around the ghetto. I dressed in my blue overalls, displaying the white worker's patch I still had from my Domienitz forest days, so that no policeman would ever dream of asking me for my worker's permit.

Now and then, I managed to sneak into Ghetto Two where I had to remove my white worker's patch. After barely subsisting on a starvation diet of bread and water in Ghetto One, I was elated to have a taste of Mother's cooking.

Slipping from one ghetto into the other was extremely risky, since the Jewish police rigorously guarded the fence. Guards watching the fence from observation posts outside the ghetto, waiting for their prey, shot anyone trying to sneak across, while other guards constantly patrolled the fence looking for breaks. All this was done on orders of the groveling Chief of Police Rosen who slavishly served the Germans beyond the call of duty.

On weekdays, I did not take any chances, but I did not want to miss spending *Shabbos* with Mother. The loneliness of the weekdays depressed me, aside from the constant fear of

being discovered in my hiding place. Whenever I heard of an impending inspection, I asked my neighbors to place a padlock on the outside of the shed to mislead the Germans. Several times, they chased me, but I managed to elude them.

On *Purim*, as I was on my way to *daven*, a policeman stopped me, demanding to see my worker's permit. I had nothing to show him.

"You'd better come along with me to the Judenrat," he ordered.

I was in no mood to see Rosen, certainly not on a happy day like *Purim*. I made up my mind that I was definitely not going to sit in jail that day. As we were walking, I suddenly made a break for it and ran. He tried to catch me, but I was faster, dashing into one of the courtyards where I disappeared into a hidden corner. He soon gave up the chase. Now, that was a real *simchas Purim*, a real rejoicing of *Purim*!

Such incidents were daily events; my life in the ghetto was a series of terrifying experiences, not to mention the freezing cold in the drafty shed.

One *Shabbos*, when I was in Ghetto Two as usual, I woke up early to witness a terrifying scene. The ghetto streets were teeming with Jewish policemen, the outside fence was guarded by Ukrainians, and the German police was coming up in the distance. People were running in all directions, frightened out of their wits. Shouts of confusion filled the air.

"What's going on?"

"What are they going to do to us?"

Some tried to sneak out of the ghetto, across the outer fence, but they were brought down by deadly rifle fire. Inside Ghetto Two, all was quiet, the policemen walking about with icy calm. It was the stillness before the storm.

Mother went into the street and inquired of a policeman

about the aim of this *Aktion*. Although according to regulations he was not permitted to reveal any "secrets," he spoke to her nonetheless.

"Go home and don't worry," he told her. "Nothing is going to happen to you. They're not looking for your kind of people."

When Mother told me what he had said, I reasoned that "*miklal lav atah shome'a hen*—from the negative you can infer the positive." If they were not looking for her kind of people, it could only mean that they were looking for able-bodied men.

I realized that some of my friends living at the other end of the ghetto surely were not aware of what was in store for them. Quick as lightning, I ran to them and found them all sound asleep. I knocked on their window.

"Wake up, everybody!" I yelled. "Wake up! Quick! The house is on fire! There's an *Aktion* going on. They're grabbing young people!"

Jumping out of bed, they quickly got dressed. They had prepared a bunker and told me to join them. The bunker was quite primitive; a dummy wall with an opening for a man to pass through set apart the space for the bunker. After the men entered the bunker, the women blocked the opening with a heavy bookcase, making it impossible to detect. Inside, it was very tight. There was barely enough room to stand, and we had to hold back any movement, cough or sneeze, since the slightest whisper could be heard through the thin wall. We even had to hold our breaths.

There were five of us in the bunker, waiting with bated breath for what the day would bring. Hardly ten minutes passed when we could hear the fearsome voices of the Germans.

"*Sind Manner hier?*" they shouted. "Are there any men in here?"

"No," was the frightened reply.

That was not good enough for them. They proceeded to turn the entire house upside down, searching all the rooms. We almost died with fright; what if they moved the bookcase? After all, the system of building dummy walls was well-known. But Hashem was on our side, and they left without doing any harm.

However, the episode did not end here. Half an hour later, another group of Germans came in, looking for men. And so it continued, a long parade of visitors barging in at regular intervals, Jewish policemen and Germans, while the women kept us abreast of the goings-on.

A short while later, two trucks pulled up from the extermination camp Jerusalemska to haul off one hundred Jewish workers to the camp, which stood under the command of the notorious SS Obersturmfuhrer Goett. This camp, situated on the site of the Jewish cemetery of Cracow-Padgursz, held about twenty thousand Jews whose numbers dwindled from day to day in the wake of terrible bloodbaths. Goett was accustomed to ride through the camp every day on his white horse, shooting at random any Jew who crossed his path. These workers had to be replaced by fresh merchandise. At the present time, he needed one hundred laborers, and Ghetto Two was going to be the source.

Meanwhile, the quota was almost filled, but they simply could not round up the few workers they still needed to complete the quota for that day. Coming back with fewer than one hundred was out of the question. The hours passed. It was almost dark, and the quota still was not filled. The Germans found a simple solution to their problem. "Let's

grab some men from Ghetto One."

It was easy. The men of Ghetto One did not dream of hiding out. After all, they were working for the *Deutsche Reich*.

Such was the fate of all the Jews, always living under the illusion that working for the Germans would afford them protection. But how was a Jew to fathom the bottomless depravity of the German nation?

At last, after long hours of painful waiting, we were told that the Germans had pulled out. Only then did we dare leave the bunker, but we were still afraid to go out into the street. At once, I sent a message to Mother who had been worrying about me all day, telling her of my whereabouts. We said our *Shabbos* prayers, thanking Hashem for saving us from this dreadful *Aktion*. Before we ended our prayers, Mother arrived in order to convince herself that I was indeed still here.

Life in the ghetto became more grim by the day. No sooner did you adjust to one decree than a new one was issued. According to the latest directive, all rooms, basements and attics in Ghetto One were to be completely emptied out. The Jewish police, which was in charge of implementing the program, dragged furniture and other possessions into the street, destroying it all in a huge bonfire. I still managed to transfer my things from the shed to Ghetto Two, and now I had no choice but to move there myself.

The *Lagerfuhrer* also ordered that a number of homes in Ghetto Two be set aside as children's homes, ostensibly to provide care for the children while the parents were at work. Of course, the true reason was obvious; we were all too familiar with the German's conception of "compassion" for Jewish children.

Everyone had an uneasy sense of foreboding, and the daily directives foreshadowed deep trouble. Hardly a day

went by without an inspection by high-ranking SS officers from the *Aussiedlungsamt* (deportation department) to survey the scene.

In spite of these ominous portents, life in Ghetto Two continued calm and undisturbed. People got up at a comfortable hour, walked to *shul* at a leisurely pace, went for a stroll, attended a Talmud lecture in the afternoon and went peacefully to sleep as if nothing had happened.

In Ghetto One, on the other hand, life was hectic. You had to get up early and rush to work, but before that you had to be present at roll-call on Kowalska Street. From there you marched to your work site in German-style military formations, five abreast, under Jewish police escort. The work itself was harsh and oppressive, it broke you down both physically and mentally. When you came home at night you were too worn out to think about the future.

Most people were convinced that the work would keep them alive. After all, their labor was essential for the German war effort! Some people worked at manufacturing bomb casings and producing uniforms for parachutists. Others recycled clothing of the murdered Jews of the ghettos into garments for German men, women and children. They thought the German victory depended on their work. By planting such myths into their minds, the Germans turned the Jews into docile slaves who would not even think of ways to save themselves.

Much as I doubted that the occupants of Ghetto One would come out alive, to my mind the eventual deadly end of Ghetto Two was a foregone conclusion. I told Mother that in my view the ghetto would be terminated that summer, and I advised her to turn all our belongings into cash.

"Money might be of help to get you out of a tight spot,"

I said, "but any object of value we'll have to abandon to the Germans."

Accordingly, we gradually began to sell to the Poles everything we owned, our clothes, linen, tablecloths and so on. The actual sale was handled by brokers, since anyone approaching the fence where the Polish buyers were waiting was likely to be shot by the German guards. However, there were brokers who were willing to risk their lives for a profit of a few measly pennies. In this manner, I managed to dispose of all our belongings.

Regrettably, my prediction came true. In early *Elul*, both sections of the ghetto were liquidated, and there remained not one Jew in the once flourishing community of Bochnia.

Bochnia lived through three *Aktionen*, extermination raids, and after the third one, the city was *Judenrein*, empty of Jews. In all the killing raids, the Germans were assisted by the Jewish police acting on orders of the Judenrat, whose members reaped handsome profits from those about to die. For reasons known only to them, the Germans did not carry out simultaneous *Aktionen* in a number of towns. Perhaps they had only a limited number of the so-called *Einsatzgruppen*, the teams of professional killers. In any event, as a result of this policy, many Jews were able to evade the *Aktion* by finding refuge in another ghetto that was still occupied by Jews, in the hope of staying there until they would flee to another safe haven or—who knows?—the war might end.

The Judenrat people, who were well aware of these runaway stragglers, directed the Jewish police to watch the railroad stations for escapees from annihilated ghettos. Anyone who was caught was jailed in the Judenrat basement, under the pretext that they would have to stay there until they received a residency permit and found an apartment. Mean-

while, the Judenrat made inquiries regarding the financial status of the escapee and used the information to squeeze every last penny out of him. Not until their ravenous appetite for money was stilled did the hapless refugees see the light of day. This was one of the main sources of their wealth, since between one *Aktion* and the next, thousands of new refugees would arrive.

Another source of income for them was the sale of jobs in the Judenrat office or on the Jewish police force. Being listed on the staff of the Judenrat or the police was considered the best insurance against any harm during an *Aktion*. The cost of these positions ran into the hundreds of dollars. In reality, everything turned out to be nothing but wishful thinking. When the *Aktion* came, the Judenrat people as well as the police were annihilated along with all the other Jews. But until that fateful day they lived a life of ease and comfort on the backs of the oppressed and tortured Jews.

The Judenrat also earned large sums by demanding money from applicants for jobs in German factories. From time to time, the Germans would establish a new factory and would order the Judenrat to furnish laborers. Whenever this became known, a long line of job seekers formed outside the Judenrat office, who thought that a job would offer them protection. The Judenrat seized the opportunity to charge as much as twelve hundred *zlotys* for a worker's permit.

As we have seen, the Germans had a fiendish policy of extorting money from the ghetto population. Before an impending *Aktion* they would suggest that the Jews pay ransom in return for which the killing raid would be deferred. The Germans, intending to extract every last cent before sending the Jews to the gas chambers, placed the Judenrat in charge of the collection of the huge ransom. The

Germans could rely on them to carry out their orders to perfection. The Judenrat did not disappoint the Germans, while at the same time lining their own pockets with the "blood money."

BOOK THREE

Kingdom of the Night

CHAPTER 26

The Final Raid

AS TIME WENT BY, MORE AND MORE JEWS BEGAN TO LOOK for ways to get out of the ghetto. The latest trend was to attempt to obtain foreign citizenship papers, or even forgeries of foreign papers. A number of ghetto residents had received such documents from relatives abroad, and when they showed their newly-acquired papers to the Gestapo commandant in Bochnia, they were amazed at how quickly and easily he granted the documents official recognition by signing them and attaching the Gestapo seal to them. The bearers of such documents were given the status of foreign nationals and, as such, were exempt from any anti-Jewish laws and free to move about the country without a special permit. They were allowed to live outside the ghetto walls, and they were not required to wear the yellow *Judenstern*.

It goes without saying that such papers were extremely helpful, especially during an *Aktion*, since they were the ticket to get out of the ghetto.

The acceptance of the foreign affidavits spurred a flourishing business in such papers, which were sold at exorbitantly high prices. The main problem was establishing contact with someone residing in a foreign country. The mail was very slow and irregular; besides, all mail to and from foreign countries had to pass the censor, which made corresponding about passports and the like extremely hazardous.

Around this time, a Jewish organization was established in Prokatzim, near Cracow, which furnished such foreign documents and helped Jews escape to Czechoslovakia and from there to Hungary, where life was more secure. It was by no means a non-profit organization; in fact, they charged a very steep fee for their services. A number of non-Jews were involved in the work; they were needed for smuggling people across the border. Since many people could not legally travel to Prokatzim, they invented a method of transporting people to a point close to the border, from where they were smuggled to the other side.

A truck with a double floor was used, something akin to a moving bunker. Fifteen to twenty Jews were squeezed, like sardines in a can, into the space between the two floors. The truck then drove to a point near the Slovakian border where Poles were waiting to take them across. This escape route was used for quite a long time, saving the lives of hundreds of Jews from the Bochnia ghetto.

But nothing lasts forever. The escape route was shut down, thanks to informers. Several trucks were captured and their entire human cargo was shot on the spot. There were some daring drivers who ignored the command to stop and

instead stepped on the gas, racing across the border at breakneck speed. As a result, the Germans barricaded with barbed wire all the roads leading to the border. After a number of people met violent deaths, the entire project was abandoned, and the search was on for new escape routes.

A Jew never sits still; he is always confident that if he searches hard enough he will find what he seeks. Since the foreign papers were recognized by the Gestapo, a dynamic enterprise was started producing spurious documents that looked more genuine than the real thing. An initial test was made, and when Gestapo chief Schoenberg validated the papers, production went into high gear. In order to avoid raising suspicion, people did not present the papers to Schoenberg themselves, using paid Jewish intermediaries instead. These intermediaries rapidly gained the chief's confidence, and before long, they were able to persuade him to do just about anything they wanted. Without asking questions, he would affix the Gestapo seal to any document they submitted, transforming the bearer into a legitimate foreign national.

Most of the documents received Schoenberg's endorsement through the efforts of his personal chauffeur, a Jew named Ferdinand. In this manner, many of the ghetto inmates were able to leave, and some of those who made it across the border wrote letters relating that they had settled in Hungary where life was unruffled and serene, just like in the good old days. Hearing all this, and knowing that the days of the ghetto were numbered, I felt the urge to try my luck in this direction. However, by the time I made up my mind, it was too late. The Gestapo chief was being inundated with a virtual torrent of documents, so that he refused to issue any further validations.

Terribly disappointed, I had no alternative but to leave the ghetto illegally. I had to get out, come what may. I had nothing to lose. I planned to escape by taking the train to Prokatzim and with the help of the Jewish underground to proceed to the Slovakian border. Having made up my mind, I proposed to my mother that she come along with me, together with my daughter. Taken by surprise by the unexpected proposition, she wrung her hands.

"What shall I do?" she moaned. "How can I take a chance like this? If I travel to Prokatzim without a *Judenstern*, my Jewish face will give me away."

With all the eloquence at my command, I tried to explain to her that we simply had no choice. An *Aktion* might be launched any day, and an *Aktion* meant certain death. On the other hand, there existed at least a possibility that our plan might succeed. It was of no avail. She wanted no part of any escape attempt.

Trying a different approach, I suggested that I go by myself, taking my daughter along with me. Still, I could not bear the thought of abandoning my mother with Pesachyah and his three children. On the other hand, I had to consider that all I would gain by remaining in the ghetto would be the doubtful privilege of being killed along with them when the Germans liquidated the ghetto. I had just about decided to leave, when Mother's sobbing, "Don't leave me! Don't leave me!" made me change my mind. I resolved to stay in the ghetto, placing my trust in the Almighty, Who would surely save us.

In Ghetto Two, one anxiety-filled day followed another as "extermination day" inexorably approached. During the daytime, I made the rounds of the streets of Ghetto One, trying to pick up news about the impending *Aktion*. The

preparations for the *Aktion* were in the works. Only the date was still uncertain. While Ghetto Two was dormant and quiet, Ghetto One was bustling with activity; it was the marketplace for foreign documents which I still hoped to acquire. In the evenings, I returned to Ghetto Two to spend the night. Every morning I peered across the fence, fearful to find the ghetto surrounded by soldiers, which was the prelude to any *Aktion*.

One fateful night, the nightmare was upon us. Suddenly, tumultuous noise emerged from the city outside the ghetto. Although it was dark, I could detect a large contingent of German soldiers raising a commotion with their boisterous laughter. I was not particularly concerned, since they were assembled near the large barracks. Figuring that they had just arrived, or perhaps were ready to leave, I went back to sleep.

At the crack of dawn, one of our neighbors awoke me. He was shaking like a leaf.

"The ghetto is surrounded by German soldiers in full battle gear," he told me.

Since I already knew of the presence of soldiers in town, I did not pay much attention to him. But noting the people's growing anxiety, I soon became caught up in the general tense atmosphere. After all, if something was about to happen, we had to try to protect ourselves. I had not built a bunker, thinking that it would be worthless anyway, since the police knew the location of all the bunkers in the ghetto. Meanwhile, I awakened the family and told them to get dressed in a hurry.

The streets were now full of terror-crazed people. Scared stiff, they were scurrying in all directions, asking questions, getting no answers. A number of German guards entered the ghetto gate, walking around calmly, followed by other guards

who entered from Ghetto One. Something's wrong here, I thought. I wonder what they have in mind? Ghetto One or Ghetto Two?

Mother approached the fence separating the two ghettos. She saw people carrying bundles. Where were they running? No answer. Everyone was preoccupied with himself. I suddenly noticed that in one lightning move the entire ghetto had been surrounded by soldiers manning machine guns, their barrels protruding through the boards of the fence. A few people were trying to run away, but the machine guns at the ready deterred them. This is the end, I thought.

Not wasting any time, I went home to lead everyone into the apartment of our neighbor who had a bunker. I didn't really believe it would be of any use, since the Jewish police had discovered it during the previous *Aktion*. Nonetheless, I had nothing better to offer, and the streets were absolutely unsafe. In my neighbor's apartment I met others who also knew of the existence of the bunker. I walked over to the bunker and opened the door.

"Listen, if you want to stay alive you'd better get in right away!" I called out. "Every minute counts. Remember, your life is at stake!"

A few people began to enter, when suddenly, a German monster appeared.

"Alle heraus in den hof!" he roared viciously. "Everybody out into the courtyard!"

Luckily, the German did not notice the open door of the bunker.

"Jawohl, wir kommen sofort!" we shouted back. "Okay, we're on our way!"

The German, relying on our assurance, continued on to the next apartment, hustling everyone out into the street.

Meanwhile, some of the men in our group decided to obey the order, laying in a supply of food in anticipation of a long journey. I urged the others to hurry into the bunker, but I waited a while before closing up the bunker, in case someone changed his mind and came back. Just then, in the very last minute, two of my brother Pesachyah's children appeared, a seven-year-old girl and a three-year-old boy, who had gotten lost in the confusion. Pesachyah and his third child never made it to the bunker and were placed on the death train. Neither did my little cousin who had been staying with us. I was the last one to enter the bunker, closing the latch from the inside.

The design of the bunker was quite unsophisticated, just a basic all-purpose bunker. In the corner of the dining room, an opening cut into the floor, measuring twenty inches by sixty inches, led into a room in the basement. The door leading to this basement room was bricked up, making it impossible to detect. The opening in the floor was covered with a rug on which a couch was placed. The last person to enter the bunker moved the couch over the hole—a complicated maneuver—but we managed somehow. The bunker had no window at all; it was pitch dark, and the air was stifling.

Surveying our bunker population, I found that there were thirteen of us, including my mother, my daughter, Pesachyah's two children and myself.

Since the courtyard of our building happened to be the central roundup point, large enough to hold the entire ghetto population, I requested that everyone be quiet so that we might hear what was going on outside. We could hear the terrifying howling and barking of the German beasts which always accompanied their *Aktionen.* The victims were loaded onto trucks amidst the bloodcurdling cries of the wailing and

shrieking women and children. We were sick at heart, overcome with grief, visualizing the horrifying fate awaiting our innocent brothers and sisters. The crying lasted throughout the night—until it became quiet. The trucks drove off, taking their pathetic cargo to its final destination.

Staying in the bunker without light, air, toilet facilities and, worst of all, without food, was quite distressing. In the confusion, our people had forgotten to prepare a supply of food. The adults and mature children understood that even if there is no food you keep quiet. But my little girl Sheindl, who wasn't quite three years old, would not take no for an answer and began to cry for food. I did not know what to do, until at last I found a bottle of water which I sweetened with saccharin; that was her breakfast.

For a short while she kept quiet, and every time she cried, we gave her some more of the sweet water. But we could not hush her for very long. The water did not still her hunger pangs, and her loud crying threatened to betray our hideout. We decided to venture out to get the loaf of bread that had been left on the dining room table. One of the girls, the granddaughter of Rabbi Elimelech Zanger, was best suited to get the bread; her father had not hidden out with us, since he was convinced that the ghetto would not be annihilated. The couch which covered the door to the bunker made it impossible to open it wide enough for an adult to pass through, but the young girl could somehow manage to wiggle her way out through the narrow space.

"If you run into a German, for Heaven's sake don't let on that we are hiding in a bunker," we cautioned her. "Tell him that you stowed away in a corner of the room."

She was an intelligent girl. We knew we could rely on her not to give us away. Crawling on hands and knees to avoid

being seen from outside, she spotted a loaf of bread on the table. With a quick move, she grabbed it and hurried back into the bunker.

As soon as Sheindl's hunger was satisfied, she calmed down. The rest of the bread was set aside for her exclusively, for I did not know how long we would be holed up in the bunker.

And so we waited out the day. From outside came the silence of death. Not a soul stirred, not a sound was heard. We lingered on without a morsel of food or a drop of water—truly a fast day. We prayed for Hashem to have mercy on us.

CHAPTER 27

In Search of Bunkers

FROM THE START, IT SEEMED TO ME THAT THE *AKTION* did not extend into Ghetto One. Quite naively, I believed it was aimed only at Ghetto Two. My plan was, therefore, to move into Ghetto One now that Ghetto Two was finished, but a mountain of obstacles barred my way. First, how was I going to move across the fence separating the ghettos? The guard had been doubled in anticipation of people like myself emerging from their bunkers. Second, even if I were to make it into Ghetto One, where would I find a job and a place to stay? And most important, what was to happen to my mother and the small children?

At any rate, staying in the bunker was out. We were without food, water and air, not to mention the lack of sanitary facilities. But it was still too early to sneak across; the

guards were still on the alert. Perhaps tomorrow night.

We spent that night in the bunker, our stomachs rumbling, our throats parched. One of us simply had to go out to try and find something to eat in one of the empty apartments. The job was given to Reich, a bright young man from Cracow who was equal to the task. We opened the door of the bunker, and Reich was on his way. It wasn't long before he returned from his expedition holding a few crusts of dry bread in one hand, the other hand carrying a bag filled with apples, carrots, beets and a jar of jelly.

He handed the food to me, and I saw to it that everything was divided fairly. Instead of distributing the entire harvest, I gave everyone, including the members of my family, just enough to stay alive, since no one could tell how long we would have to remain in the bunker. After this "satisfying" meal, we got ready to bed down on the hard, cold floor. The expectation that this would last only one more night kept our spirits up.

With Hashem's help, the night went by peacefully. The morning sun sent its soothing rays into a wounded world. A new day began, but instead of the hustle and bustle of laborers going to work, the ghetto was sheathed in a tomb-like silence. We waited in vain for the workers from Ghetto One to bring us some news. Filled with gloom, I wondered, Who knows what happened to Ghetto One? Could they have been deported along with Ghetto Two? Then there was the worry of finding food. Otherwise, we'd all starve to death in this bunker! Dolefully, we stared at each other, filled with gloomy forebodings.

I simply have to find out what is going on in Ghetto One, I thought. I must make my way across somehow. Surely, I'll find some of my friends who will offer me shelter.

My mind was made up. I opened the door of the bunker, gingerly stepped over to my apartment and stuffed some clothes and underwear into a small valise. All the while, I was shaking like a leaf, since my apartment was only about ten feet away from the ghetto fence where the guards were keeping a close watch. I wanted to pack some food as well, but I could find nothing. I decided to return temporarily to the bunker.

Meanwhile, the other bunker dwellers, following my example, had gone to their homes and brought back all their possessions, bundles of clothing, linen and the like. I begged them to bring only the bare necessities, since there simply was no space in the small bunker, but they paid no attention to me. "It's a pity to leave it," was their answer. As a result of the overcrowding, life became even more unbearable than it was before.

Thank Heaven, that night in the bunker also passed without an incident. Towards mid-morning, we heard voices coming from the street. Reich, whom I instructed to reconnoiter, reported that it was a work detail doing some kind of work. We were glad to have evidence that at least Ghetto One had not been liquidated.

Back at the window, Reich recognized one of the laborers as a friend of ours. He called him over, but seeing Reich, the laborer raised his hands to his head.

"What, are you still here?" he cried out in horror. "Don't you know your life is in grave danger? You see, the Bochnia ghetto has been made *Judenrein*. The two ghettos have been liquidated. Most of the ghetto inmates were killed and burned on the spot, and the rest were hauled off to the extermination camps. From the five thousand Bochnia ghetto Jews only about two hundred laborers remain to remove the possessions the people left in their homes. When our job is

done, we too will be shipped off to some concentration camp."

The news shattered us. We realized that we were in mortal danger. Where could we go? How could we escape? Oblivious to hunger and thirst, all our thoughts focused on our perilous situation. It seemed hopeless. It would take a miracle to rescue us from this trap.

We sat in deadly silence, like on *Tishah b'Av*. Not a word was spoken. Suddenly, the silence was broken, the ghetto came alive. The shrill voices of bloodthirsty German demons mixed with the clatter of their hobnailed boots resounded through the empty streets, striking terror into our hearts. We heard them enter our building, hungrily searching for Jews who might be hiding out. I pressed my eye to a tiny crack in the bunker door to see what was going on. The Germans were moving from room to room, turning everything upside down, swinging hammers and hatchets, splitting walls, banging, snapping, cracking, breaking furniture, looking for bunkers.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Somehow, they had skipped the apartment that held our bunker. But then I saw the *Unterscharfuhrer* point at our apartment.

"Did you take care of this one?" he asked his men.

"*Jawohl*," came the reply.

"But did you smash it up?"

"No, not yet."

I was frozen with fear. We're done for, I thought. They're going to discover our bunker, no doubt about it. Over and over, I fervently prayed, *Ribono Shel Olam*, please save us from these accursed murderers!

"Let no one make a sound," I ordered. "Keep the children absolutely quiet."

The German monsters worked with great diligence, eager to perform the "*mitzvah*" of wiping out every last Jew. I heard them enter the room behind which our bunker was situated, camouflaged by a large clothes closet. After opening the closet door, they tried moving it. That's it! I thought. Yet I never abandoned faith and continuously prayed to Hashem to protect us.

"Stay calm," I whispered to the people. "Keep quiet and don't move."

Just when we were ready to give up, Hashem performed the great miracle. As the Germans prepared to move the closet, one of them called out, "*Genug!* Enough! We have to move on!"

Seconds later, they were all gone, and we all drew long, deep breaths. Clearly, it was Hashem's indescribable miracle that had saved us from certain death. The experience lifted our spirits, filling us with gratitude to Hashem and renewed our faith in Him. We firmly believed that just as He had saved us in this instance, He surely would save us and release us from this living hell. With tear-filled eyes, we gazed silently at each other; our joy knew no bounds.

When our emotions subsided somewhat, the hunger pangs made themselves felt. After making sure that the streets were completely quiet and that the Germans had left, we sent one of our group to forage for some food. On his search, he ran into a Jewish policeman he knew, a man named Zimmet from Briegel, a nephew of Eliezer Landau. He told him about our group of thirteen people hiding in a bunker without a bite to eat for more than two days and asked him if he could provide us with some food. Zimmet, a good-hearted man from a *chassidic* background, promised to go out of his way to help us.

Towards evening, we heard a knock at the courtyard gate. Although we assumed it was Zimmet, we were afraid to open the gate which had been sealed by the Germans. Later that night, I sneaked outside to find a briefcase filled with bread and fruit, truly a self-sacrificing deed on Zimmet's part, one which could have cost him his life if the Germans had caught him. The sight of food brought big smiles to all faces; the long fast finally had come to an end.

The time had come to think about leaving the bunker. I planned to go by myself and mingle with the laborers. Since I still had my worker's overalls, I would blend in perfectly with the group. The greatest danger was the *Lagerfuhrer* who made a head count of the laborers twice a day, since he knew that scores of people hiding in bunkers would mingle with the workers. Whenever he would discover an unauthorized worker, he would shoot him on the spot without thinking twice. Knowing all his workers, he recognized the stowaways even before starting the head count. Many Jews fell victim to this inhuman creature.

What was I to do? I saw no option other than taking the risk. Ultimately, I wanted to escape from the ghetto, and I had to explore the possibilities for an escape route. Also, a way had to be found to supply food to the people in the bunker for the foreseeable future.

On *Shabbos*, I went out into the street and covertly slipped into the work detail. The workers were surprised to see me, wondering where I had come from. Convinced that I could trust them not to report me, I told them everything. Meanwhile, I learned that the Germans were constantly discovering new bunkers and immediately killed their occupants. It was estimated that there still were some five hundred people in various bunkers. With regard to finding an escape route,

I did not make much headway, but I did manage to obtain a good supply of food for the bunker; both the workers and the Jewish policemen brought me all the food I needed.

CHAPTER 28

Escape from the Ghetto

ROUTINELY, I LEFT THE BUNKER EVERY DAY TO MINGLE with the workers who kept me abreast of the latest developments. I was careful to stay out of harm's way, since the Gestapo and the *Lagerfuhrer* conducted daily spot checks in order to make sure no infiltrators had joined the work detail.

Walking the ghetto streets one day, I bumped into my friend Herschel Kitover, who was hiding in a bunker with his wife and child. Herschel was talking to another Jew, who was also living underground, about ways of rescuing their families. Joining in the conversation, I suddenly recalled that I owed Herschel a sum of money for some lace I had bought from him. Herschel had given up hope of ever collecting the money, thinking I had been killed or deported along with the

other Jews. As I pulled out my wallet to pay my debt, I was interrupted by Reb Yechezkel Halberstam, the son of the Rabbi of Bochnia, who just happened to pass.

"At a time like this, with life hanging in the balance, you still keep things like this in mind?" he burst out excitedly.

To me, it seemed a natural thing to do. Even while sitting in the bunker, I had complained to my mother that I regretted not having paid Herschel the money I owed him. Having met him now, I was only too happy to pay my debt.

As we were standing there, engaged in spirited conversation about possible escape plans, one of the bystanders suddenly called out, "*Oy vay!* We're finished!"

There he was, the *Lagerfuhrer* himself, one hundred feet away from us, escorted by his trained German shepherd police dog. This dog had shown his killer instinct during the last *Aktion* when, on his master's orders, he had ripped to pieces scores of Jews. And now we were standing face to face with this angel of death.

Quick as a flash, I picked myself up and started running toward the bunker. I had nothing to lose. If I stayed I would be torn apart by this dog. On the other hand, if I ran away there were two possibilities. One, the German might shoot me, but then there was the chance that he would miss, or hit me in a non-vital area. Two, he might send the dog after me; in that case, I would strangle the dog. When one's life is threatened, one finds sources of unknown strength.

The *Lagerfuhrer* was standing exactly opposite the house where our bunker was located. Fearful that he might see me enter the house, I quickly looked back to see if there was any reaction. All was quiet. No gunshots, no dog chasing me. To avoid being seen, I ran toward the rear of the house, climbed in through the window, knocked on the door of our bunker

and hurriedly jumped inside. Not wishing to alarm the people in the bunker, I did not tell them about the incident, but the expression on my face gave me away. I had no choice but to tell them what had happened, but I tried to calm their fears. The minutes ticked away, and everything remained quiet.

Several hours later, I went out again. I had to find out what had happened to my two friends. I feared the worst since I had not seen them run away, but to my great surprise, there they were. They told me that when they saw me make a break for it, they too ran to find shelter in a nearby storage shed. The other fellow entered the shed in time, but Herschel did not make it, whereupon the *Lagerfuhrer* sent his dog after him. The dog ripped Herschel's pants to shreds, but when he offered no resistance, the dog left him alone to report his achievement to his master. Herschel, taking advantage of the respite, quickly slipped into the storage shed, where the German never found him. Thus, the three of us were saved by what was undeniably a clear-cut divine miracle.

This incident brought home to me most vividly that I had no option but to attempt to escape from the ghetto. It was only a matter of time before the Germans would discover our bunker, just as they had unearthed all the other bunkers. Too many people knew about our hideaway, a fact which made our stay riskier by the day.

I now thought back once again to the Jewish organization in Prokatzim near Cracow which smuggled people across the Polish-Slovak border, from where they made their way to Hungary, and I again considered the possibility of using their services as an avenue of escape. However, before I could dream of crossing the border, I had to get out of the ghetto, which at that time was heavily guarded. Besides, I was not

alone, and having to take along my mother and the children made any escape attempt all the more difficult.

Pondering the problem, I came up with a plan. Since the Jewish policemen were generally on very good terms with their Polish counterparts, I asked Zimmet, the Jewish policeman who had provided us with food, to put me in touch with a reliable Polish policeman. He took care of it at once, and he pointed out to me the policeman with whom he had arranged a meeting.

Speaking of Zimmet, I want to point out that this gallant Jewish policeman risked his life for us many times. While we were in the bunker, he kept us from starving. Every night, at great personal risk, he filled a bag with food he collected from empty Jewish homes and pushed it through a break in the main door. Even now, arranging the meeting with the Polish policeman was fraught with grave danger, since any contact between Jewish and Polish policemen was punishable by death. Ultimately, his life ended in tragedy when he helped an entire Jewish family escape from the ghetto. They were caught, and under agonizing German torture, they revealed the identity of their benefactor. The Gestapo, true to form, shot and killed the valiant Zimmet.

Without waiting, I approached the Pole, but fearful of being caught conversing to me, he directed me to wait for him in a hidden corner. When we met, I came straight to the point.

"Look here, I want to escape from the ghetto," I said without mincing words. "I want you to help me by escorting me to Cracow, or at least to Prokatzim."

I reasoned that under official police escort my trip would be safer. No one would question me, since they would assume I had been arrested and was being taken to Cracow for

interrogation. I promised the Pole a beautiful piece of worsted wool cloth for a suit and one hundred *zlotys* in cash for his cooperation.

"I'm sorry," the Pole replied. "Escorting you to Cracow, or anywhere else for that matter, is out of the question. Ever since the *Aktion*, the Germans don't even allow us to go home. They're afraid we'll steal things from the Jewish homes. But I'm willing to help you get out of the ghetto. Anyway, I can't do it tonight, because I'm off duty. It'll just have to wait till Thursday."

We agreed to meet at nine o'clock in the evening on Thursday. Before that hour, it would not be dark yet, and after nine, it would be too difficult to leave the ghetto, since the guard would be reinforced.

I returned to the bunker, hoping that with Hashem's help things would work out. Mother, too, was overjoyed to be able to leave this living hell. Hoping to save the lives of the other bunker residents, I informed everyone about my plan, telling them to meet the Polish policeman at the time and the place I had arranged with him. But man proposes, and the Lord disposes.

The *Lagerfuhrer* turned out to be not only a rabid Jew-hater but a shrewd and cunning fox as well. At first, he seemed to ignore the hundreds of people hiding out in bunkers. He reasoned that the bunker residents, seeing they were being left alone, would become careless and reveal their hiding places. Thus, it was fully a week after the *Aktion*, when the police had already discovered most of the bunkers, when he ordered the police to fan out over the two ghettos and arrest all the remaining bunker occupants.

