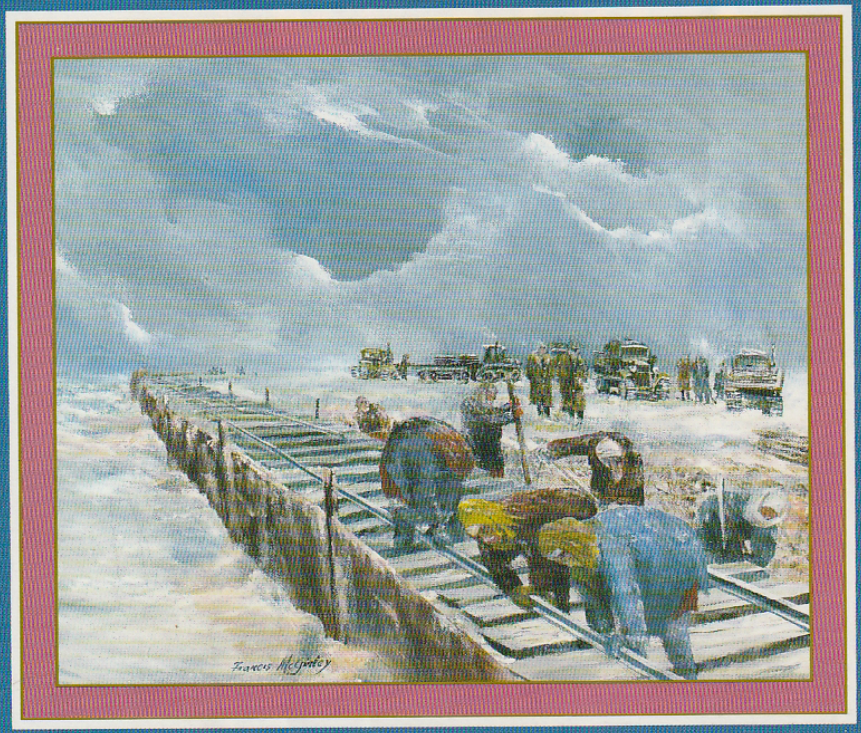
The Holocaust Diaries

BEHIND THE ICE CURTAIN



DINA GABEL

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DINA GABEL



CIS
P·U·B·L·I·S·H·E·R·S
New York · London · Jerusalem

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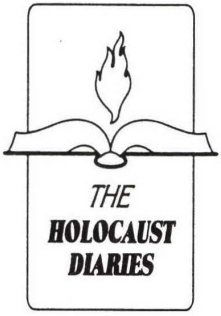
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כָּל זֹאת בָּאַתְנוּ וְלֹא שְׁכַחֲנוּךָ

(תהלים מד:יח)

All this has befallen us
yet we have not forgotten You
(*Tehillim* 44:18)

BEHIND THE ICE CURTAIN

DEDICATED TO
MY GRANDCHILDREN

IN BLESSED MEMORY
OF MY PARENTS
WHOSE LOVE, WISDOM AND CHESSED
GUIDED ME IN ALL TURNS OF MY LIFE

IN BLESSED MEMORY
OF MY ENTIRE FAMILY
WHOSE LIVES WERE
BRUTALLY EXTINGUISHED
DURING THE HOLOCAUST

AND IN BLESSED MEMORY
OF MY HUSBAND
RABBI SHIMON GABEL זיל
WHO WAS SUDDENLY AND TRAGICALLY
TAKEN FROM US
ON 24 NISSAN, 5746/1986

ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

THE HOLOCAUST WAS LIKE A GIANT BOULDER HURLED into the pool of Jewish history, the greatest disaster occurring at the point of impact where six million innocent Jewish men, women and children perished in the Nazi concentration camps and ghettoes. But the secondary ripples spread throughout the Jewish community in ever-widening circles, bringing pain, impoverishment, dispersion, exile and despair to untold numbers of Jews across the globe. From the near-victims who just managed to elude the evil grasp of the Nazis to the American Jews who moved heaven and earth to rescue their imperiled brothers and sisters, there was hardly a Jew in the world whose life was not touched to some degree by the overwhelming tragedy of the holocaust.

When the war broke out, the great majority of European

Jews were living in the threatened areas of Poland, Lithuania and the Ukraine, and since the attack came from Germany in the west, the most logical overland route of escape was to the east—into the interior of the vast and exceedingly hostile Soviet domain of Stalin. In the two decades between the Communist revolution in Russia in 1917 and the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, the professedly egalitarian Communist regime had already shown its true colors. The people of Russia were impoverished and terrorized by the Communist Party, and those that showed any resistance were either executed, imprisoned or shipped off to internal exile in the enormous ice trap known as Siberia.

For the Jews, especially those who clung to their cherished ancestral faith, the repression was particularly brutal as the atheistic Communists strove to obliterate the slightest vestige of religion. But as the Nazi terror advanced from the west, countless thousands of Jews fled eastward into the gaping maw of the lesser evil in the east; if they were jumping into the frying pan, at least they were escaping the fire. Moreover, at the beginning of the war in 1939, when Germany and Russia signed the infamous Ribbentrop-Molotov Non-Aggression Pact dividing hapless Poland between them, the Communists arrested the wealthier people in the Russian-occupied part of Poland and banished their families to Siberia. Thus, by the time Germany violated the pact and attacked Russia in 1941, multitudes of Jewish refugees and deportees were trapped in the Soviet "paradise."

The saga of these Jewish exiles is full of privation and heartbreak. Separated from their families, adrift in a strange and inhospitable land, battling hunger and cold, conscripted into forced labor, constantly in terror of the K.G.B., these people were subjected to the dual trauma of the desperate

struggle for survival and the incessant anxiety over the fate of their loved ones who had remained behind and fallen into the grasp of the Germans. But in the end, they were the fortunate ones, because most of them survived the holocaust and participated in the rejuvenation of the Jewish people.

Behind the Ice Curtain, by Dina Gabel, is an intensely illuminating autobiographical memoir which depicts this aspect of the holocaust in great detail and with powerful emotion. It is the story of a young woman from a very aristocratic family in the town of Lida in Eastern Poland, whose father was arrested by the invading Russians in 1939, while she and her mother were deported to Siberia and remained there until the end of the war. Through her eyes, we relive the dismal experiences of both the deportees and the refugees as they struggled to adjust to the harsh new realities of banishment and exile. We feel the numbing pain and grief of separation from home and family. We feel the haunting isolation of being cut off from the rest of the world, like islands in an endless ocean of snow. We feel the degradation of being reduced to living under appallingly squalid conditions and scrabbling for the barest sustenance to keep body and soul together. We feel the devastating anguish and exhaustion of people subjected to backbreaking forced labor from the predawn hours until late at night in arctic cold in the winter and scorching heat in the summer. And we feel the quiet heroism and tenacity of a people who would not allow themselves to be vanquished and their spirits crushed.

The author begins this sweeping book with a very poignant description of her home and family prior to the war, and she adds many more fascinating vignettes as part of her reminiscences while she is hiding from the K.G.B. in a barn in Petropavlovsk. As the narrative unfolds, we discover that

the author was the only child of a wealthy and prominent family. In loving brushstrokes, she draws a vivid and touchingly bittersweet portrait of her remarkable father, of his uncompromising devotion to Torah and *mitzvos*; of his vast erudition in Torah and his expansive knowledge and awareness of the world around him; of his close personal relationship with the Chafetz Chaim, Reb Chaim Ozer Grodzinski and many other *rabbanim* and *roshei yeshivah*; of his scrupulous honesty and integrity in his dealings with Jew and gentile alike; of his compassion and numerous charitable endeavors; of his filial devotion to his parents and parents-in-law; of the singular blend of love and discipline with which he brought up his only child; and of the special bond that existed between father and daughter.

The author's memory of her father and her anxiety over his uncertain fate are a constant haunting companion throughout her exile in Siberia, and her aching sense of loss and deprivation springs from the pages with deeply moving power and pathos.

Yet, in spite of her separation from her father, the values he instilled in her were so deeply implanted that she was able to withstand the ordeals of her exile without surrendering her humanity or compromising her ideals. Brought up in the lap of luxury, she was never especially discomfited by the sudden lack of material comforts, only by the degradation and humiliation of being forced to share living quarters with coarse peasants and livestock. Pampered and sheltered as a child, she did not shy away from hard physical exertions and enterprising endeavors to improve the quality of life for her ailing mother and herself. Surrounded by people who abandoned their *Yiddishkeit* in the struggle for survival, she remained steadfast in her devotion to Torah and *mitzvos*, time

and time again braving the wrath of the K.G.B. in her refusal to bend or break. In all this, she was supported by her valorous and saintly mother who was a quiet but constant pillar of strength and unquestioning *bitachon*.

In the final analysis, however, *Behind the Ice Curtain* is much more than a profoundly gripping personal memoir. It is an important historical document, a record for posterity of the excruciating experiences of a large segment of the Jewish people during the hellish period of the holocaust, victims of a different sort who persevered and lived to bear aloft again the torch that fell from the hands of their martyred families and neighbors. As such, *Behind the Ice Curtain*, the fourth volume in *The Holocaust Diaries* collection, takes a place of honor beside the distinguished and highly-acclaimed *Late Shadows* by Moshe Holczler, *They Called Me Frau Anna* by Chana Marcus Banet and *Dare to Survive* by Chaim Shlomo Friedman. Cumulatively, these important works—and the subsequent volumes which are presently in various stages of preparation—will provide future generations with an authentic and indestructible testament of the multifaceted disaster of the holocaust and the heroism of those gallant Jews who could be broken in body but not in spirit and will forever stand as immortal champions of the ideals towards which we all must strive.

We feel deeply honored and gratified to have been selected as the publishers of this outstanding book, and we would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the highly intelligent, spirited and always cooperative participation of the author in the entire process of bringing her manuscript to publication. We would also like to express our gratitude and appreciation to Michal Steinberger for her invaluable assistance to the author in the preparation of the original

manuscript, to Tzipporah Reitman for her painstaking efforts during the editing process, to Editorial Director Raizy Kaufman for her unerring vision and insight in guiding the book through all its revisions to its final form and to the many members of our talented staff whose devoted and conscientious efforts are manifest in this beautiful book. May the *Ribono Shel Olam* look upon our labors with favor and grant us the privilege of continuing this work to bring glory to His Name and inspiration to His people.