On Wednesday night, the night the command was issued, we did not have the slightest inkling that anything was afoot.

We were packing our meager possessions in anticipation of our departure the following night. I placed some clothes, underwear and food into a small valise and wrapped the material for the Polish policeman in a separate package. I also prepared a business suit for myself, since wearing overalls would mark me as a ghetto inmate.

A bright moon illuminated the star-studded sky, reminding me that I had not yet recited *Kiddush Levanah*, the Sanctification of the New Moon. Mindful that *Sefer Chassidim* assures us that no evil will befall us during any month in which we recite *Kiddush Levanah*, Reich and I and another man left the bunker to recite this prayer under the open sky which is where it preferably should be said. Because of the late hour, we did not want to venture out into the street. Instead, we said the prayer quietly in the room facing the street. The words lifted our spirits and strengthened our faith that the Almighty would rescue us.

Back in the bunker, I shaved so as not to arouse suspicion, since according to the plan I was to travel as an Aryan. This was going to be our last night in the bunker. Who could know what tomorrow would bring?

After a tense night we got up very early, impatiently awaiting the moment when at long last the ghetto walls would disappear behind us. At the same time, we were apprehensive, fearful of the unknown. In our hearts, we knew that only a miracle could save us.

After breakfast, as usual, I went out into the street to find out the latest developments. Hardly did I emerge from the front door when Yosef Sternhell, a young man I knew from Cracow, came over to me to hand me an important message from a policeman whom I knew since childhood and who used to *daven* with me in the same *shtiebel.*

"You should know," the message read, "that we received orders to search for bunkers. Be prepared to take action before it is too late!"

I felt as though someone had struck me over the head with a hammer. Just now, in the last moment, when salvation seemed so near, all was lost. I tried to think of a way out, but down the street I saw them coming—a police unit about to start the raid. The search for bunkers was under way. There was no time left for any plans.

A thought flashed through my mind. I realized there was no way to save my mother, who would not abandon her small grandchildren, but I hoped to save at least my daughter and myself. I ran to the bunker, and with the excuse that I had found warm water and wanted to give her a bath, I called down to my mother to hand me my daughter quickly. The child was still asleep.

"Hurry up! Hurry up!" I called urgently. "Hand me Sheindl! Make it quick!"

My mother could not understand my impatience, but I saw no point in revealing the imminent danger. I had not yet figured out what I was going to do. One thing was uppermost in my mind. I had to get away as fast as I could. They would arrive any minute now.

By the time I was finally carrying the child in my arms, ready to run from the house, ten policemen blocked my exit. I tried to force my way out, but one of them, a fellow who happened to be an old acquaintance of mine (I won't mention his name out of respect for his father who was a decent and upright man), stopped me.

"Hold it right there, Friedman!" he yelled. "Where do you think you're going?"

In sheer desperation, I broke through the tight circle of

policemen and ran toward Horowitz, the deputy chief of the *Judenrat*, who was in charge of the raid.

"Mr. Horowitz, please have mercy on me and my little baby," I pleaded.

Horowitz was surprised to see me carrying a child in my arms. I had asked my mother to wrap her tightly in a blanket, making it appear as though I was carrying a package. If the German guards would have seen me carrying a child they would have killed both of us instantly.

"How come you're in the ghetto?" Horowitz asked. "Aren't you supposed to be with the workers?"

"You are quite right," I replied, "but my child got sick, so I came into the ghetto last night to be with her. I'm begging you, please let me go. I promise you that tonight I'm leaving the ghetto. I've made arrangements with a Polish policeman."

"You trust a Pole?" Horowitz asked, giving me a quizzical look. "He'll take everything he can get out of you, and in the end, he'll hand you over to the SS."

"What do you care?" I answered. "Look, if you don't want to give me an official release, just look the other way and let me get away."

Seeing me conferring with the chief, the policemen relied on him to do his job and continued their house-to-house search. Meanwhile, several workers who were watching me plead with Horowitz urged him to let me go. He turned around, and I ran.

From the distance, I could see the unfortunate people being led out of the bunker, including my mother and her small grandchildren. I was heartbroken and overcome with grief. What could I do? I was in mortal danger myself. Mother was marched off by the police, while I walked in the opposite

direction toward the safety of Herschel Kitover's bunker.

The entrance leading to his bunker was very difficult to find, and because of the darkness, I tripped and fell into a deep hole. I was bruised pretty badly, but thank Heaven, my child was not hurt. Before long I heard the cries of the policemen.

"*Yidden, Yidden,* come out of your bunkers!" they coaxed. "Nothing bad will happen to you!"

Over and over, they repeated their call, but I kept quiet. Distrustful, they searched feverishly, shining their flashlights into every corner—until they discovered me and my daughter. Breaking out in a cold sweat, I tried to convince them to ignore me.

"You all saw that Horowitz let me go," I said, my voice cracking with fear.

After conferring with each other, one of them said, "Okay, we'll let you stay, but you've got to tell us if there are other people hidden here."

"There's no one else," I said. "You can go and see for yourself. There is absolutely no room for anyone besides myself."

This seemed to satisfy them, and they went away.

I took a deep breath. I had saved my own life and that of Herschel, his wife and child. I then asked Herschel to open the bunker, whereupon he invited me and my child to stay with them.

Herschel's bunker was a simple structure. They had built a dummy brick wall in the cellar, leaving a small opening for an entrance which could be closed from the inside. The bunker was so low that one could only sit on the floor. They had sufficient food and candles, and since I had not eaten all day, the bread they offered me revived me.

After the events of the day, all I had left was the overalls I was wearing. I knew that trying to leave the ghetto in this outfit would be impossible. Besides, I had also been forced to abandon the piece of material for the Polish policeman; it would be very unwise to go meet him without this material, since in his anger he was liable to hand me over to the Gestapo. I decided to go back to our old bunker to change into my business suit and retrieve the material.

Leaving the child with Herschel, I went out into the street. The laborers I met told me that the raid on the bunkers had ended with the capture of a large number of people. Entering our bunker, I found everything in terrible disarray. After leading away the occupants, the Jewish policemen came back to ransack and loot the bunker, taking anything of value, silver, gold, diamonds and good clothing which had been abandoned by the deportees. These men were living under the illusion that they were safe and secure, not realizing that only a few days after they led the bunker people to their deaths, the same fate would befall them. Indeed, after the liquidation of the ghetto, all remaining Jews—a total of two hundred and seventy persons—including the *Judenrat* and the Jewish police were carried off to the Tchebno death camp, where only a small percentage survived.

Rummaging through the clutter, I could not find the suit that I had prepared for myself, and I had to make do with another suit. Luckily, I did find the material and brought everything to the new bunker, including some food that I stumbled on.

I went back into the street to find a way to send a good-bye letter to my poor mother who was imprisoned in the basement of the Judenrat, awaiting her fate. I wrote with a trembling hand.

A brievele tzu die mame (a letter to mother)

Dear Mother,

Please don't worry too much about your present situation. We have done all we could do. I intend to flee the ghetto tonight, along with my daughter. Pray that our journey to Hungary be successful and that we arrive there safely, so that at least one member of our entire family will survive. Be strong and of good cheer.

Your only son

I sent the letter through Reb Yechezkel Halberstam, the son of the Rabbi of Bochnia, who worked in the labor detail.

After saying good-bye to all my friends and acquaintances, I returned to the bunker, changed my clothes and waited impatiently for nine o'clock, the hour of my appointment with the Polish policeman. My friend Herschel tried to dissuade me from going through with my plan, arguing that it was too dangerous. He suggested that I stay with him, assuring me that he had enough food to last for several days.

I turned down his offer. "And what are we going to do a few days from now when the food runs out?" I told him. "In the end, we'll have to get out of the ghetto anyway, so isn't it a pity to pass up a golden opportunity like this?"

Impressed by my argument, he began to ponder the merits of joining me, but it took a long time for him to make up his mind. By the time he decided to come along with me, he confessed that in order to gain time he had set the clock back by one hour and that it was actually ten o'clock already.

I was terribly upset. Would the Pole still be waiting? Aside from that, by this time the guard would be doubled, making it much more difficult to leave the ghetto. Nonetheless, since I had decided that this was to be the night, I did not want to postpone it. We decided to go.

Gingerly, we emerged from the bunker, careful not to make the slightest sound. The place where we were to meet the policeman was a good distance away. The bright light of the full moon combined with the flames of a huge bonfire to illuminate the ghetto. The fire, which had been set by the Germans, was consuming *Sifrei Torah* and other *sefarim* in a blazing inferno. Crawling on hands and knees, we made our way furtively to the meeting place where, much to my surprise, we found a group of around fifteen people waiting. Evidently, word of my plan of escape had leaked out, and they all wanted to join me.

It certainly placed the whole project at risk; the presence of a large group of people in a ghetto street at this late hour was bound to arouse suspicion and jeopardize the entire escape attempt. Nevertheless, I said nothing; perhaps it would work anyway.

We waited and waited, but no Polish policeman appeared. He had probably left when I did not show up at nine o'clock. Carrying my little girl in my arms, I went looking for him, but I soon gave up and returned to the group. We sized up the situation and decided to try to sneak out of the ghetto on our own. One of the boards of the fence was quickly pulled out, and one after another we slid through the narrow opening.

Just when we all made it through the fence and took a few steps, a volley of rifle shots rang out behind us. Everyone ran forward in a mad dash, thinking that ahead lay the free streets

of the city. Instead, we ran head-on into a barbed wire barricade that was invisible in the dark. Cries of pain erupted, especially from the children. My little girl, whom I was carrying in my arms, also broke out crying; only later did I notice that her entire head was full of cuts and bruises. The situation was desperate. The cries would surely give us away, and they'd catch up with us.

Instantly, I took cover, lying down flat on the ground, hiding in the tall grass. I begged Sheindl to keep quiet; somehow, she understood and stifled her whimpering. For a long time, I lay there without moving a muscle.

It's all over, I thought. But then I regained confidence. Don't give up hope, I told myself. Place your faith in Hashem; strengthen yourself, and He will give you strength.

Most of the people made it into the courtyard of a house, hoping to go out into the Polish part of town. The Pole who lived in the house, alerted by the noise outside, came out.

"Hey, you Jews!" he roared. "Get back into the ghetto! Police! Police!"

The situation was critical. It would be foolish to stay in the grass any longer; the Germans would undoubtedly find me when they combed the area. I had to get out!

I jerked myself off the ground. Crouching low, I moved away from the danger zone. Then I ran for my life.

Running along the barricade, I noticed a small section made up of a brick wall, low enough for me to climb over. At the same time, peering into the dark, I made out the dark silhouette of a figure standing on the other side of the wall. I saw no way to climb the wall while carrying my child, and I stood there for a moment pondering my predicament. Suddenly, a pair of hands emerged from the other side, reaching out toward me. Without a moment's hesitation, I handed the

child to him, climbed the wall and took the child back from the mysterious, shadowy man.

Herschel, who had been following me, then thrust his child into my hands. Then he and his wife climbed across the wall, so that we were all standing in the free part of town. I turned to thank the mysterious stranger who had so graciously helped us, but to my utter surprise, he had vanished into nothingness without leaving a trace. To this day, I wonder who it was. In my heart, I believe it was a *malach* sent by Hashem to save us.

We quickened our pace to get away as far as possible from the ghetto. Suddenly, we heard the sound of gunfire at close range. We realized the gunfire was directed at the group that had been betrayed by the Pole. Since then, I have never seen or heard of any of them again; evidently, they were all killed.

As to my two partners at the *Kiddush Levanah* of the previous night, they just happened to be out in the street when the police discovered our bunker. After hiding out in various places, they managed an amazing escape by breaking through the ghetto wall in broad daylight. I do not know what happened to them afterwards.

CHAPTER 29

Alone on the Road

THE MARCH I HAD MADE FROM BOCHNIA TO DOMIENITZ a short time before—when I was drafted to work in the Domienitz forest and was forced, on the first day, to walk the entire distance on foot—now stood me in good stead.

Boarding a train in Bochnia would be hazardous, as the station had been heavily guarded since the first *Aktion*. We had no choice but to walk all the way to Domienitz and catch the train to Cracow from there. We set out on our march, having in mind to spend the night somewhere near the Domienitz station, so as to catch the first train in the morning. This train was never checked, since it was always crammed with laborers on their way to work. Besides, we reasoned, no one would take notice of us in the early morning darkness.

A few minutes into our march, we suddenly noticed two SS men in full regalia strutting toward us.

"I know them," whispered Herschel. "They are Beck and Bogusch, the two worst bloodhounds of the ghetto."

We were proceeding straight ahead, while the Germans were approaching from a side street, so that we would meet at the intersection, a highly distasteful prospect, to say the least. Herschel dashed ahead in order to reach the intersection before the Germans did, but I did not follow suit, thinking that a large group on the run would arouse suspicion. Instead, I stayed in place and waited for them to cross the street and continue on their way. To my disappointment, they turned right, proceeding on a collision course with me. Taking cover behind a small stairwell, I watched with apprehension as the two SS men approached in my direction. In spite of my Polish appearance, it was not hard to figure out that I was a Jew escaping from the ghetto. Carrying a child and a small valise in Bochnia, within a short distance from the ghetto, gave me all the earmarks of a ghetto escapee.

Suddenly, their bright flashlights were shining into my face.

"Where are you going?" they asked, pointing at my valise. "Did you arrive at the station just now?"

"No, I'm going *to* the station," I replied, petrified with fear.

I instantly realized I had made two mistakes. First, I should have answered I had indeed come *from* the station, since the last train had already left a long time before. My second mistake was speaking to them in German, a telltale sign that I was a Jew since Poles rarely speak German.

The Germans looked at each other with raised eyebrows, as if to say, "There's something strange about this fellow."

Without waiting for further questions I bolted toward the station.

"Maybe I'll still catch the train!" I shouted, running as fast as I could.

Miraculously, they did not order me to come back, nor did they shoot at me. I do not know what got into them at that particular moment. I am convinced it was Hashem's protective Hand shielding me. When Herschel noticed that I had been stopped by the two SS men he quickly ran away. I did not find him any more.

In the dark, I could not find the road leading to Domienitz, and I was forced to ask directions from a Pole. In an attempt to make my nocturnal walk with a child in my arms look more plausible, I placed a bandage on Sheindl's head. No one will suspect me now, I thought. The first Pole I asked for directions to the Domienitz station eyed me with suspicion.

"Get away from me," he snarled. "I know you're a Jew. Don't give me any stories. You're running away from the ghetto."

Happy that the Pole let it go at that and did not alert the police, I continued on my way. The next Pole I asked for directions gave me an entirely different answer. He, too, recognized that I was a Jew.

"My friend," he said, "you did the right thing escaping from the ghetto. Don't worry. The political situation is getting better by the day. Go into hiding until the war is over. It won't last much longer." He paused briefly. "In the village down the road you'll find many policemen patrolling the streets. Don't pay any attention to them; just walk down Main Street without fear. You'll also notice many people sitting in front of their homes. Don't worry about them either."

I wanted to thank the kindhearted man, but before I

could say anything, he vanished. I was not sure if he was a Pole or perhaps even a Jew. To my mind, he was another heavenly messenger sent by Hashem to save me.

Before long, I had evidence of the soundness of his advice. All along the main street, peasants were sitting outside enjoying the cool evening breeze. If the kind Pole had not guided me I would have been afraid to pass through the hamlet in full view of the policemen and the local peasants.

After a while, I reached a fork in the road. Should I turn to the right or to the left? It was already late, the road was deserted, and there was no one to ask. The best thing, it seemed, was to spend the night right there and continue on in the morning. The soft grass was my bed. My coat and the material I had prepared for the Polish policeman served as a blanket for my little girl, while I shivered throughout the night.

The hours passed with agonizing slowness. In the distance, I heard the chimes of the Bochnia bell tower tolling the hours. At last, dawn was breaking, the farm workers' heavy boots were pounding the gravel as they marched off to work.

"Which way to Domienitz?" I inquired of a worker.

The worker told me how to get there, but at the same time I realized I had missed the early morning train which took the workers to Cracow. I had no choice but to hire a horse-drawn wagon. However, since it was Friday, the market day in Bochnia, everyone was going *to* Bochnia. Finally, I found a peasant who agreed to take me, demanding the unheard of sum of three hundred *zlotys.* Without haggling, I agreed to pay the full amount, which made him suspicious of the entire deal.

"The next train is leaving in an hour," he said, scrutinizing me. "Why don't you go by train?"

"Don't you see?" I replied. "My little girl is hurt. I've got to get her to a doctor, and she's afraid to ride the train."

"Do you take me for a fool?" he snapped. "I know perfectly well what you're trying to do . . . but I'll take you anyhow." Evidently, the easy money influenced his decision.

I mounted the wagon with my daughter, and he returned to the village to have a bite to eat and feed the horse. Meanwhile, I warmed up a little from the cold night, and Sheindl drank a cup of fresh warm milk, something she had not had in a long time. The Pole then told me that he did not have time to take me, but that his thirteen-year-old son would drive the wagon. Furthermore, the boy could only take us as far as Niepolomitz, midway to Cracow, because he needed the wagon. This was clearly just a lame excuse. The truth was that he was afraid to risk his life transporting Jews, whereas his son, being a minor, would go free if caught. Instead of the three hundred *zlotys*, however, he offered to charge me only two hundred *zlotys*. Since I had no alternative, I accepted his proposal, thinking, When I get to Niepolomitz I'll worry about continuing my trip.

At last, the wagon was ready. I sat down on the floor, keeping the child next to me as the wagon rolled along the main highway. Buses, cars and trucks manned by German police and Gestapo whizzed past us, and I could not help but feel that every German had his eyes on me.

At one o'clock in the afternoon, we reached our destination. The boy stopped the wagon at the outskirts of Niepolomitz, evidently on his father's orders. After I paid him, he turned the wagon around and left.

I found myself at the side of the highway, fully exposed to the passing German vehicles. Putting Sheindl to sleep in the grass, I set out to find another wagon to take us to Cracow.

Suddenly, from the distance I heard someone shouting, "Hey you! Come over here!"

My heart skipped a beat. The stranger had probably guessed I was a Jew. But I simply had to go. Otherwise, he might shoot me.

"What are you looking for?" he asked.

"I'm looking for a wagon to take me and my sick child to Cracow to see a doctor," I answered calmly.

"Let me warn you that this is a very unsafe area," the man cautioned me. "Get off this highway, if you know what's good for you. Down the road is Gestapo Headquarters. The area is crawling with SS men. You'll never catch a ride around here anyhow. You're better off following the country roads all the way to Cracow. That way you won't run into any Germans."

He explained to me exactly how to go, accompanying me part of the way. Gratefully, I gave him a tip for his kind advice and continued in the direction he had indicated. I am convinced that this too was a miracle from Heaven; it was the third time a mysterious stranger had come along to save my life.

At first, trudging along the country trails was easy enough, but carrying my child in the midday sun took its toll and forced me to stop at a farmhouse to ask for a drink of water. The kind farmer offered me a cool drink; I washed my hands for *netillas yadayim* and ate a breakfast consisting of a piece of dry bread and a cup of water. Refreshed and invigorated, I continued my march, but since I did not know the way well, I decided to follow the railroad tracks.

Walking in total silence, I did not encounter a soul all day, but once, passing a field, I heard the field workers shout, "*Zhid! Zhid!* Jew! Jew!"

When I saw them in the distance, I pondered whether to

say hello to them in the traditional Polish greeting of "The Lord bless you." But I decided to look the other way, so as not to attract their attention. Although they had apparently concluded that I was a Jew, since there were no Germans around I was not afraid they would report me.

Parched after hours of walking in the blazing sun through the monotonous countryside I came upon a little pond. The water was covered with algae, pond weeds and frogs croaking happily. It did not matter; it was water. Using my cap as a cup, I first gave a drink to little Sheindl who had all along been moaning, "I'm so thirsty!" Then I quenched my own thirst. Refreshed, I resumed the long trek. But before long, we were thirsty again, and this time I could not even find a muddy puddle to moisten our dried lips.

Towards evening, as the sun slowly descended, I noticed in the distance a lonely cluster of trees reaching up from amidst the placid fields. Dragging myself to the small oasis with my last ounce of strength, I sat down on a stump to rest in the cool shade. It was a perfect place to *daven*. I took out my *tallis* and *tefillin* and immersed myself in *tefillah*. No one would find me here. After *davening*, I took out a slice of bread, and Sheindl and I enjoyed the meal.

But what good is a meal without a drink of water? I began to search, hoping that in the *zchus* of the innocent little one, Hashem would grant me a miracle of finding water. And indeed, after only a few minutes, I heard the sound of water bubbling up from the ground. There it was—a spring of pure clear water rising from the earth. I filled my cap with the cool life-giving water, slaking Sheindl's thirst and my own. The sense that Hashem was manifestly watching over us imbued me with hope and courage. With renewed vitality, I resumed the march.

Slowly, the long shadows of the night enveloped all of existence. I did not have the foggiest notion of where I was or how far I was from my destination of Cracow and Prokatzim. In the far-off distance, I detected a work detail digging a ditch. Should I go over and ask for directions? If they were Poles, they might hand me over to the Germans, and if they were Jewish laborers, no doubt they were being watched by German guards. Either way, I would be risking my life. In the end, I decided to approach them, placing my trust in Hashem. He had helped me thus far. He would help me again.

Coming closer, I noticed that they were Jews. Yet strangely, they were working without any supervision—a very rare occurrence indeed. I approached and asked them for directions to Cracow.

"Where are you from, and where are you headed?" they answered with a question, in typically Jewish fashion.

Briefly, I told them my story, explaining that I was trying to get to Cracow, but I did not tell them I intended to flee across the border and go to Hungary; such things are better left unsaid. However, instead of giving me the information I required, they tried to convince me to give up my plans of going to Cracow and Prokatzim, for my chances of survival would be very slim. They were willing—as a favor—to allow me to join them in their labor camp along with my daughter.

"You know, there are no children in this camp," they told me. "The Germans killed all children before carting off their parents to labor camps. But the Jewish camp doctor has influence with the *Lagerfuhrer*. He can arrange to have her stay with you."

Before I had a chance to answer, one of the men called out, "Quick, someone go get the doctor!"

Having experienced the comforts of life in a German

labor camp, I politely but firmly rejected their offer. These poor Jews still harbored the illusion that by working in a labor camp they would survive the war. I knew better.

"If that's your decision, you'd better leave in a hurry before the German guard arrives," one of the men said. "If he sees you, you're doomed. You're not too far from Cracow, but you've got to be very careful. At this hour of the evening, all the forced laborers are returning from work guarded by SS men who are itching for a chance to blow a Jew to bits."

Heeding their advice, I proceeded cautiously, and with Hashem's help, I made it safely to the railroad station. I wanted very much to go by train, yet at the same time I was afraid of being asked to show identification papers, which I did not have. Then again, I was so tired from marching all day that I was ready to collapse. In the end, I decided to throw caution to the winds and go by train as far as Prokatzim. After a long wait, I finally saw the train pull into the station. Assuming a nonchalant air, I quickly bought my ticket, seemingly indifferent to the bystanders who were gazing with curious stares at the little girl I was carrying in my arms.

I hurriedly boarded the train, and we were on our way. Our railroad car had no light. It was pitch-dark; one couldn't see a thing. Still, to be on the safe side, I stayed in the hallway.

"Prokatzim!" the conductor announced after a short ride.

I was elated, especially considering that walking this distance would have taken me several hours. The train came to a halt. Getting off, I bypassed the crush at the main exit hall and took a shortcut into town.

Thank Heaven, I had made it!

CHAPTER 30

The Rescue Committee

PROKATZIM! I HAD REACHED MY DESTINATION, BUT I DID not have the faintest notion of how to find the organizers of the escape route to Hungary. Since these people were living under assumed Aryan names, I had no way of identifying them.

It was already quite late. The nine o'clock curfew was approaching, the streets would be deserted, and I had nowhere to turn. Weighing the alternative options, I took the calculated risk of asking one of the men I had seen on the train whether he knew of any people in Prokatzim who held foreign citizenship. My question could have landed me in deep trouble, but to my surprise, it did not.

"Why, certainly. Not far from here, there lives a Jew who owns foreign citizenship papers," was the man's amazing

reply. "I'll be happy to take you to his house."

Overjoyed at his cordial attitude, I saw his answer as yet another sign from Heaven that Hashem was guiding my footsteps and preventing me from stumbling into any pitfalls. We got into a friendly chat; the man apparently thought that I, too, was a foreign citizen, and I certainly did nothing to make him think otherwise. When we reached the house, I thanked him wholeheartedly, and flashing a warm smile, he bid me good-bye.

I rang the bell, and after a moment a Polish maid came to the door.

"What do you want?" she asked brusquely.

"I arrived in town just a short while ago, and I don't have a place to stay," I explained. "Could I just lie down to sleep in a corner of the house?"

Through the glass door, I could see her convey my request to the master of the house. She returned at once.

"Impossible," she said curtly. "You can't stay here."

"Don't you see?" I tried to reason with her. "It's late already, and I'm not allowed to stay in the streets. All I'm asking is to sleep in the hall. In the morning, I'll be on my way."

Suddenly, the master of the house emerged.

"Get out of here," he shouted. "There are no Jews living in this house. Beat it! Get lost!"

The uproar he created could be heard clear across town. All I needed was for the police to respond to the ruckus. That would be the last straw. After he calmed down a bit, I held up Sheindl.

"Look at the little girl in my arms," I pleaded. "What am I supposed to do? I have no place to go at this hour of the night. I know you are Jewish. Have a heart! Take pity on the

little one! All I'm asking for is a small corner in which to spend the night."

"No," he insisted. "I'm not Jewish, and if you don't leave this minute I'm going to call the police!"

When he saw me stall for time, he started screaming at the top of his voice, "Police! Police!"

I begged him to stop screaming, and he finally calmed down and went back into the house. I found myself out in the street facing a grave predicament. I had nowhere to turn.

So I won't get any sleep, I thought to myself, but my little girl hasn't had a bite to eat or a drink of water for many hours. I decided to knock on another door of the house. Once again, the maid answered the door. When she heard that I wanted a drink of water, she went back into the house and did not return. After waiting a good while, I knocked again, this time on the window. No reaction at all. But I was not about to give up. The crying and moaning of the thirsty child might alert a policeman, and that would be real trouble.

I was furious.

"How can a Jew be so heartless?" I lashed out angrily. "You ought to be ashamed of yourselves, denying a Jew a drink of water! Don't you have any compassion?"

Presently, the master of the house came to the door.

"There's a well in the courtyard," he told me without opening the door. "Take as much water as you want."

After placing Sheindl on the floor, I went to look for the well, but I was unable find it in the dark. I returned to the front door.

"Sir, I can't find the well!" I called out.

"Just keep looking," he replied blandly.

Once more I searched, but still, I could find no sign of a well. Again, I begged him to give me just a cup of water, but

the callous, good-for-nothing just turned a deaf ear.

In spite of everything, I did not forget that it was Friday night. Hiding in a corner, I *davened Kabbalas Shabbos* and sang *zemiros.* Since I had no water to wash my hands for *netillas yadayim,* I was unable to recite the *Kiddush* and eat bread. I could do without it, but little Sheindl kept moaning, "Water, water!" Seeing the child suffer was sheer torture.

"In the morning I'll get you water," I said, trying to appease her.

I prepared a bed for her in the grass, lulling her asleep with the promise of water and food in the morning.

No more than half an hour had gone by when, wonder of wonders, a window was opened, and through it a lady gently lowered a basket containing hot coffee and food. Sheindl did not want to touch the food, but she eagerly drank the entire cup. Because of concern regarding *kashrus,* I did not want to eat the food. I thanked the lady and explained this to her, asking her to take the food back, but to let me have just some water. Seconds later, she lowered a bottle of water from the window. After washing my hands, I recited the *Kiddush* over bread instead of wine and sang to myself the *zemiros,* sitting on the ground at my make-believe, open-air *Shabbos* meal.

It began to rain as soon as I fell asleep. I found shelter underneath a narrow porch among coils of barbed wire that were stored there. Just as I began to stretch out, the maid appeared with a blanket which I wrapped around Sheindl, making a comfortable bed for her. My body was aching all over, but at least the little one was sleeping soundly.

At the crack of dawn, the maid came to make sure I had not made off with the blanket. Returning a short time later, she invited us in. Imagine my surprise when the man of the house smilingly invited me to join him for a breakfast of fresh

buttered rolls and piping hot coffee. At the same time, he apologized for his cold-hearted conduct the night before.

"I am not really a callous person," he said. "But a few days ago, there was a big robbery at the home of a friend of mine—also a foreign national—and since I didn't know you, I was afraid you had foul play in mind."

I thanked him, and then he inquired about my situation.

"Don't worry," he reassured me. "I know the people who are helping Jews escape to Hungary. I'll be glad to introduce you to them."

Patiently, he waited for my little girl to finish her meal, after which he took me to the house of the escape organization. To avoid being associated with me, he asked me to follow him at a distance. After we had walked for a good while, he pointed out the house. I thanked him for his kindness, and we parted.

Upon entering the house, I was met by two men I knew from Cracow and Bochnia, who were now officials on the rescue committee. However, my hopes of receiving a friendly reception from these old acquaintances were promptly dashed when the two men showed me the door and sent me packing. I was deeply hurt. They knew what I had been through, and instead of inquiring if my little girl needed some food or drink—never mind asking if I was hungry—they threw me out into the street. Meanwhile, they were seated around a table richly laden with an abundance of fish, meat, *challos* and other delicacies. Only people with hearts of stone could act like this; it was incomprehensible. I implored them to help me.

"I have money," I assured them. "I can pay."

It was useless.

"Look here, you had better get going," they answered

with grim finality. "There's nothing to discuss."

They directed me to the home of the Stern brothers, who were also foreign nationals.

"They'll take care of you," they said.

Thankfully, the Stern brothers offered me a warm welcome. After *davening Shacharis*, they invited me to a sumptuous *Shabbos* meal. It wouldn't be bad at all if I could stay here until I continue my journey, I thought. But I was in for a letdown when one of the brothers approached me.

"Reb Yid, please forgive us," he said apologetically. "We must ask you to leave at once. We are scheduled to leave for Hungary today, and the apartment will be returned to our Polish landlord."

What was I to do? I picked up my child and my valise and left together with the Stern brothers. They escorted me to the home of Reb Yitzchak Glanzer, the pre-war *shochet* of Cracow and Padgursz.

Reb Yitzchak Glanzer, an old friend of mine, received me with obvious delight. Much to my surprise, I met there my friend Herschel Kitover with his wife and child who had become separated from me when we ran into the two SS men shortly after escaping from the Bochnia ghetto. They, too, had suffered a great deal before reaching Prokatzim. I was very happy to see they had made it to safety and gratified that I had been instrumental in their rescue. Reb Yitzchak Glanzer did not keep us waiting. Within minutes, he set the table and produced a feast that was nothing short of a royal banquet.

After the meal, we sat down to some serious talk. Here I was, a fugitive without any papers, liable to be picked up in the first dragnet.

"I must leave as soon as possible," I said gravely.

"I'm willing to do all I can to help you," Reb Yitzchak

replied. "I'm slated to cross the border into Slovakia today, but I'm going to give up my seat on the transport and let you go instead."

His noble and unselfish offer brought tears to my eyes. He immediately informed the officers of the escape committee, who approved the switch; his trip would be postponed until the next opportunity. Meanwhile, I enjoyed Reb Yitzchak's hospitality, which knew no bounds. He even offered me his own bed while he slept on the floor. It was my first restful moment in the ten days since the beginning of the Bochnia *Aktion.*

Although the escape committee had agreed to the substitution, they went back on their word and refused to include me in the transport. Day after day, I urged them to let me go, pointing out that the local police knew all foreign nationals and any new face would arouse suspicion. They persistently refused with the justification that both I and my daughter looked Jewish and, since we had to make the trip to the border as non-Jews, our appearance would give us away. It was a flimsy excuse, since many Jews fled daily across the border without any trouble. The committee's true motive for turning me down was sheer greed. Priority went to the highest bidder.

The *shochet,* realizing that his selfless offer had not accomplished anything, decided not to postpone his trip any longer. He helped us immeasurably by not revealing his impending departure to his Polish landlord, so that we were able to remain in his apartment. He did me the additional favor of procuring for me some kind of Slovak identity papers, issued to Moshe Elyakim Beriah, a pre-war friend of mine. Although the document was of no great value, psychologically it gave me a tremendous boost.

My future looked quite bleak, but "the Guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps." Salvation arrived in the person of Avraham Yitzchak Glanzer, a nephew of the *shochet,* also a holder of foreign citizenship papers.

"Don't worry," he told me. "I am friendly with the Pole who runs the escape network. I'll see to it that he takes you in the next transport."

During the course of our conversation, I briefed him on my financial condition. I was carrying cash and the piece of material I had prepared for the Polish policeman, a total value of about one hundred and twenty dollars, which would be sufficient to cover the cost of my escape and that of my friend Herschel and his family. The organization demanded one hundred and fifty dollars for the same rescue operation. Avraham Yitzchak also handed me his uncle's foreign citizenship documents. Since his uncle had already crossed the border, he did not need them any longer, and his passport picture bore a slight resemblance to me. So now I was kosher. Well, not quite, since the local police knew all the foreign nationals personally, but the document gave me a sense of security.

It was around this time that I learned of the horrifying fate that had befallen the people caught in the bunkers in the Bochnia ghetto. After being detained in the *Judenrat* jail, all prisoners were brought to a courtyard where the Germans shot all of them to death. Afterwards, they removed the victims' clothes for the purpose of finding hidden valuables. The bodies were then stacked and burned on a pile of wood which had been prepared by Jewish slave laborers. Two hundred pure and innocent souls, including my dear mother and her two grandchildren, died in the murderous pyre.

A Jewish policeman I knew told me that before the

prisoners were led to their execution, my mother called him over and told him, "I'm well aware of what they are going to do to us. I have only minutes to live, but I'm not afraid to die. I am going to my death as if I were going to a wedding. I am happy mainly because I have been granted the *zchus* of marrying off my children the way I have always hoped for, to decent, Torah-observant husbands and wives. I am also happy that my son Chaim Shlomo and his daughter managed to escape from the ghetto. I fervently hope and pray that they will survive."

Although I knew all along what was in store for the people arrested by the Germans, I was still shocked and outraged upon hearing the report. My mother being killed so brutally deeply saddened me. I was overcome with inconsolable grief. Whoever knew her could attest that she exemplified the verse, A woman of valor, who can find her? (*Mishlei* 31:10) She distinguished herself by her noble character and her deeds of charity and kindness. On the way to her death—as I was told—she did not cry or lament. She accepted her fate with love, with the full knowledge that she was offering her life *al kiddush Hashem*, for the greater glory of Hashem's Name.

The courtyard where they were murdered was situated in the center of Salno Gura Street. The fire department, alerted by the column of smoke rising from the roaring fire, rushed to the scene. However, the German scoundrels sent them back. "It's nothing," they said. "Just a bunch of Jews burning."

During those days of death, destruction and unremitting pain and sorrow, it became increasingly difficult to maintain the level of religious observance with regard to *davening* with a *minyan*, putting on *tefillin*, observing *Shabbos*, *kashrus* and other *mitzvos*. It took immense effort and sacrifice to fulfill

the laws of the Torah. Even among the most scrupulously observant Jews, a gradual relaxation of the standards of observance could be noticed, to the point of sliding into an attitude of carefree negligence.

Personally, I experienced great difficulty in observing the *mitzvos,* and I was afraid of becoming accustomed to a life of non-observance. In order to prevent my drifting away from Torah-life, I solemnly resolved never, not even under the worst circumstances, to violate either of the following two *mitzvos*. I would never shave with a straight razor or a razor blade, and I would never eat non-kosher food. I reasoned that it was within my power to observe both of these prohibitions, in contrast to other *mitzvos* where I would be subject to the will of the German oppressors. As I recall, it was these *mitzvos* in particular that created great difficulty for me, but I resisted all temptation.

My first test came about in Prokatzim where I was walking around without papers and without the yellow *Judenstern*. Any spot check would have placed me in mortal danger. In the meantime, my beard began to grow. I had no electric shaver, and of course, a beard was the earmark of a Jew. Moreover, this would present a serious danger when I would have to travel several hours by train to reach the Slovak border. Evaluating my situation I concluded that under these circumstances shaving constituted *pikuach nefesh*—a life saving procedure which is permitted. Consequently, I decided to get a shave with a straight razor. I went to a barber shop, but just as I was about to enter I stopped.

No, I said to myself. I'm not going to do it. I won't violate my vow, no matter what will happen. Hashem can help me anyway, and perhaps He will help me precisely because of my refusal to shave.

I am happy to say that the eventual trip to the border passed without incident, in spite of my beard.

In the meantime, however, I was still stranded in Prokatzim. The appalling news from the Bochnia ghetto and my mother's cruel death shocked me to the core, but there was no time for weeping, not even for sitting *shivah*. My first priority was to save my life and that of my daughter. As long as we were trapped in the German claws our lives were in danger.

My stay in Prokatzim dragged on and on, a buzz of activity with few results. Finally, after waiting for ten days, Avraham Yitzchak told Herschel and me to pack our bags.

"Today you're going to Slovakia," he explained. "The Pole agreed to take you first. The others can wait."

We were ecstatic. At long last, we would escape the lion's den! To be sure, we still had to clear a good many hurdles, but we were confident that Hashem would help us, just as He had saved us until then. We packed our meager possessions, and we were on our way!

At the designated meeting place, we found a fairly large group of people waiting to cross the border together with us. Also present were the Poles who would guide us to our destination, headed by Kortchmartchek, the railroad engineer.

"Today I'm taking only the people who fled from Bochnia," he announced, standing on a chair. "All others go home. I'll take you next time."

The organizers had devised an ingenious plan. The train which would take us from Prokatzim to the Polish-Slovak border was staffed by men who were in on the plot. At the border station, we would be met by people who would lead us across the border in the dark of night. In Prokatzim, the Jews were to be guided by Polish scouts who would survey the

road to the station. Kortchmartchek would give the all-clear from the window of the incoming train. In the event that a German inspector boarded the train in Cracow, Kortchmartchek would give a sign and the Jews would head back to wait for another opportunity. For added insurance, they had arranged for Polish women to bring the children to the station and to ride with them to the border.

The reason for selecting the Polish-Slovak border was that German border guards were deployed all along the Polish-Hungarian border, making it virtually impenetrable. At the Slovak border, however, the Germans relied on the high Carpathian Mountains to deter any escape attempt. Reasoning that no one would dare scale the treacherous cliffs, the Germans did not guard this border very heavily. Eventually, the Germans discovered the Slovak escape route, as well as the names of the members of the smugglers' organization. Kortchmartchek, who was on their most wanted list, narrowly escaped to Hungary, where he remained until the war's end.

Before setting out on our journey, we were given several important instructions. One, throughout the entire trip we were not to exhibit any familiarity with our Polish guides, not to speak to them or ask questions. Two, in case someone would get caught, either by the Polish police or by the Germans, he was not to divulge the identity of the escaping Jews or of the members of the organization. Three, all adults were to find seats in different compartments, while the children, accompanied by Polish women would travel in another compartment. Four, upon arrival at the station near the border, we were to proceed straight to the end of the platform where two men would be waiting. We were to follow these men without speaking to them.

A quick wave of Kortchmartchek's hand told us it was time to move. The short walk to the station gave me a sinking feeling in my stomach, since we had to pass the notorious Jerusalemska death camp. Just as we were going by, a group of Jews guarded by "black guards" were working alongside the road. The mere sight of these guards was enough to send shivers down my spine. Feigning indifference, I projected an I-couldn't-care-less image, while my heart was beating rapidly with trepidation. With Hashem's help, everything went smoothly.

While we were waiting at a safe distance from the platform, the Polish women with the children remained on the platform to find out from Kortchmartchek whether it was safe for us to travel. When the train pulled in, I took a seat in a separate compartment, according to instructions, and slowly the train began to move, gradually picking up speed.

One thing troubled me a great deal. Since Sheindl could speak only Yiddish, one word of hers might foul up the entire operation. I pointed this out to the Polish woman taking care of her.

"Don't worry," she reassured me. "I'll see to it that everything turns out all right."

Just to be sure I gave Sheindl some candy to keep her quiet. I paid five hundred *zlotys* for this trip, but it was well worth it.

"Tickets, please," the conductor called out.

I handed him my ticket, but he was not satisfied.

"Let me see your identification," he demanded.

I was terrified. What's this? The entire crew was supposed to be in on the operation. Could this be a new man?

With outward calm, I showed him the foreign papers the *shochet* had left me. The conductor glanced at them.

"Everything's okay," he said.

I breathed an audible sigh of relief.

After a long ride, we arrived at our destination. As soon as we got off, the two men waiting for us on the platform started to march ahead, leading the way. We followed them, and after a long walk, we found ourselves deep in a forest. There was no one else around, nothing to fear.

Before long, Kortchmartchek arrived. He took a head count to make sure no one was missing. There were twelve in our group. One of the guides asked for volunteers who wanted to accomplish the border crossing in one night. He explained that, as a rule, the journey took two nights, and the intervening day was spent in the dense forest.

I myself could hardly wait to put the German misery behind me. Aside from that, there always loomed the possibility that the Germans might attack us. Many times before, when they found out about an escape attempt, they surrounded the forest and ferreted out the unfortunate Jews. I readily agreed to join the guide, and several others, including Herschel, followed suit. Facing a grave predicament, we had nowhere to turn.

CHAPTER 31

The Slovak Border

AFTER BIDDING FAREWELL TO THE OTHERS, WE SET OUT on our trek across the border. At first, things went very smoothly, as we marched through fields on a level road. The bright moon smiled at us, and even the pleasant weather seemed to cooperate with us. After marching for a good hour, we took a break. Not bad, not bad at all. Certainly not as bad as I was led to believe it would be. However, as we continued I realized how wrong I was.

We were entering a mountainous region. What had started out as an easy march was turning into an uphill climb. Laboriously, I trudged along, breathing heavily, while Sheindl kept asking for water. My small canteen was empty, and I was forced to draw water from muddy puddles alongside the trail. Never mind cleanliness, the main thing was to keep her quiet,

since the slightest sound might betray us.

After several hours of steep climbing, we noticed that our guide, who was marching ahead of us, suddenly doubled back at full speed, motioning to us to follow him. Without asking questions, we followed suit, running at top speed. This was twice as difficult for me, since I was carrying my child. We reached the valley where we crept on hands and knees, seeking shelter among the bushes. There we stayed, trembling with the fear of being discovered.

The reason for our precipitous flight was that the Poles living in this region had begun noticing Jewish groups crossing the border. They would lay in ambush to capture the escaping Jews, either in order to hand them over to the police or simply to extort money from them. Luckily, our guide spotted them first and alerted us.

At long last, the guide ventured out of our hiding place to ascertain if the coast was clear. He gave us the thumbs-up signal, and once again, we plodded up the mountain, scaling sheer cliffs, often hanging on by our nails, until we reached the peak, only to continue on to the next summit. Meanwhile, the moon disappeared, and total darkness shrouded everything. We had to stay close to each other and advance very slowly. The climb seemed endless; my back was aching from carrying Sheindl up the steep incline step by laborious step.

We were approaching the Slovak border in the area dominated by the towering High Tatra Mountains, which soar to heights of seven thousand feet. The mountain trail rose almost perpendicular, straight up. Normal climbing became impossible, and we had to proceed on hands and knees. Straining with all my might, perspiring profusely as I carried Sheindl, I managed to keep up with the group.

After reaching the first high summit, we all collapsed,

totally exhausted and out of breath. Our guide allowed us a short rest period, but not too long, since every minute was precious. But the people were simply too worn-out to get up. Noting the rundown condition of the group, the guide was willing to allow us to spend the night there and continue our trip the following night. Personally, I did not mind going along with his suggestion being that I was absolutely drained. I had tried a variety of methods of carrying the child—on my arms, my back, my shoulders, my head—but now, I was too tired to take even one more step. On the other hand, I reasoned that staying there would be hazardous. We, therefore, asked the guide to let us rest a little longer and then to continue, to which he agreed. With our last ounce of strength, we got up to resume our march. But now our guide changed his tune.

"Whoever doesn't keep up with the group is going to get clobbered," he growled, picking up a heavy stick. "If we get stuck crossing the border, we're all done for."

We made slow but steady progress, climbing mountain after mountain, while our guide goaded us on with his stick.

"Five more kilometers to the border," he announced.

More endless laborious trudging.

"Four more kilometers to the border," he announced.

His tactics worked. Bit by agonizing bit, we closed the distance to the border.

"Listen folks, we're getting close to the border," he finally announced. "Keep quiet, and make sure the children are kept quiet! There's a German checkpoint nearby."

The last sentence started the adrenalin flowing. With newfound energy, we advanced quickly, driven by the notion that each step brought us closer to freedom from the German Kingdom of the Night.

"Hurry up, hurry up," the guide kept urging us on. "Dawn is breaking. Quick!"

Finally, the mountains receded behind us, and we were on flat ground once again. We were really stepping up our pace. A thin red ribbon of light appeared on the horizon. Dawn was breaking. We saw a white border marker . . . and we walked past it.

"*Baruch Hashem!*" I exclaimed loudly, the first words I spoke in freedom.

I breathed a deep sigh of relief. Somehow, freedom became tangible. I felt a sense of buoyancy. I was walking on air.

Meanwhile, we did not slow down but continued marching to the first hamlet, about thirty minutes from the border. Our guide knocked on the door of one of the farmhouses. The door opened, and we all entered. The Slovak farmer quickly brought water for us to freshen up, while at the same time, our guide asked me to sign a paper certifying that he had carried out his mission. I was happy to comply and thanked him for a job well done.

The Slovak family treated us very cordially.

"Now you have nothing to fear any more," the farmer said, smiling graciously. "In the attic, there is plenty of room for you all to rest up."

In the spacious attic, we were served an abundance of food and water. The simple food tasted like a gourmet banquet. After the meal, we bedded down on the fragrant hay, resting our weary bones and relaxing our taut nerves. Feeling an indescribable sense of relief at having escaped the German inferno, I even began to dream that some day I would resume a normal life again.

My joy was short-lived. I had barely rested for a couple of

hours when I heard the sound of heavy boots climbing the stairs to the attic. Seconds later, four men appeared, one dressed in civilian clothes, the others in uniform. They pointed their guns at us.

Here we go again, I thought. The Germans caught up with us after all we've been through!

"Everybody, get up!" they shouted.

Everyone got up. The men searched the hay for valuables but came up with nothing. In the last minute, right under their noses, I managed to hide the small amount of money I had left.

They instructed us to go down into the street. In spite of everything, I was relieved to note that they were, after all, Slovak policemen, not Germans.

"Where are you taking us?" I asked one of the policemen.

"Back to where you came from," he retorted. "Across the border."

I was stunned. Could he be lying? Turning to another policeman who looked Jewish I asked the same question.

"You are being taken by bus to the police station in the village down the road," he replied.

I repeated to him the answer his colleague had just given me.

"Oh, forget it," he said. "He was just kidding."

The good man certainly put my mind at ease. We were instructed to board the waiting bus. One of the policemen escorting us got up.

"Anyone trying to escape will be shot at once," he announced, brandishing his revolver.

Checking my pockets, I tore up any incriminating papers, shredding everything—even family pictures—and threw the pieces out the window.

After a half hour's ride, we came to the police station of the village of Yablonka. The police inspector welcomed us courteously, invited us to sit down and inquired as to whether we had eaten breakfast. Before long, fresh bread and coffee were served, food I had not seen in a long time. We ate to our heart's content.

After the meal, he interrogated each person individually about his experiences under the Germans. Subsequently, we had to submit to a body search; the women were searched in a separate room by policewomen. All valuables, gold, silver and diamonds were confiscated, as well as less valuable items like watches and fountain pens. At noon, bread and soup were served to anyone wishing to eat. Later that afternoon, we were taken to the bus station under police escort.

"Where are you taking us?" I asked one of the policemen.

"To Hungary," was the laconic answer.

It sounded like a cruel hoax. I had the distinct impression that we were being taken to prison. Feverishly, I tried to devise an escape scheme, but I would have to leave Sheindl behind. Out of the question. I would have to leave my fate in the hands of Hashem.

Towards evening, we arrived at the village of Tristina, where we were led into a large building. A public official squeezed us all into a tiny room. When we asked him for some food and water, he angrily slammed the door shut. Our worst fears were suddenly realized. Here we were, tightly pressed into a suffocating cell without food or drink. The children were crying for food, and we had nothing to offer them. It was completely dark. There was nothing to do but to try to get some sleep.

Imagine our heartbreak and disappointment. Hunger and pain were things to which we were accustomed, but now

we had to cope with the gnawing worry about the ominous future.

"Hashem has helped thus far," we tried to reassure each other. "He will not abandon us now."

Sitting in the dark, each of us was engrossed in his own private thoughts.

About two hours later, the lamp hanging from the ceiling was turned on from the outside, and the room was suddenly bathed in bright light. The door opened, and a well-dressed gentleman entered. He was accompanied by the official who had brought us to this room.

"Don't worry," the gentleman said, after inquiring about our situation. "You'll be staying here only for one day. Tomorrow, you continue on to Hungary."

"Are you Jewish?" I asked him, having noticed his small *magen david* lapel pin.

"Yes," was his straightforward answer.

Hearing his message, we became jubilant.

"I'm going to get you some food," he promised.

True to his word, he came back together with his daughter a half hour later, carrying a large basket filled with fresh bread, savory hot roast beef, fruit and several bottles of milk, truly a royal feast. Our mouths were watering.

"Is the meat kosher?" I asked.

"No, it is not," he replied apologetically. "Sorry to say, we have no *shochet*."

We explained that we could not eat the meat and that it would be best if he took it back. He bid us a friendly good-bye and left. The children fell all over the delicious milk, and we sat down to eat the fruit, the likes of which we had not seen since the beginning of the war. Less than thirty minutes later, the daughter came back with a box filled with hard-boiled

eggs to replace the roast we had to forgo.

"Tomorrow, I'm coming to visit you again," she said, flashing a warm smile as she turned to leave.

After such a good meal and the happy news, I fell into a deep sleep. The trip to Hungary was not an empty dream after all. It was actually coming true.

Early in the morning, the magnanimous Jewish gentleman and his daughter brought a new supply of food. Only then did I notice the scribbles on the wall of our small cell room, written most probably by people who, like us, had been locked up here. The inscriptions were hope-inspiring messages addressed to future occupants of this room.

"Don't worry," one of the inscriptions read. "From here you'll be taken to Hungary."

I recognized many of the signatures as belonging to Bochnia ghetto inmates who had fled earlier.

The next morning, we were told to go to the courtyard, where we found people who had been brought there from other prisons. After breakfast, we marched to the railroad station escorted by Slovak officers and entered a specially reserved railroad car. We were on our way! I don't care where we are going, I thought, as long as we are moving. On the train, the officers treated us very kindly, sharing their food with us, offering cigarettes to the men and candy to the children. After several hours of travelling, we arrived in Mikolash, where we were greeted by representatives of the Jewish community who brought us to the community center.

At the community center, we met a large number of friends and acquaintances, mostly from the Bochnia ghetto who were waiting to go on to Hungary. Some of them had no desire at all to leave, since the local Jewish community provided them with food and shelter. Besides, why should

they jeopardize their life once again? Furthermore, rumor had it that the Hungarians handed over to the Germans all refugees they rounded up, and falling into German hands meant certain death.

The Jewish community gave us a very cordial reception, taking care of all our needs. Meals were served in a large hall, and several spacious rooms were set aside as sleeping quarters. After a good night's sleep, we were taken back to the police station where they returned to us the small items taken from us in Yablonka, such as the watches and fountain pens. The valuable articles they kept. I took advantage of the opportunity to take Sheindl to a doctor. On our climb across the mountains, she had become ill, but thanks to the medication I now acquired, she soon recovered.

It was only much later that I found out what the Slovak government policy was of dealing with the refugee problem. Upon the intervention of Slovak Jews, the Slovak government agreed to assist the refugees who escaped from Poland and not to hand them over to the Germans, which would amount to a death sentence. A directive was issued to all police precincts, especially to those near the border, not to extradite any Jew who illegally crossed the border. Instead, the directive stated, these Jews were to be detained in a town near the border, in our case Yablonka. The purpose of this procedure was to confiscate the valuables they were carrying on their persons. This was the payoff for their humanitarian treatment of the Jews. It turned out to be a very lucrative enterprise for the Slovaks. Many of the refugees carried their entire fortune in their valise, including diamonds, jewels, pearls and cash. This was the reason for the body search to which we had been subjected. The government even offered a bounty of one thousand Czech *kronen*, a considerable

amount, to anyone turning in an illegal Jew.

Now it became clear to me how the police knew at once of our hiding place in the attic. I had been wondering about this all along. The simple answer was that the hospitable farmer at whose farmstead we were staying, tempted by the promised reward of one thousand *kronen* a head, had reported us to the police. By frisking us, the police netted a handsome profit. Indeed, they found a veritable fortune in cash on Yehoshua Weinfeld, a wealthy Cracow industrialist, in addition to the smaller amounts they found on the other members of the group. Having plundered them, the Slovaks wanted to make sure that none of the Jews remained on Slovak territory. For this purpose, each group of refugees was taken under police escort to the Hungarian border.

It is well-known that Rabbi Michoel Ber Weissmandl, the leader of Slovak Jewry, labored throughout the war years with superhuman heroism and self-sacrifice to save Jewish lives from the clutches of the Germans. Rabbi Weissmandl negotiated an arrangement with Dieter Wisliceny, Eichmann's adjutant in Slovakia, to halt the deportations of Slovak Jews indefinitely for a payment of fifty thousand dollars. Later, a deal was negotiated with Eichmann whereby Jewish lives would be traded for trucks. Thousands of Jewish lives could have been saved if leading Jewish figures in America had paid attention to Rabbi Weissmandl's clamors for help. In the end, he himself was arrested by the Germans and placed on a train to Auschwitz. Miraculously, he managed to escape by jumping off the moving train. After surviving the war, he settled in the United States where he established and led an outstanding *yeshivah*. The experiences of the Slovak Jews among whom we had come are well-chronicled in his heartrending autobiography, entitled *Min Hameitzar* (From the Depths), in

which he records his negotiations with the Slovak and Nazi chieftains, including Eichmann, and provides copies of the original documents.

CHAPTER 32

Budapest at Last

ON FRIDAY MORNING, THE MIKOLASH POLICE INSPECTOR appeared and called out the names of the people scheduled to proceed to Hungary. Hearing my name, I jumped for joy.

"Be ready in ten minutes," we were told.

It took me only a few minutes to pack my baggage; my little daughter represented my entire fortune. Accompanied by police and members of the Jewish community, we marched to the station where we boarded the train. Our group, which comprised twenty-two persons, was assigned a special car.

Moving through a scenic wonderland of majestic mountains and verdant valleys, I sensed a cheerful exhilaration, not strong enough, however, to dispel my uneasiness about what lay ahead.

Without warning, the train came to a halt in the middle of nowhere.

"Everybody, get off!" a shrill voice rang out. "Quickly!"

What was the meaning of this? The train was supposed to take us to Preshov, from where we would be led across the border. Why were we stopping here? But orders are orders. Our group got off, and the train moved on.

"*Shalom aleichem!*"

The pleasant greeting came from a group of Jewish men and women who had been awaiting us. Speaking in low voices, they indicated to us to speak only in whispers. They showed us two cars that were prepared for us. Since there was not enough room for all of us, we were divided into two groups. I was assigned to the first trip, which made me very happy, thinking that the car would take me across the border into Hungary, that freedom and safety were within arm's reach at last. We had been led to believe that our entry into Hungary would be legal. Unfortunately, there was not a shred of truth to it; the Hungarian government had never agreed to accept any refugees.

During the car ride, I found out the reason for the change of plans. Someone had alerted the government that the Jewish community of Preshov was helping people escape from Poland to Hungary. As a result, they were forced to change the escape route, and we were picked up midway, rather than enter Preshov where the police were waiting to arrest us.

After a ten-minute ride, we got out of the car, and our Slovak guide led us away from the highway into a field, where he told us to wait until the second group would arrive. There was no doubt about it, this border crossing was going to be a replay of our harrowing crossing into Slovakia. But there

was nothing I could do about it, except pray that Hashem bring an end to our troubles.

Half an hour later, the cars brought the others. Our two guides told us that our march to Kaschau on the Hungarian side of the border would take no more than two or three hours.

"It's a straight and level road," they reassured us. "It's going to be smooth sailing."

And so it was—until we entered a jungle-like forest. The thick foliage completely blocked out the sun, forcing us to hold hands in order to stay together. This was important, as people would frequently be badly injured on these border crossings by tripping over a fallen branch or stumbling into a hidden hole.

"Stop," our guides called out, as in the distance we recognized six men coming in our direction.

"We are very close to the border now," our guides explained. "These men will lead us across to a nearby village, where we will spend the night. Early in the morning, they will take us to Kaschau."

Since there were too many of us to take across at one time, the guides split us up into groups of four, one guide to each group. Everyone pushed to be in the first group, thinking it would be the most likely to succeed. Sticking to my rule never to force my way into anything, I calmly waited until all the groups were formed.

The first group of six people set out at once, while the others waited to give them a head start. The spacing was done so that, in the event one group was captured, the others would not fall into the same trap.

We sat down and waited, but after five minutes, we suddenly heard the sounds of crying and shrieking in the

distance. Obviously, the first group had been captured by the border guards. The wailing and moaning of the unfortunate refugees blended with the shouts of the border guards and the barking of their dogs. The crying and wailing made our hair stand on end; we knew that our friends were doomed. Our guides, who were just as frightened as we were, motioned to us to lie down. Without saying a word, we lay down flat on the ground, the sword of death hanging over our heads.

For an hour and a half, we lay there, until complete silence returned to the forest, a sure sign that the border guards had left. Meanwhile, the five guides who were to lead us to the village all disappeared for fear that they, too, would be caught. Our two guides wanted to follow suit. We implored them not to abandon us here in the middle of the dark forest, but it was no use.

"If they catch us," they argued, "we'll be shot as smugglers. But if you are caught, nothing will happen to you. The Hungarians treat all Jewish refugees very kindly."

We were not taken in by their story. "If you refuse to take us across the border," we said, "then at least take us back to the town from which we came. We cannot possibly stay here."

"If we bring you back, we don't get paid," they replied. "And we need the money."

We begged and cajoled. It was to no avail. They showed us the trail which leads to the border.

"Go straight ahead, then turn right," they said. "After that, turn left."

Before we could ask for more details, they picked themselves up and disappeared.

There we were, alone in the middle of a deep forest, not knowing where to turn. After talking things over, we decided

we had no choice but to try to cross the border by ourselves. Soon it would be daylight, which would make our venture even more hazardous.

Setting out in the direction the guides had indicated, we calculated that we would be on Hungarian soil within thirty minutes. However, we lost our way on account of the darkness. We walked and walked without getting anywhere, going around in circles. We felt like a cat chasing its own tail. Were we on Hungarian or Slovak territory? At last, we caught sight of a village in the distance. Assuming it to be a Hungarian village, we made our way towards it. In fact, we reasoned that the city lights we perceived on the horizon must be Kaschau. We became even more convinced when we began to hear the humming of machinery emanating from the factories of the city.

We decided to go to Kaschau by way of the village, since on the bypass we were likely to run into police patrols. As we approached the village, as if on cue, all the dogs welcomed us with earsplitting barks. We quickly retreated for fear of waking up the border guards.

We were at an impasse. How should we proceed? While we were waiting there helplessly, I began to *daven Kabbalas Shabbos.* The same sense of awe I would usually feel at *Kol Nidrei* on *Yom Kippur* gripped me at that moment. I stood there, trembling within. Was this to be my last prayer? After all the hardships and tribulations I had experienced and all the calamities I had suffered, to be caught in this trap within sight of freedom! In spite of these depressing thoughts, I found renewed courage and faith in *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* that this time, too, He would show me a miracle, as He had done until now.

After *davening,* I volunteered to scout the village by

myself to determine the attitude of the peasants towards refugees.

"What have I got to lose?" I argued. "One man will not create as much of a stir as an entire crew of disheveled refugees prancing down Main Street."

I left Sheindl in the care of my friends. She was sleeping soundly in the grass, oblivious to all the goings-on, relying on her father to take care of her. I made my way through the freshly plowed fields to the village, exhausted from all the setbacks and adversities, directing a silent prayer for help to Hashem.

No sooner did I approach the village than the first dog started to bark, arousing the entire dog population into a howling, growling, snarling cacophony. Shrugging off the noise, I advanced into the village. The gate to the first courtyard was closed. I tried the second, the third—they were all closed. I tried a few more houses but still no luck. Since I was not making any headway, I decided to return to the group.

To my surprise, I found them talking to two Hungarians who were on their way to the border. Evidently, they were guides, and my friends had asked them to wait for me. Since I did not speak Hungarian, I had to use sign language to get across to them that we wanted them to lead us to Kaschau. They turned me down, explaining that they had to be in Slovakia that night. After negotiating for half an hour, and promising to make it worth their while, one of them agreed to lead us.

After we marched a good distance, the guide stopped.

"Listen," he said. "I've got to cross into Slovakia tonight, and soon it will be daylight. You can find the way into the city by yourselves. It's easy. I have to go."

We pleaded with him to stay with us, but he vigorously shook his head.

"Nothing doing!" he said.

However, after we promised him five hundred *pengo*, he reconsidered.

When dawn broke, we found ourselves on the outskirts of Kaschau. The city was beginning to stir, people moving in the streets, and our group attracted curious stares. Admittedly, we looked different—to put it mildly. Tired and exhausted, wearing shabby and dirty clothes, carrying tattered bundles and valises, we were a pitiful sight. We rushed our guide, fearful of encountering a police patrol, but he was in no hurry.

"Sit down and wait," he told us.

We were on pins and needles, and he was telling us to wait! At any minute, a policeman was likely to appear. After a short while, however, he told us to continue, as he marched ahead of us along the main thoroughfare. Slowly, the sun was rising and our fears were mounting. I slowed my pace to be last in line, so that if there was trouble I could still run away, but thank Heaven, nothing happened.

The guide took us to the Jewish community building. He rang the bell, but there was no answer; it was still early in the morning. For quite a while, we waited anxiously outside, fearful of being spotted by a passing patrol. At long last, the door opened, and we were ushered inside. We were in the section of the building where the *mikveh* was located. The *gabbaim* welcomed us, brought us into one of the bathrooms and instructed us to stay there for the time being.

Before long, a large crowd of men of all ages began to arrive in order to immerse in the *mikveh.* In the hall, I caught a glimpse of a man with a long white beard and long *peyos*, a

sight I had not seen in a long time. I approached him reverently and asked if he served as the rabbi of the community.

"No," he replied. "I'm just an ordinary Jew."

Only then did I recall that in Cracow, too, ordinary Jews had once looked like this, not only rabbis. In the wake of all my grief and troubles, I had almost forgotten what an "ordinary" Jew looked like back home.

It was *Shabbos*, and the *mikveh* building was buzzing with activity. Men wearing long *kapotes*, wide-brimmed hats, their *tzitzis* almost trailing to the floor, were milling about. The majestic scene brought tears to my eyes. A different world—a different planet. These Jews didn't know the meaning of *tzores*, Gestapo, ghettoes, *Aktionen*, massacres, bloodbaths and all the German evils. No fear of Hitler existed here. Only in Poland the sun of life and happiness has been obscured forever by the black smoke of the crematoria.

Within minutes, the *gabbaim* reappeared, carrying platters heaped with an abundance of food and drink—white fresh *challos,* cake and pastries, coffee, milk and butter—everything strictly kosher. The mere sight of all these delicacies breathed new life into our weary bodies.

"Could you find a room where I could put my child to sleep for a while?" I asked one of the men.

"I'm sorry, but that's impossible," he answered resolutely. "You see, anyone caught harboring an illegal immigrant is sent to Poland along with his guest. And no one comes back alive from there."

"So be it," I said to myself. "At least, I have escaped the German hell." Or so I thought.

Regaining my strength after some coffee and cake, I entered the *shul* in the community building where the *Shabbos*

service was already in progress. A large number of worshipers were singing happy *niggunim* in an exhilarated mood, while I stood in a corner listening with a broken heart. But how could they be of any help to me?

After *davening*, I had a little talk with the *gabbai*, a very dignified gentleman by the name of Goldstein. To my great delight, he told me that the Belzer Rebbe was in Budapest. He also explained that staying in Kaschau would be extremely dangerous for me. Since Kaschau was close to the border, any illegal Jew snatched by the police was immediately expelled to Poland and, needless to say, the fate that awaited him there.

Listening to him speak, I saw my hopes turn to ashes. I had imagined that my troubles were over now that I was on Hungarian soil, yet my life apparently was still in very real danger. According to Goldstein, plainclothesmen were patrolling the streets looking for illegal aliens whom they detected without much effort. Since aliens did not speak Hungarian, it took only a few short questions to establish their illegal status. He advised me to get to Budapest as soon as possible.

"There you will be safe," he said. "There they have ways of legalizing your status."

In view of the danger that remaining in Kaschau entailed, I decided to indeed go on to Budapest as soon as possible. The Jewish community also was interested in seeing us leave, as sheltering illegal refugees exposed them to grave danger. They informed me that at one o'clock in the afternoon a bus was leaving for Shatra Ujhel. From there, I could catch a connecting train straight to Budapest.

I went along with their suggestion; the main thing was to leave town. At the conclusion of *davening*, we were served an

elaborate *Shabbos seudah*—in the *mikveh,* of all places. There was an abundance of all the traditional *Shabbos* dishes, *challos,* fish, meat, *cholent* and *kugel,* a real feast. Only a nagging sense of fear and anxiety marred my enjoyment. On the other hand, my firm trust in Hashem gave me courage to face the uncertain future.

The question was, what to do with Sheindl? A grown man travelling with a small child was bound to arouse suspicion. After a brief discussion, the leaders of the community suggested that my daughter remain in their care for the time being.

"We will place her in the Jewish Children's Home," they assured me. "Whenever you will notify us, we will see to it that she is brought to Budapest."

It seemed like an ideal solution. First, my journey to Budapest was going to be dangerous. Second, having no friends or relatives in Budapest I would have great difficulty finding food and shelter. This was the answer to my problems, or so I thought.

But the plan had a catch. They explained that they would take the child to the police where they would file a deposition to the effect that she had been found in the street. The police would register her as an abandoned child which would give her legal status, whereupon she would be remanded to the custody of the Jewish child care institution.

I did not like this arrangement at all. Although at the present no children were expelled to Poland, who could be sure that this policy would not change? However, having no choice, I agreed. Now I had to persuade Sheindl, who was all of three years old at the time, to go along with the plan. When she realized I was about to leave her, she broke into uncontrollable sobs, clinging to me with all her might. I tried

various ways to appease her, but nothing worked. In the end, I placed the totally exhausted child on a bench where she fell asleep. I was ready to set out on my journey.

The *yeshivah* students who were the main organizers of the escape committee immediately went to the railroad station to buy tickets. They could obtain only three train tickets which they assigned to me, Herschel and a third person. The other members of our group would travel straight to Budapest on Sunday. Herschel, however, refused to travel without his family. I tried to point out to him the danger involved in travelling with a small child, but he refused to listen, preferring to wait for the next trip. Someone else took his place.

As we were preparing to leave, the good people of Kaschau gave us a number of instructions and warnings. We were not likely to encounter any secret police at the bus station, since they were active mainly at the railroad station. Nevertheless, since we did not speak Hungarian, we were easy prey. Therefore, the community provided a guide to accompany us so that we would not have to ask for directions. They warned us strongly not to initiate any contact with the guide throughout the entire trip, just to follow him without saying a word. He would take care of everything, such as buying our tickets and other necessities. We were introduced to him, and after expressing our heartfelt thanks for the community's gracious hospitality, we were on our way.

Promptly at one o'clock, the bus left. We were still quite petrified; our pale faces and disheveled clothes gave us away, and we stood out like sore thumbs among the well-dressed passengers on the bus. We tried to look calm and casual, and although terribly tired, we fought off our sleepiness to avoid arousing even the slightest suspicion.

I gazed through the window as we passed through the towns and villages, and I saw a dream world unfolding before my eyes. Jews were calmly taking *Shabbos* afternoon strolls in the company of their families, content after a beautiful *Shabbos* meal.

Look at me, I thought. All my loved ones have been murdered, gassed, burned. Only I and my little girl are left, and even we still need a miracle to stay alive.

After a few hours, we arrived in Ujhel where we had to catch the train to Budapest. The Ujhel station was not a healthy place for people like us. The police often conducted raids there in an attempt to find illegal aliens. Silently, we followed our guide as he bought tickets for us, whereupon we boarded the jam-packed train. It was standing-room only, but in spite of the crowding, our appearance piqued the curious interest of the passengers. One distinguished-looking man in particular could not take his eyes off us. We were afraid that he might report us, or that perhaps he was an undercover agent. To avoid his stares, we dispersed to different corners of the car. When he got off at the next station, we all breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Gradually, the train emptied until we even found seats. I sat down briefly, yet in spite of my fatigue I got up for fear that someone might strike up a conversation with me in Hungarian. To make things worse, next to me were seated two Hungarian officers in dress uniform, wearing some kind of top hat decorated with a feathery plume. As I was to learn later, these were officers of the internal security police force called *zsandars*, which means law enforcement officers. Its members were selected from among the young and uneducated peasant boys and received special training in the various techniques of making people talk. By employing

crude methods of torture, they were able to extract information from prisoners. Often, the victims would die as a result of the brutal beatings. At this moment, however, as I had the honor of sitting next to them, I had no inkling of their expertise. Thus, I got up, placed myself in front of a window and looked out. Meanwhile, the sun began to set, and dusk afforded me more protection. I sang to myself the *zemiros* of *shalosh seudos*, looking forward to our arrival in Budapest.