Y.Y.R.
Lakewood, NJ
Adar 5752 (1992)

PREFACE

WHEN MY GRANDCHILDREN CAME TO YERUSHALAYIM during their vacation in the summer of 1986, shortly after the tragic death of my husband, *zichrono livrachah*, I told them a few stories about the war years, which I spent in Russia. They were fascinated; they wanted to know everything about the war and about what life was like before it. When their vacation was over and it was time to return to New York, they made me promise to write down whatever I remembered.

It was almost a year before I was able to begin. I did not have any references other than my own memory, but I do, *baruch Hashem*, remember a great deal. I have always kept the memories alive; the good years I wanted to remember, the bad I couldn't forget. My memoir is not a thriller but a day-

to-day account of the hard times and good times, and I tried to present both as accurately as I could.

As paragraph after paragraph began to flow from my pen onto the pages of my notebook, I realized it might be a story not only for my grandchildren but also for their peers, parents and others as well. Besides my personal experiences and reminiscences about my family and forebears, it touches on the most horrible period in the history of our people, and of many other nations as well, a tragic period which spans more than seventy years.

Two experiments were undertaken in our "enlightened" twentieth century—not with laboratory mice and guinea pigs, but with human beings, with people. The first experiment was the Communist Revolution, the attempt to create a theoretical utopia which violated all rules of nature, even from the secular point of view. In the process, its executors emerged as the most brutal and inhuman tyrants, forswearing and stifling all vestiges of belief and religion; scruples and morality were thrown to the winds. The Communist Revolution aroused the lowest instincts in the pursuers of power, and in the pursuit of this power, millions were killed and oceans of blood spilled.

The second experiment was undertaken by the Germans. Their goal was to rid the world of Jews. The outcome is only too well-known. In the resulting holocaust, six million Jews were murdered and burned.

These two experiments have many things in common. For the Jewish people, the most significant common factor is the price we paid in blood. The Germans, with their Teutonic efficiency and "scientific" methods, managed to murder six million Jews in five years, while it took the Soviets seven decades to achieve almost the identical results. In addition to

the hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, of Jews who were shot and tortured to death in the Russian prisons, how many more Jews were lost through spiritual annihilation! Is a spiritual holocaust less of a tragedy? In times past, if a Jewish son or a daughter converted or married out of faith, the parents would observe the traditional *shivah* mourning period for the child, who was henceforth considered dead by the parents and lost as Jews. Thus, by attempting to destroy the Jewish faith, the Soviets were in effect destroying untold numbers of our Jewish people. I consider the Communist holocaust, in its full scope, no less grave and devastating than the Nazi holocaust.

The Jewish people are veterans of tragedy. After the destruction of the holy *Beis Hamikdash* by the Romans and our subsequent dispersion throughout the world, the Spanish Inquisition stood out for centuries as one of the bleakest tragedies in our history. But although the Inquisition took many thousands of lives, the Jews at least had the option of leaving the country and continuing to live as Jews. In the experiments of the present century, however, there were no such options. The German experiment culminated in near total physical annihilation, while the Soviet experiment enchained the Jews behind an iron curtain, with the slightest attempt at observance and adherence to our religion resulting in imprisonment and torture in the gulags or in death.

For a Jew in the Soviet Union, particularly during the three decades of Stalin's rule, it took superhuman courage, will power and endurance, often at the risk of losing his life, to keep *mitzvos* and observe the commandments of our Torah. Still, there were some Jews who, regardless of all danger, clung to their principles and beliefs, unsung heroes whose stories have yet to be told. Among the new books

dealing with this era is the heartbreaking and heartwarming *Deep in the Russian Night* by Rav Aharon Chazan, which was recently released by C.I.S. Publishers, who are also the publishers of this book.

At this point, I would like to express my deep respect and recognition to C.I.S. Publishers for undertaking the publication of *The Holocaust Diaries*. It is a most worthy and important project documenting the personal experiences of survivors of the holocaust from the Torah point of view, people whose faith in the Almighty bolstered their spirits and kept them beyond the reach of their tormentors and persecutors. I am also very pleased and honored to have my memoir included in this distinguished collection.

I would also like to acknowledge my deep and sincere appreciation to Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Reinman, Rabbi Alexander Zissel Ellinson and Mrs. Raizy Kaufman of C.I.S. Publishers for their warm attitude, thorough insight, personal involvement and cooperation during the entire process of preparing my book for publication. Working with them was a very rewarding experience.

I am also grateful to Michal Steinberger of Yerushalayim, for her integrity, skill and intelligence in helping me coordinate my original manuscript. Special thanks are due to my good friends Reine Hochster and Fay Tanzer for their constant, enthusiastic encouragement.

But my deepest thanks go to my children and grandchildren on whose request I started to write the book and whose love and invaluable support brought it to fruition.

I offer up my most heartfelt and profound thanks and prayers of gratitude to the *Ribono Shel Olam* for granting me the *zchus* of seeing my grandchildren grow up in an atmosphere of Torah values, *chessed* and ethics, which their parents

instilled in them since their earliest years. Their *midos tovos*, *yiras shamayim* and strict adherence to *mitzvos* surpass even my grandmother's wishes for her own children. And I pray to Him that the luminous light of the holy Torah shall always shine upon them and upon all the generations to come.

BEHIND THE ICE CURTAIN

PROLOGUE

AUGUST 23, 1939. IT WAS WEDNESDAY, EARLY IN THE afternoon. I remember the time exactly. It is burned into my memory.

It was a beautiful end-of-summer day. The end of summer, as it turns into autumn, is the most pleasant season in Poland; many poems and hymns in Polish literature glorify the beauty of the *Polska Jesien*, the Polish autumn. It is a time when the flowers in their last stage of bloom still perfume the air with a mixture of delicate scents. But this time, it was different—different because the atmosphere was also filled with the foreboding of doom, different because the imagined scent of gunpowder and blood mingled like an ominous undercurrent with the rich fragrance of ripe fruit on trees still heavy with foliage. The catastrophe had not yet come, but the

threat of it hung in the air like a dark cloud over our heads.

On the surface, life was still normal. We had, as we often did, a few *orchim* on that particular day. As we prepared to start dinner, one of the *orchim* came in and said, "There are big posters all over town about a general mobilization of all military forces. In fact, I just saw a man putting up some posters on your front fence."

"So war with Germany seems inescapable," said my father with a light tremor in his voice.

"Please, Dina, may I have your plate?" I heard my mother say to me, calm as always. She held a ladle over the soup tureen and waited for me to hand her my plate.

Something inexplicable happened then. Instead of picking up my bowl, I ran to the door and into the street, as if propelled by some dynamic force. I looked at the big white posters covered with bold black letters for a long while. Though they were all the same, I read every one of them. Then, in a state of extreme panic, I ran back into the house, dashed to my room, threw myself on my bed and broke down in an uncontrollable, hysterical fit of crying.

My parents came rushing in, as did my aunt and uncle who lived next door. They were all frightened and worried.

"What happened?" they kept asking. "Why are you crying? The war was expected. Why are you more concerned than anyone else?"

I couldn't answer. I didn't have an answer. I didn't know the reason myself, but I couldn't control my desperate sobs. No comforting words could stop the flow of tears.

What had caused such an outburst? Was it a premonition, a warning? Had I seen in "my heart's eye" what was going to happen? I was still ensconced in the lap of comfort and protection, surrounded by the love and devotion of my

parents and family. The future seemed promising, the social and financial position of our family, its sound, moral and ethical foundation, its respectability and prominence, all these gave my aspirations an assurance of easy reach. It seemed just natural for me to believe that the path of my life would continue in the same established, comfortable manner. But now I felt strangely disconcerted. Had I somehow seen my future inscribed between and beyond the words on the posters?

As time passed and events unfolded, I found I had been chosen by Hashem to be the only survivor of my family, besides my cousin Yocheved, to pass on to future generations our family's long history of deep devotion to the Torah, its commandments and ethical teachings, and our tradition of *tzeddakah* and *chessed*. I tried to do what was expected of me, and Hashem guided me in the right direction.

BOOK ONE

The Golden Years

CHAPTER 1

Childhood Memories

WHEN I THINK BACK TO MY CHILDHOOD YEARS, TO the good times when we still had no inkling of the appalling fate that awaited us, the image of my father emerges almost instantly with vivid clarity. My father loomed over my life as a strong figure, always busy doing important things, yet always there for me.

There was a special bond between my father and me. It was a bond that, in my mind, dated back to that special, unforgettable day when my father returned from one of his business trips with a large white box tied with a blue ribbon. I remember watching wide-eyed as he put the box on the table. To further excite my curiosity, my father encouraged me to open the box myself.

Standing on a chair, supported by his arm, I struggled

with the ribbon. The box finally popped open, and there was a huge, beautiful doll almost as big as I was. She wore a blue velvet dress with white lace trimming. Long wavy locks framed her rosy face. And the biggest wonder of all, she was sleeping with her eyes closed! Black eyelashes, matching her black hair, reached almost to her cheeks.

I turned to look at my father, and he instantly understood what I wanted to know.

"Yes, you can pick her up," he replied with a smile. "She'll sleep more later."

I picked her up, and an even bigger wonder occurred. Her eyelids rolled back revealing big, dark blue eyes streaked with black and gold. I put her back into the box, and she closed her eyes again. Such dolls are common today, but at that time, it was nothing less than magic.

All day long, I couldn't stop thinking about the doll's magical eyes. I knew full well that she was only a doll, but her ability to open and close her eyes fascinated me. I wanted to know how she did it, and I decided to find out.

Alone in my room, I pulled off her hair, which was a glued-on wig, and with the handle of my comb, I pried her head open. To my surprise, it was filled only with shredded newspaper and a little spring on a wire that was connected to both eyes.

Just at this moment, my mother came into the room, saw the disaster and slapped me. It was the only time, I believe, that she ever struck me on impulse.

"Is this the way you appreciate Papa's present?" she said with deep reproach. "Such dolls are not available in our town, and seeing what you have done, Papa will not buy another one."