It was nine o'clock in the evening when the train finally pulled into the Budapest station. The hustle and bustle of thousands of passengers scurrying in all directions made my head swim. Trains arriving, trains departing, clanging, whistling, the blaring music of the radio, the echoing sound of the announcements, the blinding floodlights, all of it left me in a daze. During the years I was locked up in the ghetto, these things had faded from my memory, so that now I felt as though I had suddenly been thrust into a new world.

But never mind the noise and the chaos. I had to keep a cool head and concentrate on following the guide. He led us out onto the plaza where we boarded a streetcar. For the first time, I felt a degree of relief, realizing that we were in Budapest and out of danger.

We got off at Kiray Street where our guide took us to the home of Mr. Schweitzer, one of the wealthy and prominent members of the community and a leading figure in the Jewish Relief Committee for refugees from Poland. At the door, we were met by Mr. Yaker, a member of the refugee organization. Our guide, having fulfilled his mission, returned to Kaschau with a sense of gratification, assured of our gratitude for a job well done.

Mr. Schweitzer was a prosperous furrier, but his greatest claim to fame was his dedicated work on behalf of Polish

refugees from Nazi terror. His faithful partner in all his undertakings was his noble wife who opened her home to anyone needing help. She was particularly active in relieving the plight of orphans whose parents had been killed by the Germans, feeding and clothing them in the children's home she headed. Like a compassionate mother, she took care of my little Sheindl when I eventually brought her to Budapest, finding a place for her in the children's home. She was ably assisted by two volunteer communal workers, Mr. Yaker and Mr. Turkeltaub, both of whom settled in the United States after the war. Thus it was that I met Mr. Yaker in the Schweitzer home on the first night of my arrival in Budapest.

To my utter surprise and delight, Mr. Yaker informed me that the Belzer Rebbe lived on the same street, only a short distance away.

"But you're wasting your time going there," he said. "There is such a huge crowd waiting to see the Rebbe, they have placed doorkeepers at the entrance. No one is allowed in. Take my advice. Have a bite to eat, and get some sleep."

But I simply could not wait to visit my revered Rebbe.

"Food and sleep don't mean a thing to me unless I first go and see the Rebbe," I insisted.

Seeing that I was not going to be dissuaded, he agreed to take me to the Rebbe's house. Because of the late hour, the official doorkeepers had already gone home, and there were just a few *chassidim* keeping order in front of the Rebbe's residence. They allowed us to enter, although I did not even identify myself, and I proceeded at once toward the room where the Rebbe was presiding over a large crowd of *chassidim* assembled for *shalosh seudos*. This time, I was stopped by the doorkeepers who adamantly refused to let me in. I recognized the doorkeepers from pre-war days when they used to

come to Belz, but they did not recognize me. I tried to force my way in, but the guard blocked my way.

"No one is allowed to enter!" he shouted.

The Bilgorayer Rav, the Belzer Rebbe's brother, was seated by the Rebbe's side, and he got up to see what the commotion was all about. He immediately recognized me and whispered to the Rebbe that it was I who was standing at the door. Upon receiving the news, the Rebbe rose from his seat and riveted his eyes on me. Instantly, the wall of guards opened up, and I entered the room. As I walked in, word spread about who I was. The joy radiating from the Rebbe's face was simply beyond words. Everyone had heard of the final *Aktion* in the Bochnia ghetto and that in the end every last inhabitant had been killed. They thought that the same fate had befallen me.

I was deeply moved by the scene I was witnessing, a vision I had not seen in so many years that it took on an otherworldly appearance. The Rebbe, his face beaming with pure holiness, was seated at the head of the table, surrounded by *chassidim* with long beards and *peyos*, dressed in black silk *kapotes*, singing *Yetzaveh Tzur Chasdo* (May the Rock Command His Kindness) to the familiar Belzer *niggun*. Tears welled up in my eyes and streamed freely down my cheeks. I did not wipe them away. They were tears of joy, tears of thanksgiving, of song and praise to Hashem for bringing me to this moment.

After *Havdalah*, the Rebbe invited me to his private chamber. Greeting me with a warm *shalom aleichem*, he asked me in great detail about all my experiences on my journey from Bochnia to Budapest. I did not leave out anything, describing to him, as accurately as I could, all the events I had lived through, with particular attention to my crossing the Hungarian border and how, when we were almost at the end

of our rope, a Hungarian peasant appeared who led us into Kaschau.

"*Mamesh malachim haben dich gebrengt!*" the Rebbe exclaimed with holy fervor when I finished my account. "These were real angels that accompanied you!"

He then asked me whether I had brought his *tefillin*, which he had left with me when he escaped to Hungary.

"No," I replied.

"Did you bring your own *tefillin*?"

"No, I couldn't bring those either," I replied. "But I did carry in my valise a few pages of hand-written Torah commentaries by the Rebbe."

"Did you really?" the Rebbe asked, jumping out of his seat with excitement. "Tell me, where are they?"

Fleeing from Bochnia, I had thrown away all papers that might betray my Jewish identity, but this manuscript I guarded like the priceless treasure which it truly was. I believed that the moment would come that I would see the Rebbe again and hand it over to him. At the same time, I felt sure that the merit of this manuscript would help me to overcome all adversity and arrive safely in Hungary. Now, I pulled the precious pages out of my breast pocket and placed them on the table. The Rebbe was overjoyed at seeing his manuscript.

"*Die hast mich mamesh mechayeh geven!*" he exclaimed. "You truly gave me a new lease on life!"

The Rebbe invited me to stay at his house and instructed his household to treat me like an honored guest. To begin with, I was served a full *melaveh malkah* meal, and for the following four months, until the Rebbe's departure for Eretz Yisrael, I found a haven at the Rebbe's house.

Of course, I could not spend the nights there, so I had to find a place to sleep. Luckily, however, I ran into a friend who

had come to visit the Rebbe. Since he was returning home that night, he offered me his room in the Jewish hotel for which he had paid in advance. The hotelkeeper, noticing that I was a foreigner, was reluctant to let me stay at the hotel. Meanwhile, his entire family—his wife and children—gathered to stare at this strange creature from outer space who did not speak Hungarian. Their unanimous decision was that a character like this should not be admitted to our hotel. There was nothing left for me to do but go sleep on a park bench.

A few days later, I received grim news about the fate of the other members of our group. According to the report, several people, including Herschel and his family, left Kaschau by train on Sunday. They were captured by the police, deported back to Poland and handed over to the Germans, who killed them on the spot. It was Hashem's guiding Hand that had prompted me to leave on the earlier trip. Praise to Hashem for delivering me from my pursuers who wanted to take my life.

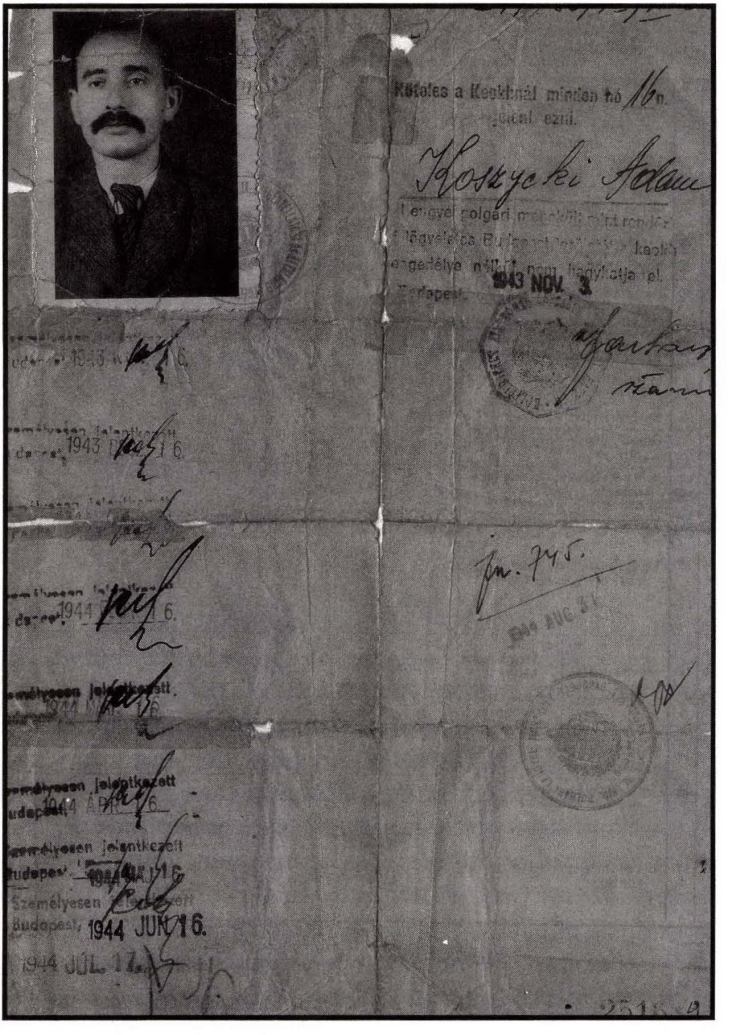
BOOK FOUR

The Hungarian Inferno

CHAPTER 33

A False Sense of Security

AT THE TIME OF MY ARRIVAL IN BUDAPEST, IN THE summer of 1943, the Hungarian government still displayed a benevolent attitude toward Polish refugees, non-Jews and Jews alike. Not only did the authorities permit all refugees to stay in Hungary, they even provided financial assistance for them. However, the government did not wish to show open support of Jews, either because they were ashamed of doing so or because they did not wish to antagonize the Germans. In any event, in an attempt to avoid unwanted publicity, the Hungarian government issued certain guidelines. Those who identified themselves as Jews were settled in specific areas beyond which they were forbidden to move, whereas those declaring themselves Aryans received papers certifying them as Polish gentiles—even



the author's "Aryan" identification papers

though the Hungarians knew that they were actually Jewish—and interned in camps designated for non-Jewish Poles, whose movements were also restricted. Only ten percent of the refugees received permission to reside in Budapest.

The office dealing with refugee affairs was staffed by high-ranking Polish officers and office workers who had escaped from Poland early in the war. Upon arriving in Budapest, I immediately went to this office and filed an application registering as a non-Jewish Polish refugee under the name of Adam Koszicki.

The Polish refugee camp to which I was assigned was located in Kolatcha, a village near Budapest. I never intended to move there, knowing only too well the character of our Polish "friends." Even when oppressed and treated like dirt by the Germans, they never lost their ingrained hatred of the Jews. I also feared that some day the status of the Jews might change. If that were to happen, I had no doubt the Poles would sell out the "Aryan" Jews. Even now, although the Polish officials issued Aryan papers to anyone declaring himself to be non-Jewish, applicants who looked Jewish were entered on a separate list. I had serious misgivings that, Heaven forbid, the time would come when they would use this list to turn us over to the Germans. In light of this, I decided to remain in Budapest, a large city from which it would be easy to escape in case of danger. Later on, it became clear that my suspicions were well-founded when one day, out of the blue, the police entered the Kolatcha camp, rounded up all Jews with Aryan papers and put them in prison.

Thus, I remained in Budapest illegally. All Poles living in the city were required to report to the police once a month to have their permits stamped. Being an illegal resident, I

could dispense with these formalities. My illegal status did not overly concern me, since the general mood in Budapest was unruffled, and the city was unperturbed by the tumultuous upheavals of the war which had gripped all of Europe.

Since I was unable to obtain a residency permit, I could not rent a room, either in a private house or in a hotel. Therefore, I was forced to sleep in the basement of the Belzer Rebbe's residence. I befriended the janitor, and in exchange for a few *pengo* each month, he let me use the basement. My "bed" was a wooden cot that had been placed there to be used in case of an air raid, and I had one blanket to cover myself. It was not very comfortable, but it served the purpose. Except for decent living quarters, I lacked nothing. With the money I had brought with me from Poland, I bought a stylish suit which gave me a Hungarian look.

After a few months, I got tired of living in Budapest. Staying there just did not make sense, particularly since the Germans were breathing down our necks. Who could tell what they held in store for us? People were talking of opportunities for legal immigration to Eretz Yisrael, and I took steps to secure the necessary visas. At the same time, I asked the Kaschau community to send my daughter to Budapest, so that I would not have to delay my departure for Eretz Yisrael by waiting for her. However, since Sheindl had come down with scarlet fever, she had to be nursed back to health, so that it took several weeks before she arrived. As soon as she arrived, I inquired about the progress of my projected immigration to Eretz Yisrael, but I was told that the entire venture had collapsed. As a result, I placed Sheindl in the Jewish Children's Home headed by Mrs. Schweitzer.

A short time later, Sheindl developed a growth on her neck which had to be removed surgically. It so happened that

I was not present when she was admitted to the hospital, and since no one knew my name, she was registered as an Aryan under the name Sophia Garetzka, a non-Jewish name.

It was during these days of uncertainty that I was approached by Avraham Yitzchak Weinberger, a good friend of mine from pre-war times in Belz.

"Listen, Chaim Shlomo," he said, speaking on behalf of our mutual friends. "It just isn't becoming for a *chassidic* fellow like you to use Aryan identification papers and to go around clean-shaven and dressed like a Hungarian. Why don't you get Hungarian papers? Then you will be able to dress like a Jew again. I'm willing to pay the few hundred *pengo* it will cost to arrange everything."

After giving his proposal serious thought, I rejected it. "I don't think the war is over yet," I replied. "We still don't know what will happen to the Hungarian Jews."

I could not be sure if I had convinced him, because at that time, Hungarian Jews still clung to the illusion that the things happening to Polish Jewry would never happen to them. They imagined that the Hungarian government would protect its Jewish citizens. As a matter of fact, they did not even fully believe our reports of the extermination of the Polish Jews. Only later did they realize their error.

My appraisal of the situation, however, was in line with the Belzer Rebbe's way of thinking. Before his departure for Eretz Yisrael, the Belzer Rebbe was approached by a delegation of Belzer *chassidim* who urged him to remain in Budapest.

"This is Hungary," they argued. "You are safe here."

"You are wrong," the Belzer Rebbe replied. "The war is not over. The Germans are getting ready to pounce on us!"

The tragic end of Hungarian Jewry is known to everyone.

CHAPTER 34

Under German Occupation

IN MARCH OF 1944, ONE WEEK AFTER *PURIM*, THE GERMAN hordes rolled unopposed into Hungary. The Polish Jews in Hungary were thunderstruck. We knew full well what German occupation meant. Just when we thought we had left all the misery behind us, we were again facing the same atrocities from which we had only recently escaped. By contrast, the Hungarian Jews had no idea of the horrors awaiting them. As mentioned before, when Polish refugees reported the total destruction of Polish Jewry, the Hungarian Jews refused to believe us, thinking that Polish Jews were actually running away for fear of having to work for the Germans.

With the arrival of the Germans, chaos and confusion reigned supreme. Hundreds of Jews were arrested and shipped

to "unknown" destinations. All railroad stations were placed under German-Hungarian guard. Jews who were picked up were transported to various concentration camps. By this system of random arrests, the Germans rounded up thousands of Jews in the very first week of the occupation. They also seized all anti-German, high-ranking government officials, and the appalling spectacle of highly respected men being paraded through the streets shackled in chains like common criminals was a daily occurrence. At the same time, valiant Hungarian fighters, holed up in strongholds scattered throughout the city, were offering last-ditch resistance. Amidst this turmoil, we Polish refugees found ourselves completely helpless and forlorn.

In the first week of the occupation, the Germans paid a visit to the Polish refugee office and arrested the Polish officers in charge. One officer who resisted was shot on the spot and left to drown in his own blood. This incident threw blind fear into us. Now there was no one to whom to turn. We would just have to wait until the initial fury of the Germans subsided and then look for ways to get out of this new inferno.

I myself had an experience that almost cost my life. It happened one Friday night. After a terror-filled week, I was seated at the table of a Budapest friend named Avraham Steinmetz. Gathered around the festive *Shabbos* table was his family and a number of boarders who lived in his house. Suddenly, a tall, broad-shouldered, grim-looking man in civilian clothes entered the room. Showing his badge, he identified himself as an officer of the secret police and demanded to see our papers. I turned pale. Some "Aryan" I was, sharing a meal with a group of Jews in the home of a Jew wearing a *kapote* and a *shtreimel*! I had no doubt that if he saw

my Aryan papers he'd arrest me on the spot, and then I'd be doomed. All the others pulled out their papers, but I just sat there, thinking that before long it would be my turn. Closing my eyes tightly, I prayed to Hashem, "Save me, *Ribono Shel Olam*!"

The officer was standing two steps away from the door. As he was examining the documents of the others, I sneaked out the door behind him and dashed through the kitchen onto the porch, which extended all along the house. The officer immediately noticed my escape and ran after me. But I was faster. By the time he got to the porch, I was already at the other end racing down the steps into the street. Looking up, I saw him searching for me with a flashlight. Go ahead and keep on looking all you want, I thought.

It was cold outside, and I had left my coat in the house. It didn't matter. My escape had warmed me up. Thank you, Hashem, for saving me, I mouthed wordlessly.

Once again, I was a fugitive, trying to stay a step ahead of the German hyenas. Our Sages told us that "experience is the best teacher." Well, I had gained a great deal of experience under the German occupation in Poland, and I did not have the slightest doubt that the "Final Solution" would be applied to the Hungarian Jews as well.

In April of 1944, one month after the Germans invaded Hungary, I realized that my Aryan papers were worthless, since the police had learned all about the bogus "Jewish Aryans." And if, in the past, Hungarians had looked away, things were different now that Hitler was the new master. Sooner or later, the directive would arrive from Berlin to round up the holders of these fictitious papers. I was not fooled by the current tranquility. This was nothing but the calm before the storm. They were following the same pattern

they had used in all the countries they occupied.

According to the news reports, the Red Army had advanced as far as the Carpathian Mountains, the natural line of defense protecting the Hungarian border. Our Jewish "strategists" had it all figured out. The Red Army surely wasn't going to be stopped by a few mountains. The Russians would continue their offensive and penetrate deep into the heartland of Hungary. This theory lulled the Hungarian Jews into a false sense of security. They reasoned that the advancing Soviet forces would defeat the Germans, freeing the Jews from Nazi oppression. But I calculated that since Budapest is located more than one hundred fifty miles from the Carpathian Mountains, the Germans would have had ample time to finish off all the Jews before the Russians would arrive. Besides, staying in Budapest would be dangerous for another reason. When the Russians would take the city, I might get caught in the cross-fire or fall victim to artillery shelling or bombing. Thus, I decided to get away from Budapest as soon as possible and to move closer to the Carpathian Mountains where I would be liberated much sooner.

I chose as my destination the town of Satmar. Aside from being close to the Carpathian Mountains, Satmar was a vibrant center of *chassidic* life, and many of my acquaintances lived there. *Pesach* was approaching, and each day in Budapest presented new dangers. I could not postpone the trip; I had to leave right away, before the *Yom Tov*. The problem was: how? All Poles, even non-Jews, were required to have a government travel permit, especially at times like these. But I had a solution. I got in touch with a Polish "fixer" on Kiray Street who had ways of forging any kind of paper, signature and all, making it look more genuine than the original. For

a few *pengo*, I obtained a blank travel document form which I completed at home, filling in my name and destination; everything was *glatt kosher*. My friend Reuven Wolkan got hold of similar papers for himself and his wife. We packed our bags and were ready to go.

We boarded the train, and by the grace of Hashem, our papers passed inspection, so that we had an uneventful journey. Arriving in Satmar, we were jubilant to see unmistakable signs that liberation was at hand. The town was teeming with convoys of clanging German tanks and noisy army trucks loaded with soldiers moving away from the front, obviously in full retreat before the advancing Russian forces. The Jews of Satmar were elated, hoping that within a day or two they would be freed from the German nightmare.

On *Erev Pesach*, I went to the *mikveh*, as I was accustomed to do. Although I was afraid of running into a police dragnet, I did not want to forgo my customary practice, relying on the verse, "One who fulfills a *mitzvah* will not suffer from danger." (*Koheles* 8:5) In the *mikveh*, my non-*chassidic* attire created quite a stir. Moreover, since *chassidim* crop their hair very short, leaving only the *peyos*, a *chassid* wearing his hair in a brushed-up style was unheard of. People were gaping at me, as if to say, "What's *he* doing in the *mikveh*?" Still, no one said a word. Perhaps some of the people knew me and assumed that I was compelled to wear my hair longer because I professed to be a *goy*. There were many cases where famous Polish rabbis who fled to Hungary were forced to wear longer hair pretending to be *goyim*. Indeed, later on, many Hungarian Jews used the same ruse to save their lives.

All in all, the Jews of Satmar welcomed me with open arms. I received so many invitations to the *Pesach sedarim* that I had difficulty deciding which to accept. In the end, I chose

to join Reb Aharon Hirsch Weinberger and his family for the *sedarim* and stayed there for the entire *Yom Tov*. Reb Aharon Hirsch and his wife treated me royally and made me feel completely at home. In spite of all this, I felt ill at ease, since the police often conducted raids and might doubt the authenticity of my Aryan papers.

Simply walking the streets was a frightening experience, for I had not registered with the police as required by law. Since the chief of police was a rabid anti-Semite, I was afraid to register with him. Time proved that my fears were justified, for one day all men who had registered as Aryans were summoned to present themselves at police headquarters. Everyone had to undergo a "medical check-up," and all those found to be Jewish disappeared, never to be heard from again. Only then did I realize how I was saved miraculously by not registering. In any event, I lived in constant fear, whether staying indoors or walking the street. Sometimes, I was forced to hide in a bunker. (The Hungarian Jews learned the method of building bunkers from the Polish refugees who told them that thousands of people saved their lives hiding out in them.) Still, the expectation of the imminent liberation by the Russian army made everything bearable.

Pesach came and went, however, and the weeks passed without any visible movement in the disposition of the Soviet troops. I realized that this was going to be a long drawn-out affair; the Russians evidently had not consulted with our armchair generals in the *bais midrash* and the *mikveh*. I realized that the Russian offensive might not materialize altogether and that by staying here I might miss other opportunities, losing out on both ends. My plan of moving to Satmar proved to be a failure; I had to think of other means of escape while there still was time.

The deportations were not long in coming. Even while I was still in Satmar, shortly after *Pesach* of 1944, the first transports of Satmar Jews left for Auschwitz. Before *Pesach*, freight trains loaded with Jews from Munkacz passed through Satmar on their final journey to Auschwitz. Satmar Jews who went to the railroad station to say good-bye to their unfortunate relatives and friends and hand them some food and water returned home crushed and broken-hearted. Seeing the deportees tightly packed in locked cattle cars, without a breath of air or a drop of water to moisten their parched lips, was an agonizing experience. Hearing the cries and groans along with the shrieking children's voices rising from the train without being able to relieve their plight was too much to bear. In spite of that, in the early stages of the deportations, the Jews of Satmar refused to believe that this bitter cup would pass to them as well. I tried to convince my acquaintances to stop worrying about their business affairs and start looking for ways to escape. My warnings fell on deaf ears.

When I saw the first boards being raised for the fence that was to close off the Satmar Jewish quarter, I picked myself up and returned to Budapest. I brought my friends up to date on the new situation, telling them that the Germans planned to deport all Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz for extermination.

At the same time, I wrote a letter to my friend Shmuel Porges in Sombathel, describing the situation. I suggested that he either build an underground bunker or come to Budapest immediately, before the Germans launched their first *Aktion*. I had a hunch that the Jews of Budapest had the best chance of being spared deportation. My premonition turned out to be correct. By the end of the war, seventy thousand Jews survived in Budapest, and only a small percentage were deported to Auschwitz.

In his reply, Shmuel Porges thanked me for my advice and informed me that he and his friends had decided to build a bunker in the yard of the *shul*, laying in a supply of food and water to last for an extended period of time. As I later found out, when the *Aktion* went into full swing, eight people entered the bunker and were saved. These included Shmuel Porges of Sombathel, currently in Canada; Avraham Shmuel Gross of Papa, currently in Belgium; Shmulke Weiss of Munkacz, who perished in a tragic drowning accident near Tel Aviv after the war; Shmuel Hirsch Teichman of Munkacz, who perished when a bomb struck the Budapest ghetto; Chaim Einhorn of Sombathel, currently in the United States; Bertche Hoffman; and Neuhaus, currently in the United States. After surviving in the bunker for several weeks, they all made their way to Budapest, where we took care of their needs.

While I was still in Satmar waiting in vain for a Russian offensive, I devised two plans for an escape. My first scheme was to build a bunker. We constructed a model bunker in Mr. Berger's soap factory, but when the Hungarian who was hired to supply us with food backed out of the deal, the entire venture fell apart.

Thinking feverishly, I hatched up a brilliant new idea. Since Satmar is situated close to Romania, why not try to smuggle across the border? According to our sources, Jews were living there in relative safety, free from persecution. The Romanian government was adamantly opposed to any German interference with their humane treatment of the Jews. We decided to work together on the complicated task of implementing the plan.

Our group was made up of Mr. and Mrs. Reuven Wolkan, Rabbi Alter Weinberger, the Rabbi of Turka, Rabbi David

Shapiro, Moshe David Kempler and myself. Since knowledge of the Romanian language was essential for the success of the plan, especially in dealing with the smugglers, we had to include in our plot several additional people who spoke both Hungarian and Romanian.

There still were numerous hurdles to clear. Jews were forbidden to travel by train without a special permit, which was impossible to secure, and we would have to make several trips to a border town in order to get in touch and negotiate with smugglers. The solution to the problem was to open our own clandestine "travel permit office" where we produced counterfeit documents, complete with official seals and signatures. Forging signatures was not easy, but practice makes perfect and the final product was a perfect duplicate of the original. Of course, the entire operation was conducted under the tightest secrecy; no one outside the group knew about it.

As the next step, we sent a few men to Klausenburg, which was situated on the border of Hungary and Romania. The Somesu River, which flowed through the center of town, formed the border separating the two countries. Our men got in touch with the smugglers and concluded the deal. Hearing their report, we broke into big smiles. Freedom was just around the corner.

Our group was too large to cross the border at one time. We split into two groups. The first group included the Wolkans and several other Satmar people, while the second group consisted of Rabbi David Shapiro, Rabbi Alter Weinberger, his brother-in-law and others. Although I was the main organizer and the manager of the "office," for the time being, I did not register with either group. My little Sheindl was still in Budapest, and I could not abandon her.

I decided to return to Budapest with the intention of bringing her to Satmar and escaping at the next opportunity. Meanwhile, the first group set out for the Romanian border.

Before departing for Budapest, I arranged with Reuven Wolkan to wait for me in Klausenburg for a day or two until I would arrive with Sheindl. To make things easier for me, he took along the suitcase containing my clothes and personal effects. At the station, he boarded the train for Klausenburg, while I waited for the train to Budapest.

Through a misunderstanding, I missed my train and was forced to wait for the next train, leaving one day later. That night, I learned that Wolkan had crossed safely into Romania. He could not wait for me since the situation on the Hungarian side had become hazardous.

I was torn by conflicting emotions. I could have been in Romania, too, and the second group was also getting ready to cross into Romania within hours. But how could I give up my little girl after surviving the unspeakable German horrors and experiencing daily miracles in bringing her, by Hashem's grace, to safety in Budapest? I placed my trust in Hashem who had stood by my side until now.

I postponed my trip to Budapest and remained in Satmar for another day, hoping to receive good news from the second group. Unfortunately, this group was captured by border guards. As I was told by one who got away, the smuggler used the wrong route so that they fell into the hands of the waiting police. The news broke my heart. I worried about my friends and about my own prospects. How would I ever make it to freedom?

This was no time for negative thinking. I had to run for my life. The Germans were beginning to install barbed wire around the Satmar Jewish quarter. Before long, the ghetto

would be closed and I'd be locked in. I'd been in a ghetto before, and once is enough. I couldn't wait to get on the train to Budapest. Once there, I'd work out a new plan for reaching Romania.

Arriving in Budapest, I felt like a free man. Everything was peaceful and serene. People went about their day-to-day business, content and relaxed. In one corner of Hungary, Jews were being shipped to Auschwitz like cattle to be slaughtered in the gas chambers and burned in the crematoria, while one hundred and fifty miles away there was dancing and merriment. To the Jews of Budapest, the stories of deportations and atrocities sounded like tales of fantasy, and at best, those who did believe the reports imagined that these outrages were happening only to the Jews of Poland.

This was, essentially, the terrible and tragic mistake of all Hungarian Jews. They refused to believe that the deadly fire would spread and destroy them, too. Even after the deportations started, they had many opportunities to save their lives by crossing the border into Romania, which could be done with a minimum of risk and at relatively low cost. But business was booming, and they simply could not tear themselves away. And when the blaze threatened to devour them, it was too late.

As soon as I arrived in Budapest, I went to see Sheindl, and thank Heaven, I found her full of life and vigor. She had completely forgotten Yiddish, her *mame loshen,* and spoke only Hungarian, which made it difficult for me to communicate and to establish closeness with her. The main thing was, however, that she was in excellent health, *baruch Hashem.*

Around this time I received a letter from my friend, Rabbi David Shapiro (currently in the United States) stating:

Dear Friend,

> At the present time I am in Ujhel, Hungary. I find myself in a very serious situation. Having discovered that I am Jewish, the Germans have included me in a transport destined for Auschwitz comprised of Hungarian and Polish Jews. Please, I beg of you to do me the favor of sending me via cable five hundred *pengo* [a substantial amount at the time]. You will obtain the money at the following address . . .

Without delay, I procured the money and wired it to his address in Ujhel. A short time later, I met my friend Rabbi David Shapiro in Budapest. He had been in the second Satmar group that was to cross the border into Romania. Their guide led them, intentionally or unintentionally, on a wrong trail, straight into the hands of the border guards, who shipped them to a concentration camp near Ujhel, from where they were to be sent to Auschwitz. Rabbi Shapiro found out that all sick persons would remain in Ujhel until they recovered. (This was one of the crafty deceptions the Germans used in their extermination program, to mislead people into believing that they were being sent to a labor camp.) Rabbi Shapiro reached a doctor who, for the price of five hundred *pengo,* "diagnosed" him as suffering from acute appendicitis, requiring immediate surgery and an extended recovery period. He was admitted to a hospital and underwent unnecessary surgery. In the meantime, the transport left for Auschwitz without him. After his recovery, he was permitted to go to Budapest on the basis of his Polish Aryan papers.

The Rabbi of Turka (who later became my brother-in-law)

was on the train to Auschwitz. With Hashem's help, he managed to jump out of the moving train through a hole he sawed through the wooden door of the freight car. Several other Jews jumping through the same hole also saved their lives.

CHAPTER 35

A New Lease on Life

ALTHOUGH BUDAPEST WAS TRANQUIL AND UNTROUBLED, the Polish refugees, having been burned once, could not reconcile themselves to living under the rule of the German oppressors. Thus we began to look for new avenues of escape.

Toward mid-summer of 1944, rumors persisted that a deal had been struck between the Gestapo in Hungary and certain American Jews for the ransom of seven hundred Jews who were to be released to Switzerland in exchange for an enormous amount of money, payable in dollars. The rumor spread like wildfire, and within a short time, hundreds of Jews were converging on 12 Schiff Street, the address of the Budapest Jewish community, which was acting as the intermediary between the Gestapo and the Jews.

According to the terms of the agreement, only Polish Jews were to be ransomed since they lived under greater threat than Hungarian Jews did. Nonetheless, for a price, a large number of Hungarian Jews were included in the transport to Switzerland. Polish Jews, on the other hand, were accepted without payment. Meanwhile, the number of seven hundred Jews to be released to Switzerland was raised to fourteen hundred, and my application for inclusion in the transport for myself and my daughter was approved without a hitch.

However, when I learned that the transport would first be taken to a concentration camp under SS administration, I began to have second thoughts. On the one hand, I had my heart set on leaving the German vale of tears, and I hated to pass up a golden opportunity like this, since those in the know said that this time the Germans would keep their word. On the other hand, I simply could not allow myself to enter the lion's den voluntarily. It was a very difficult decision to make. However, against the advice of my friends, I decided not to join the transport. The project seemed too risky, and I hoped and prayed that Hashem would show me an easier way.

As a matter of fact, I could have sold my seats on the transport to a Hungarian Jew who was willing to pay an enormous amount for them. But since I considered it a hazardous undertaking, I did not want to cause someone else to endanger his life and I did not sell my seats.

As it turned out, the so-called "Kastner train" ended up in the SS-controlled Bergen-Belsen concentration camp where the transportees remained for several months. They were treated well, and all their needs were met. On December 6, 1944, with Hashem's help, the entire group of one thousand three hundred and sixty-eight Jews arrived safely in Switzerland.

As I mentioned earlier, my daughter had been admitted to the Jewish Hospital (Zsido Karhaz) for the surgical removal of a growth on her neck. However, after she recovered I was in no hurry to take her out. Mrs. Schweitzer, the administrator of the Children's Home, did not object, since the home was filled to overflowing with Polish refugee children. I was happy with this arrangement, since the hospital staff was taking very good care of her. I visited her regularly to ascertain that everything was in order, and in the meantime, I worked on various escape projects.

However, when my attempt to flee to Romania failed, I decided to take her out of the hospital and keep her with me, so that I would not miss the next chance to escape on account of her. In light of the tense situation, a delay of even one day might make the difference between life and death.

And so, quite unwary, I approached the administrator of the hospital Mr. Nemety and asked him to discharge my daughter. Imagine my shock when he denied my request.

"No, I'm sorry," he replied with firm determination. "You cannot have custody of your daughter. The child has been placed in our care by the Ministry of Health, and I can release her only if you present their proper official authorization."

It was like a thunderclap on a clear day. I was speechless. I had not set foot in a government office since the day I received my Aryan identification papers, for I had not obeyed government orders to live in the Kolatch camp. No doubt, I appeared on their list of wanted fugitives. To be sure, my forged papers were kosher enough to pass a cursory inspection, but to present them in a government office would be sheer suicide.

I begged Nemety not to cause trouble and to let me have my child, but it was like talking to a wall. Even when Mrs.

Schweitzer intervened on my behalf, he was unrelenting. He was the epitome of a petty, inflexible bureaucrat. People said that he was not even Jewish. He began his career as the hospital janitor and gradually advanced until he was appointed director. Only in Hungary could a lowly janitor rise to a directorship of a Jewish hospital!

I left empty-handed, depressed and confused. The only solution I could think of was to kidnap my own child. I began by making frequent visits, and when one day I found myself alone in the room with her, I quickly grabbed her and ran. Unfortunately, one of the nurses caught me as I was trying to sneak out the back door. A week later, I tried once more, but again I failed. I was frantic, trapped in Budapest, while the enemy was closing in on me.

Having no alternative, I again approached the administrator, asking him to let my daughter go. I explained that being a Polish refugee on the run from the Nazis I was forced to leave Hungary as soon as possible, and my departure was being delayed because of my daughter. This time he eased up a little.

"All right," he said. "I'm not going to insist on an official authorization from the Ministry of Health, as long as you bring in the girl's identification papers, with the proper up-to-date stamps and signatures."

I was relieved. Getting the papers was an easy thing; nothing to it. All I had to do was find the counterfeiter; he would prepare the papers in no time. Without losing a minute, I ordered the document with the proper stamps and signatures—one for each month she had been in the hospital—paid the forger, and the next day, the paper was ready, sealed and signed, like the genuine article. Smiling broadly, I returned to the hospital, placed the paper on Nemety's desk

and waited for him to release my little girl.

Nemety picked up the document and scrutinized it from all angles. I didn't like this close examination; this spelled trouble. I had noticed that the counterfeiter, in his haste, had forgotten to place one stamp in the proper square. The irregularity was hardly noticeable, but this finicky character, with his pedantic attention to detail, was probably going to detect it, and the entire hoax would be exposed. My stomach was tied up in knots. Finally, the administrator looked up.

"Go to the children's ward," he told me to my great relief. "Identify yourself to the head nurse, and ask her to call me. I will instruct her to release the girl."

When I entered the children's ward, the nurse thought that I was attempting another kidnaping. "This time it's legal," I said soothingly, asking her to verify it with the administrator. After a brief telephone conversation with Nemety, she turned to me.

"He has changed his mind," she said. "I cannot give you the child. He wants to see you in his office."

I turned white. He must have spotted the forgery after all. But I had no choice but to hear what he had to say.

Entering Nemety's office, I almost fainted as I heard him call on the phone, "Hello, hello, Petkatze! Are you there, Petkatze?" Petkatze was the government official whose signature appeared on my daughter's identification paper. Suspecting fraud, Nemety had evidently decided to verify the signature by getting in touch with Petkatze.

My whole world was about to crumble, and seized by sudden panic, I ran into the hall like a demon-possessed madman. Petkatze would surely tell him that he had never signed the document and that the paper was a forgery. Now I am in double trouble, for Petkatze would instruct Nemety

to arrest me as a forger, and Nemety, the obedient bureaucrat, would follow orders. After that, they would scrutinize my not-so-kosher Aryan papers. My delicately balanced world of deception was falling down. I had no choice but to run; but what about Sheindl? What would be, would be, I decided. Maybe later on I'd find a way of getting her out. But then I had second thoughts. No, I could not abandon my child. In times like these, I could not rely on others, seeing as everyone was wrapped up in his own problems.

Conflicting thoughts raced through my mind. The seconds were ticking away, and Nemety was still roaring, "Petkatze! Petkatze!" There could be no more than a few seconds left before Petkatze would pick up the phone, and I'd be finished.

At this critical moment, Hashem enlightened me, and a brilliant idea flashed into my mind. Storming into the office, I ran over to Nemety's desk.

"Mr. Nemety, put down that phone," I screamed excitedly. "Don't you see? I'm dying!"

Startled, Nemety put down the receiver. In a calm tone of voice, I then explained to him that Polish Jews always received their ministry stamp without difficulty. However, since the start of the German occupation we could only obtain these stamps by bribing certain officials.

Looking him squarely in the eyes I continued, "I also obtained the stamps and signatures on my daughter's paper by taking care of certain officials. Of course, this has to be kept under wraps. If anyone finds out, heads will roll at the ministry; and I mean literally. Therefore, by prying into the matter of the stamps, you were going to land both of us in hot water. I simply had to stop you for your own good."

Listening with rapt attention to my "revelations," Nemety

appeared convinced. However, when I asked him once again to release my daughter, he reverted to his original demand that he would let her go only upon presentation of an authorization by the Ministry. He turned a deaf ear to all my pleading; I was back to square one. Still, my heart overflowed with gratitude to Hashem for planting in my mind the thought that saved my life. I also saw Hashem's protective Hand in that Petkatze did not immediately pick up the phone which gained me the valuable seconds for the idea to ripen. At least, I was still a "kosher Aryan." Surely, Hashem would continue to help me.

In Hungary, things gradually were coming to a head. With the German invasion, a serious and protracted rift erupted among the various factions in the Hungarian government regarding the expulsion of the Jewish population in general and that of Budapest in particular. The majority of the members of the administration opposed the policy in the belief that a German victory was highly doubtful and that after an Allied victory the Hungarian government would be held accountable for their conduct during the war years. Besides, the Hungarian administration counted numerous Jews among its members, as well as many non-Jews who were married to Jewish women. In spite of their influential positions in the government, they would be seriously affected by any anti-Jewish measures. In the end, the pro-German faction introduced legislation to send all Hungarian Jews to labor camps for a few months after which they could return home. At the same time, an assurance was given that absolutely no Hungarian Jews would be shipped off to the Auschwitz gas chambers. In the face of such an explicit "assurance" by the pro-Nazi faction, the existing opposition crumbled, all the more so since Jewish labor would benefit the Hungarian

economy. As a result, the legislation was passed.

In the wake of this pro-Nazi victory, deportations went into full swing throughout Hungary. Under Adolf Eichmann's methodical planning, transports of as many as twelve thousand Jews a day were sent on their last journey, rendering all the towns and villages of the country *Judenrein*, free of Jews. The exception was Budapest, which was temporarily spared this bitter fate. Even so, the Jews of Budapest lived in constant fear. There were daily arrests of prominent Jews and random raids in which thousands of people were arrested and sent to concentration camps. The Germans were champing at the bit, eagerly awaiting the day of the full-fledged destruction of Budapest Jewry.

Now that the Final Solution had been implemented in most of Hungary, plans were drawn up for the annihilation of the Budapest community. Again a furious struggle broke out among the various members of the cabinet, and although Hungary was confronted with an imminent onslaught by the Red Army, the entire officialdom focused on what to do with the Jews. Banner headlines screamed about the Jewish problem, and remarks on the subject by various ministers were given extensive press coverage.

The Jews were utterly dismayed. Until then, they had felt safe and secure, but now their lives were hanging by a thin thread. After lengthy negotiations, a settlement was reached. For the time being, only fifty thousand Budapest Jews would be inducted into forced labor battalions, while the remaining Jews were permitted to stay. It was a compromise whereby both sides to the dispute could claim victory. Only the Jews were the losers.

Polish Jews, the majority of whom resided in Budapest, were particularly terrified by the new decree. Experience had

taught us that when it came to harming Jews, fifty thousand meant one hundred thousand or more, since "once the force of destruction is on the loose it cannot be controlled." We, the so-called Aryans, were in no less danger, since our documents were not worth the paper on which they were written. The police knew all along that the bearers of these papers were in reality Jews or, as the Hungarians would say, *Lengyel Zsido* (Polish Jews).

Budapest, the city which until now had been a safe haven for us, became a death trap. Raids and roundups were the order of the day, and those caught in the dragnet were hauled off to be gassed. Once the *Aktion* would start, no matter what papers we had, we would all be in the same boat. As things stood, I had no choice but to leave the city. The question was: where to go?

At that time, there lived in Budapest a friend of mine named Moshe David Kempler, also a holder of Aryan papers. He was a bright fellow who knew his way around, and like me, he was itching to get out of Budapest. He had been a member of the second group of Satmar Jews trying to flee to Romania and had been arrested. En route to be imprisoned in Budapest he escaped by jumping off the moving train when the guard watching him fell asleep. Earlier, while imprisoned in Klausenburg before being sent to Budapest, he struck up a friendship with a non-Jew who was being held in jail for making disparaging remarks about the German regime. He had been sentenced to a short term and was due to be released soon. This man, who happened to be a wealthy country squire owning large tracts of woodland near the Hungarian-Romanian border, promised Kempler that if ever the need would arise, he himself would lead Kempler across the border through his forests. Kempler figured that the man

surely would be out of jail by now, and this would be our easiest and safest escape route. The fact that Nagy Ilvar, the village where the man lived, was hundreds of miles away from Budapest was no major obstacle.

After working out the logistics, we were ready to go. Meanwhile, we learned that the district where the village was located had been converted into a military reservation and declared off-limits to all except local residents. Even military personnel were required to carry special badges. We realized that under these circumstances we would have to be twice as careful and carry appropriate documents that warranted our travel to this restricted area.

No problem. My friend the counterfeiter supplied two travel permits as well as two additional authorizations certifying that we were procurement agents of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry Division, on official business to purchase lumber in the border region for various government projects. We also had the address of the wealthy landowner who was going to help us.

The following day, the papers were signed, sealed and delivered. We estimated that our papers would enable us to move around freely throughout the military zone. By the time everything fell into place, it was already Thursday. However, we did not want to postpone the trip until after *Shabbos,* since the *Aktion* might be launched any day. Feeling upbeat and filled with high hopes, we made our way to the railroad station and set out on our journey.

By the time we entered the military reservation it was Friday afternoon. Every passenger had to pass a thorough inspection. We were a bit concerned, but when we presented our documents we were regarded with respectful glances. Wow! Government procurement agents! That's amazing.

Enough to take your breath away!

At long last, after thirty hours of travel, we arrived at our destination. It was seven o'clock in the evening, close to *Shabbos.* Kempler went straight to the home of the landowner, only to learn that, regrettably, the man was still in prison. We were deeply disappointed. What now? We decided to remain there until after *Shabbos* and then return to Budapest. Staying any longer in this tiny hamlet would arouse suspicion, all the more so since we were in a restricted area and close to the Romanian border.

Famished and exhausted from the long journey, we approached one of the local peasants and asked him to sell us some food. After handing us a loaf of bread, he took us into the barn where he was milking the cows and filled a pitcher of milk for us. Since there was no room in his house he arranged for sleeping quarters with a neighbor who gave us a private room. We hastily *davened Kabbalas Shabbos,* recited *Kiddush* over the loaf of bread and sat down to have our *Shabbos* meal.

We had hardly begun to eat when the door opened and a heavy-set peasant entered, introducing himself as a lumber dealer.

"I've heard that you've come to buy lumber," he said bluntly. "I want you to know that I can supply all the lumber you want."

The village had until recently been part of Romania, and the man spoke only Romanian, so we had to communicate in sign language. Although I got the general drift, I sat there with an impassive face, as if I was not able to make any sense of what he was trying to say. I could not wait to get rid of him. But the peasant was not about to give up on the fat profit he was going to rake in. He was going to bring an interpreter.

A few minutes later, he came back with a friend. When I took one look at him I almost passed out. The interpreter was an SS man! That was all I needed. Trying to cover up my fear, I managed a wan smile.

They both sat down, and the negotiations started, the SS man interpreting. In the course of the conversation, I inquired about the kinds of timber growing on his land, and of course, I told him I was looking exactly for the kind he could not supply. The peasant was finally convinced that he could not make a deal with me and left, allowing us to continue our *Shabbos* meal.

Minutes later, the SS man knocked on our door and asked whether we had reported to the police, as required by law.

"No, not yet," I replied. "We didn't have time. We just got here, and the station is closed until tomorrow morning. We'll do it first thing in the morning. I promise."

The SS man left, but I had an uneasy feeling that something was amiss. We talked it over and decided to go to sleep; in the morning, we would determine whether to report to the police or to leave before they would ask too many questions.

However, only a few minutes passed, and the SS man was back again.

"Why don't you register with military headquarters?" he suggested. "It's close by, and it's open all night."

"All right," I said. "Why not?"

Wanting to prove that I was not afraid, I got up, emptied my pockets so as not to carry on *Shabbos* and accompanied him to headquarters. The SS man explained to the officer on duty that we wanted to register. The officer treated us very politely, speaking to us in German. Suddenly, the SS man interrupted and pointed at me.

"This guy isn't speaking German!" he exclaimed. "He's

speaking Yiddish! I'll bet he's a Jew."

Inwardly, I shuddered, but I managed a forced smile. Gone was their respectful and polite manner, replaced by howls of contemptuous laughter. Instead of registering us, they held us for the night for further investigation.

Our "dinner" consisted of a piece of dark bread, bacon and coffee. We were quite hungry, since we had not had time to eat our *Shabbos* meal. The bacon we gave away, and we ate just bread and coffee.

The soldiers who had heard that we were suspected to be Jews had fun at our expense as each tried to show his expertise in physiognomy, the "science" of determining a person's race by his facial features. They concluded that my friend Kempler looked like an Aryan, whereas I had Jewish features. This was because I had dark hair while my friend was fair-haired. I looked around for a chance to escape; all the windows were reinforced with heavy steel bars. We are like birds in a cage, I thought, so let's at least try to get some sleep. But the soldiers had other ideas. We provided the entertainment for them to while away the night as they tossed our hats to one another, cracking crude jokes. Occasionally, they would shine their flashlights into our faces, jeering, "Ha, Ha, this one is a Jew!" Let it be a *kapparah* for our sins, we thought. The problem is, how do we get out of this fix? We firmly believed that Hashem would show us the way.

Early the next morning, a soldier woke us to take us into the village to register at the police station. All along the three mile march, I looked for a way of escape but realized that any try was doomed to failure. At the police station, we were taken to the office of the chief of police who was surrounded by a group of border guards resplendent in military uniforms, wearing tall hats adorned with long turkey feathers.

The soldier handed our documents to the chief of police, making sure not to forget to mention that we were suspected to be Jews. The chief of police—a man of about sixty years of age—was a somber-looking man who never seemed to smile; still, his eyes reflected kindness. After a short while, he took us into the village to what appeared to be a government building, where he made a full report about us to some officials.

The officials, after studying our facial features, arrived at the opposite conclusion of the soldiers of the night before. They determined that I was an Aryan, while my friend was a native-born Jew. Now they turned to questioning us about the purpose of our presence in the village.

"We are on an official mission on behalf of the Ministry of Agriculture to buy lumber," I replied with a straight face.

"Who is the dealer you were planning to visit?"

I gave them the name of the wealthy local landowner.

"Oh!" they all exclaimed, flashing each other knowing smiles. "So that's the fellow you came to see. Now it all adds up . . . Hm, it figures . . ."

You could have knocked me down with a feather. The danger we were in till now was mild compared to the suspicion of being associated with a lumber dealer in prison for opposing the German regime and evidently belonging to a partisan organization. In fact, this brought to four the different sentences hanging over our heads. We were now under suspicion of being Jews, under suspicion of belonging to a partisan organization, accused of unauthorized entry into a restricted military zone and suspected of possession of forged government documents, each of which was enough to place us in front of a firing squad. In the meantime, however, the village officials were unable to pass sentence on us, since

our papers bore the "personal" signature of the head of the Ministry of Agriculture, and they could not convict us on mere suspicion.

After the inconclusive ending of our grilling, the chief of police brought us back to his office, placed us in an adjacent room and served us bread and coffee, which was welcome indeed after two days of hardly any food. Two hours went by without anyone paying attention to us. While waiting we concocted plans for escape, whispering in Polish.

At last, the chief of police came in, sat down and began to call Budapest on the telephone. It did not take any guesswork for us to figure out what he was going to hear on the other end. For starters, my name was blacklisted in Budapest for failing to register as required by law, not to mention the forged documents. With every turn of the dial my heart beat faster, as I saw my end closing in on me. For more than half an hour, he tried unsuccessfully to reach Budapest; apparently, the circuits were busy. We began to relax a little, hoping that he might let us go. Meanwhile, we remained in our seats, and the chief never so much as glanced at us.

We used the time to *daven Shacharis* of *Shabbos* undisturbed. At lunchtime, the entire police force sat down to a meal, the chief sitting at the head of the table surrounded by his men. Very graciously, he invited us to join him, a kind gesture which created an embarrassing situation for me since I would have to eat non-kosher food. Especially now, when my days were numbered, I was not going to defile myself by eating such food, all the more so since in all my life I had never tasted forbidden foods. I politely declined, saying that we were still full from breakfast and could not eat before another hour. The chief accepted this explanation and did not suspect anything.

An hour later, we were served a heaping plate of beef stew and bread. What were we to do? If we turned it down they would know for sure that we were Jews. While we were discussing ways of avoiding to eat the food, the police officers left the room to go on duty, except for the chief who remained at his desk, filling forms and doing paper work. We chewed the bread, smacking our lips, making it sound as if we were slurping the stew. Gradually, the plate became empty, but instead of putting the stew into our mouths, we placed it into our pockets. In this way, we "ate" the entire plateful, noisily gobbling the bread, without the chief noticing anything. We then asked permission to go to the bathroom where we emptied our pockets, and thus, we managed, *baruch Hashem*, to keep from eating non-kosher food.

Back in our seats, we began to make plans for the things that lay ahead. If the answer from Budapest would not come soon they would lock us up for the night. Moreover, if the answer did arrive it would surely be negative, and as a result, we would be transported to Budapest, in which case we could perhaps try to jump off the train under cover of darkness or blend into the crowds at the Budapest station. If we would be handcuffed to a guard we then could try to escape from the Budapest jail, and in a worst case scenario, if we would be sent to Auschwitz, we still could jump off the train, as many people had done with success—and I was an expert at the technique of jumping off a speeding train without getting hurt. Come what may, we were not going to give up but would keep trying, and with Hashem's help, we would survive. For hours on end, we weighed the merits of the various options, making sure to speak an idiomatic Polish like real *goyim*.

During the afternoon, the entire police force went for a walk, including the chief, while we were watched by one

guard. The guard was of Slovak descent, and since he knew a little Polish, we engaged him in some small talk. Being a little inebriated, he began to play Polish songs on his accordion and asked us whether we knew the tunes. Of course, we said yes and joined him as best as we could. Whether we knew the songs or not—we had to sing; we pretended to be singing *Shabbos zemiros.*

When the singing ended, the conversation drifted into the area of politics, and we soon observed that he was no dedicated Hungarian patriot. As our rapport grew, I questioned him about why we were being held. He replied that the chief of police had tried a number of times to call Budapest, and since he was unable to get through, he had sent two cables to verify our identification papers. The response would determine our fate. One cable had arrived confirming the authenticity of one document, but he was still awaiting the confirmation of the other paper before he would release us.

We were speechless. We never would have dared dream that they would authenticate our papers. We tried to conceal our excitement and did not want to ask him whose papers had been confirmed. Still, we were worried in case the second answer would be negative.

Towards evening, the police officers returned, and we were given a light supper, which to us was *shalosh seudos.* Two sacks of straw were to be our beds for the night, and since we had just had two sleepless nights, we fell into a deep sleep, hoping that the first ray of light was penetrating the darkness of our sorry plight.

Early in the morning, we were awakened together with the entire staff and invited to the kitchen for breakfast. Suddenly, in the middle of breakfast, the chief of police came

over to me and gave me a pat on the back.

"Do you have enough money to get you back to Budapest?" he asked me with a smile.

I told him that I did.

"Well, in that case, everything's fine," he replied.

I was flabbergasted. It was the first time I had seen him smile, and I simply could not believe that everything was turning out satisfactorily. The unbelievable had come to pass.

After breakfast, he invited us into his office and returned to us all our papers which had been confiscated. We finally believed that with Hashem's help we had actually been saved, and we were free. We had to stay another day because we had missed the one-a-day train to Budapest.

We left the office exhilarated, feeling as if a heavy load had been lifted from our shoulders. For hours, we could not get over the surprise that our papers had been accepted; we were completely mystified. Once again, we had clear proof that when Heaven wants to help anything is possible.

Since all our belongings were in the village, we received a six-hour pass to go pick them up. On the way, we ran into the SS man who had been the cause of all our troubles. When he saw us from the distance he quickly disappeared. Evidently, seeing us walking freely through the village, he realized he had made a bad mistake accusing us of being Jews and was ashamed to face us. We also met the lumber dealer and the other folks who raised their eyebrows with surprise at seeing us. We went to our room, washed and shaved with our electric razor, packed our bags and headed back to the police station.

There we were met by an altogether different attitude. The police officers went out of their way to be pleasant and show their kindness, emphasizing the traditional friendship

that exists between the Hungarian and the Polish peoples. No more sacks of straw for us.

In the morning, an officer escorted us all the way to the railroad station where he waited until the train began to move. We shook hands, thanking him warmly for his helpfulness. As the train slowly pulled out of the depot, we realized that we had been granted a new lease on life.

CHAPTER 36

The Cemetery Bunker

OUR ARRIVAL IN BUDAPEST WAS MARRED BY AN ALARMing spectacle. A hodgepodge of trucks and wagons loaded with Jewish household possessions could be seen scrambling in all directions, vehicles piled high with such items as furniture, bedding, kitchen utensils and all sorts of clothes. When I asked a Jewish onlooker about the meaning of the commotion, he stared at me with wide-eyed amazement.

"What's the matter? Don't you know?" he said. He then explained that a ghetto was being created in Budapest, but that here the Germans were using a different approach than in the rest of occupied Europe. Since the Hungarian capital was the seat of all foreign embassies, the Germans did not dare create an outright ghetto under the noses of the entire

diplomatic corps. However, they found a solution. An ordinance was enacted prohibiting Jews and non-Jews to reside in the same building. In a building with a majority of Jewish tenants, the non-Jews were required to move out; while buildings occupied by a majority of non-Jews were made *Judenrein.* In a sense, the individual apartment houses were converted into miniature ghettos.

Our arrival coincided with the climax of the mad scramble caused by thousands of people moving at the same time. In utter disbelief, we surveyed the dizzying swirl of vehicles loading and unloading amidst a horrendous traffic jam and the deafening din of blaring horns blending with the shouts and curses of exasperated drivers.

The Jews of Budapest still did not grasp the full impact of the situation. We Polish Jews, having learned from bitter experience, harbored no doubts about the sinister intentions that prompted the creation of these mini-ghettos. We knew only too well that this segregation was nothing but a shrewd tactical maneuver on the road to bringing the Final Solution to the Jews of Budapest. The Germans were merely laying the groundwork for the ultimate deportation of the fifty thousand remaining Jews, attempting to blunt the vehement opposition to the expulsion of the Jews by a number of Hungarian politicians. The Germans knew that the erection of a ghetto encircled by barbed wire would create panic among the Jewish population who would bring pressure to bear on high-placed government officials to have the ghetto abolished. Anticipating strong negative government reaction, the Germans created this semi-ghetto which would soften government resistance, since after all, the Jews would still be living in comfortable apartments. The issue of racial segregation would be avoided.

Since I was always in the company of Jews, this separation of Jews and non-Jews was disastrous for me, the pseudo-Aryan. The undercover agents knew our true identities, and any "Aryan" found in a Jewish home was arrested and sent to prison. As a result, I was forced to spend my days out in the street and sneak into my room for a short time to *daven* and have a bite to eat. I still slept in my old "hotel" in the basement on Nagyatadi Szabo Street. I was on friendly terms with the superintendent, and whenever I rang the bell, he let me in. Naturally, he welcomed the few *pengo* I slipped him every week.

At any rate, the situation was deteriorating by the day. I had to get out while the going was good. But first I had to visit Sheindl whom I had left in the hospital before I set out on my abortive mission as a government purchasing agent. To my surprise I learned that the Jewish Hospital had been expropriated by the Germans, and all patients had been transferred to the school building belonging to the Jewish community, located on Wesselenyi Street. The Jewish Hospital was a magnificent building, boasting the most advanced medical equipment, which made it an attractive target for German greed. I went over to the schoolhouse and happily found Sheindl in the best of health.

Unlike the Jewish Hospital, this makeshift infirmary was overcrowded and disorganized. I realized at once that under these circumstances I would stand a much better chance of taking her out than I did before. However, for the time being I was in no hurry to remove her. I was living in a dark and damp cellar, and I preferred for her to remain in the hospital, where she was enjoying the best of care, until an opportunity would arise to leave the country. When the time was ripe, the hospital administration surely would place no obstacles in my

way. On the contrary, they would be happy to gain an additional bed.

From time to time, I would run into my friends Shlomo Reich and another fellow who were my two partners in reciting *Kiddush Levanah* in the ghetto in Bochnia on the night before the *Aktion*, and whom I had helped escape. Once, when we were discussing possible ways of saving ourselves, Shlomo Reich came up with an idea. Yaakov Farkas, an Orthodox Jewish friend of his, had a job at the Neolog (the Hungarian name for Reform) Jewish cemetery and planned to build a bunker for himself on the cemetery grounds. Since he did not know how to go about constructing one, Reich suggested that it might be a good idea that I, an expert bunker builder, get together with him and help him build it, so that we all could benefit from it. His proposal seemed reasonable. A cemetery was the safest place to be during an *Aktion*. It was the one place the Germans would never dream of looking for victims. Surely, they would never find us hiding out in a bunker in a cemetery! We immediately got in touch with Farkas and agreed on the day and hour to meet at the cemetery.

The cemetery extended over an area as large as a city, and each worker was assigned a specific numbered section. Farkas was fairly new at the job, so that it took a long time until he found his section. I surveyed the area, looking for a protected site, until I found the perfect place, an empty area near the wooden fence that enclosed the cemetery, surrounded by monuments; the ideal location for a bunker.

Eager to get the project under way, we decided to start the following day. The steady traffic of visitors and workers forced us to do all our work very early in the morning. The four of us slept in the cemetery under the open skies, a

pleasant experience in the balmy summer breezes. At four in the morning, at the crack of dawn, we were already busy digging, and a few days later, the job was done.

The bunker measured ten feet by six-and-a-half feet and was six-and-a-half feet deep, providing plenty of space for the four of us. The roof was made of boards which we camouflaged with freshly turned earth. Since a large pile of earth might arouse suspicion, we arranged the earth in a series of parallel mounds in the shape of graves so that no one would suspect that buried under the earth there were live human beings. Inside the bunker we provided space for clothing and food, as well as a ladder for climbing in and out. When everything was in place I did not return to my damp and dingy basement but spent my nights inside the bunker or outside in the fresh air. I considered it safer to be among the dead than among the living—I mean the living hyenas lusting for our blood, eagerly awaiting the orders to start the deportations.

Since we wanted to avoid being seen by the cemetery gatekeeper, we sneaked in and out through an opening in the fence which we made by removing one of the boards. The high grass covering the hole made it virtually invisible. Every night, I went into town to hear the latest developments and to buy provisions. Those nights that I did not spend in the bunker I slept on a hard wooden bench in the Bais Midrash Chevrah Tehillim, avoiding Jewish homes for fear of getting caught in an inspection.

For quite a while, we had been hearing persistent rumors of the imminent arrival of sixteen hundred men of the special police force called *zsandar*, and people speculated as to the purpose for which they were coming. The predominant opinion was that inasmuch as the various factions within the government were at loggerheads, the *zsandars*, who were

proficient at keeping law and order, were being dispatched to prevent the overthrow of the government. The Jews of Budapest favored this theory; it provided the rationale for believing that they would not be subjected to deportations. I, on the other hand, knew that it was based on nothing but wishful thinking. The truth was that the *zsandars* were coming to rule with an iron hand, imposing their "law and order" on the Jews.

One day, we were told that the *zsandars* had indeed arrived. In the battle between the opposing forces in the Hungarian government, the anti-Semites had gained the upper hand.

For a long time, the *zsandars* maintained a low profile, and the city remained calm. Nevertheless, I was afraid to spend the night in the city, and I travelled to the cemetery every evening where I joined my friends for supper and occasionally for Torah study. Relaxing under a tree, breathing the pure, invigorating summer air far removed from all danger, we were in a different world.

But the good life was not to last. One evening, as I was going toward the cemetery, I noticed a company of *zsandars* hanging around not far from our hiding place. Ignoring them, I continued on my way. At the bunker, I told my friends what I had seen, expressing my fear that these *zsandars* spelled trouble.

We changed the subject, sat down under the tree to have supper and engaged in small talk. Suddenly, we heard heavy footsteps in the grass, and as we looked up, there in front of us we saw one of the *zsandars*. We recoiled in shock; what was he up to?

"Let's see your papers," he demanded, pointing his gun at us.

My two friends pulled out their documents, and he began examining them. While he was perusing the documents, I put on my shoes and ran toward our opening in the fence, thinking that he would never catch me since I was a champion runner.

But this time my luck ran out. The *zsandar* signaled his partner, who was walking around among the tombstones. Just at that moment, I tripped over some pieces of stone that were strewn about, tumbling into the high grass. The *zsandar* let me have it, slapping me left and right. He then called his comrades, one of whom kicked my knees with his heavy hobnailed boots and gave me a sound thrashing, making sure that I would not be able to run away again. Then they asked to see my documents, after which they told us to follow them.

They took us on the first streetcar that passed. Where were we going? They did not say. I had not expected to be one of the *zsandars'* first victims.

After a long ride, we were taken to a one-story building where we met a number of other Jews who had also been arrested. Each of us was taken into a separate room to be searched and robbed of all our valuables. Since I was dressed in a stylish business suit, they meticulously examined every inch of my clothing, expecting to find a considerable amount of money, but luckily, they found nothing. I did carry a substantial amount of cash underneath my shirt, but in their search they only went as far as my shirt. They did take my elegant shoes, replacing them with a pair of disgusting, worn-out tennis shoes. But at least, they did not find my money. After the examination, I was placed under heavy guard on account of my escape attempt.

It was becoming dark, but our hosts did not dream of offering us any food, not even a drink of water. They told all

prisoners to go out on the porch and sit down on the floor. This was the way we spent the night, under the watchful eyes of a number of guards, staring into the barrel of a machine gun that was ready to fire at anyone attempting to escape. We were made to sit back to back, and talking was strictly forbidden. The night seemed interminable as we huddled on the cold floor, hungry, thirsty, and scared to death, until at long last the faint glimmer of dawn heralded the new day.

At daybreak, we were lined up and taken by streetcar to a spacious courtyard where we saw a large number of *zsandars*; evidently, this was their headquarters. Like chickens in a coop, we were forced into a large storeroom where we encountered a sizable group of refined, upper class assimilated Budapest Jews, their faces reflecting pain and deep distress—they were bemoaning mainly the cash and jewels that had been taken from them. They could not imagine that a fate far worse than the loss of their possessions awaited them in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

I knew I was in serious trouble, and I focused my thoughts on finding a way out. When I learned that after a day or two the prisoners would be shipped out to "labor" camps, I knew it was going to be our last journey. I had to break loose. There was not a moment to lose. It wouldn't be easy, but Hashem can send His salvation in the blink of an eye. There was no time for deliberation; I had to act right now.

Surveying the storeroom, I could not find even a crack through which to escape. The courtyard was surrounded by a brick wall, but I noticed a small area six feet wide where the wall was made of wooden boards. There is my chance, I thought. Peeking through the cracks between the boards, I was encouraged. I noticed an outer court faced by barracks on one side and by a twelve-foot-high wall on the other side.

Growing close to this wall there was a tall tree with low-hanging branches.

Instantly, my plan took shape. Somehow, I would have to break through the boards and get into the outer court where I would scale the wall using the branches of the tree and be free.

Of course, there were a number of obstacles to overcome. First, without tools, how was I to break the heavy boards? Second, how would I sneak across the courtyard undetected trying to reach the tree, since the windows of the barracks were facing the courtyard? Also, while jumping off the twelve-foot wall I was apt to break a few bones. Yet in spite of all these difficulties, I saw no alternative, for staying in the storeroom meant certain death in the gas chamber.

After working out the details in my mind, I shared the plan with my two friends who had been captured along with me at the cemetery, explaining to them how dangerous it would be to remain here. They were too tired to listen. "Let's discuss it tomorrow," they said listlessly. Much as I tried, I could not convince them of the urgency of the situation. Undaunted, I decided to carry out the plan by myself.

The night passed, but still no food. They probably did not want to waste food on people who were going to be gassed anyhow.

When a few buckets used for watering horses were brought in, the parched captives voraciously pounced on them. The heat in the crammed storeroom was stifling, as new victims were arriving in a steady stream. The bread that I had on me I distributed to the famished people, thinking that by the night I'd be a free man and who knows how long these poor souls will have to go hungry? I also gave away my blanket which had served as a good mattress, as well as my bag

of clothes. To me, they were a worthless burden that would slow me down in my escape, which I believed would surely succeed with Hashem's help.

I completed all my preparations and waited impatiently for the sun to set. All of a sudden, four or five *zsandars* entered.

"All men out into the courtyard!" they shouted.

The command left me in total shock. It meant that the plan for which I had such high hopes had collapsed. I did not know what they had in mind. It seemed to me that they were getting ready to ship us to Auschwitz. Whatever their intentions, I was caught in a hornet's nest. Meanwhile, the men were beginning to file outside. In desperation, I remained frozen in my place. I didn't have much time to think. At the last moment, I made my decision. I was staying! In the corner of the storeroom, there stood an old wagon, and without a moment's hesitation, I took cover underneath it, lying flat on the floor.

After the last of the men had left, the guards came back and summoned the women to come out, and within a short time, the room was completely empty. Thereupon, they began to search every corner, hoping to find hidden valuables. It was not long before they found me.

The fellow who discovered me alerted his colleagues, who yelled at me to come out from my hiding place. Pretending to be asleep, I ignored them. Suddenly, I felt the harrowing pain of a rifle butt landing on my shoulder. I thought my bones were cracking. The game was over; no more pretending, I had to get up. Two barbarians grabbed me and dragged me outside into another building in the courtyard. The Jews lined up outside cast sympathetic glances in my direction, but that was all they could do.

The *zsandars* placed me in front of the commanding officer as they explained my crime. Seconds later, I was surrounded by a group of *zsandars* who went to work on me. First, they emptied my pockets, which was followed by a blow to my face, then a second and a third—on and on and on. I had been beaten by Germans countless times, but I must admit, I'd never received a whipping quite like this. These monsters were expert professionals. One of them in particular showed exceptional proficiency when he raised both his arms and, biceps bulging, swung his tightly clenched fists like a sledge hammer, pounding my head with one mighty crash that sent me spinning, writhing in agony. It felt as though he had cracked my skull wide open. There was no time to think. Fast and furious, the punches came raining down on me, on my mouth, my eyes and my stomach, as I staggered around dizzily, blinded by the blood streaming from my nose and mouth, my face reduced to a shapeless pulp. The merciless pounding continued without letup. Was there no end to my suffering?

Finally, there was a breathing spell. They handed me a little rag to wipe the blood from my eyes, and I thought that this was the end of my treatment. I was sadly mistaken. After a brief pause, they went at it again, continuing the torture with renewed energy. It reminded me of the words of the prophet, "From head to foot no spot was whole; all bruises and welts, and festering sores." (*Yeshayahu* 1:6) They beat me black and blue to the point that my legs gave way. Reeling under the barrage of blows I fell to the floor, semiconscious, thinking that now they would surely quit. But they had other ideas. Raising me to my feet, they gave me another beating until I fell down again. This time, they did not bother to pick me up; instead, they started kicking me indiscriminately with

their heavy hobnailed boots. Crouching and wincing with throbbing pain, I was nothing but a football to them. When they raised me to my feet again, I was more dead than alive.

Seeing the hopelessness of my situation, and as a last resort, I tried to show them my papers to prove my Aryan identity—in keeping with *Halachah*, I was always careful not to state verbally that I was a non-Jew—hoping that my papers would save my life. They reacted by ordering me to lower my pants. One quick look revealed my true identity.

Well, that was all I needed. The thrashing resumed, blow upon murderous blow. With savage passion, the vicious cutthroats tossed me like a rag doll from one end of the room to the other, splattering the white walls with my blood, making my head spin like a top. By now I was numb, dazed, knocked senseless. I gave up. I didn't care any more. I wanted it over with.

Just when I was sure that death was around the corner, salvation arrived from an unexpected quarter. Suddenly the door opened and several *zsandars* entered, bringing in "fresh merchandise." Since they had had their fill of my blood, they sent me outside and started to work on their new Jewish victim.