I started to cry, humiliated by the slap, and mortified at

the injustice I had done to my father. With trepidation, I awaited his return home.

When my father saw what I had done and heard my tearful explanation, he started to laugh, picked me up, wiped away my tears and gave me a kiss. Gently, he told me that he, too, liked to know how things worked. In the future, all I had to do was ask him. There was no need to break things apart. Then he smiled again and patted my cheek. A special bond was sealed then and there between my father and me.

As I grew older, I discovered that my father's inquisitive nature and his interest in mechanics helped him immensely in operating the machine factory he owned in partnership with my uncle. He was also quite creative in this direction, and several years after this incident, he patented two inventions and used them in the production of two machines he later sent to technological exhibitions in the United States, one in 1934 in Chicago, the other in 1939 at the World's Fair in New York. Both machines won gold medals.

Sometimes, during the long winter evenings, he would sit me down next to him at the dining room table and carve small pieces of wood with his little penknife into various toys for me, such as a boat or a little table and chair. Sometimes, it was little cups and saucers from modeling compound. My father knew the pleasure it gave me, and he would interrupt his very busy schedule to give me joy. I cherish those moments of intimacy with my father to this very day.

Although I was an only and long-awaited child—and in spite of my warm and intimate relationship with my parents—I was brought up with a strict and rigid discipline. I knew that I had to obey, and a "no" remained a "no." I accepted most of the rules, but there was one thing that, from about the age of four, I remember resenting with futile frustration.

We had very cold winters in our part of Poland, and I was always thoroughly bundled before being taken out for a walk. In his boundless and overprotective love for me, my father insisted on it, and my mother did not object, although she herself actually liked the cold.

I remember standing on the kitchen table, a pile of clothing nearby. It was a ceremony supervised by my mother and conducted by the maid. First came woolen tights and cream-colored felt leggings, knee high, buttoned with a dozen little black buttons. Then felt-lined boots on top of the shoes. My winter coat was fur-lined, but two sweaters went under it nevertheless. This was topped off by a woolen cap with ear flaps, one scarf under the coat and another above tied in the back under the raised collar. Gloves and a muff completed the armor. After this treatment, I was completely immobilized. I remember being taken off the table and put outside to wait for my mother or the maid to get dressed. In the street, I was told not to talk so that cold air would not get into my mouth. As a result of this treatment, I contracted either laryngitis or a cold every other week.

Only when I started school (at the age of seven, as was the custom in Poland), and saw how my classmates were dressed, was I able to convince my parents, after long bargaining and pleading, to reduce the number of scarves and sweaters.

Another vivid image that lingers in my mind was the remodeling of our house, which was near the factory. As I always liked to watch people at work, I found a limitless source of pleasure in watching our house being remodeled and two new wings being added, one of them for my Uncle Yaakov and Aunt Gittel, the other for us. (Uncle Yaakov and Aunt Gittel were actually my uncle and aunt twice over; Uncle Yaakov was my father's brother and Aunt Gittel was my

mother's sister.) Before the renovation, our house had been a one-family house, and Uncle Yaakov and Aunt Gittel had lived in town, only about two kilometers away. Then my father and Uncle Yaakov decided to expand the house into a two-family structure so that Uncle Yaakov could also live near the factory. I was only five-and-a-half years old at the time, and I understood very little of what was being done and why. But for me it was enough just to look.

The work started at the beginning of the summer, and all summer long, except for the rainy days, I was in heaven. From the first delivery of building material until the house was completed, I "supervised" every step, often annoying the workers with my constant questions. I would fall over the piles of rubble and debris and even climb on the scaffold to take a closer look at what they were doing. I wasn't deterred by splinters, scratches, skinned knees and warnings. Only when they complained to my parents, and I received a deserved scolding, did I unwillingly keep my distance.

Of the inside work, the most interesting part was watching the workers putting up the wallpaper. I remember the maid washing my hair and complaining ceaselessly that she couldn't get out the glue.

I vaguely remember moving into the finished wing (the one that was designated for Uncle Yaakov and Aunt Gittel) sometime during the summer so that our own apartment could be built.

Many details have escaped my memory, but I do remember how strange I felt in our new apartment with all the new, modern furniture. Most of all, I missed my pale green room and our beautiful, old salon with its familiar antique furniture.

Before the renovation, the salon had had light gray and

silver wallpaper and antique, beautifully carved ebony furniture with dark green, silky, plush upholstery. My childhood memories still retain an exact picture of every piece of furniture in the room. Virtually all that was left after the renovation was the unique, ebony-framed mirror on its stand, relocated to the foyer, and the priceless, antique, solid silver, twelve-arm, newly electrified chandelier, which was moved to my father's study. It was so heavy and elaborate that it took two people to hang it.

The new salon was a much bigger room with a brass chandelier, a huge glass-and-oak china closet and our big, old dining table and chairs. Marquisette curtains, potted plants and forest green, brown and gold wallpaper completed the redecoration. It was probably a more contemporary decor, but I missed the old one. I was born to it; it was part of me.

A new chapter started for me when the entire renovation was completed and Uncle Yaakov and Aunt Gittel moved in next to us. I wasn't an only child any more. My cousins Sonia and Mendel became my siblings for all practical purposes. Sonia, six or seven years older than me, was a quiet, reserved girl who never shared any of my interests. Mendel, who was my age, was an active volcano. His pranks and practical jokes drove everyone into a frenzy. But there was another difference between us, besides personalities. They were both wiry and pencil-thin, and no amount of "gold poured down their throats" helped them gain another ounce, to my aunt's great dismay. I, however, was on the chubby side.

In contrast to my overprotective dressing, my parents were very strict about food. No snacks between meals, no candies, no chocolate, cake only on *Shabbos*. What was served had to be eaten. No picking.

One food I particularly disliked was *kasha*. I couldn't

stand it. I remember once at dinner, when I was about five, it was served as a side dish with meat. I looked sullenly at my plate and didn't start eating.

"I don't want the *kasha*," I said.

"If you don't eat the *kasha* you can't have the meat either," my mother remarked.

I still didn't eat.

"You don't want to eat this?" my father asked when everyone else was almost finished.

"No."

His hand went to the little bell suspended from the center of the chandelier. When the maid arrived she was told to take away my plate. I secretly hoped that something else would be brought instead, but nothing else was served. When the meal was over and everyone started to *bentch*, a ball formed in my throat, but I was too proud to cry.

Our suppers were always dairy. At suppertime, my left-over dinner was placed on a separate tray for me. I was hungry and hurt, but I still didn't want to touch it. My mother ignored my behavior. My father, without asking anymore, reached for the bell.

I started to cry.

"Not a sound," he said. "Go straight to bed."

Hungry, defeated and remorseful, I went to bed. In the morning, instead of the usual breakfast, a plate of *kasha* was placed before me. I ate it. Since then, *kasha* is one of my favorite foods. I wasn't an "expert" on child-rearing then, but I instinctively understood that my parents' strictness came from love and caring.

Aside from the incident with the *kasha*, however, my parents had no reason to worry about my eating. I was always hungry. Robust, energetic, active and hungry. I remember

how jealous I was of my cousins, who had fresh buns every morning, swimming in butter and sugar, the likes of which my mother forbade me to touch.

There was another thing about my cousins I secretly envied. My Aunt Gittel had kept her old living room set. It was different from ours, mahogany with gold inlay, upholstered in blue-gray brocade, but it had that same old-world style as ours had had, and it reminded me of our own old salon. Both sets, ours and theirs, were among the many wedding presents given to my father and Uncle Yaakov by their mother, my paternal grandmother.

My grandmother was an only child, the daughter of a multimillionaire in Czarist Russia in the town of Vitebsk. After she married my grandfather, they settled in Grodno, my grandfather's hometown. Though her new house had twelve rooms, it was packed to overflowing with genuine antiques, and each of her five children received generous presents of their own choosing. Apart from the living room set, many of these presents, such as the unusual chandelier, rare silver pieces, crystal and jewelry were cherished and kept as family heirlooms.

When my mother replaced our old, beautiful set with modern furniture, I was too young to know that the old set was of museum value. I just knew it had come from my grandmother, whom I adored, and I was disturbed that it was no longer there. Somehow, I had always thought that the familiar sights of my childhood would always be there, that nothing in my beloved world would ever change.

CHAPTER 2

My Lida Grandfather

I DON'T REMEMBER MY MATERNAL GRANDMOTHER. SHE passed away when I was an infant. My mother's father was a great *talmid chacham* named Reb Yudel Emes; *emes*, the Hebrew word for truth, was his family name, and nothing could have been more appropriate. He was very rich before the First World War, but during the war he lost his fortune.

All his life, till the age of eighty-six, he learned Torah practically every waking minute, sometimes twenty hours a day. After he married, he invested his dowry in other people's businesses on a percentage basis as a silent partner, which gave him free time to learn. Every business in which he invested prospered, and businessmen vied for his participation. His fortune grew without his lifting a finger.

My mother was the second of five daughters. Aunt Gittel, who married my father's brother Yaakov, was the oldest.

Chaya, the third daughter, married into the prominent Bunimovitz family and moved to Russia. During the Bolshevik Revolution, she and her husband lost everything, and in 1928, they emigrated to Johannesburg, South Africa. She passed away long ago. Her two widowed daughters and their children still live there.

The fourth sister was Mina, my favorite aunt. Quiet, modest, undemanding, possessing a heart of gold, she married in her twenties and lived in Vilna. Her only child Yocheved, named after my maternal grandmother, was only twelve years old when World War II started. Two years later, both her parents were shot by the Nazis. Besides my mother and myself, she is the only one from my mother's family who lived through the holocaust tragedy. From my father's family there is not even one.

The youngest sister Sarah was a high school teacher of math and German. She had earned all her qualifications and diplomas by external examinations, since my grandfather didn't approve of her attending secular schools. Sarah also moved to Vilna, but she never married. She perished in the holocaust at the age of forty.

My mother's father lived in Lida, in the center of town. After his two youngest daughters left, the family encouraged him to come live with us or with Aunt Gittel. This was about the time we finished the remodeling of our house, and he could have had a room fixed up for him in either of the apartments. Accustomed to his privacy, however, he preferred an apartment of his own.

Fortunately, we found a property right next to us which suited him just fine. It was a nice, little house with five rooms,

an enclosed porch, a large garden and front and back entrances. Two rooms in the back were given to a needy couple who took care of the house. My parents and my aunt and uncle took care of his other needs.

My grandfather was extremely neat, never allowing a speck on his clothes, and his boots had to be polished daily. He wore soft, kid leather boots, which fell in folds to mid-calf, with his pants tucked inside. On *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov* he ate with us, and during the rest of the week his meals were brought to him from our house on a tray. For me, it was a special treat to have a grandfather so close by. He lived next door to us for the rest of his life.

My grandfather didn't believe in modern conveniences. He could never be persuaded to take a shower at home. All year round, even on the coldest days, he walked to town to *daven* in the same *shul* in which he had *davened* since he was a young man and to immerse himself in the *mikveh* there.

Almost all the stories about my mother's family I heard from my aunts; my mother didn't like to talk about people, even her own family. But the bonus of going to my aunts for stories was that they used to tell me things about my mother as well. It was an accepted fact that she was my grandfather's favorite daughter, but not for any unreasonable partiality. It was simply that she was the only one who had ever shown any serious interest in learning Torah subjects, which were my grandfather's biggest delight in life.

In my mother's time, *frum* Jewish girls didn't attend school at all. They had private teachers for both secular and Jewish subjects. The duration of a girl's studies would depend on her parents' ability to pay and her own desire and diligence. All of my aunts were taught *davening, mitzvos*, basic *Chumash* and the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic, with

a general knowledge of geography, world history and Jewish history. Only my Aunt Sarah had a thirst to acquire more secular knowledge, up to the level of a university degree, and only my mother expressed a desire to become fluent in Jewish subjects as well.

Fearing that the kind of advanced Hebrew teachers available to teach girls might be influenced by the *Haskalah* movement, my grandfather took it upon himself to be her tutor. By the time she was finished, she was not only fluent in *lashon hakodesh*, she was also learned in *Chumash* and *Tanach*, and was even able to understand some *Gemara*. She used to write her father-in-law letters in perfect *lashon hakodesh*, to his initial surprise and perpetual delight. I remember my husband's surprise, many years later in New York, when one day he saw my elderly mother perusing a page of his just-written *chiddushim* on *Gemara*, which he had left for a few minutes on a table. "Why didn't *you* ever learn to read *sefarim*?" he teased me at the time.

My grandfather was a very strict parent, and he made sure he was never disturbed while learning. My mother was the only one of the five girls in the house who was allowed to enter his study at any time. When she was older, she was also entrusted with managing his accounts in his many silent partnerships in firms all over town.

While she was learning Jewish subjects, my mother also managed to acquire a very respectable level of knowledge in the liberal arts, as well as in Yiddish and Russian literature, and she often contributed many educated opinions to the discussions my father had with some of his business associates or the other widely varied guests my parents used to entertain. The best times for watching her were when my educated Aunt Sarah would come for a visit. I used to look

forward to the hours after dinner when my aunt was over, just to see her and my mother in full debate. By then, I was old enough to catch an inkling of the subjects under discussion and not to be dismayed by the intensity of the arguments.

And yet, despite all her erudition, my mother in all her life never missed a *Minchah* and always said her daily *kapittel Tehillim*. She was the same woman who would eventually be able to make the transition from a life of society, charity, wealth and strict adherence to *mitzvos* to a life of dirt and isolation in a Siberian *kolkhoz*, as if all she were doing was changing shoes to go out in the rain and mud, because "when Hashem wills it, that's what you have to do."

Both my grandfathers were great *talmidei chachamim*. My father's parents lived in Grodno, about three-and-a-half hours away by train. I liked both grandfathers, but I felt more at ease with my mother's father. He was more affable, and though he was very strict with me, he always had a ready smile. He was tall and slim, with a milk-white beard. Friendly, outspoken and outgoing, he was at the same time rock-hard in his principles. In those qualities, he was similar to my father.

My paternal grandfather was entirely different. He was of medium height, stout and slightly bent, and his beard remained red until he passed away at the age of eighty-four. He was good-hearted but serious and reserved. He spoke little, seldom smiled and never laughed. His brown eyes were like two burning coals; with one penetrating look, he could appraise a person even before he had a chance to utter a word. I was always awed by him.

I was about five years old when he once came for a visit. It was a big event in our household, because he seldom travelled. The atmosphere in the house was electric as our

two families gathered for dinner in our apartment.

Both my grandfathers respected each other very much, and for this occasion, my mother's father even put on his *Shabbosdike kapote*, his *Shabbos* attire. It was still early in the day, and I remember my father, Uncle Yaakov and both grandfathers sitting at the table in the dining room. My mother told me to leave the room so as not to disturb their talk. I left the room, but I still had to see what was going on, so I stood between the folds of the drapes, just outside the dining room door, from where I could observe without being seen. Their conversation, though I understood almost none of it, had me completely absorbed.

What do two big *talmidei chachamim*, for whom learning Torah is the very air they breathe, do when they meet? After a short inquiry about health and a few general questions, which came mostly from my Lida grandfather, with my Grodno grandfather just inclining his head with an occasional murmur, the conversation turned to the only topic in which they were interested—Torah.

Here my Grodno grandfather didn't spare words. Sentences started to fly across the table, growing louder and louder by the minute. My Grodno grandfather's deep baritone voice dominated the room. My tall, thin Lida grandfather stood up a few times, waving his right hand, and dismissed his opponent's arguments. My stern Grodno grandfather sat still the whole time, not shifting a shoulder, only waving his hands. He had a habit of keeping his eyes lowered when listening or talking and then abruptly raising his head, his piercing eyes looking straight at you, which would make most people stop in the middle of a sentence, as if caught in a blunder.

My Lida grandfather's high-pitched voice couldn't match

the strong baritone, but evidently his arguments could, because at one point my Grodno grandfather let his hand fall on the table.

"No, no, it is not so!" he exclaimed.

"What you say is just the opposite of what it means," my Lida grandfather heatedly answered. His face inflamed, his look excited, he kept repeating, "I'll show you the place where you err!"

"Let's take a look," my Grodno grandfather concurred.

That they were challenging each other, each trying to prove his point, I didn't understand. I shivered from fright. Just a short while before, they were so happy to see each other and now they were screaming and fighting! Why?

My father and uncle had been listening intently to the discussion. Every few minutes, one or the other rushed to the study, bringing in one big *sefer* after another for the older men until the table was piled high. Covers were flipped open, pages turning fast, fingers pointing.

"Here, here it is."

"This is in connection with something else!"

Another *sefer* was spread open, more pages were turned, and voices rose still higher.

"Oh!"

"Look!"

Unable to understand what was going on, I was frightened, upset and sad.

Dinner was served much later than usual, and when I was told to take my seat, I was afraid to look at either of my grandfathers. Though now the conversation was quiet and animated, my holiday was spoiled.

I remember asking my father later, "Papa, the Lida Zeide doesn't like the Grodno Zeide?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because he was screaming at him so much."

My father smiled. "When two *talmidei chachamim* have a Torah discussion they can get carried away," he explained. "One is saying what he thinks and the other is saying something else, and they want to find out who is right. This is not screaming."

"When you learn Torah you sing so nicely and you never scream," I objected.

"When Zeide learns he also sings," my father reassured me.

"When the Lida Zeide learns he talks to himself, but he never sings," I insisted.

I made this statement with conviction, because I often watched him when he was learning. Indeed, whenever I think of my mother's father from the days of my early childhood, two things stand out in my memory. First, I see his room dominated by the big *sefarim shrank* and the *shtender* with a candle in the right corner, and Zeide standing, both elbows on the *shtender*, bent over the open *Gemara*. He never sat when he learned, and he only learned by daylight or bent over the light of a candle, so that his cap was often charred and half a dozen had to be kept in reserve.

I also have many fond memories of the times he would make a *siyum*. For fifty years, each morning after *davening*, he gave a *shiur* at the same table, in the same place, in the same *shul*.

"Be a good girl," he would say to me sometimes. "I have a *siyum* tomorrow." The reward was an unwrapped piece of cake, which he would take out of his *kapote* pocket or, in the winter, from his ankle-long, beaver-lined fur coat. The cake was "powdered" on all sides with sniffing tobacco from his

pocket, but none of Sorel the Cook's "masterpieces" tasted as good as this cake. It had the *kedushah* of Torah in it.

The last three or four years of his life, my grandfather weakened a little, and my mother was able to persuade him not to walk all the way to town but to *daven* in the *shul* near our home.

Two days before he was *niftar*, he woke up in the morning unable to recognize anyone, but still able to speak. He even tried to get out of bed. The doctor diagnosed a mild stroke. Those were the only two days in his entire life that he was sick. He was eighty-six years old. His *levayah* began at ten in the morning and ended at four in the afternoon. An endless succession of *hespedim* concluded eighty years of total immersion in Torah.

CHAPTER 3

Trouble at the Factory

MY FATHER WAS ALWAYS EXTREMELY ORGANIZED AND punctual. Every activity had its own time and place. Not a minute was wasted, and as a result, a lot was accomplished without rushing or undue tension.

He was an early riser. His day started at five o'clock in the morning with two hours of learning. At seven o'clock, after a glass of tea, he was the first in the *shul*, which was on the factory premises next to the office. Work at the factory started at seven, work in the office at eight. The Jewish workers who joined the *minyan* were paid for the hour of prayer as if they had been at work. From eight o'clock to ten o'clock, my father met with the foreman of each department. At ten o'clock, he ate breakfast. From ten-thirty until twelve o'clock, he took care of the business mail.