While they were occupied with their new victim, I used the opportunity to ask one of the *zsandars* who was standing around to get my document, pointing out to him the place where they had put my Aryan certificate. I cannot understand how, after the stupefying beating I received, I still was able to think coherently. The greatest marvel was that the fellow agreed, and without the others noticing, he handed me my document. I consider this an even greater miracle than surviving the brutal beating. Without the Aryan papers, any thought of escape was out of the question; at the first

checkpoint, I would be sent straight back to prison. From the bottom of my heart, I offered thanks to Hashem.

Back in the storeroom, I found all the prisoners who had returned from the courtyard. Apparently, the reason they had sent everyone outside was to enable them to search the room for valuables, but it seems I was the only prize they managed to find. My two friends were appalled to see me looking like a ghost. My entire face was unrecognizably bloodied and swollen, my eyes and ears black as coal.

They asked me about my plans for the future.

"I've got to get out of here tonight," I replied matter-of-factly. "I don't want to go to Auschwitz."

They were shocked. "After all you went through you still have the courage to think of escaping?"

They tried to persuade me to abandon my dangerous plan. However, they could not make me change my mind. On the contrary, I kept urging them to join me, arguing that thereby they would avoid certain death. I realized I was wasting my breath, since they did not even want to forgo their night's sleep. Well, if that's the way you want it, I thought, *gam zu letovah*, this too was for the best. Perhaps it's better that I go by myself rather than with a group. This way there's less chance of getting caught.

I sat down near the wooden fence in order to study the crack and noticed that one of the boards was loosely attached; all I had to do was pull it out altogether and I'd have smooth sailing. Since pulling out the board in the quiet of the night would wake the guards, I got up, and with my last ounce of strength, I kicked the board loose. Only then did I notice the thickness of the board and the heavy nails that held it in place. I marveled at my strength, how with one kick I was able to loosen the board. I thought, this and the fact that no one

noticed what I had done were additional links in the chain of miracles that happened to me today. I would need many more miracles before I could breathe the air of freedom, but this was tangible proof that Heaven was guiding my steps and that redemption was at hand.

I remained sitting there until it got dark, for fear that someone else might take my place. I counted the minutes and the seconds, as if that would make time go faster. My greatest fear was falling asleep as a reaction to the beatings. With all my might, I fought off my drowsiness. In spite of this, overcome by fatigue, I fell asleep, waking up from time to time. I had in mind to break out late at night when everyone, including the guards, would be sound asleep. Since my watch had been confiscated, I could not keep track of time. Imperceptibly, the hours were creeping along; it seemed as if time was standing still. Finally, I could wait no longer. I decided to go ahead.

Cautiously, I moved the board and gave it a little push. And just like that, I was outside! The moon lit up the courtyard as I tiptoed forward. The crackling sound that arose when I stepped on the dry little twigs gave me a fright. I was afraid that the noise might awaken the guards who were sleeping in the building facing the courtyard, especially since the windows were wide open because of the summer heat. But I became even more fearful when I detected what I thought was the shadow of a watchdog. I stopped dead in my tracks, deliberating whether to go on. On the one hand, I had made it a rule for myself always to advance, never to go back. On the other hand, the dog scared the life out of me. After weighing the alternate options, I decided to continue, come what may. Hashem would help.

I proceeded warily, as though walking on a razor's edge—

which I was. Coming closer to the shadow of the dog, I realized it was only a figment of my overwrought imagination. What I had seen was, in fact, the shadow cast by the moonlight on some sort of object resembling a dog.

Slowly, I made my way towards the tree. However, I became aware that behind the wall of this court there was another court which resounded with the laughter of a number of guards. I held my breath, waiting for the noise to subside. When everything was quiet, I tried to climb the tree but ran into a new problem. First, the trunk of the tree was larger than the reach of my arms, making it impossible to climb. Second, when, in spite of this I tried to climb up, the dried out bark of the tree broke off. The ensuing noise was liable to wake up the guards. For a short while, I was faced with a dilemma, realizing that there was nothing left for me to do but to go back. But true to my principle never to turn back, I decided to go forward, never mind the consequences.

I had to come up with a new strategy quickly. I didn't have much time; my life was hanging by a thin thread, and every second counted. Leaning against the wall, which I assumed separated the courtyard from the street, there was a wooden shed. All I had to do was climb onto the roof of the shed and from there to the wall and then jump down into the street. The problem was how to climb the shed without creating any noise. The slanted roof of the shed reached into the other court where a short while ago I had heard the laughter of the guards, and there was a good chance that there were some guards inside the shed. It was going to be a risky venture. But I decided to shrug off all difficulties and go to it. I had to get out of here, or else.

Without hesitating, I headed straight for the shed and began to climb. As soon as I placed my foot on the first board,

it gave way with a loud crash. For a brief moment, I was startled, wondering whether anyone had heard the noise. Then I went ahead; I had to go forward. In the end, with Hashem's help and a great deal of exertion, I reached the roof of the shed. From there it was an easy climb up to the top of the wall.

My calculation was correct; on the other side of the wall I saw the street. At last, freedom was only one leap away. But I was afraid to jump because of the guards in the adjacent court.

The moon shone brightly as I stood on top of the wall, like an illuminated statue, visible to everyone. Any minute now, someone might see me and open fire on me. I bent down and continued on hands and knees, constantly on the lookout for guards or a regular policeman who would jump at the opportunity to arrest a runaway prisoner.

Creeping along the extended wall, I reached an area that seemed safe. Still, I did not want to jump down. First of all, a passerby might notice me and report me to the police. Second, jumping from the wall was in itself quite dangerous and might leave me crippled. I continued slithering for some distance until I reached a spot where a tall tree with branches overhanging the wall obscured the moonlight, casting a large shadow on the street below.

"This is it," I said to myself. "A better place for jumping than this I'll never find. Here I'm more or less hidden from view by the branches of the tree."

I lowered myself from the wall, hanging only by my fingertips, thus shortening the distance I would have to jump. I let my fingers slip, and there I was! Standing in the street! *Baruch Hashem*, I made it without a scratch. Hastily, I walked away from the area until I estimated that I was out of danger.

Now I didn't have to be afraid of the police any more. After all, I was a "kosher" Aryan thanks to the documents that had been returned to me miraculously. It is impossible to describe the jubilation and relief I sensed at this moment—I was saved from Auschwitz.

In the wake of the terrible trauma, the tremendous physical exertion and the inner tension I had experienced, I was overcome by a wave of fatigue. My legs simply refused to budge. I had no choice but to sit down on a sidewalk bench to take a rest. As I was sitting there, I suddenly heard the courthouse chimes pierce the silence of the night. I began to count. One. Two. Three. This means it is three o'clock in the morning and soon it will be daybreak. I was saved in the nick of time. If I had waited any longer I wouldn't have made it. Praise and thanks to Hashem for saving me from the jaws of the hyenas.

After a brief pause, I continued my walk. I did not have the slightest idea in what part of the city I was, but my first priority was to get as far away from the camp as quickly as possible.

Before long, I noticed the first brightening of the morning, and people began to appear in the streets. I asked for directions on how to get to the street where two of my friends were living. They were Lipa Salzberg and Yosef Zeiger, also holders of Aryan papers, who lived in the house of a non-Jew. The distance was quite far, but after a long and tiring walk, I arrived there safely.

By the time I got there, the sun had already risen, but I still had to wait a while until the gate was opened. I climbed the stairs to their apartment, but before they would let me in, I almost had to prove who I was. They stared at me in stunned silence. To be sure, I was a frightening sight; from top to

bottom soiled with dirt, grime and blood, my face a swollen mass of hideous black welts, my entire body covered with cuts, bruises and festering sores. When he first saw me, the non-Jewish landlord turned to my friend.

"What's this bum doing here?" he burst out. "I want him to leave my house this instant."

Only after my friends convinced him that I was not a drunken derelict did he finally calm down. We all sat down together on the terrace where I told them all about my dreadful ordeal.

Afterwards, we went to Rabbi Schick at 32 Nagyatadi Szabo Street, where I took a hot bath and changed into clean clothes. I felt like a new man after the hell I had lived through during the past several days.

For many months, I felt the aftereffects of the brutal beatings I received. My body felt as though it was on fire, and I suffered from insomnia, as night after night I relived the dreadful experience. But I accepted every adversity, and I firmly believed that *gam zu letovah*, whatever happens is for the good. The main thing was that I came out alive. May my pain and distress serve as an atonement for all my transgressions, and may Hashem speedily bring an end to all the afflictions of His people.

I saw it as my duty to tell my story to the Jews of Budapest, with the aim of waking them from their slumber and making them face reality, so that they would take action to save their lives. My hair-raising report had a profound impact on the audiences, especially the information that thousands of Jews, quietly and unnoticed, were being snatched away from under their noses to be shipped to the gas chambers of Auschwitz. Even people with close connections to high-ranking government officials were shocked and dumfounded when they

heard for the first time that the tricky Nazis, in an attempt to avoid a public outcry, randomly picked up hundreds of Jews each day, mostly on the outskirts of the city, and hauled them to their deadly destination—Auschwitz.

CHAPTER 37

Saved from Auschwitz

WHILE EICHMANN CONTINUED HIS METHODICAL extermination of Hungarian Jewry, sending transports of up to twelve thousand Jews a day to the furnaces of Auschwitz, the Jews of Budapest still clung to their illusion of being secure and protected. As a result of this wishful thinking, they passed up many opportunities for saving themselves. Polish Jews, on the other hand, having experienced first-hand the full impact of German fury, feverishly busied themselves devising new plans for surviving the impending catastrophe. Some of them succeeded in fleeing across the border to Romania, but the majority of Polish Jews remained in Budapest where they looked for other avenues of escape.

A novel idea which surfaced and created quite a furor was

the suggestion of surgically removing the physical sign of Jewish identity, the *milah*. The procedure involved *halachic* as well as medical problems. There were some rabbis who sanctioned the operation on the grounds that it constituted *pikuach nefesh*, a lifesaving technique, as indeed it was. (My own experience at the hands of the *zsandars* proved it.) Some of my friends tried to persuade me to have the surgery done, and at their advice, I consulted the surgeon who specialized in it. His examination showed that, unlike many others, I was a suitable candidate for the operation. Nonetheless, after thinking things over I refused to go through with it in the belief that Hashem had other ways of saving me. I placed my trust in Him, praying that He would rescue me from my pursuers, as indeed He did.

After my escape from the claws of the *zsandars*, I found myself without a roof over my head. I would not dream of going back to the cemetery, and the basement where I used to stay had been designated as an air raid shelter, not to be used as living quarters. Moreover, since the shelters were inspected frequently to ensure proper maintenance, I could not plan on sleeping there surreptitiously. Nor would it be safe to spend the night in a Jewish home during these turbulent times, since a raid could occur at any time; the only thing holding the Germans at bay was the opposition of a few gallant pro-Jewish government officials who were fighting a losing battle. The sole option open to me was to find a room in an Aryan apartment, not an easy thing to do since the non-Jews were aware that many Jews were holding bogus Aryan papers and were therefore reluctant to rent rooms to strangers for fear of being accused of harboring Jews. It took several days of intensive room hunting until my friend Yosef Zeiger and I managed to rent a room from a poor Hungarian.

It was around this time that a new ordinance was issued requiring all aliens to find employment. In and of itself, this did not worry me too much; I had no trouble keeping myself occupied. However, the ordinance required each person to present himself at the Bureau of Labor to receive a license permitting him to work at his place of employment. This had an adverse effect on the Jewish refugees, as we knew that all professed Aryans suspected of being Jews had been entered on a special blacklist. We had proof of this in the fact that during random raids all Jews with Aryan papers who were arrested were promptly shipped to the death camps. I was sure to be on this blacklist, and presenting myself at the Bureau of Labor would undoubtedly land me in trouble.

However, with Hashem's help, I found a way out of my predicament. I knew several Polish Jews who had good connections with some of the high officials at the Bureau of Labor, and upon payment of two hundred *pengo* they arranged for me to get a work permit without the required personal appearance. The two hundred *pengo* was no small amount, but when it is a question of life or death, money is no object.

Aided by my worker's permit, I secured a job at a glass company which was in the business of replacing windows shattered during the bombings. The work was not very difficult, particularly since most of our time was spent in an air raid shelter because of the constant bombings. My salary was quite good—twenty *pengo* for a day's work. The job provided the additional advantage of giving me a place to spend the day. I could not stay in my room, since my neighbors knew about the ordinance requiring me to work, and I certainly could not walk the streets for fear of spot checks.

My first day of work fell on a Sunday. All that week I made sure to be there on time and work diligently. But I made up my mind that on *Shabbos* I wasn't going to show up. Since this would be an unmistakable sign of my Jewishness, I decided to quit the job with the excuse that I was forced to leave town because of an urgent personal matter. This created a serious problem for me, since I could not stay in my room or walk the streets. However, Hashem sent me a helper in the person of Avraham Steinmetz from Budapest, who is currently residing in the United States. Earlier on, as I have already related, I had had a narrow escape when I was enjoying a *Shabbos* meal at his house. This big-hearted man made available to me a room lined with *sefarim* to use for *Shabbos*.

However, pleasant though my *Shabbos* was, I was ill at ease, since most of his neighbors were non-Jews who observed me, a professed Aryan, regularly entering the home of Reb Avraham, a Jew wearing a beard and *peyos*, something that could easily have gotten me into to serious trouble. I placed my trust in Hashem, however, hoping that He would protect me from all harm.

In spite of the enormous peril involved, I and many other Polish refugees never missed the daily *shiurim* and *davening* at the *bais midrash*. Frequently, there would be raids on the various *batei midrash* in an attempt to find "Aryans," and those who were found were never heard from again. However, we did not want to do without the daily *davening* and *shiurim*. The greatest concentration of "Aryans" could be found in the *shuls* on Kiraly Street, specifically, the Chevrah Tehillim, the Polish *bais midrash* and Chevrah Shass. It was fascinating to watch the animated *Talmudic* debates between Hungarian Jews and Polish "Aryans" taking place during the *Gemara shiur* conducted by Rabbi Chananiah Kohn.

With the passage of the weeks, the wrangling among the various political parties concerning what to do with the Jews continued unabated, as opposing forces alternately gained and lost the upper hand. The uncertainty made life extremely tense and worrisome for the Jews of Budapest. Would they be deported to Auschwitz or would they be allowed to stay? Life or death hinged on the outcome.

For us "Aryans," the situation took a slight turn for the better. Until then, we had been under the jurisdiction of the office staffed by Polish army officers who had fled to Hungary where they received a warm welcome from the Hungarians, Poland's traditional friends. However, after the German occupation, the Hungarians lost interest in the Polish officers. Instead, the Hungarian government took all Polish refugees under its own wing. As a consequence, Polish refugees received a notice summoning them to register with a branch office of Army Headquarters that had been set up at the outskirts of Budapest for the express purpose of looking after the interests of Polish refugees. The Poles presented their documents, which were inscribed and countersigned by the Hungarian army, certifying the holder of the document as a Polish citizen. The bearer could then dispense with the monthly visit to the ministry to have his document stamped and signed.

I also received such a notice, which presented me with the problem of whether to register, since all the signatures and stamps on my paper were false. On the other hand, I did not want to be an illegal alien, since this would expose me to untold dangers. I decided to register, hoping that the clerk would not notice the forgeries, and indeed, I received my certification without any difficulties. I became an officially certified "kosher" Pole.

The Hungarian Defense Department treated the Poles very generously, offering them financial assistance, distributing monthly stipends according to the size of the recipient's family and occasionally donating clothing free of charge. Still, I was reluctant to enter their office building each month to claim my share, since I knew that the Germans were keeping an eye on the entire distribution and I was afraid of the eventual outcome. Subsequent events proved me right. One day, as the Poles were lined up to receive their monthly grant, they were suddenly surrounded by a company of German soldiers who had arrived by car. The Germans selected hundreds of Jewish "Aryans" and carted them off to the Auschwitz death camp.

Although I enjoyed staying at Reb Avraham Steinmetz's house, it entailed too many risks. Going to his house and returning home was dangerous, even though I held a valid work permit. The police, who knew full well that many permit holders did not go to work, checked with the employers. Fearful of getting caught in an inspection, I decided to go back to my place of work.

When I told my boss that I had returned from my trip, he was delighted to take me back, as he considered it a great honor to have a person holding a doctorate working for him. (I must point out that at my first registration in Hungary, the clerk mistakenly registered me as a physician with a doctorate from Cracow University. My employer took great pride in his educated worker and would introduce me to the various government representatives who came to inspect his establishment from time to time.)

But like the previous time, I wasn't going to work for him for a full week. Come what may, I would not desecrate the *Shabbos.* And so, on Friday afternoon I left, never to come

back again. I figured that by now he'd surely suspect me of being a Jew, as this was already the second time that I quit on Friday afternoon. And indeed, my friends later told me that on one occasion when the boss was drunk he wondered out loud whether I was a Jew. Thus, I returned to enjoy the hospitality of Reb Avraham Steinmetz on 6 Kiraly Street.

In the meantime, after a lengthy and heated debate between the pro-German and anti-German forces in the Hungarian government, the latter prevailed. However, although the anti-Semites were in the minority and had been outvoted, they continued their vicious attacks on their opponents and demanded the deportation of the Budapest Jews. Their bitter tirades fell on deaf ears.

The news was encouraging. The sixteen hundred *zsandars* who had been imported to "maintain law and order" were sent packing. As I was told by my friend Yaakov Singer (who was forced to work for the *zsandars* and currently lives in the United States), the new government used an ingenious ruse to put an end to the ruthless regime of the *zsandars*. One day, out of the blue, the sirens were sounded signaling the approach of enemy aircraft. Everyone, of course, rushed into the air raid shelters. After the *zsandars*, along with their laborers, found refuge underground, a company of Hungarian soldiers burst into the shelter, their guns drawn, and shouted, "Hands up!" Taken by surprise, outnumbered and outgunned, the *zsandars* surrendered. The soldiers loaded them onto waiting trucks and shipped them out. The ruling party celebrated the victory, and there was jubilation in all of Budapest.

It seemed that all our troubles were over. The Jews of Budapest ecstatically began removing the yellow *Judenstern* from their doors and their clothing, although the law was still

officially on the books. Needless to say, the raids and spot checks came to an end. The *shuls* and *shtieblach* resounded again with the sound of Torah study and prayer emanating from the mouths of thousands of Jews who thronged to attend the daily *davening* and *shiurim*. The change was most pronounced in the *shuls* which were patronized by the "Aryan" Jews—the Chevrah Tehillim, Chevrah Shass and the Polish *shtiebel*; whereas in months past they had been almost deserted, now they were vibrantly alive with *shiurim* at which Hungarian *Talmudic* scholars matched wits with their Polish "Aryan" counterparts. A spirit of optimism and happiness pervaded the Jewish community. Everyone believed that this situation would last until the end of the war. Any thought that this blissful state of enchantment might end was banished from the mind.

I, on the other hand, did not delude myself into thinking that this condition was going to endure indefinitely. I was convinced that the Germans were not going to relinquish their master plan. They would not be satisfied until the last Jews has been wiped out. I had to keep trying to flee from this blood-soaked land.

Quite unexpectedly, I stumbled upon a way to enter Romania legally by means of a passport and visa furnished by Polish Jews with the right connections. I did not know whether the documents were genuine or false, but I really did not care. My informants told me that dozens of people had crossed the border in this fashion, arriving safely at their destination. This seemed to be an easy way of getting out, and as for Sheindl, if I would show my passport and visa to the hospital administration, they surely would not prevent me from taking her out.

Exploring the matter further, I found out that the people

who ran the program were old acquaintances of mine from Cracow. Without wasting time, I got in touch with them and applied for the papers, for which they charged two thousand *pengo.* It was a substantial amount, but better to pay the price than to stay in Budapest. I gave them a deposit and waited for the passport which they promised would arrive within a few days. Days and weeks went by, but no passport. They kept stalling for time with lame excuses until I realized I was dealing with a bunch of incompetent bunglers. I gave up on ever obtaining a passport and hoped at least to get back my deposit. After repeatedly demanding payment, they refunded the money, claiming that the Hungarian government had put a stop to the operation.

During the summer of 1944, the American State Department and the British Foreign Office dispatched a diplomatic note to the Hungarian government calling for the immediate expulsion of all German forces from Hungary as otherwise the Allied powers would take the necessary steps to force a German withdrawal. Naturally, the Hungarian puppet regime was unable to fulfill the demand; after all, the Germans were in complete control of Hungary and would not dream of withdrawing. The Allied response was not long in coming. Formation after formation of heavy bombers appeared over the skies of Budapest, leaving a trail of death and destruction. The population spent more time in air raid shelters than in their homes.

Although by law everyone was required to be in a shelter during an air raid, I preferred to spend the time of the alert in the Bais Midrash Chevrah Tehillim. This *shul* became a center for homeless Jewish refugees from Poland who would pray, eat and sleep there. I myself slept countless nights on its hard wooden benches. The *gabbaim* of the *bais midrash* did

not object. Quite the contrary, they welcomed the opportunity to help the unfortunate refugees.

Every morning, I would climb up to the attic to wait for the Allied bombers to appear on their mission of sowing fire, smoke and ruin. Once, while I was in the attic during an air raid, we were warned that the air raid wardens were coming to make sure that everyone was in a shelter. In the ensuing wild scramble, my friends Yosef Zeiger and Lipa Salzberg did not make it to the shelter and were arrested by the wardens to be turned over to the police after the all-clear was sounded. I remained in the attic, but when I noticed that the wardens were continuing their search I had to think quickly.

The main hall of the *bais midrash* had a door leading into the next apartment. I sneaked into the empty apartment through that door, climbed into a bed and covered myself with as many pillows and blankets as I could find. I stayed there for several hours until the all-clear sounded and the occupants of the apartment returned from the shelter. One of the wardens took my two friends to the police station, but after they appealed to him and slipped him a few *pengo*, he let them go.

During these difficult times, there were many who exploited the misery of the Jewish people. One of the organizations that capitalized on our predicament was the Catholic Church, which used the fear, torment and distress that gripped the Jewish community of Budapest to further its own interests and gain thousands of Jewish converts to the "religion of love and compassion." The government passed new legislation, proposed by the Church prelates, whereby any Jew who converted to Christianity would be exempt from all anti-Jewish decrees and would enjoy the same status as a native-born Hungarian Catholic.

The "good tidings" spread like wildfire, and within a short time hundreds of Jews converged on the main church where the baptisms were to be performed. A long line formed outside the church stretching for several blocks. The smiling faces of the aspiring proselytes betrayed their belief that a door had opened for them, that they had hit upon a scheme by which they could save their lives.

Needless to say, this conversion approach was used mainly by Jews whose attachment to Judaism was tenuous at best. Most of them belonged to the Neolog community, many of whose members had no qualms, even in peacetime, about converting to Christianity to accommodate their non-Jewish wives. However, it cannot be denied that there were some Orthodox Jews—albeit a minimal percentage—who were lured by the enticing prospects the priests held out, thinking that by converting they would save their lives. Regrettably, these Jews did not consult a rabbinical authority and failed to take into account that this step would tarnish their family's reputation.

The baptism ceremony was very simple. A Jew who expressed his desire to convert was placed in front of the bishop of the archdiocese who sprinkled some water on his head, transforming him into a full-fledged Catholic. These apostate Jews were furnished with certificates that would supposedly protect them in case of an *Aktion* and exempt them from all restrictions applicable to Jews.

The baptism program continued for quite a long time. Day after day, a throng could be seen assembling in the plaza in front of the church. Men and women, young and old, pushing and shoving for a place in the line to receive the scrap of paper that would insure their survival—this in spite of Hitler's having ordered the extermination even of gentiles

with a Jewish ancestor who converted to Christianity. These gentiles of mixed ancestry were gassed and burned in Auschwitz along with their Jewish "brothers and sisters." The Hungarian anti-Semitic press made a laughingstock of the converted Jews, publishing caricatures of Jews standing with bowed heads in front of a bishop who handed them their ticket to life. It eventually became obvious that the entire baptism policy was nothing but a farce, a maneuver on the part of the Catholic Church to gain prestige at the expense of some gullible Jews.

Ultimately, when the deportations started, the conversion certificates were not worth the paper on which they were written. The converts, relying on the benevolent protection of the Church, had passed up other opportunities for saving themselves, and when a short time later disaster struck, they were swept along in the firestorm.

Just when it seemed that things looked their worst, a ray of light pierced the darkness of despair that enveloped Hungarian Jewry. In some way, the International Red Cross reached an agreement which had the support of the pro-Nazi faction whereby Jews could be placed under its protection. Under the terms of the agreement, Jewish holders of a *Schutzpass* (passport of protection) issued by the Swiss consulate would be exempt from all anti-Jewish laws. Within a short time, the office established to distribute these *Schutzpasse* was flooded with thousands of applications. The staff at this office consisted mainly of Polish Jews, and understandably, Polish Jewish applicants had the inside track in obtaining the coveted passports. I also made an application for a *Schutzpass* for myself and took adavantage of the opportunity to arrange one for my daughter, too.

More and more people applied, and almost all of the

applications were approved. As I sized up the situation, the more passports there were in circulation, the less they were worth. It was inconceivable to me that the Germans would allow thousands of Jews to slip through their deadly net this way, and I decided therefore not to use the *Schutzpass*. I could not imagine that these passports would be of any help during an *Aktion* when every German SS man was his own boss and was not held accountable for a Jew who disappeared. I put the passports into a drawer and carried only my Aryan papers, which, to my mind, offered greater protection than the *Schutzpass* passports.

The Swedish consulate also played an active role in rescuing Jews. It acquired a number of buildings which, by international law, came under Swedish territorial jurisdiction. In these buildings, the Swedes housed scores of Jewish families who stayed there for the duration of the war and were provided with all their needs.

My hunch concerning the ineffectiveness of the *Schutzpass* proved to be correct. At the time when the passports were issued, the Hungarian government was controlled by the pro-Jewish faction. However, when a short time later the pro-German party headed by Ferenc Szalasi seized power, all protective passports became worthless. Szalasi, the ruthless leader of the right wing Arrow Cross Party, handed Hungary over to the Germans who went on a wild rampage of deportation and pillage. A large number of Budapest Jews were carted off to Auschwitz, including many holders of *Schutzpass*. By the grace of Hashem, many deportees returned after the war, and by a sheer miracle, around seventy thousand Jews survived the war in the Budapest ghetto. And Szalasi shared the fate of his predecessor Haman. At the end of the war, he was hanged in the main square of Budapest in the presence

of tens of thousands of spectators, including his closest advisors who were made to watch the richly deserved execution of their leader.

So may all your enemies perish, Hashem! (*Shoftim* 6:31)

CHAPTER 38

Bombs on Budapest

FOR THE TIME BEING, THE RISE TO POWER OF THE HUMANE and benevolent regime of Premier Kallay brought about a marked improvement in the lives of the Jews of Budapest. People felt relieved and began making preparations for the upcoming *Yamim Noraim* (High Holy Days). The *shuls* once again were packed to overflowing, like in the good old days. The streets were filled with Jews undauntedly wearing *talleisim*, some on their way home from the *shul*, others—mostly *chassidim*—rushing to the *mikveh* before going to *daven* in their *bais midrash*. Friends and strangers alike greeted each other with a heartfelt *leshanah tovah* (wishes for a happy new year), their smiling faces beaming with gladness over the turnabout in their situation.

Although the air was filled with joy and jubilation, the

exhilaration was tinged with concern and anxiety. Two weeks before *Rosh Hashanah* the American State Department and the British Foreign Office concluded that their demands to the Hungarian government to expel the German forces were having no effect and that the Germans had no intention of withdrawing. They then issued an ultimatum threatening a continuous ten-day massive bombing attack on Budapest, the likes of which the world had never seen. When the ultimatum expired, true to their word, the Allied bombing raids began.

For ten long days, including *Rosh Hashanah,* wave after wave of Allied bombers and fighters swarmed across the Budapest skies, unloading their deadly cargo on the city. It was impossible to go in the street where the bombs were coming down like hail and hundreds of buildings were collapsing like houses of cards. Anticipating the bombings, some people had prepared to have *Rosh Hashanah* services and meals in their air raid shelters. The bomb blasts caused the death of thousands, including many Jews. Even the air raid shelters offered no ironclad guarantee of safety since the falling buildings would crush and bury the shelters under mountains of debris. Not far from my shelter a collapsing four-story building came crashing through the ceiling of the shelter, killing two hundred people, mostly Jews.

This tragic incident jolted the Jewish community. It brought home the reality that the shelters were no safe haven. The new year was greeted with mixed feelings. Ironically, just as things began to look up, and the fear of deportations seemed to have passed, this new calamity struck. The Jews of Budapest took a small degree of comfort in that at least the bombs were not aimed specifically at them but at the population at large. As the saying goes, "A shared distress is a partial consolation."

Unlike the Budapest Jews, we Polish Jews did not quite feel out of harm's reach yet. We knew only too well that you don't get rid of the German tyrants quite so easily. Even in their death throes, they would not rest until they accomplished their goal of wiping out the Jewish people. We could not rely on the sympathetic Hungarian government since the anti-Semitic Arrow Cross party had not thrown in the towel yet and was trying to overthrow the government. Time and again, I tried to convince my friends not to lose sight of the threatening danger by clinging to the illusion that salvation had arrived; the current regime might fall, and then it would be too late. Although I had a premonition that the improved situation was not going to last, I made no further efforts at escaping since all my previous attempts had ended in failure.

In the meantime, as a result of the overcrowded conditions in the temporary Children's Home on Wesseleny Street, many children, my daughter included, were placed in private homes. However, after an intense effort, the management succeeded in obtaining a spacious and modern building which they renovated and turned into a suitable home for the children, so that they were once again housed and cared for in one building.

I was very happy about this, thinking that even in the worst case of an *Aktion,* the Germans would not dare liquidate an institution of this kind. I frequently visited Sheindl who was returned to the Home after boarding for a long time with one of the nurses. The thought of abducting her was the farthest thing from my mind since all my previous plans had failed, but the nurses, who had not forgotten my earlier attempts at kidnapping her, kept a watchful eye on me.

Then it happened. On the day before *Rosh Hashanah,* which fell in the middle of the ten-day bombing raid, I was

sitting in the shelter on Nagyatadi Street. In the past, I had always gone to an Aryan air raid shelter because of my Aryan identification papers, but now with the danger of a direct hit hanging over my head, I chose a Jewish shelter. I did not want to be in Aryan company for fear that I might end up buried in an Aryan cemetery.

On that fateful *Erev Rosh Hashanah*, the bombings lasted uncommonly long. Early in the morning, we entered the shelter as the bombers appeared in the sky, and the bombs continued falling without letup. Relentlessly, hour after hour, the bombs exploded all around us with ear-splitting noise, reducing entire neighborhoods to rubble. By noon, people could not endure the tension of being cooped up any longer. After all, it was the eve of *Rosh Hashanah* and preparations had to be made.

Just as we were deliberating about what to do, Rabbi Schick came over and asked me in what building my daughter was. As I was telling him that she was in the Children's Home, I realized that he must have had a reason for asking me.

"Why are you asking me?" I inquired.

"Oh, it's nothing," he replied. "I was just wondering."

I sensed that he was dodging the question, which worried me even more. I began asking around until one man quite innocently told me that the Children's Home had suffered a direct hit. Word of the disaster reached our shelter because in our building there was a clinic and the ambulances had been summoned to the scene of the explosion. Now the reason for Rabbi Schick's question became clear.

The news frightened and stunned me. My first reaction was, in spite of the terrible danger, to run to the home, which was a good distance away. But the air raid wardens guarding our building allowed no one except medical personnel to

leave the premises. I sat on pins and needles, each minute seeming like an hour. My nerves were on edge as I worried about my only child who had miraculously survived the countless hardships we had experienced.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity of anxious waiting, the all-clear was sounded; the eight-hour alarm had ended. I rushed over to the home only to find that the street was cordoned off; no one was permitted to enter. The Children's Home was enveloped in a thick cloud of acrid smoke. All I could see were fire engines and ambulances entering and leaving the street. The frenzied activity only served to confirm that a major disaster had occurred. Questioning the guards for details got me nowhere; they either did not know or did not want to tell. Worried sick, I ran from one side of the street to the other, until I managed to sneak past the barricade. I headed straight for the home. Nurses were carrying children out of the building, completely covered with layers of powdery dust swirling up from the falling rubble.

"How is my daughter?" I asked one of the nurses, my voice cracking with fear.

"She's all right," she replied. "She has not been hurt."

Could it be true? I waited and waited. Scores of children emerged from the building but not a trace of Sheindl. Were they trying to hide the truth?

After a nerve-racking wait, I finally noticed Sheindl being carried out by one of the nurses. I took the child from her arms and asked her to let me take her for just a few hours.

"I promise I'll bring her back," I said.

"I'm sorry, I can't do that," the nurse insisted. "I'm personally responsible for her." But after I implored and gave her my word that I would return the child, she relented.

Carrying the child in my arms, I took her to Rabbi Schick's house where I gave her a bath to remove the heavy dust. After giving her a bite to eat, I returned her to the Children's Home at the old location on Wesseleny Street. Miraculously, not one of the children in the home was hurt, and only a few of the workers were injured slightly.

CHAPTER 39

The Fascists Seize Power

TRAGICALLY, MY OMINOUS FOREBODINGS ALL CAME TRUE. The deceptive calm that reigned in Budapest did not last very long, and soon after the *Yamim Tovim*, it came to an abrupt halt. On a bright Sunday afternoon, a few days after *Sukkos*, the peaceful tranquility was broken by the clatter of tanks moving across the pavement of the main avenues of the Hungarian capital. All the side streets were blocked by German military units in full battle gear. Vehicular traffic was halted, pedestrians were forbidden to cross the streets, and soldiers were stationed at every corner. In an unprecedented show of force, all government buildings were cordoned off by heavily armed German forces. The entire operation was shrouded in mystery; no one had any idea about the meaning of this display of German might. Before

long, the official radio station broadcasted the bitter news—the government had passed into the hands of the fascist Arrow Cross Party, the anti-Semitic movement headed by Ferenc Szalasi whose program called for the extermination of every Jew in Hungary.

As the news stories had it, Premier Kallay had been asked to resign, and when he refused to do so, he was declared a traitor and placed under house arrest. His house was surrounded by German soldiers to prevent a possible counter-attack by his followers, which might bring in its wake a civil war. The Germans who backed the rightist takeover had planned the coup in every detail, ensuring its complete success.

The power grab by Szalasi, a man whose insane hatred of the Jews matched that of the Germans, raised consternation among the Jewish population. People were panic-stricken. The Polish refugees were no less afraid. The Aryan documents they possessed had become worthless, since every policeman was aware of the deception. Whenever anyone identified himself as a *lengyel* (Hungarian for Pole), the police would say, "You mean Polish Jew." Indeed, we were no better off than the Hungarian Jews.

At the moment, my main concern was little Sheindl. To relieve the overcrowded conditions in the old building where the children had been transferred after the bombing, many children, including Sheindl, were placed in the homes of members of the staff. Sheindl was boarding with a Jewish nurse, something which was likely to place her in grave jeopardy in the event of a raid.