At noon, the factory siren would signal the lunch break for the workers, which lasted until one o'clock. This hour was often my father's and uncle's busiest time. Besides the business mail, there was always mail from institutions and private people asking for help, donations or loans, as well as thank-you letters and acknowledgments for sums received. Money orders for charity were always sent privately, not from the business, as charities were not tax deductible. In addition to the letters, the business subscribed to four daily newspapers, two Yiddish and two Polish. My father scanned all four quickly. In business, it was important to be informed about events taking place, especially in the last few years before the war when the Polish government waged its own war against Jewish businesses. Uncle Yaakov never had any patience for this. He would wait anxiously until my father finished, his interest in knowing the essential points expressed in a single "*Nu?*"

Often, the hour was taken up checking and rechecking the *Shulchan Aruch*, when my father and uncle had the slightest question about the propriety of some business dealing. They remembered their mother's expressed wish that their grandparents and great-grandparents should be proud of them. I am sure they were.

At two-thirty, my father and uncle returned home for dinner. Again, organization paid off, and business didn't interfere with family. My father was rarely five or ten minutes late.

After a short nap following dinner, my father's hectic schedule resumed, especially in the last few years before the war, when the factory was working two or three shifts.

In Poland, there was a six-day work week, with Sunday as the official day of rest. The Poles, being devout Catholics,

were very scrupulous about this, and policemen patrolled the streets on Sunday to ensure that no store or shop was open. The Jewish stores were closed on Saturday as well, but unfortunately, many Jewish factories were open and operating on Saturday. Our factory was the only one among thirty industries in Lida which ran on a five-day work week and was closed on *Shabbos*, although the majority of the workers were Poles.

This was not an easy thing to accomplish, and it was done by special arrangement with the Polish workers at the time the factory was established in 1899. According to the plan, the work shifts on Monday to Thursday were extended for two hours to make up for the extra day, with work ending at six o'clock in the afternoon instead of at four o'clock. On Fridays in the winter, work would stop at two o'clock in the afternoon, with hours gradually added as the days grew longer. The arrangement worked smoothly for thirty-five years.

In the middle Thirties, the steady rise of Nazism in Germany sparked a corresponding rise in anti-Semitism in neighboring Poland, and the entire situation was destabilized. At that time, a Pole from Lida, a trade school principal named Brylski, decided to run for a vacant seat in the Polish Senate, the *Sejm*, in Warsaw. Lida, as an industrial town, had a considerable number of workers, and Brylski maneuvered himself into the position of leader of the workers' party. During the election campaign, he made frequent appearances at the factories, organized workers' meetings, delivered demagogic, inflammatory speeches, made numerous promises and engaged in all sorts of dubious campaign chicanery. As a result, he was elected.

Anti-Semitic speeches by Polish senators, including Brylski,

became a routine feature of the Polish Senate. The more venomous the speeches, the more popular they were with the Polish population and the more worthy of extensive coverage in the Polish press. The smallest Jewish deviation from the norm became an excuse for harassment.

One day, during lunch hour, my father opened the *Gazeta Polska*, the official government newspaper, the most prestigious paper in Poland. He was struck by a screaming headline in inch-high letters over a full page article: JEWISH FACTORY IN LIDA FORCING POLISH WORKERS TO OBSERVE JEWISH SABBATH. The word "forcing" was in even bolder print. The bulk of the article consisted of verbatim quotes from a two-hour speech delivered on the floor of the Senate by Brylski, in which he quoted long passages from the infamous Czarist fabrication *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and from Goebbels' *Der Sturmer*, the official Nazi organ. Using my father's factory as an example, the new senator exposed the "danger" which "threatened" Poland from the dominance of Jewish parasites, feeding on the blood and sweat of unsuspecting and innocent Polish people, and he presented a plan to save and liberate Polish industry and trade from the Jewish grip.

Brylski wasn't the only one. The entire Polish government started a campaign to "de-Judaize" what they termed the Jewish monopoly. Heavy taxes and senseless regulations put a heavy strain on big and small trade alike. Polish stores started to crop up like mushrooms after a rain. Big signs proclaiming, "*Swoj do swego*, each to his own," invited the gentile customer to buy in the new shops. More often than not, these stores were financed and subsidized by the government, because the Polish inexperience in business produced nothing but losses.

My father decided to take the initiative. He called a

meeting of the workers in his factory the very same day the article appeared, while Brylski was still in Warsaw. In a few sentences, my father explained the issue. He stressed that because the agreement about the longer workday in order to have a two-day weekend had been made so many years before, long before most of the current workers had joined the plant, he wanted to put the issue to a new vote. All the workers, without hesitation, voted for the status quo. They said the arrangement was to their benefit, Jewish Sabbath or not, because it gave them an extra day off without any loss of earnings.

Triumphant after his initial speech and the write-up it had received, Brylski proudly entered the lunchroom a few days later while the workers were resting and smoking after the meal.

"Stay on after work," he ordered his constituents. "We'll have a meeting."

A long battle ensued in which the factory workers defended my father. It was hard for Brylski to digest the notion that Polish workers would defend their Jewish boss.

"It is not for the boss, it's for ourselves," they argued. "We want the longer weekend."

Brylski was not so easily deterred. He sent hordes of building inspectors, labor inspectors and fire inspectors to our factory, but no one could find any violations. Our wages were the best, working conditions were good, and relations with the workers were excellent. But constant hammering can break even the hardest steel. Brylski's aim was to provoke a strike. He put together a list of outrageous demands, and a delegation of workers, stammering and with lowered eyes, presented it to my father and uncle.

As Brylski had planned, the strike began during the

height of the busy season. Still, in spite of the difficulties caused by the strike, many needy Jewish workers (and some needy Polish workers as well) were secretly paid their usual salaries by my father during the strike.

A few times during the following weeks, groups of three or four Polish workers came to the house under cover of night to beg forgiveness and plead with my father and uncle to start the factory running again.

"The only way," my father answered, "is to submit a declaration, signed by Senator Brylski, that he and you withdraw all demands."

Under pressure from the workers, Brylski was left with no choice. He signed the declaration.

CHAPTER 4

The First Address in Lida

WHEN I THINK OF MY FATHER AND UNCLE YAAKOV, I often wonder how two brothers so entirely different in every detail—in nature and in looks, in habits and in tastes—could be as attached to each other as Siamese twins. My father was organized, composed, patient and calm, while Uncle Yaakov was absentminded and impulsive. He was always rushing, always forgetting things such as keys, wallets and umbrellas. Indeed, whenever Uncle Yaakov returned from one of his infrequent trips, the first thing he did was rush to call the hotel where he had stayed and ask for something he had left behind. Often, just upon hearing his name, the person on the other end of the line would assure him, "Yes, yes, Mr. Shapiro, we have it. It's taken care of."

Uncle Yaakov didn't like to travel and left all business

trips to my father. Once a year, though, he would travel abroad to seek treatment for arthritis and gout in the best spas of Europe.

The two brothers did have a few features in common. They were both good-hearted, extremely righteous, compassionate and charitable.

While my father and Uncle Yaakov spent their whole day together in the factory, they went their separate ways in the evening. Uncle Yaakov, being smart, logical and objective, was often asked to arbitrate disputes between businessmen in his spare time. In addition, he was actively involved in many charitable organizations and regularly attended meetings which kept him busy most evenings during the week. Extremely generous by nature, he often co-signed promissory notes for these organizations, and every other month or so, the business duly paid off such a note.

My father, on the other hand, would spend most evenings at home, tending to the needs of the *orchim* who frequented our house. During the week, the steady ones were *yeshivah* boys, as there were no dormitories in those days and most of the boys ate with private families. Years later, in America, I met two of the *yeshivah* boys who used to come to us for meals. One was a *rosh yeshivah* in New York, the other a rabbi in a town in Massachusetts. Upon learning who I was "from home," they both told me how eagerly they would await their assigned days at our house. The good meals, my father's warmth and friendliness, and my mother's attention had made them feel welcome and at home.

Many *rabbanim* who visited our town, either for private reasons or on behalf of their *kehillos*, would come to our house straight from the station, often staying for several days. And almost all the visiting rabbis and *roshei yeshivah* would at

least be our guests for dinner. *Meshulachim* from various institutions and *yeshivos* also knew that the first address in Lida was the Shapiro home.

A number of illustrious personages who visited with us stand out in my mind, among them Rav Avraham Trop, the *rosh yeshivah* of Radun, Rav Mendel Zaks, the Chafetz Chaim's son-in-law, and Rav Karelitz, the *rav* of Lachva and the brother of the Chazon Ish, who would come to Lida on community business and stay with us for two weeks. I also remember my father's and uncle's enjoyment of the yearly visits of Rav Yechezkel Ehrlach, the *mashgiach* of the famous Lubliner Yeshivah. He had an unusually long, wide beard, and he always arrived on a Thursday and stayed over *Shabbos*. Departing Sunday morning, he would invariably say that he had enjoyed the time spent in our house no less than the generous gift for the *yeshivah*. Another frequent guest was Rav Aharon Rabinowitz, our own *rav* of Lida, who would often stop by to discuss Torah with my father; he was usually accompanied by one or both *roshei yeshivah* from the Lida Yeshivah, Rav Mordechai Shmuckler and Rav Yaakov Neiman (who later founded Yeshivath Ohr Yisrael in Petach Tikvah). On all of those evenings, the sound of Torah talk and discussion would fill the house.

On *Pesach* and *Sukkos*, our *orchim* were Jewish soldiers doing their military service in Lida. In most cases, these were men who had been denied permission to return to their families for the holidays. The only concession the Polish authorities made was to permit them to go for a meal to a Jewish home in town.

My father's famous hospitality was rivalled by his equally famous generosity. His sympathetic heart and helping hand for every cause and person in need were widely known. But

the amounts he gave anonymously far exceeded what was known. *Mattan beseisser* was the real *chessed*, the real *mitzvah* he pursued. It often seemed to me that the driving force behind his enormous capacity for work and achievement was the desire to share and give.

My father's prime interest was assistance to *yeshivos*, *roshei yeshivah* and *bnei Torah*. Lithuania, especially the Polish part, was known for its many *yeshivos*–Mir, Radun, Kamenitz, Kletzk, Novardok (Novogrodek), Baranovich, Vilna, Slonim and many others. The Polish government did not contribute a single *grosh* to any of the *yeshivos*, nor to the Jewish hospital, orphanages, old-age homes and all the other Jewish institutions. All of these were supported by the *kehillah*, the representative body of the Jewish population in every town, and by private donations. The main part of the budgets of these *yeshivos* was covered by private contributions. Having a share in the Torah of these great *yeshivos* was my father's greatest pleasure.

My father also had a few reliable "informers" to help him distribute his private charities. Whenever there was a sick child, a mother hospitalized, a father unable to work, a daughter to be married off with no dowry, or any similar circumstance, money was sent readily without revealing the donor.

When singled out as an example, my father always replied that he was only the agent, the middleman. The Almighty had entrusted him with wealth, and he had to carry out his responsibilities. In all of these matters Uncle Yaakov was a full partner. My father was only the more active one.

CHAPTER 5

Fire Insurance

"IF THERE WERE A FEW MORE JEWS LIKE THE SHAPIROS from Lida, it would have been easier to live in this world," Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzinski once remarked to Rav Mendel Zaks, the Chafetz Chaim's son-in-law. Rav Zaks repeated these words to Rabbi Shmuel Orenstein, who passed them on to me many years later in New York. This was but one example of the great esteem in which my father was held by the *gedolim* of his time.

A special relationship existed between my father and the saintly Chafetz Chaim *zatzal*. I don't remember when it started, but I do remember that every few months my father would announce in the morning, "I am going to Radun."

Radun, the small town where the Chafetz Chaim lived, was fourteen kilometers from Lida, on the road to Vilna, and

a bus would pass twice a day just outside our property. My father would take this bus to Radun and return several hours later.

Though my father was always open and communicative, he never divulged the contents of his conversations with the Chafetz Chaim. I do remember once overhearing my father tell Uncle Yaakov that, when he had come in, the Chafetz Chaim had asked his family members not to disturb him because he now had a *tayeren gast*, a very dear guest. My father did not say this to boast, of course, but to stress the warmth and humility of the Chafetz Chaim. Nevertheless, if the Chafetz Chaim referred to my father as a "dear guest" he probably had reason to do so. I think the following incident can, to a certain degree, demonstrate it.

Our factory, with its huge ovens and clouds of sparks and flames bursting from ten-story chimneys, was considered a potential fire hazard. Insurance premiums for enterprises like ours were very high, and for ten years, the only fire insurance we carried was the nominal amount required by the government. All three insurance agents in our town couldn't persuade my father and Uncle Yaakov to take out an insurance policy.

"It is insured," my father would tell them.

Periodically, they would come and try again, only to hear the same answer. Thinking that we must have taken out a policy with some out-of-town company, they insisted on knowing who held our policy.

My father pointed to the sky.

Only their great respect for him restrained them from terming my father's response crazy. Eventually, they gave up.

I remember the faraway look in my father's eyes when he explained his confidence even though he had inadequate

insurance. "Give the amount you have to pay for the policy to *tzeddakah*," the Chafetz Chaim had told him, "and I assure you there will be no fire." This amount was, of course, in addition to all the charities my father and Uncle Yaakov were giving already.

This made a deep impression on me for two reasons. One was my father's unquestioning, without-the-slightest-shadow-of-a-doubt belief that the Chafetz Chaim's assurance was more than enough. Second was my firm belief that the Chafetz Chaim would not have undertaken to protect a business unless it was conducted on the highest level of justice, integrity and business ethics, as well as serving as a source of support for countless Torah institutions, students, families in distress, the sick and every other needy cause.

CHAPTER 6

Lessons in Life

I ALWAYS ENJOYED THE COMPANY OF ADULTS, THOUGH I was often just a silent onlooker. I had friends, of course, and I enjoyed children's games as well, but nothing compared to the atmosphere in our house. The openness, warmth, understanding and communication, the broad interests, the political and philosophical discussions, all of these permeated with a profound, unshakable faith, were the nourishment of my childhood. My parents made themselves available to me, and the worlds they and other adults opened to me I found far more interesting than playing with children my own age.

My father's knowledge was inexhaustible, be it on the subject of Torah, *gedolim* stories or secular matters. During the frequent visits by *roshei yeshivah* and *rabbanim*, long

discussions on Talmudic subjects echoed throughout the house.

My father was also extremely creative, and when we expanded our business and added new buildings, my father made the blueprints himself. At first, it was simple, one-story buildings of no special difficulty, but when my father and Uncle Yaakov decided to erect a four-story warehouse for the finished agricultural machines, the blueprints became complicated indeed. My father learned the basics of design from a professional magazine on architecture to which he subscribed, but his own inventor's intuition took him far beyond. He designed the building himself, inventing an easier way to bring the heavy machines up to the top floor than the hoists then in use. It was a device similar to an escalator, an invention as yet unheard of in Poland. Only a licensed architect could present a plan to the city architect for approval, but none of the architects my father approached would risk their reputations by presenting my father's "outlandish" proposal. Therefore, he took it to the city architect himself, and after a few minor corrections, the plans were approved.

As I grew older, I used to spend a great deal of time wandering around the factory buildings, fascinated by every detail. Whenever possible, I would follow my father and listen to his technical discussions with the engineer about new models, improvements and so on. If not for a government requirement to employ a licensed engineer, my father's knowledge could have fully sufficed. Uncle Yaakov, however, could hardly distinguish a bolt from a nut, even after four decades in the business. He was more interested in the commercial side of the business than the technical.

Once, during one of my visits to the factory office, there

was excited talk about a prominent person who was coming to the factory, but when the gentleman finally arrived, a poor man came in right after him and asked for a donation. My father greeted the poor man first and only afterward did he greet the important guest.

Undoubtedly, my father noticed the puzzled expression on my face, because during dinner he brought up the subject. He explained that the poor man had been humiliated enough simply because of his predicament and that the honor of being greeted first had made him feel better.

"You should never be misled by external luster," my father said. "Look at the human side, and be very careful not to hurt anyone's feelings. If the important person is really important he would understand, and if he doesn't his importance is an empty shell."

My father took advantage of this and similar situations to teach me values and righteous behavior. Lectures and sermons are often forgotten, but teaching by example is far more lasting.

When I was about twelve years old, I got a pair of new wine-colored buckskin shoes, pointy with a wide strap. My mother was a little hesitant about buying them, thinking they might be more suitable if I were older, but seeing my eagerness, she bought them anyway.

I remember wearing the new shoes as I practiced my piano scales, while my mother was out attending to an errand. All of a sudden, I heard a beautiful voice through the open window. It was not uncommon in our town for talented poor people to try to earn some money by singing or playing the violin in back yards and courtyards, hoping that a few small coins would be thrown to them from the surrounding windows. I looked out my window and saw a short woman

with black hair, pouring out her misery and pain in soft, lyrical tones, singing from the depths of her heart.

I ran outside and stood in front of her, mesmerized, but she didn't see me. She sang with her eyes closed, her face turned upward. Her dress was worn but clean, but when I looked down, I shuddered. Remnants of shoes were tied, sole to uppers, with string, and her bare toes were uncovered. I quickly bent down, unbuckled the straps of my prized shoes and gave them to her. She put them on. Her mouth opened in a smile—and my eyes filled with tears. She thanked me and left, and I started back to the house. I don't remember what language the song was in, but her thanks were in Yiddish.

I was holding the knob of the porch door to go inside when, for some reason, my father came home early from the factory, perhaps to get something or to look up some passage in a *sefer*.

"Why did you leave the house without shoes?" he asked me. "It is not decent."

I kept my eyes down to hide the tears.

"I-I didn't go out without shoes," I stammered. "I had them on, but I gave them away." And quickly, to cover up my confusion and forestall my father's questions, I told him what had happened.

My father listened until I was finished. Then he told me to put on other shoes and come to the dining room, where he would wait for me. With the same patience he showed me when I was small, he now disregarded the urgent business that awaited him in his office and took the opportunity to discuss the importance of *tzeddakah*. If someone's misery had moved me to tears, that was the moment that had to be seized. At that moment, there was nothing more important to my father than to talk to me about giving *tzeddakah*.

"You have to know that the manner in which it is given is important," he told me. "If you have only two bites of bread and a hungry man stretches out his hand, you should give him one. Otherwise, he may starve to death."

"And if I have only one?" I asked.

"Then you break the one bite in half."

Such words are remembered forever. My father wanted to stress that the real needs of those who ask should be met accordingly.

All subjects were interesting and fulfilling when I discussed them with my father. "Papa, I wish you were my teacher in history and geography. You know so much more than the teachers in school," I told my father once when, checking on my school progress, he asked me about unfamiliar places and historical facts. His photographic memory retained every bit of information heard, seen or read, and he combined it all with logical analysis, deep insight, practical conclusions and a profound psychological approach to people and issues. His compassion and love for people were unparalleled. He was like a perfect, multifaceted diamond, each facet shining with its own brilliance.

If I had written down all my father's teachings, it would have made a wonderful book on ethics. In our town there were secular schools only, public and private, which all the children attended. When I mention today that I attended a secular school, eyebrows are raised. But my deep belief is that no school could have given me more *hashkafah* and religious conviction than the atmosphere and example I experienced in my parents' home. And not only from my parents, but from the models I had in the whole family.

We were once gathered in my father's sister Julia's house. At that time, his other sister Tania's husband Moishe, the

"joker" in the family, said, "We can talk about anything but cheese. I smell chicken roasting in the kitchen." Considering the seriousness given to every matter of religious observance in our family, his remark was almost closer to the truth than a joke.

What I absorbed in my childhood and youth penetrated my whole being, my bones and my veins. It carried me through the horrors of our Siberian exile and the tragic realization upon our return that not even the ashes of our whole family could be traced. It carried me through the hardships of rebuilding a shattered life, along with new disappointments and traumas. It stood like a massive pillar on which I could lean, as a source of ever-renewing hope that tomorrow the sun would shine more brightly.

BOOK TWO

A Road Paved with Ice

CHAPTER 7

Our Fate Is Sealed

WOJNA! WOJNA! WOJNA! WAR! WAR! WAR! THIS ONE word repeated three times set the world on fire. The words were pronounced, after a long silence, on Polish radio at five o'clock in the morning on Friday, September 1, 1939.

Ten days earlier, large posters plastered on every available surface had announced the general mobilization of all Polish military forces, and from that moment on, a choking uneasiness, a cold shiver, a feeling of predestined doom had overwhelmed us. There was no escape now. We felt as if we were locked in a small cubicle with a sagging ceiling liable to collapse at any moment and bury us beneath it.