Without losing a minute, I went to the home of the nurse who sheltered my daughter. I asked her to release Sheindl into my care so that I could take her to my relatively safe

Aryan home. At first she was quite reluctant, claiming that the child had been placed into her custody by the management of the Children's Home. However, when I argued that I had only the best interests of the child in mind, and that if things got better I would return her, and Heaven forbid, if the worst were to happen, she would be safer with me, she relented and let her go with me.

Since I had no food in my apartment, I was forced to go out to buy some bread. When I returned, I remembered that I had left a few sticks of butter in Rabbi Schick's refrigerator. I asked the landlady to watch Sheindl for a short time until I came back. I went straight to Rabbi Schick's apartment on Nagyatadi Street, picked up the butter and left.

As I was coming down the stairs and wanted to leave through the front door I heard the familiar cry of, "*Halt! Juden zuruck!* Stop! Jews, get back inside!" Here we go again, I thought.

The house was surrounded by heavily armed German soldiers, and guards were stationed in all the windows of the neighboring houses. I tried to show them my Aryan papers, but they pushed me back into the building. I ran up the stairs thinking feverishly of a way to escape. Impossible. Germans were guarding the house from all sides, keeping a sharp lookout from the windows and even from the rooftops.

Within minutes, all the tenants of the house got together to decide on ways of dealing with the emergency. Everyone realized that the Germans were up to no good. The meeting was chaired by Rabbi Schick, a bright and resourceful man. After a lengthy discussion, a decision was reached. The air raid shelter in our building was equipped with an emergency entrance to be used in the event the regular entrance was blocked by rubble. This entrance could be forced open with

a hatchet that had been installed for this purpose. The plan was to use this emergency door to gain entry to the shelter, from there to pass into the shelter of the adjacent building, which was a government office building, and from there into the street. It was hoped that the Germans would not surmise that the people leaving the government building were escaping Jews. The plan was unanimously accepted, notwithstanding the grave risk that a mass exodus of men, women and children might raise the suspicion of Germans. There was no other choice. We simply had to rely on a miracle to happen.

No sooner said than done. Rabbi Schick took the hatchet in hand and began to swing at the emergency door. It was obvious that he was no expert lumberjack; this probably was the first time in his life he held a hatchet in his hands. After his abortive try, someone else took over. Watching from the sidelines, I thought that this plan held too many risks. There was no doubt in my mind that the people would get caught. It would take no great genius to figure out that this was an escape attempt. Most of the people were women, and since there was a total lack of organization, everyone would be pushing and shoving, trying to be the first outside. The German guards would arrest everyone, and in addition to all the false charges, they would be charged with destroying government property by breaking the door of the shelter.

I decided to leave the group and find my own escape route. Looking for a place to hide, I came upon a window on the first floor that opened into one of the classrooms of the Jewish school. (The entire building belonged to the Jewish community; the Jewish school occupied the first floor, while the apartments of the teaching staff were located on the second and third floors.) Jumping through the window, I

found myself inside the classroom. I closed the window from the inside and felt quite secure since the classroom door had a big lock on it so that no one would suspect anyone was hiding inside. Here I'll spend the night, I thought, and tomorrow I'll map out a new plan.

I squeezed myself into one of the small class benches, and as I relaxed, my thoughts focused on my little Sheindl whom I had left in my apartment in the care of the non-Jewish landlady. All I could do now was wait patiently for daybreak.

The hours crept by at a snail's pace. The night seemed endless. Finally, it grew light. Outside, there was the deathlike silence of the sleeping city. The world seemed to be at a standstill. But not for long.

All of a sudden, I was startled by terrifying screams piercing the air. Looking out the window, the scene I witnessed made my blood run cold. Passing in the street in front of me was a steady stream of men, women and children escorted on both sides by scores of teenage boys beating their victims with clubs, bottles and rubber hoses. With my own eyes, I saw one of the young hoodlums crack a bottle on the head of a Jew. The savage beatings were accompanied by shouted obscenities and curses.

What I had always been afraid of had occurred. The bitter cup had been passed to the Jews of Budapest. Terror-stricken, I watched Jews being dragged out of their homes. I wondered, will they raid this building? If they do, they'll find a padlock outside my door. But what is to stop them from breaking the lock in their search for prey? I've got to find a place to hide before they get here.

Running from room to room trying to find some kind of bunker, I came upon a huge pile of heavy bags filled with old books and office files. This was perfect. I stacked the bags,

creating an empty space inside the pile for me to hide, and my bunker was ready. The Germans would never dream of searching inside this massive pile. I decided to wait out the day in this bunker; one never could tell when they might come back. In my briefcase, I had a few slices of bread which I always carried with me—just in case. I took only a few bites, not knowing how long I would remain trapped in this place.

The day went by quietly. The entire building was absolutely silent. There was not a sound from either the tenants or the Germans. I waited until nightfall to leave my bunker and make my way to the apartment of the Levy family where I had left all my possessions. At the same time, I wanted to put in a supply of food.

But it wasn't going to be easy. The entrance to the Levy apartment was within sight of the German soldier patrolling the roof of the adjacent building. If he saw me, he would shoot me without thinking twice. On the other hand, without bread I would not last very long either. I had to take the chance and pray for a miracle.

I opened the window gingerly and crawled outside toward the second floor. My heart was pounding. I hoped the German guard would not notice me. The bright moon was lighting up the porch, making me an easy target. I continued, taking one step after another, until I reached the door of the apartment. Luckily, it was unlocked. I opened it, but there was nobody at home. I did not turn on the light, and by the light of the moon, I hastily gathered up my belongings and put them into my suitcase. Then I inspected the pantry, but to my disappointment, it was empty. The Levys must have taken all their food when they were rounded up. It seemed that I risked my life for nothing. But *gam zu letovah*, I thought. This too is for the good.

When I left the apartment, my ear caught snatches of a conversation coming from Rabbi Schick's apartment. I decided to enter. There I'll surely get a bite to eat, I reasoned. Taken by surprise, Rabbi Schick jumped from his chair.

"What? You're here?" he blurted out. "Where have you been hiding?"

"Please don't ask questions," I replied. "All I'm asking is a little something to eat. I'm starved."

"Of course," answered the rabbi, and he served me an entire meal that truly revived me, while at the same time he filled my suitcase with food.

Curious about the people who tried to escape through the emergency door, I asked Rabbi Schick what had happened to them. He gave me a full account of the events.

When he was trying to break down the door, the people in the adjacent building, noticing a suspicious noise emerging from the shelter, alerted the Germans. Several high-ranking German officers appeared at once to investigate the source of the noise. They found the entire group standing in front of the partially broken entrance. They were all ordered to raise their hands and line up in front of the wall.

"Who broke this door?" the Germans demanded to know.

The people were petrified with fear. This was their first face-to-face encounter with the German monsters.

Rabbi Schick stepped forward. "It is I who broke through this door," he confessed, wanting to save the others.

Surprisingly, the Germans let him go and expressed their admiration for his noble character. All the others were ordered to remain in the shelter until morning when the entire group was taken to an unknown destination. Only Rabbi Schick and another man were spared, since they were

employees of the Jewish community. According to an agreement, all communal workers were exempt from deportation. It was then that I realized what a great miracle it was that I left the shelter at the right moment.

Before leaving, I asked Rabbi Schick not to tell anyone that I was in the building, since this could put me in grave jeopardy. I also requested that, in case things would change for the better, he should let me know by slipping a note under the door of the school. He gave me his word, and I returned to my hiding place underneath the sacks of old books.

Days went by, but no word from Rabbi Schick. I was forced to stay in my hideaway, continuing to look forward to the good news which never came.

In spite of my strict rationing system, the food Rabbi Schick had supplied gradually dwindled. All day long, I felt pangs of hunger. I could come to terms with the hunger if only I knew when it would end. Several more days passed, and still no news from Rabbi Schick. Obviously, the situation had not improved, and I had to stay where I was, cut off from the rest of the world, hungry and thirsty, with no end in sight.

Suddenly, one night I was awakened by the noise of sledgehammers banging against the wall behind me. What was that supposed to mean? After giving it some thought, I realized it was simply a burglary attempt by thieves who thought that in the offices of the Jewish community they would find a treasure trove of cash. Since the building was empty, they were trying their luck. Of course, if they would find me they would finish me off, or at best, they would hand me over to the Germans. Meanwhile, the burglars were proceeding with their work, while I prayed to Hashem to save me.

And then the miracle happened. Turning from side to

side, I inadvertently knocked against the wall of my bunker, causing the stack of heavy sacks to come tumbling down with a mighty crash that practically shook the entire building. I was scared to death. Would the explosive rumble disrupting the stillness of the night arouse the suspicion of the guards in the building next door? At any moment now, the Germans would show up and find me, and I had nowhere to hide; my bunker was a shambles. However, when a full hour went by and nothing happened, I calmed down somewhat. I realized that the collapse of my bunker had been a blessing in disguise. The loud noise had chased away the burglars, and now I was out of danger. As the saying goes, "Out of the strong came something sweet." (*Shoftim* 14:14)

After everything remained quiet, I went about rebuilding my bunker. Having gone without food for a long time, I simply did not have the strength to lift the heavy bags. It took a great deal of hard labor, but at long last the bunker was standing again. In the wake of the hunger and the constant fear, I began to hallucinate to the point that I imagined that I was the biblical Lot sitting in his cave at the time of the destruction of Sedom and Amorah. (*Bereishis* 19:30) Like Lot, I was obsessed with the feeling that the entire world had been destroyed and that not one Jew in Budapest had survived the dreadful killings I had witnessed.

Another day of waiting impatiently went by. Every so often, I would run to the door to see if the long-awaited message from Rabbi Schick had arrived. It was pointless. A sense of hopelessness overtook me, heightened by the grinding worry about the fate of Sheindl. I decided to venture out into the street, even though I had no idea of the prevailing situation or if my Aryan papers would be of any use. Staying here, locked up and close to starvation did not serve any

useful purpose either. But how would I get out? By orders of the police, the main door of the building had to remain locked at all times. Although I used to be quite friendly with the superintendent who lived in the building, as things stood I could not count on him helping me. Moreover, the superintendent knew I was really Jewish, since he had once seen me dressed in *chassidic* clothes on Shabbos, back when the Belzer Rebbe was still in Budapest. At that time, the community allowed the rebbe to use its spacious assembly hall in the school building to conduct his *tischen*. I concluded that it would not be wise to let the superintendent know I was in the building.

At long last, on Friday afternoon, I heard the rasping sound of a key turning in the lock, followed by the door being opened. I quickly barricaded myself in my bunker, awaiting further developments.

Seconds later, I heard someone call my name. How could anyone know I was here? Rabbi Schick had given me his word not to reveal my hideout to anyone.

I hesitated to answer, but when the mysterious visitor kept calling, I thought that perhaps he was carrying a message from Rabbi Schick. Emerging from my bunker, I was surprised to see my good friend Mr. Breuer, an employee of the Jewish community who used to live in this building.

He told me that the Germans had kept him behind bars for an entire week, and now that he had been released he was bringing me a message from Rabbi Schick who was still in prison himself. Rabbi Schick wanted to let me know that things were settling down, and the harassment and persecutions had abated somewhat. Breuer also told me that the superintendent had gone away on an errand and had left the door unlocked so that this was my chance to sneak out of the

building. I thanked Mr. Breuer for the good news, picked up my briefcase, and with the speed of light, I was in the street.

I took a deep breath. After a week of fear and starvation, I had renewed trust in Hashem that my fate would take a turn for the better.

BOOK FIVE

The Final Tribulations

CHAPTER 40

On to Romania

NOW THAT WE WERE FREE OF THE GERMAN OPPRESSION, thank Heaven, it was high time for me to find out how my dear little Sheindl had survived the difficult times. The last word I received about her was that she had been taken by a police inspector and placed in a Budapest municipal children's shelter. Before the liberation, it was impossible for me to get in touch with her since the administrator of the shelter suspected me of being a communist, as I mentioned earlier. After the Russian takeover, however, being a suspected communist was no longer such a terrible thing. And so I went to the children's shelter, accompanied by my friend Shmuel Porges who spoke Hungarian and would serve as my interpreter. At the shelter, I declared that I had come to take my little daughter with me. I also

mentioned the name of the police inspector who had placed her with them. The registrar carefully thumbed through the admissions book.

"You're quite right," he replied. "The girl is registered with us, but she isn't here right now. With the constant bombing attacks and the street fighting going on around us, we transferred the children to a safer place in the interior of Hungary. She is in Szombathely, near the Austrian border, about one hundred and twenty miles east of here."

I was bitterly disappointed. Just when I thought that my troubles were over, the bubble burst. My daughter was out of my reach in German-occupied territory, and there was nothing I could do about it. I placed my trust in Hashem that He would bring my daughter back to me safely. Without her, my life had no meaning; she was the sole remnant of my entire family.

As the weeks went by, there were increasingly numerous rumors about an impending Russian withdrawal. Meanwhile, I had another narrow escape when the house where we had found refuge was hit by a heavy bomb and only through a miracle did we all escape without a scratch. The situation was becoming intolerable with conditions in Hungary on a downhill slide, the threat of a Russian retreat, our food supply reaching bottom and even the most basic necessities becoming very scarce. This bomb was the last straw. We decided to leave Hungary and emigrate to Romania where it was said that life was almost back to normal. But getting there wasn't going to be easy; passenger trains were not running at all, and all private cars had been requisitioned for use in the war effort.

After looking into the matter, we found out that we could catch a freight train at a point about twenty miles from our

house, a distance we had to march on foot. We did not relish the prospect of marching through the bitter cold, but there was no other way. We packed our bags, loaded them on a sled we had managed to acquire, and off we went. We started out very early in the morning, before the Russians would have a chance to grab us and put us to work on one of their projects.

We took a rather circuitous route to avoid meeting any crude Russian soldiers who were in the habit of assaulting travellers and robbing them of all their possessions. Because of this we chose the narrow country roads in preference to the main highway, even though we lost precious time. Trudging through the snow for many hours, taking turns at pushing and pulling the sled, we made slow progress. More than once the sled overturned, forcing us to stop and reload all the bags. But we took all of this in stride, knowing that we were getting farther away from Budapest and closer to our destination.

Several miles beyond the city, we suddenly noticed a platoon of Russian soldiers heading our way. The soldiers were escorting several wagons loaded with food. Trembling with fear, we watched the commanding officer, riding on horseback, approach us and dismount, but all he did was hand us several loaves of bread. Although he did not introduce himself to us, we could tell by his facial features that he was Jewish. His generous gift was a shot in the arm for us. We thanked him very warmly, and with redoubled energy, we continued our trek.

Towards evening, we finally reached the station, where we met a number of people who were also waiting for the train. After a long delay, the freight train arrived. The boxcars were filled to the brim with nothing but scrap metal—rusty engines, airplane parts, various armaments—the "spoils of war" the Russians were carting off to their country. There was

no place to sit, but the people were not particular and squatted down on the junk.

Slowly, the train began to move, gradually picking up speed. The bone-chilling blasts of cold air went right through me, and my hands clutching icy metal parts remained stuck to the machinery. The frigid, howling wind made my teeth chatter. But who cares? As long as we were getting out of Hungary. We were on our way to Romania!

After what seemed like an interminable night, we reached the first Romanian city—Arad. It was still very early in the morning, well before sunrise, and the city was still sleeping. We asked for directions to the *shul*, and when we entered, we were greeted by an indescribably pleasing warmth that caressed our frozen limbs. The *bais midrash* had an aura of *kedushah*, recalling an era that had vanished. It was brightly lit, the black pot-bellied stove radiated heat, and we saw long tables ringed with Jews with beards and *peyos*, some reciting *Tehillim*, others *davening* or learning. A cup of piping hot tea and a piece of old-fashioned *lekach* cake revived me from the rigors of the frigid train ride.

It was Friday morning. To start off the new day, I went to the bathhouse to cleanse myself and immerse in the *mikveh*. There, I met scores of Jews immersing in honor of the *Shabbos*, while others were gathered, sitting in the steam and discussing the political issues of the day.

What a joy it was to be transported back to a world we thought no longer existed!

On Friday night, the *bais midrash* was alive with hundreds of people who came to *daven*, including many refugees from Hungary. At the end of the *davening*, the *gabbai* assigned us to be guests for the *Shabbos* meals at the homes of prominent members of the community, like Reb Wolf, the *shochet*.

The hospitality and friendship we were shown by the Jews of Arad was outstanding. A case in point was Reb Wolf, the *shochet*, who graciously welcomed any stranger, offering him a satisfying meal and a clean bed to rest his weary bones, often at the expense of his children who had to double up with each other. We enjoyed his hospitality during the entire time we stayed in Arad.

Life in Arad, with its authentic Jewish atmosphere, was delightful. However, much as we liked it, we could not go on living on the dole, eating "the bread of shame" indefinitely. Besides, being illegal immigrants, we were not out of harm's reach yet. Numerous Nazi war criminals, trying to save their skin, had fled to Romania, and the Russians were tracking them down. Anyone without legal identification papers was liable to be picked up as a suspected Nazi. How ironic that we now had to worry about being suspected of being Nazis!

As a matter of fact, it was not all that difficult to secure the proper documents, especially if you were Jewish. But papers could only be obtained in the capital city of Bucharest, and so we were forced to pack our bundles and travel there to make the arrangements.

It was a harrowing journey on an overcrowded train, with thousands of people packed like sardines in the aisles, on the steps and even on the roofs of the cars. We considered ourselves fortunate to find standing space on the small platform in back of the car, exposed to the icy weather. After a gruelling, forty-eight hours, we arrived safely in Bucharest.

Our first stop was at the house of the Kolorasher Rebbe. The Kolorasher Rebbe was a remarkable personality. A descendant of the famous Skver dynasty, he was the son-in-law of the Rebbe of Ostila, who, in turn, was the son-in-law of Rabbi Yissachar Dov Rokeach, the third Belzer Rebbe. True

to our expectations, the Rebbe offered us a warm welcome and took us into his home, where we had the opportunity to recover from the rigors of the arduous trip. At the time, the Rebbe was also providing food and shelter to a large group of *chassidic* young men, whom we joined in prayer and Torah study. Everyone contributed according to his ability to pay, and the Rebbe covered the deficit from his own pocket.

We were deeply impressed by the immense piety and self-denial of the Kolorasher Rebbe. This saintly man personally cared for the physical needs of all the refugees who had found shelter in his house. Like a father, he shared the anguish of these unfortunate men who had lost all that was dear to them and, miraculously, had themselves escaped the German hell. In his modest apartment, he housed and cared for more than fifty people. He encouraged them, soothed their wounded souls and restored their faith, while devoting every free minute to prayer and study. With equal dedication, his wife, the *rebbetzin*, stood in the kitchen all day, seeing to it that no one lacked food.

I spent many hours conversing with the Rebbe. He felt a close attachment to the *chassidus* of Belz and was eager to hear me tell incidents from the Belzer Rebbe's life, his Torah insights and customs.

Bucharest was a modern city where *chassidim* in their traditional garb were rarely, if ever, seen. Moreover, in the entire city of thousands of Jews there was not even one kosher restaurant. Thus, we were forced to spend our days in the Rebbe's house, studying and praying. In the tranquil atmosphere of Torah and in the nearness of the Rebbe, we found the solace we needed to overcome our anxieties and tensions, and gradually, we began to banish our troubles from our minds.

The Rebbe gently revived our spirits; his *tischen*, the *Shabbos* meals over which he presided, carried us into a higher world of *dveikus*, closeness to Hashem, making our troubles of the past seem like only a bad dream.

During our very first week in Bucharest, we obtained our residency permits from the office of the Chief of Police, so that throughout our six months' stay we were able to move about freely, without worry of being arrested.

After a few weeks, we began to make plans for the future. For a young *chassid*, Bucharest was not a suitable place to settle. Through the grapevine, we heard of a committee which was organizing the emigration of refugees to Palestine. Rumor had it that three ships, with a total capacity of six hundred passengers, would set sail for the coast of Palestine. Without hesitating, we made up our minds to join this group. But we soon discovered that there were thousands of other Jews trying to do the same and we would need a lot of pull to get on such a restricted passenger list.

Since the committee was headed by Polish Jews, I decided to go straight to them, rather than work my way through the lower echelons staffed by Hungarians, where my chances would be nil.

I submitted an application for twenty passengers to the chief of the committee. At the same time, I got in touch with Mr. Philip Freudiger, erstwhile president of the Budapest Jewish community, whom I had befriended during my stay in Budapest and who carried a great deal of influence with the management of the committee. My efforts bore fruit, and I was assured that our group would be on the list. We would be sailing before *Pesach*.

Although I was the one who had made the arrangements, I myself could not come along, since my little Sheindl was still

in Hungary. Nevertheless, I reassured myself that after I found her, we could sail together to Eretz Yisrael on a future voyage. And who could know? Perhaps this trip would also be delayed and we might still manage to join it.

CHAPTER 41

Where Is Sheindl?

WHILE STILL IN BUCHAREST, I LEARNED THAT Szombathely, the city to which Sheindl had been transferred, had been liberated by the Red Army after a long and bloody battle. The news raised my hopes of finding Sheindl, while at the same time it filled me with a cold dread about her possible fate in the battle zone. No, I must not think any dark and ominous thoughts, I told myself. With Hashem's help, everything will turn out all right.

When the news about the liberation of Szombathely arrived, my friend Shmuel Porges, who was a native of Szombathely, decided to return to his hometown to see if any of his family had somehow survived. Elated at this fortuitous turn of events, I implored him to find Sheindl and bring her back to Bucharest along with him.

After a long period of anxious waiting, a messenger brought me a note from Porges. Sheindl's name had indeed appeared on the list of children who had been transferred, but he had searched high and low and had come up empty-handed. All the children were present and accounted for, he wrote. All except Sheindl. They had no idea where she might be. It seemed as if she had vanished into thin air.

I was shocked, dismayed and mystified. It seemed strange that all the other children were unhurt and well and only Sheindl should be missing. No doubt, Porges had done all he could to find her; he certainly knew his way around in his own hometown. Still, how could she possibly be missing?

I decided to go to Budapest to sort out the problem. I dropped everything, including the preparation for my projected immigration to Eretz Yisrael, and, with total disregard for all the difficulties a trip to Budapest would entail, I set out for the railroad station on the night after *Purim*.

The only seat I managed to find was on the roof of the car, but I did not care. All I could think of was Sheindl, and I prayed that Hashem would help me find her in good health.

As the train chugged along, passing through towns and hamlets, I was overcome by an irresistible urge to sleep. It took a tremendous effort to resist the soporific feeling, otherwise I might have fallen off the roof. From time to time, I also had the honor of having my papers checked by Russian soldiers who did not neglect the rooftop passengers.

Three days later, the train pulled into the Budapest station on a Friday afternoon, shortly before *Shabbos*. I went straight to the home of my friend Lipa Piller Salzberg who had remained in Budapest. He and his family made me feel at home, and I spent the entire *Shabbos* with them.

Early on Sunday morning, I made my way to the institute

that had arranged the transfer of the children to Szombathely. At the front desk, I was met by a bored-looking official whom I asked about my daughter's whereabouts.

"Yes, indeed," he told me after flipping through a pile of papers. "Your daughter has been with us for a long time. But in view of the hostilities in and around Budapest, she was moved away from the war zone to Szombathely."

"But sir," I replied. "I've been looking for her there, and I can't find her."

"In that case, there's nothing I can do for you," he said, stifling a yawn. "You've got to be patient and wait until we get more information about her. You know, things are still very confused over there. My advice to you is this, go home and come back in about one month. Perhaps by that time we will have some concrete information for you."

I realized there was nothing else for me to do. Disillusioned and depressed, I left the office.

CHAPTER 42

Captured by the Russians

CLEARLY, THERE WAS NOTHING TO BE GAINED BY STAYING in Budapest. The administrator of the home would keep stalling forever, offering one lame excuse after another. Besides, *Pesach* was just around the corner, and in view of *kashrus* problems in Budapest, I would not be able to prepare for the *Yom Tov* properly. Consequently, I decided to return to Bucharest. I packed my bags, and together with several travelling companions, I jumped a freight train heading for Romania. The train rolled along all day and far into the night.

Towards midnight, sitting on the hard floor of the boxcar, shivering in the icy cold and worrying about Sheindl, I was overcome by fatigue. Unable to keep my eyes open, I fell into a deep sleep. When I awoke, I was surprised to find myself all

alone in the dark freight car. The train had come to a halt at a small depot, and all the passengers has gotten off. It appeared that the train had been standing for a long time.

Stepping outside, I saw by the sign that this was the town of Kurtitch, the last stop on the Hungarian side of the border, a station I had passed a number of times. Sometimes the train would pass through this station without stopping, continuing on to Arad in Romania, while at other times, it stopped so that the passengers heading for Romania could change trains. With this in mind, I went to look for another train which would take me across the border to Romania.

As I was standing on the platform surveying the scene, I suddenly heard the shrill whistle of a train about to depart. I felt lucky, because one often had to wait hours for a connecting train. Leaping eagerly across the tracks, I made my way to the Romania-bound train, but my joy was short-lived. A burly Russian guard stopped me.

"Hey, where do you think you're going?" he asked gruffly. "This is a military train."

"I'm just trying to catch a ride to Arad," I replied.

The Russian did not believe a word I was saying. "Okay, buddy, follow me," he said. "I'm taking you in."

I was in big trouble. Ordinarily, the Russians did not mind if civilians used their military trains. Why then had he arrested me? Evidently, he suspected me of some sinister activities. Things did not look good.

The soldier took me to an isolated boxcar parked on a siding, which served as an office. There I was interrogated by an officer. I showed him my papers and related my personal history, explaining that I was a Polish Jewish refugee in Hungary with Aryan papers, wanting to go to Romania. When I was finished going over all the details, he motioned

to the soldier that the interrogation was over.

I was sure he would let me go, but the soldier knew better. After searching my baggage, he led me to a freight car, shoved me inside and slammed the door shut.

It was pitch dark inside the freight car, but I could make out that I was in the company of seven tough-looking characters.

Before I had a chance to say a word, they lunged at me, one of them grabbing my lunch box, another the bottle of water I always carried with me. Like ravenous wolves, they devoured all my food; not a crumb was left.

"How can you do a thing like this?" I screamed. "Have you no decency left?"

They just laughed in my face. I realized that yelling would not get me anywhere. On the contrary, it would only antagonize them. Taking a different tack, I burst out laughing, treating the entire incident like a big joke. Pretending to be in a jovial mood, I tried to get on good terms with them, and before long, we were getting along fabulously. It turned out that they were Serbians, and while waiting for a train they had been arrested, just as I had been. They had been locked up in this boxcar for a full day and had no idea of where they were being taken.

While we were talking, I heard keys rattling. The Russian officer entered, carrying a flashlight. Coming straight at me with a big smile on his face, he asked me to open my suitcase. He poked around in it with his coarse hands, taking anything that struck his fancy. When he came upon my *tefillin*, he gaped at them in wide-eyed amazement. This was the first time he had ever seen such strange-looking things, and he assumed they were secret radio transmitters. But when I explained to him that they were religious articles I used for

praying, he seemed to be convinced and let me keep them. Satisfied with the loot he had taken, he turned around to leave.

"What are you people going to do with me?" I asked him, gathering up all my courage.

"Don't you worry," he replied with a scornful laugh. "You wanted to go to Arad. Well, that's where this train is taking you. After you help unload it, you will be free to go."

I did not trust him, but I had no choice. Still, I had to be fully on guard, for if I found out he was lying, I would have to think of a way to escape. I certainly had no desire to go to Siberia.

Early the next morning, the train began to move, and I began counting the minutes it would take to reach Arad. Smiling broadly, the same officer came in again.

"Soon you'll be in Arad," he reassured me. "Then you'll be on your own."

As he was talking to me, he frisked me with a greedy glint in his eyes. I had anticipated something like this, and I had hidden my cash and several expensive watches in the lining of my coat. But he made a thorough search and found the hidden treasures. Without compunction he helped himself and put everything into his pocket.

"Why did you hide these things so carefully?" he asked with feigned innocence. "Do you take us Russians for thieves?"

"Heaven forbid," I answered defensively. "I didn't suspect you people. I was worried about these fellows here in the car with me."

"Don't be concerned," the officer replied. "You'll get back whatever has been confiscated."

As if to underscore his words, he pulled out a pad on which he listed all the articles and the amount of cash he had

taken. When he left, his face was beaming. He had made a good haul. Still, I wasn't concerned then about my losses. All I could think was how to extricate myself from this predicament.

After a few hours, the train stopped. This had to be Arad. I could hardly wait to be summoned to unload the train and be on my way, but hour after hour went by with nothing happening. At last, the train set into motion again, heading for a destination the very thought of which made me shudder. The Russian officer had been feeding me nothing but empty illusions. It was time to prepare a getaway, and I decided to include the seven Serbs in my plans.

Although our communication was fragmentary at best, we still managed to make ourselves understood. Polish and Serbian, both being Slavic languages, have much in common. Moreover, one of the Serbians knew a little Hungarian, and I picked up a bit of Hungarian during my stay in Hungary. We also used quite a bit of sign language.

Since the Serbians had no experience at breaking loose, it was left to me to come up with a plan. I suggested that we look for an opportunity to make our break at nightfall, but just as we were beginning to get ready, a ferocious-looking Russian officer opened the door.

"Out, out!" he shouted. "Everybody outside!"

Screaming and cursing, he pummeled everyone in sight as he directed us to another boxcar and herded us inside.

We entered into a world of horror. The car was packed wall to wall with all kinds of people, and it was difficult to breathe. Everyone was sitting on the floor in total darkness. I managed to secure a space near the door, so that I could get some air through the cracks. The Russians did not offer us a crumb of food or a drop of water.

No doubt about it, we were headed for Siberia. Not in my worst nightmares had I dreamed of getting into this kind of trouble. However, if this was what Hashem had decreed I had to accept it.

CHAPTER 43

Prison on Wheels

THE HOURS OF THE NIGHT SEEMED TO STAND STILL. I tried to get some sleep, but there was no room to stretch my legs. Slowly, dawn broke, and the first rays of sunlight penetrated our dark prison on wheels. Studying the features of my fellow prisoners, I could not detect one Jewish face.

At eight o'clock in the morning, a group of soldiers brought breakfast. It consisted of one loaf of bread for each four people. The bread was a black, clay-like mass, but it was like manna from heaven to the starving prisoners. Each person also received a cup of black coffee and some water. Since I had no water for *netillas yadayim,* I traded a slice of my bread for some water. Then I ate the rest of my "bread of affliction" with gusto, and it recharged my energies.

The journey continued. For lunch, we received some mud-colored liquid, which they called soup. Of course, I did not touch it. Instead, I traded it for water, since I needed more water for *netillas yadayim*. Day after day, the same procedure was repeated, as the train rolled on to an unknown destination.

As I befriended the fellow with whom I made my food-for-water barter deals, I asked him to tell me something about the other prisoners in our boxcar.

"These fellows," he said, pointing out several to me, "used to hold high-ranking positions in the Hungarian government."

Suddenly, it dawned on me in whose company I had the dubious honor of travelling. These were genuine Nyilashes, the Nazi sympathizers who had overthrown the Hungarian democratic government and collaborated with the Germans in the murder of Hungarian Jewry. It was an ironic twist of fate that I, the escapee of Hitler's hell, now had to suffer under the Russians along with a bunch of Nazis.

The ride in the boxcar with eighty people packed together like sardines, most of whom had been in prison camps where they had become infested with lice, was enough to drive a person mad. As if this were not enough, the sanitary conditions were impossible, the stench unbearable. I was afraid of catching some horrible disease on this never-ending journey.

During the interminable train ride, I had time to reflect on the tragedy of my life here on earth. All my troubles since the outbreak of the war passed in review before my mind's eye—the first years under the Germans, the time I spent in Hungary, the prisons, the ghettos, the concentration camps—and yet, this latest misfortune seemed to me the worst of all.

The more I thought about it the greater was my chagrin. The war was over. All Jews, freed of oppression, were resuming a normal and happy life, while I was stuck up to my neck in mud, unable to extricate myself. I was now part of a group of Nazi war criminals, without any papers to prove my true identity and my innocence. Would I ever again be able to build a home permeated with the spirit of Torah as I had in years past?

I kept thinking. The Nazi persecutions were shared by all Jews without exception, a death sentence for every Jew. And as the saying goes, *tzaras rabbim chatzi nechamah*, there is some solace in a shared misfortune. But this present trouble was my own private agony, and there was no way to escape. I was being transported deep into the interior of a hermetically sealed country.

Worst of all, what was going to happen to my dearest Sheindl? How many perils I had endured for her sake! And now that with the help of Hashem we had survived, what purpose was there in life if all it meant was me rotting in a Russian prison and her growing up as a gentile? Was that all I had gotten out of my labors and travails? Oh, my Lord, I cried out silently, how can I bear such a heavy burden?

These thoughts kept grinding against each other in my mind, and I prayed to Hashem that He save me for the sake of Sheindl so that I might raise her as a Jew, faithful to her people and the Torah, and that she should not be lost, Heaven forbid, to the gentiles.

The train kept rolling on and on. The endless ride provided me with proof of the saying of *Chazal* that "even when facing the gates of Hell, the wicked do not repent." The fascist Nazis on this train, knowing full well that they were headed for hell on earth, a place from which they would never

return, did not give up their ingrained bottomless hatred of the Jewish people. When they noticed that I was Jewish—since I made it a point to put on *tefillin* each day—they began to harass me by coming from behind and hitting me over the head. One time, I caught the culprit in the act. I immediately jumped up and let him have it, while unleashing a stream of choice Hungarian curses. This had the desired effect, and they stopped annoying me.

I resisted the feeling of desperation by trying to keep track of the days of the week so that I would know when it was *Shabbos*. I did not know if I would find other Jews in the place to which they were taking me. When was this interminable journey going to end?

After eight days, the door was finally opened.

"Everybody, get off!" the command rang out.

Outside there was absolute emptiness, nothing but endless sky over the vast treeless steppe. We were greeted by a company of soldiers and ordered to line up in rows of four abreast. We marched and marched without knowing whether we were in Russia or perhaps in another country. After an hour, we saw a settlement, with people and cars moving about. We had reached our destination.

Before us lay an immense area fenced in by barbed wire as far as the eye could see. The barbed wire was being installed by German prisoners-of-war still wearing their military uniforms. I was impressed by the tall guard towers all around the camp, built on the model of the German concentration camps in which the Germans had mercilessly slaughtered our brothers and sisters.

Very well, I thought, in this camp the Germans will get a dose of their own medicine, measure for measure, an eye for an eye. I am witnessing divine justice being meted out, but

how did *I* get involved in this? Am I not myself a victim of these Germans?

My torment was beyond words as I beheld the place where I was going to waste away together with my oppressors, the very people who had slaughtered and burned our dear ones by the millions.

But despite all this I tried not to lose heart, remembering the words of our Sages, "Even if the sword's cutting edge is resting on your throat, do not give up hope." Yes, even now, with the sword hanging over my head, I hoped with all my heart that Hashem would send me His salvation.

CHAPTER 44

Yes, I Am a Jew

WE FINALLY ARRIVED AT THE MAIN GATE OF THE CAMP. Looking around, I saw among the prisoners hundreds of soldiers and Nyilashes who had come in the other boxcars on the same train. After a long wait, a delegation of high-ranking officers appeared. One of the officers, an impressive-looking man about sixty years old, stood out among the others. By his bearing and uniform, I could tell he was the camp commandant.

"*Yest to zhidy?*" he announced in sonorous Russian. "Are there any Jews here?"

I did not hesitate for a moment; things couldn't get any worse. I stepped forward.

"*Da, ya zhid!*" I said in a loud and clear voice. "Yes, I am a Jew."

He began to interrogate me, asking me about my identity and the reason I was among these criminals. I told him my entire story in detail. I spoke in Polish, but since the Polish and Russian languages have a common Slavic root, we could understand each other. When I took the liberty of telling him about the officer who had confiscated all my money and possessions, he began to smile.

"Who is that officer?" he asked.

I looked around, but I did not see him. He was probably hiding somewhere.

The commander told me to remain in my place. Then he began pacing back and forth alongside the column of men, examining the new arrivals. I did not know why I was told to stand aside, but I hoped it would end well.

A short while later, two more men stepped forward, claiming to be Jews. They did not know Yiddish and spoke only Hungarian. The commandant looked them over with a skeptical eye.

"Why didn't you respond right away?" he asked.

They hemmed and hawed, offering excuses that did not ring true, and the officer sent them back to their places in the column. He then announced that anyone able to prove Romanian citizenship should step forward. A large number of men presented themselves, but only seven of them could substantiate their claim. The others were told to go back to their places.

The seven Romanians and I were ordered to wait outside the camp while the entire transport was led inside. The commandant then ordered an officer to take us to the police station in the nearby town where we would be given proper identification papers with which to travel home. Seeing the camp behind me made me the happiest man in the world. I

was beside myself with joy at the overt miracle that had happened to me. The unseen Hand of Hashem was clearly discernible.

At the police station, the officer told us to wait outside while he entered. While we were standing there I seized the opportunity to ask the passersby the name of the town. I learned that we were in Pagshan, a Romanian town near the Russian border.

After a long while, the officer came back and ordered us to follow him. I immediately noticed that we were retracing out steps, and soon we saw the barbed wire enclosure of the camp in the distance. Evidently, the police inspector did not want to grant us our freedom, and now we were being taken back to the camp. I regretted that I did not run away while the officer was inside. Why did I need to wait for an official document? Couldn't I have gotten along without one, as I had done so often before? Well, what was done was done. It was too late now.

At the main gate, we were told to wait while the officer discussed our cases with the commandant. I was holding my breath. What would be the outcome?

When the discussion ended, the officer took us back to town, where we had to wait in front of a house while he went inside. As we relaxed by sitting on the sidewalk, the people from the neighboring houses, who must have found out about our misfortune, brought out platters filled with delicacies and bread. My companions hungrily wolfed down the good food, but I was too upset to eat anything. I saw myself caught in the middle; the camp commandant wanted to let us go free, but the police chief refused to release us.

Towards evening, the officer brought us to an empty house.

"This is where you'll sleep tonight," he said, and then he was gone.

Early in the morning, the officer who had taken my money and the valuables came over and embraced me like a long lost friend.

"Follow me," he commanded.

"Say," I asked him as we marched along. "What about my watches and the money you took from me?"

"Sure, you'll get everything back," he replied. "But not now. I'll give it to you when I take you to the railroad station."

I did not care whether he was or wasn't going to return the things. All I wanted to hear was that I was going to be put on a train as a free man.

The officer took us to a Romanian military establishment, where we were told to wait outside. Although the Russians handed us over to the Romanian authorities, my status was still unclear. The entire day went by, and aside from the meals we were served, nothing happened.

At long last, an officer told us to wait in the hall until we would be called. When my turn came, I was questioned by several officers to whom I recited my whole story. Afterwards, I was given a travel document issued with my Jewish name, which entitled me to travel free of charge to my destination—Bucharest.

Everyone received two loaves of bread and a sausage to eat on the way, as well as some pocket money. We were taken to the station by two soldiers, but we found out that the train had already left and we would have to wait until the following day for the next train. The soldiers arranged sleeping quarters for us and obtained straw and blankets, and we had a good night's sleep.

The next morning—it was a Friday—I got up early. In view

of the irregular train schedules, I was afraid that because of *Shabbos,* I might have to interrupt my journey midway. I decided, therefore, to stay in town and postpone my trip until Sunday.

Returning to town, I found a *shul,* where I *davened Shacharis* together with the rabbi of the community. Afterwards, I went over to him and asked if he could arrange a place for me to stay for *Shabbos.*

"I don't know," he replied, giving me short shrift. "There is no room in my house."

I asked a few of the other people, promising to leave on Sunday morning, but everyone turned me down. Actually, I was not surprised at their rejection, for I looked like an out-and-out vagabond. My beard stubble gave me the appearance of a convict. I was wearing the shabby coat I had received from the Russian soldier in Budapest in exchange for my new coat. To top it off, I looked exhausted from the long journey and all the hardships I had endured. In addition, I was not very clean. All in all, I looked like quite a suspicious character. Can a person be blamed for not wanting to take a criminal into his house?

After a while, one person invited me to come along with him. As we were walking, I told him all that had happened and how I had arrived in this town. He was not a local resident but had come on business. He took me to the hotel where he offered me the second bed in his room.

"You are welcome to sleep in this bed," he said. "But the food will present a problem. You see, the *kashrus* here is not very reliable."

To me this presented no difficulty, as long as I had some bread. My host graciously lent me some money to buy bread. I celebrated the *Shabbos* joyfully over dry bread, singing songs

of praise and thanksgiving to Hashem for my miraculous rescue.

That Friday night, I witnessed a bizarre incident in the *shul*. While the *davening* was still in progress, the *shamash* walked over to the burning stove and shoveled out the ashes into a pan, which he then carried outside. Minutes later, a tall, broad-shouldered member rushed over to the charity box, dropped some coins into it and left in a great hurry. Of course, all these actions are strictly forbidden on *Shabbos*. Both these incidents illustrate how ignorant of the law the Jews of Pagshan were. Furthermore, the rabbi did not see any need to react to either of these transgressions.

On Sunday, I said good-bye to my gracious host, asking him for his address. He gave me his business card; his last name was Dann and he was from Klausenburg. I boarded the train, and after a full day of travelling, I arrived safely in Bucharest.

Upon my arrival, I immediately proceeded to the Kolorasher Rebbe's house where all my friends gave me a very big *baruch haba*. For the last two weeks, after I had disappeared without leaving a trace, they had been wondering what had become of me. The *Yom Tov* of *Pesach* was approaching, and preparations for twenty guests were in full swing. But their worries about me lay like a pall over everyone.

At first, I made light of it.

"Oh, it was nothing," I said with a smile. "Nothing at all. Don't worry."

But when they insisted, I told them all my experiences, leaving out nothing.

The *Yom Tov* itself turned out to be a truly inspiring experience, but my personal joy exceeded all bounds. On this

Pesach, I felt tangibly the meaning of the words "from darkness to bright light." I offered my heartfelt thanks to Hashem for saving me from all the troubles and distress that had befallen me.

CHAPTER 45

Sheindl Is Still Alive

MY FRIEND SHMUEL PORGES HAD RETURNED TO SPEND *Pesach* in Bucharest and was now preparing to travel to Budapest once again. Before he left, I asked him to inquire about Sheindl at the children's home. A few days later, I received a letter from him filling me in on the results of his efforts.

He wrote that, happily, he had received word that they now had detailed information regarding her whereabouts. The administrator of the home had told him the fascinating story of her disappearance and how she was subsequently found.

When the children were travelling to Szombathely in the aftermath of the bombings in Budapest, their train was attacked by fighter planes who probably thought the train

was carrying troops and war materiel to the front. The children were taken off the train and led to an air raid shelter, with the intention to resume the voyage after the all-clear was sounded.

It just so happened that Sheindl wandered away while the children were being taken off the train, and in the turmoil and confusion, the monitors did not notice that she was missing. A Hungarian woman saw the lone little girl wandering about the station and assumed she was lost. Since the bombings made it dangerous for anyone to be outside, the Hungarian woman took the little girl into her house and kept her for the duration of the war. As luck would have it, just the day before Porges appeared at the home, the Hungarian woman brought the child back, claiming that she could no longer take care of her because of the food shortage. The woman told them that she had found the abandoned little girl at the station and that she knew her name and the address of the home because it was written on the tag sewn onto her dress.

On the very same day that the woman brought in the child, the administrator reported, the Communist Party had arranged for the children of the home to go on a vacation to Nyiregyhaza. This was because the children had suffered a great deal during recent months and were seriously undernourished. A stay in the country would do much to get them back in shape. Sheindl had joined the other children and was now in Nyiregyhaza.

Sheindl was alive and well! I was overjoyed with the good news, but I was particularly moved by the gentile woman's having brought Sheindl back. Had she so chosen, she could have kept the child forever and no one would have been the wiser. In a wondrous way, Hashem had helped me discover

where she was. I hoped it would not be long until I would be reunited with her.

Without losing a minute, I wrote to my old friend Meilech Wieder, who lived in Nyiregyhaza, and asked him to locate Sheindl and take her into his house. In due time, we would find a way to bring her to Bucharest.

After several days, his answer arrived. He had searched high and low in Jewish and gentile orphanages and children's shelters, but he had not found any trace of Sheindl. He had tried everything but without success.

I was devastated and baffled. Her name appeared on the children's list, and the entire children's transport arrived safely—all except Sheindl! I was sure Meilech had done his very best; he knew the town, and he knew his way around. What could have gone wrong? Would I ever see my little Sheindl again? Still, I refused to give up hope that everything would turn out all right.

I decided to travel to Nyiregyhaza myself and try to track her down. I could not imagine that the officials of the home would want to hide her from me.

The problem was how to get to Nyiregyhaza. Bitter experience had taught me that it was not going to be easy. After weighing the various options, I came up with a good idea. I had San Salvador citizenship papers in my possession, and I decided to use them for this trip. At the station, I walked up to the window reserved for Russian officers and soldiers, so that I did not have to stand on line. I showed my papers to the agent, who examined them and found them in order. He then issued a travel permit and assigned to me a seat on the express train to Arad which was about to depart.

After a comfortable overnight trip, I arrived in Arad. Now I still had to sneak across the Hungarian border, which was

heavily guarded. I managed to smuggle myself onto a freight train which was going straight to Nyiregyhaza. I arrived at three o'clock in the morning. Several friends, whom I had notified of my plans ahead of time, were waiting for me at the station.

In the morning, I started out by asking a Jewish soldier to help me find my daughter. He would be helpful in gaining access to the various offices without being shunted aside by low-ranking bureaucrats, and, besides, he spoke Hungarian, which would be extremely helpful in my situation.

We set out for the Bureau of Social Services located in City Hall. There I could expect to find all the details concerning out-of-town children who were guests in the city. The soldier, ignoring the long line of people waiting in the hall, walked straight into the office, and no one dared raise any objection. I remained outside, anticipating his report with bated breath.

After a short while, he emerged from the office with a big smile on his face. Breathlessly, he told me the news.

"When I mentioned the child's name Sophia Garetzka," he said, "the official replied that the name rang a bell. After perusing the list, she said that the girl was at the hospital."

When he finished speaking, I broke into tears—tears of sheer happiness. Could it be true, would I really see her again? In the past, so many supposedly reliable reports had ended in disappointment. Without wasting time, we rushed to the hospital and went straight to the head nurse.

"Do you have a patient by the name of Sophia Garetzka?" I asked.

"Yes, we certainly do," she replied. "But tell me, please, why do you want to know?"

"I am her father," I stated simply.

The nurse was positively flabbergasted. This was not surprising, since Sheindl was registered as a Christian and the man standing in front of her, claiming to be the girl's father, was wearing a beard and *peyos*, obviously a Jew!

Without saying a word, she took us to the courtyard where she pointed to a little girl who was playing with the other children.

I stood there, frozen in place, torn by inner doubt. Conflicting thoughts raced through my mind. Was the nurse trying to mislead me? Was she telling the truth? Was this really Sheindl? I didn't recognize her at all! She looked emaciated and hollow-eyed, reduced to mere skin and bones, and she was dressed like a *shiksa*. Was this really my child? There had to be a mistake. This child couldn't be my daughter.

The next moment, I felt an overwhelming surge of emotion. The little girl turned around and took one look at me. Instantly, she recognized me! She jumped up, ran toward me and flung her little arms around my neck, smothering me with a thousand kisses. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Opuka! Opuka! Opuka!" she cried over and over. "Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!"

At last, I could allow myself to believe that it was no dream. I had found my sweet, long-lost Sheindl!

Just to satisfy my curiosity, I checked the scars on her hand and neck where she had surgery performed. No doubt about it! Yes, she was Sheindl all right. And to think that she had recognized me! After all, she was no more than five years old and hadn't seen me with a beard and *peyos* since she was a little baby.

Standing there with my little girl in the safety of the sunlit, peaceful courtyard, with the sound of children playing in the

background and the wind rustling in the trees, I realized that for us the war was finally over. We could never forget the past, but we could finally take a deep breath and look towards the future.

After I calmed down somewhat, I told the nurse that I wanted to take my daughter home. A special release was needed, since the child was still suffering from whooping cough. I signed the necessary papers, took Sheindl in my arms and headed back to town. All she possessed was the hospital gown she was wearing.

Meanwhile, I realized to what extent the people at the children's home had poisoned her pure soul with hatred against Jews. On our way back into town, she suddenly turned to me.

"*Nem szeretem a zsidokat, csak Opukat,*" she said in Hungarian. "I don't like any Jews, only Daddy."

It was a double miracle that I had her with me again. With an anti-Semitic upbringing like this, she probably would have grown up a rabid Jew hater.

CHAPTER 46

Father of Orphans

MY PRIMARY CONCERN WAS TAKING CARE OF SHEINDL, obtaining nourishing food for her and getting her back into shape. Thank Heaven, she had a healthy appetite, and gradually, the sickly little child turned into a wholesome and rosy-cheeked girl.

As a result of the war, everything was in short supply, yet somehow I managed to secure new clothes for her. The biggest problem was procuring shoes; it was simply impossible to obtain shoes that fit. I was forced to order a pair of shoes from a shoemaker who promised to deliver them within a few days. In the meantime, she had to walk around barefoot.

One day, as she was walking in the street, she cut her foot on a piece of glass. At first, I hardly noticed it, but after a few

days, the wound became infected. Moreover, the whooping cough did not seem to improve. I decided to go back to Bucharest, where it would be easier for me to care for her.

The arduous journey to Bucharest lasted two interminable days. If it wasn't one thing, it was another. Sitting in the overcrowded train, I had to pacify Sheindl continuously; she was suffering from whooping cough, her foot injury was hurting badly, and in addition to that, she also developed stomach cramps.

When we finally reached Bucharest, I noticed that, *baruch Hashem*, the whooping cough had disappeared. It was past midnight, and I went straight to the Kolorasher Rebbe's house. First thing in the morning, I took Sheindl to see a doctor. The doctor lanced the abscess in her foot and prescribed medication for her stomach disorder. Within a few days, she was fully recovered.

Now my sights were set on our projected immigration to Eretz Yisrael. As it turned out, however, all the promises I had been given were just so much hot air. I waited and waited, but nothing materialized. Our group decided to leave Bucharest and settle elsewhere. How much longer could we accept the support of the Kolorasher Rebbe, who barely had enough to make ends meet for his own family?

After some deliberation, we moved to Temishvar, a vibrant Jewish community, where we received a warm welcome. Especially helpful was the local *shochet*, whose modest home was a haven for the homeless. After a while, most of us settled in private apartments, and I was very active in helping my friends find suitable matches and establish families.

I devoted myself to the task of taking care of orphans who had lost their parents in the Holocaust and had no one to care for them. Thanks to the generous contributions of Jews who

were themselves Holocaust survivors, I was able to help hundreds of such unfortunate orphans, to the point that I was given the sobriquet of "father of orphans."

In my heart, I continued to hope that some day I might find that at least one more member of my family had survived the Holocaust. Scores of people who had somehow escaped the gas chambers—the majority being Hungarian Jews, with only a small sprinkling of Polish Jews—arrived daily in Temishvar, and I asked each returnee for news about my family. But it was all in vain. There was not one survivor; they had all gone to Heaven in a cloud of smoke.

As time went by and life returned to normal, I began to think about establishing a business. The Hungarian economy was improving, an abundance of food appeared on the grocery shelves, and commerce and industry showed signs of revival. Opportunity beckoned, and so we moved away from Temishvar, Romania, to settle in Szombathely, Hungary, near the Austrian border.

Although business was good and I was earning a good income, I did not abandon my plans of leaving the blood-soaked soil of Europe behind and settling in Eretz Yisrael. However, since all attempts to emigrate by way of Romania had failed, a different route had to be found. From friends, I heard that there was a way to reach Eretz Yisrael via Germany, under the auspices of the Brichah movement.

The Brichah plan was to gather tens of thousands of Holocaust survivors in German military camps as a means of putting pressure on the British to open the gates of Eretz Yisrael to these shattered remnants of the Jewish people. Thousands of people converged on these camps, where they were supported by the UNRRA, an organization funded by the American government.

We spent the *Yamim Noraim* in Szombathely, and a few weeks after *Sukkos*, we set out for Germany. Unfortunately, en route, all my suitcases, which contained my entire fortune, were lost. I remained with only the shirt on my back. Well, *gam zu letovah*.

Our first stop was Munich, the central terminus for all transports, from where the refugees were distributed to different camps. After a few days in Munich, we were assigned to the Neu Freimann Camp on the outskirts of Munich.

This camp housed about two thousand people, many of them Orthodox Jews. I was elected to the board of directors of the camp and placed in charge of religious affairs. I requested from the American UNRRA officer, an American Jew by the name of Chaim Wachtel, that he appoint a rabbi to serve the spiritual needs of the camp residents. He suggested that I take the post, but I declined. Instead, I proposed Rabbi Mendel Rubin, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Hollander and Rabbi Michael Porges. The UNRRA appointed these rabbis and set aside a building to serve as a *bais midrash*. We also installed a *mikveh* and founded a *Talmud Torah*. And so, Torah was once again being studied from the early pre-dawn hours until late at night.

CHAPTER 47

A Home in Antwerp

AT FIRST, LIFE IN THE CAMP IN GERMANY WAS QUITE tolerable, but as time wore on and immigration to Eretz Yisrael seemed beyond our reach, we began to look for alternative ways of leaving the camp.

We had three options. First, we could go to France, which had opened its doors to hundreds of thousands of refugees; many thousands of Jews had already settled in Paris, including famous Torah personalities, Rebbes and *chassidim*. Second, we could go to Morocco, to the home of a wealthy magnate by the name of Hollander who lived in Tangier. He proposed that our group of thirty move to Tangier, where he would take it upon himself to provide suitable employment for all of us. Third, we could go to Antwerp, Belgium, a city which before the war had had a population of fifty thousand

Jews, most of whom were deported to extermination camps; at the end of the war, it had again become a dynamic center of *chassidic* life.

After carefully considering all the pros and cons, the third option seemed the most attractive. But since we were all Belzer *chassidim,* we would not lift a finger without consulting the Belzer Rebbe. In a letter to the Rebbe, who lived in Eretz Yisrael, we set forth the various choices and asked his advice. A short while later, the Rebbe's clear and unambiguous reply arrived. "Belgium is the best place for you to settle," he wrote. Any lingering doubts were now eliminated, and our entire group prepared to move to Belgium.

We got in touch with the leaders of the Shomrei Hadas community and told them of our intentions. They were very encouraging and helpful in arranging our entry into Belgium, so that within a short time our group, comprising more than two hundred persons, arrived in Antwerp. Included in our group was Rabbi Yosef Grunwald of Papa-Szombathely and fifty of his students. We immediately set out to establish a *yeshivah* and a school for girls along traditional Belzer guidelines, and I am happy to say that these institutions are still in existence.

With the passage of time, the refugees adjusted to the environment of Antwerp, some of them establishing themselves in various businesses, others entering the diamond trade, either as brokers or cutters. I turned to the diamond business, learning the lucrative trade of cutting diamonds, which was the occupation of most *chassidic* Jews in Antwerp.

Before the war, Antwerp had boasted the largest Orthodox Jewish *kehillah* in Belgium, and with the end of the war, a considerable number of emigres from Hungary and Romania, as well as a smaller group from Galicia in Poland, joined

the community. Many of the new arrivals were *chassidim*, who brought about marked changes in many aspects of Jewish life. Most of the *chassidic* Jews entered the diamond business, the main industry of the city. Still, they clung tenaciously to their traditional way of dress, refusing to adapt to prevailing styles. In no way did this affect or diminish their income, however. Quite the contrary, the *zchus* of their perseverance seemed to contribute to their success, as many of them became world-renowned captains of industry. Indeed, at the present time, the Jewish population numbers twelve thousand, including a growing number of *chassidim*. The community takes pride in its *yeshivos* and girls' schools as well as its numerous *chassidishe shtieblach*. And the relatively small community, greatly enriched by a multiplicity of Holocaust survivors, has gained fame across the world for its unparalleled generosity.

In 1948, having settled into the Antwerp community, we were all shocked to hear that the frail *yishuv* in Eretz Yisrael was being attacked by the combined armies of the Arab nations and was threatened with extinction. Jews of the entire world were deeply concerned about the fate of their brethren in the Holy Land. Belzer *chassidim* were particularly worried about the Belzer Rebbe, who after years of pain and suffering under the Germans had finally reached the shores of Eretz Yisrael.

Leaders of the Belzer movement decided to remove the Rebbe temporarily from the danger zone in Eretz Yisrael until the storm would blow over. It was planned to bring the Rebbe to Antwerp, a city where many of his *chassidim* had settled after the war. Many obstacles stood in the way, not the least of which was finding transportation since all the airlines had suspended service to Eretz Yisrael; only Pan African Airlines still flew to Eretz Yisrael.

At the conclusion of the crucial meeting, which was held in Antwerp, I was chosen as the emissary to travel to Eretz Yisrael and bring the Rebbe to Antwerp. At the time, I had remarried and was already blessed with more children, and my family strongly opposed my mission. When they realized that it was to the Rebbe's benefit, however, they reluctantly gave their consent.

Since there was no Israeli consulate in Belgium, I travelled to Paris in order to obtain a visa for the Rebbe. There, I got in touch with Dr. Yaakov Griffel, an outstanding Orthodox rescue worker who saved thousands of Jews during the holocaust and who had access to government circles. Through his intervention I secured the visa. Then I bought a ticket on Pan African Airlines, and I was on my way. With Hashem's help, the rickety old plane arrived that evening, landing at Haifa airport, since Lod was still under British control.

From the airport, I went straight to Tel Aviv through blacked-out streets, arriving at the Rebbe's residence late at night. Speaking to the Rebbe in his private room, I set forth the request of the Antwerp *chassidim* that he consider moving temporarily to Antwerp until the danger passed.

The Rebbe, in keeping with his principle of not answering on the spot but only after a period of reflection, instructed me to come back for his answer on the following day. When I returned the next day, the Rebbe told me that he decided not to leave Eretz Yisrael. He added that he intended to establish a *chassidishe yeshivah* in Eretz Yisrael, a project which would require vast sums of money. At the same time, he emphasized that he did not plan a fund-raising trip to the United States, but that he would enlist the aid of world Jewry by writing letters to all Jewish communities. The Rebbe

intended to remain in Eretz Yisrael and direct his undivided attention towards the realization of these goals. *Baruch Hashem*, the Rebbe survived this danger as well, and the *yeshivah* he established is today one of the foremost *chassidishe yeshivos* in the world.

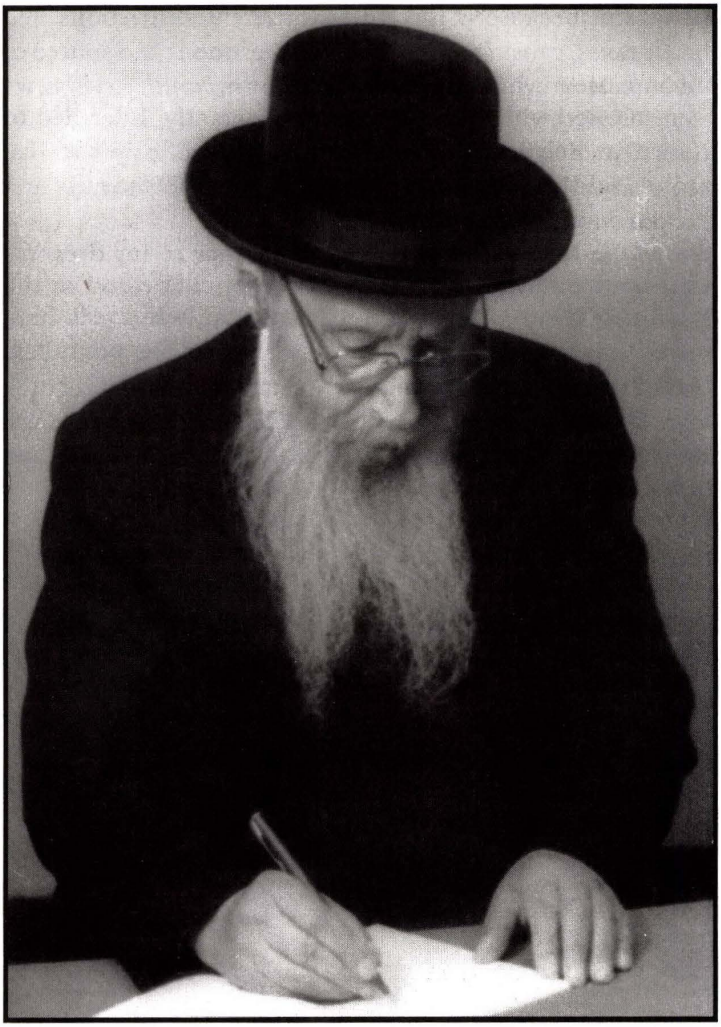
Twice in *Elul* of 1948, I flew to Eretz Yisrael on missions on behalf of the Belzer Rebbe. Upon my return to Antwerp, my mind was made up—I was going to settle in Eretz Yisrael. It was not going to be easy, since I had no prospects for earning a livelihood in Eretz Yisrael. Nonetheless, I realized it was essential for the Belzer Rebbe that more *chassidim* join him to strengthen the resurgent Belzer movement, and I was eager to participate in the rebuilding process to the best of my ability. Even more, the words of the Rebbe still rang in my ears. "I am planning to establish a *yeshivah* for young *chassidic* children," he had told me. The Rebbe needed me.

In 1949, shortly before *Rosh Hashanah*, I moved my family to Eretz Yisrael, and immediately after *Sukkos*, I plunged into the work of building the *yeshivah*. At the Rebbe's behest, the *yeshivah* was called Yeshivah Dichassidei Belz. As early as *Cheshvan*, after a great deal of hard labor, we opened the *yeshivah* with ten students. From these modest beginnings, the *yeshivah* grew from day to day, developing into the flourishing institution that it is today. During this time, following the Rebbe's instructions, *Talmud Torah* schools were also founded in Tel Aviv and Bnei Brak.

Now that the *yeshivah* was well under way, it was time for me to think of a way to support my family. My initial attempts at finding work as a diamond cutter were unsuccessful, since at that time the diamond business in Eretz Yisrael was still in a fledgling state and there was no great need for cutters. An attempt to go into the dairy processing business was also not

successful because of severe government restrictions and heavy taxes, causing me to lose my investment and source of income. Meanwhile, my family had grown, *baruch Hashem*; we were blessed with seven children. Reluctantly, I decided to return to Belgium and resume my old profession in diamonds, and in that worthy community, I was able to raise and support my growing family.

As the years pass by, when I think back to my dreadful experiences during the war and how often I stood in the shadow of death, I am overcome with gratitude to Hashem for all the miracles He showed me and for His boundless *chessed* in helping me rebuild our shattered family and guide it in the footsteps of its martyred forbears. May *Hashem Yisbarach* grant that I may derive joy and *nachas* from all my offspring in good health.



the author in his final years

POSTSCIPT

IN HIS DEEP AND CHARACTERISTIC HUMILITY, THE AUTHOR Reb Chaim Shlomo Friedman is very reticent about the wonderful family he raised. However, it represents one of the glorious pages in the story of his life and should not be omitted.

After the war, Reb Chaim Shlomo Friedman married Rachel Miller, the sister of the Turker Rav *zatzal.* Together, they raised an exemplary family of eight children—five sons and three daughters—*yere'im usheleimim,* upright and devout Torah-observant Jews, who are themselves the proud parents of a large progeny of children, *bli ayin hora,* all of them following in their grandfather's tradition of Torah, *yiras shamayim* and *chassidus.* Several of Reb Chaim Shlomo's sons are outstanding and prominent *talmidei chachamim.*

Little Sheindl, whose life was saved by the heroic efforts of her father, is today a grandmother and lives in Antwerp. She is married to Reb Yitzchak Jacob, a prominent Belzer *chassid*, and together, they have raised a large family and married off all their children to *chassidic* young men and women; all their sons and sons-in-law are either studying in *kollelim* or *rabbeim* in *yeshivos*. A true *eishes chayil*, she continues to instill into her offspring the Torah values she received from her father, carrying on the traditions he implanted in her heart.

After a fruitful and rewarding life, Reb Chaim Shlomo Friedman passed away on 25 *Tishrei*, 5746 (1985), at the age of seventy-two and was laid to rest in Yerushalayim.

May his stunning memoir be an everlasting legacy of unflinching *emunah* and *bitachon* for future generations.

GLOSSARY

Aktion: round-up [Ger.]
al kiddush Hashem: to sanctify the Name
Appell: roll call [Ger.]
avodah: divine service
baal madreigah: superior person
bais (batei) midrash: study hall(s)
Bais Hamikdash: the Holy Temple
Baruch Hashem: blessed is the Name
berachah: blessing
Bereishis: Book of Genesis
bitachon: trust
bli ayin hora: spare the evil eye
blitzkrieg: lightning attack [Ger.]
challos: *Shabbos* loaves
chassidus: Jewish pietist movement
Chazal: the Sages of blessed memory
chazzan: cantor
Cheshvan: Jewish month
chessed: kindness
Chol Hamoed Sukkos: Intermediate Days of *Sukkos*
cholent: special *Shabbos* stew
daven: pray
dayan: rabbinic judge
dveikus: devotion
Einsatzgruppen: killing squads [Ger.]
eishes chayil: woman of valor
Elul: Jewish month
emunah: faith
Erev Pesach: day before *Pesach*
Erev Rosh Hashanah: day before *Rosh Hashanah*
esrog: citron
gabbai(m): synagogue officer(s)
gam zu letovah: this too is for the good
Gemara: part of the Talmud
gemillus chassadim: acts of kindness
glatt kosher: strictly kosher
goy(im): gentile(s)
Hakadosh Baruch Hu: the Holy Blessed One
Halachah: Jewish law
halachic: of Jewish law
Hallel: special prayer of praise
Hashem Yisbarach: the Blessed Name
Havdalah: concluding ritual of *Shabbos*
Hoshannah Rabbah: part of *Sukkos*
Juden: Jews [Ger.]
Judenrat: Jewish community council [Ger.]
Judenrein: free of Jews [Ger.]
Judenstern: Jewish star [Ger.]
Kabbalas Shabbos: welcoming *Shabbos*
Kaddish: Mourner's Prayer
kapote: frock

kapparah: atonement
kashrus: being kosher
kedushah: holiness
kehillah: community
Kiddush Levanah: sanctification of the new moon
Kiddush: sanctification of *Shabbos*
klaus: *chassidic* synagogue
Koheles: Book of Ecclesiastes
Kol Nidrei: opening *Yom Kippur* prayer
kollel(im): Torah study center(s)
kronen: Czechoslovakian currency
kugel: *Shabbos* dish
kvittel: supplication
Lager: camp [Ger.]
Lagerfuhrer: camp commandant [Ger.]
lechayim: to life; traditional toast
lekach: cake received from a Rebbe
leshanah tovah: wishes for a good new year
lulav: palm fronds
Maariv: evening prayer
malach: angel
mame: mother [Yiddish]
mechutan: connection by marriage
Melachim: Book of Kings
melaveh malkah: post-*Shabbos* meal
mikveh: ritual bath
milah: circumcision
Minchah: afternoon prayer
minyan(im): quorum for prayer
Mishlei: Book of Proverbs
mitzv(ah)(os): Torah commandment(s)
nachas: satisfaction
nein: no [Ger.]
netillas yadayim: purification of the hands
niggun(im): tune(s)
oneg Shabbos: *Shabbos* pleasure
oy vay: Yiddish lament
pengo: Hungarian currency
Pesach: Passover
peyos: earlocks
pikuach nefesh: a matter of life and death
Purim: Festival of Lots
Rabbiner: rabbi [Ger.]
rebbe (rabbeim): *chassidic* rabbi(s)
rebbetzin: rabbi's wife
Ribono Shel Olam: Master of the Universe
Rosh Chodesh: New Month
Rosh Hashanah: New Year
sechach: *sukkah* roofing
sedarim: Passover feast
sefer (sefarim): book(s)
Sefiras Haomer: Counting of the Omer
seudah: meal
Shabbos: the Sabbath
Shacharis: morning prayer
shalom aleichem: peace unto you; greeting
shalosh seudos: third *Shabbos* meal
shamash: beadle
shechitah: ritual slaughter

Shemini Atzeres: Festival of the Eighth Day
Shevat: Jewish month
shiksa: gentile woman
shiur(im): lecture(s)
shivah: mourning period
shochet: ritual slaughterer
shofar: ram's horn
Shoftim: Book of Judges
shtiebel (shtieblach): *chassidic* synagogue
shtreimel: *chassidic* headress
shul: synagogue
Shushan Purim: day after *Purim*
siddur(im): prayer book(s)
simchah: rejoicing
Simchas Torah: Festival of the Torah
sukkah: *Sukkos* booth
Sukkos: Festival of Tabernacles
tallis (talleisim): prayer shawl(s)
talmid(ei) chacham(im): Torah scholar(s)
Talmud Torah: elementary Torah school
tefill(ah)(os): prayer(s)
tefillin: phylacteries
Tehillim: Book of Psalms
tisch(en): *chassidic* celebration
Tishah b'Av: day of fasting
Tishrei: Jewish month
tzitzis: fringes
Tzom Gedalyah: day of fasting
tzores: troubles
Viduy: confession
Wehrmacht: German Army [Ger.]
yahrzeit: commemorative day
Yamim Noraim: Days of Awe
Yamim Tovim: festivals
yarmulka: skullcap
Yeshayahu: Book of Isaiah
yeshiv(ah)(os): Torah school(s)
Yidden: Jews [Yiddish]
yiras shamayim: fear of Heaven
yishuv: settlement
Yom Tov: festival
Yom Kippur: Day of Atonement
zatzal: of blessed memory
zchus: merit
zemiros: songs
zhid: Jew [Polish]
zloty: Polish currency
zsandar: Hungarian militia