Hitler had made no secret of his plans; long before the outbreak of war, his craving for blood and *Lebensraum*

(expanded living space for the German people) had been distinctly spelled out in his book *Mein Kampf* and his fiery speeches. Nor did he bother to conceal his specific objectives, which included, among many others, to exterminate the Jewish race, to establish the dominance of the "pure" German race, to eradicate the forces of Communism and to recapture the Polish Corridor. The League of Nations had awarded Poland this narrow strip of land after the First World War to allow it access to the Baltic Sea, thus cutting off part of Germany from the rest of the country. Every time a German wanted to travel from Berlin to Koeningsburg, he had to have his documents checked by Polish customs officials, and to the Germans, more than any other people, this was particularly galling.

Those few kilometers of land gave Hitler a convenient pretext to start on his quest to fulfill his broader goals, to conquer Europe, demolish Russia and rule the world. When it became clear that war was imminent, we knew that Poland, the geographical stepping-stone to Russia, would not be spared.

For a number of years before the war, the Germans had carried out their slogan "armaments instead of butter" to the letter, raising taxes and stockpiling arms. Poland would be the first target, a small nation to consume on the way to Russia. This was expected. What was not expected was the sudden rapprochement between the two demons Hitler and Stalin, when their respective foreign ministers Ribbentrop and Molotov shook hands and signed their infamous non-aggression pact.

Poland, crushed and in flames, ceased to exist sixteen days after the outbreak of war. Hitler satisfied himself temporarily with western Poland, while Stalin marched unopposed

into eastern Poland after two weeks of German bombardment. For the Germans, it was a small price to pay for Russian non-interference in the German campaign to conquer western and northern Europe.

Though the farthest Polish town from Germany, my hometown of Lida was one of the first to be bombed. At seven o'clock in the morning, two hours after the outbreak of war, sirens were already screaming and airplanes roaring overhead. Explosions were heard from several directions.

We had a very good shortwave radio, and a few days earlier, while spinning the dial, I had accidentally intercepted an order given in German, "The first three cities to be bombed are Cracow, Gdynia and Lida."

Cracow had been the historic capital of Poland from medieval times until Poland was dismembered in 1793 by the imperial predators Russia, Austria and Prussia (the forerunner of modern Germany). When Poland regained independence at the close of the First World War in 1918, the capital was moved to Warsaw. Nevertheless, Cracow retained prime strategic importance because of its close proximity to Austria and the military bases and airfields in its vicinity.

Gdynia was the only Polish port on the Baltic Sea, located at the tip of the Polish Corridor, that narrow strip of land which divided Germany into two parts.

Lida, close to the Russian border, had two military regiments stationed there, one infantry and one air force. It had a big airfield, an air force pilot training school, hangars and airplane repair shops. In addition, Lida was an industrial center. Among other things, there was a big rubber factory, which had been leased by the Polish government for the last six months before the war and dedicated exclusively to the production of gas masks.

The military bases around our town suffered heavy damage during the German bombardment, much of the destruction due to sabotage by the numerous German spies who infested Poland. One such case of sabotage took us all by surprise. It involved a certain Polish air force captain who was in charge of ordering brass parts for the airplanes from my father and Uncle Yaakov. The airplane repair shops were our occasional customers, and this captain was their purchasing agent. I distinctly remember the inflated pride and aloofness, characteristic of most Poles, with which he used to enter our office. His manner was unfailingly rude and impertinent.

On the second day of the bombing, Saturday, September 2, 1939, three German airplanes were shot down by Polish anti-aircraft guns after the airbase in Lida was already in flames, and the body of the very same Polish captain was found in one of the downed German planes. It was no wonder that the Germans had known the exact locations of their targets.

On September 17, 1939, Russian troops, preceded by hundreds of armored trucks, tanks and all kinds of military hardware entered our town. In the beginning, many townspeople greeted them with a sense of relief that Lida would at least avoid German occupation. In the sixteen-day war, the center of the town itself hadn't been damaged at all. The main bombing was directed at the outlying military bases and the industrial area, in which we lived. Fortunately, although the bases were destroyed, not one bomb in the industrial area hit its target. The beneficiaries of this good fortune, however, were not us but the Soviets.

Shortly after they took possession of our territory, the Soviet system was put into effect. The nightmare of Stalin's regime soon started to show its true face. Stores were

emptied, and long lines, extending out to the sidewalks, Soviet style, materialized wherever anything of value was still available. Among the shoppers were many Soviet military men and their wives, who were astonished to find hundreds of stores filled with all kinds of merchandise in a small town such as ours. "Just for presents," they used to say to rationalize their sharklike appetites. Even after the stores were emptied, the owners were ordered to keep them open, and since no new goods became available, they were accused of hoarding. Many storekeepers were indeed guilty of "stealing" their own goods from their own stores and selling them secretly for black market prices.

The N.K.V.D. (National Commissariat [Ministry] for Interior Affairs) and K.G.B. (Commissariat for Government Security) became involved. Why bother buying when confiscating was easier? As a result, a horde of commissars appeared on the scene, assisted by members of the underground Polish Communist Party, who had been imprisoned under the old democratic Polish government.

When the Soviets opened the prison doors for them, the Polish Communists had felt like heroes and partners to the holy cause, but they didn't enjoy their freedom for long. After a very short while, they were arrested by their Soviet liberators and charged with treason. "If you were real Communists," the accusation went, "why didn't you overthrow your government?" I had the opportunity to meet some of these erstwhile Polish Communists in Siberia, after the amnesty for Polish prisoners who had survived. Their idealism had long since evaporated, and their new and only goal was to reach the free world.

I remember the visit of the first two commissars who came to our factory. One claimed to be some kind of

technical expert. The other was in charge of the financial side of the proposed deal. They were polite, courteous and urbane, obviously having been instructed to act that way. They asked to see the owner and the plant.

The factory was still in full operation, by order of the Commissariat and in accordance with typical Soviet waste, using up raw materials and confiscating the products of industry. My father and the main engineer showed the commissars around, explaining every detail of the operation. The commissars gave the impression of clients interested in purchasing the plant. After they finished their inspection of the plant, they went back into the office and started their inspection there.

Our office consisted of three rooms on the ground floor of a new four-story building. The first was a big room, its width divided by a long counter. Behind the counter was a row of desks, wall shelves, file cabinets and, in a corner, the steel vault. In front of the counter, at the far end, were two doors. One door led to the office shared by my father and Uncle Yaakov. The other led to the office shared by my cousin Doctor Simcha Eiges and the head accountant.

At that time, I was working in the office, and I was there when the commissars and my father returned from their inspection of the plant. As they began their inspection of the office, the "financial expert" took over. He didn't even bother to examine the books. Instead, he asked for the keys to the vault and the combination to open it. In the vault, we kept notes, stocks, policies, cash and personal items, such as my mother's and my aunt's jewelry and family heirlooms. The commissar took out every item, made a detailed list, put everything back, folded the list and put it in his pocket.

"Not a thing may be taken from the safe," he said,

courteous but firm. We knew what he meant.

The commissars also went into the other two rooms of the office and gave the same order. "Everything must be left in place."

There was also another door off the main entrance, and passing through, the two commissars encountered a large room with rows of benches. On the far wall stood a narrow cabinet with a fringed velvet curtain. In front of it, on a raised platform, was a pulpit, also covered with a fringed velvet cover.

"What is this?" they asked with an expression of bewilderment. "What do you do in this room?"

"It is a *molelnia*," answered my father. "A synagogue."

"A synagogue in a factory?" They burst out laughing.

With an air of skepticism, the commissars started a thorough inspection of the room. They raised the curtain on the *aron kodesh,* removed the cover of the *bimah*, opened the drawers and checked the shelves, but all they found were *siddurim* and other *sefarim*.

After the inspection at the factory, they invited themselves to the house. Since it was dinnertime anyway, I went along. As we entered the house, the maid was setting the table, and we had no choice but to ask them to join us for dinner. During the meal, the commissars played the role of charming guests, complimenting the food, discussing various subjects and admiring our perfect Russian accents. Despite her profound sense of foreboding, my mother played the part of the gracious hostess and participated in the conversation as calmly and intelligently as she did with more pleasant, genuine guests.

The Russians' behavior surprised us. We knew we were dealing with the devil incarnate, so why the pretense? It was

surely intended to confuse us, to make us less cautious, as if to say, "You see, we are human. We'll not do you any harm." But when they finally left, we weren't all that confused. Rather, we were deeply worried. We sensed what was going to happen.

That same evening, my father and my uncle took the *Sefer Torah* from the *shul* in the factory to one of the *shuls* in town for safekeeping. Fortunately, the commissars had not put it on their list.

Two days later, six commissars arrived, our two "experts" and four others in N.K.V.D. uniforms. There were no more smiles now, but masks of gray stone and harsh words like sharp knives.

"According to the order of..."—and there followed a long litany of paragraphs and articles—"the Government of the Soviet Union is confiscating the plant, the house and all of their contents."

They gave us two weeks to vacate the apartments, ours and my uncle's, and only allowed us to take our personal belongings. Our fate was sealed.

CHAPTER 8

Confiscation and Arrest

IT WAS STILL POSSIBLE TO RUN, IF ONE WAS WILLING TO take a risk. But our family was so close-knit that one brother wouldn't leave without the other, nor one sister without the other. To make matters more complicated, Uncle Shmuel, a younger brother, had fled the Germans just a few weeks before and came to us with his wife, two children and his wife's parents, both eighty-seven years old. There was no other choice but to remain in Lida.

On the day we moved out of the house, two long lines of Polish and Jewish workers positioned themselves in protest at the gate.

"We will not let our bosses leave!" they yelled. "We want them here. They are like brothers to us!"

The workers blocked the way but were removed by force.

Three of them were arrested on the spot. What a spectacle this was for the Russians! Employees defending their blood-sucking employers? Unheard of! Finally, as a concession to the workers, the new bosses appointed my cousin Mendel, Uncle Yaakov's son, as manager of the plant, but fearing that an arrest would inevitably follow, Mendel escaped the next day to Vilna and from there to Kovno. Unfortunately, two years later, he shared the fate of most Kovno Jews at the hands of the Nazis.

After the Russians occupied eastern Poland, a contingent of Russian troops entered sovereign Lithuania as well. To mollify the Lithuanians for this invasion, they allowed Lithuania, which still had nominal independence, to annex the famous city of Vilna, known as "the Jerusalem of Lithuania." In medieval times, Vilna had belonged to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, as had Lida, Novogrodek and other towns in this part of northeastern Europe. In the fourteenth century, Lithuania had been joined to Poland following the marriage of Prince Jagiello of Lithuania and Queen Jadwiga of Poland, and at the end of the eighteenth century, after the dismemberment of Poland, it had come into the possession of Czarist Russia. After the First World War, when Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland had regained independence, Vilna and the neighboring towns became part of Poland. Kovno now became the capital of Lithuania, but Lithuania never gave up her claim to Vilna. And now that the Russians had allowed Lithuania to take back Vilna, it became the natural destination for many thousands of Jews who were fleeing the Germans.

The only road to Vilna from western Poland passed through our town of Lida, which was only ninety kilometers away. And so, tens of thousands of Jewish refugees streamed

through Lida on their way to Vilna. While Lida had originally been home to thirty thousand inhabitants, its population swelled to one hundred thousand or more during the period of the exodus. Countless Jewish refugees spent a few nights in Lida, sleeping in private homes, *shuls*, schools, even the streets, as they waited for the opportunity to cross the border. Many Lida residents also joined the exodus. At first, the Russians were lenient about border crossings, but after a while, they clamped down and many refugees were arrested.

The housing situation in Lida became desperate. Besides the thousands of refugees who needed a place during their brief stay in town, the Soviets had also requisitioned many apartments for themselves. Entire families were squeezed into one room, with the rest of the house occupied by the Soviet officials and their families, who had come along in the belief that Hitler would keep his word and the Soviet occupation would be permanent. The richer and more prominent families were put out of their homes altogether. Indeed, the lower a family's social standing, the less it suffered. And so, when we were ordered to move, it was next to impossible to find another apartment.

It took my father and uncle most of the two-week grace period before they came up with a "find" at the other end of town behind the tiny, cramped house of Rav Mordechai Shmuckler, one of the *roshei yeshivah* in town. It had two small rooms with a tiny kitchen, conveniences in the back yard and an entrance straight from the outside, which meant that the wind, rain and snow blew right into the middle of the tiny kitchen every time anyone opened the door. The outside was not even a street but a vegetable garden. Without enough space for his own large family, Rav Shmuckler had nonetheless offered us the little hut he had at the other end of his

garden. It looked like, and probably had been, a gardener's hut. With the same grace and dignity my mother had exhibited while running our big and elegant house, she now cooked the one-pot meals in the tiny, cramped kitchen.

My Uncle Shmuel and his family had better fortune. Having fled their town Suvalki a few days before the war started, right after the announcement of the general mobilization, my uncle had been able to bring a large part of the merchandise of his huge textile business and some of his furniture, which he deposited in one of our warehouses. He found a four-room apartment, as well as a big storefront with back rooms into which he transferred his merchandise just before the Soviets entered our town. Half a dozen of his salespeople, who had fled together with him, joined by another half a dozen locally-hired people, worked until exhaustion measuring, cutting and selling, liquidating as much of the inventory as possible before it would be confiscated.

Our machinery, though, stopped selling as soon as the war started. Wholesale business, our main line, died completely, since many of our customers were from abroad. In Europe, they were from Romania, Latvia and Lithuania, in South America, from Brazil and Argentina, where small agricultural establishments were using motorless machines like ours. In Poland itself, there was absolutely no interest in our products. Food, shoes and clothing were sought after, not ploughs, threshers or straw-cutters. And since such items couldn't be hidden or carried away under an overcoat, we were left with literally nothing at all when our factory was confiscated.

By the time we had to move, Uncle Yaakov's children, his son Mendel and daughter Sonia, with her husband Simchah

and their small child, had already fled to Vilna. (Simchah's father was the well-known *rav* Reb Henoch Eiges of Vilna. He was one of the *gedolei hador* and was considered the leading authority on divorce law.) As my parents and my uncle and aunt were inseparable, it left the five of us to fit into the new flat. There was barely enough room to stand or sit. One of us had to go to Uncle Shmuel's apartment every night to sleep. As we were allowed to take only our personal things, we weren't crowded by furniture, pictures, carpets, lamps or any of the other items which had surrounded me since my childhood and were so dear to me. But even our personal things needed much more space than the two tiny rooms could provide. We took some things to Uncle Shmuel, a valise or a carton went to one friend or another, and so our few remaining possessions found their places in several locations around town.

The packing was a very sad ordeal. Most of it was done by my father, myself and my father's two sisters on a visit from Grodno. My mother was always spared any physical strain. Being perfectly organized and orderly, she was only given the task of deciding which of the more valuable things had to be packed separately.

The thriving business in my uncle's "textile emporium" didn't last long. The confiscation order reached him when only a small part of his huge stock had been sold, but it still left him with a sizeable amount of Russian currency, *chervoncy*, which was pretty solid at the time.

Sharing was the rule in my father's family. If Uncle Shmuel had money, a part of it would naturally be given to his two older brothers. My father's two sisters Yocheved and Esther also received equal shares. They lived with their families in the town of Grodno, also occupied by the Soviets.

Though they were well off before the war, after the occupation they suffered the same misfortune we did.

When my father's two sisters came to visit from Grodno, it was a very sad reunion, indeed. How different from the joyous family reunions we had shared just a short while before! Was it just a nightmare, a bad dream? Was it possible that in the span of only three months our world could collapse?

We sat huddled, hands clasped in our laps, avoiding each other's eyes, unable to find words to say to each other. It wasn't only the material loss, it was the loss of our entire lives' work in every field, our striving, achieving and hoping. We felt suspended in the air, uprooted, afraid to think about tomorrow, about the next moment. The confiscations and evictions had come too suddenly, not giving us time for our new status to sink in. But under the Soviets, things can always get worse. Just when you think you've reached the bottom of a pit, you suddenly realize there is another, even deeper one into which they are ready, mercilessly, to throw you.

With an aching heart, I looked at my father. How worried and forlorn he was now. My dear father! How I adored him! I knew he wasn't worried about himself. He was concerned for my mother and me and the rest of the family. I also knew that, considering our uncertain future, he was particularly worried about me, his only child, since at the time I was twenty-two years old and not yet married. He was always so courageous, so energetic, so capable of handling any situation. Always full of hope and *bitachon*, a pillar of strength for the rest of the family.

My father's righteousness, his honesty, his love for people, his *midos tovos*, his good deeds, his ability to get along with people from all walks of life, were all unmatched. He was

liked, admired and respected by all who knew him or knew of him, except the N.K.V.D. For them, he was too prominent, too good a person. They had a special place for people such as my father. And so, my father was the first of the group of capitalists that had to be removed.

One winter afternoon, on January 7, 1940, three N.K.V.D. men carrying rifles with fixed bayonets entered our dwelling. A truck was waiting outside. They produced a document, and after reading the all too familiar, horrible paragraphs, they called in two other soldiers who had been waiting on the truck. Just as hired movers would do, they started carrying valises, cartons and trunks which were piled up in one of the two rooms. There had been no place to unpack them, and now they were being taken away. We stood motionless, as if hypnotized, and watched.

When they finished, one of them turned a page he was holding in his hand and called out, "Which of you is Eber? You'll come with us," he said. It was my father.

As if in a trance, my father took his overcoat and started moving toward the door.

Then one of them said, in a fit of humanity, or maybe sadism, "Say good-bye to your family, because you'll never see them again."

My mother fainted, my aunt ran to help her, my uncle froze. My father turned, but I knew he didn't see us. His eyes were overflowing with terror and tears.

I started to cry hysterically, "My father, my father! He is an angel. He hasn't hurt a fly in his life. All he ever did was help people. Why are you taking him?"

"If you don't stop, we'll arrest you, too," the N.K.V.D. men said.

I clung to my father's arm and reached out to kiss him, but

at that moment, he was brutally pushed out the door.

Sobbing bitterly, unaware of the fierce cold, I ran outside. There was another car behind the truck, the N.K.V.D.'s windowless "Black Maria." I saw how two of them pushed my father inside, climbed in behind him and slammed the door.

And so the door was shut on my father's meaningful and fruitful past, on his promising and hopeful future. It was slammed on all those happy years I had had the *zchus* and privilege to live and benefit from the wisdom, warmth and goodness of my father's unique personality, from the ethics he had taught me, not only with words but with deeds and examples. Would I truly never see him again?

CHAPTER 9

Like Wilted Leaves

NO MATTER HOW HARD I STRAIN MY MEMORY, I HAVE NO recollection of how and when I went back into the house and what happened during the rest of the day. I do remember seeing a dim, foggy, bluish-gray rectangle of the night sky through a window. I stared at it for a long time.

I looked at my mother. In the semi-darkness, I could see that her eyes were open, looking at the ceiling. She lay next to me, fully dressed as I was, quiet, not moving, not crying. To my left, I saw Aunt Gittel, sitting next to us in a chair.

"Yaakov," my aunt said quietly to her husband. "Go lie down for a while. Your staying up all night will not help anyone."

My uncle didn't answer but continued swaying and looking at the window, which was becoming gradually brighter,

announcing the birth of a new day. Finally, slowly, he turned from the window, unable to face the new day. He went to a little cabinet and took out his *tallis* and *tefillin*. He held them in his hands, as if not knowing what to do next, his mind far from the confines of the room.

"D-D-Dina," he said to me, stammering slightly as he always did when distraught or nervous. "G-go at once to Uncle Shmuel and warn him not to come to us. It is dangerous to be seen visiting the family of an arrested person."

I looked again at my mother. With such a heavy stone in my heart, I couldn't imagine how I could stand up or walk out of the house, but I felt I had to obey my uncle. My mother nodded, barely moving her lips. "Go," she whispered. I went.

The winter of 1940 was the coldest in memory. Temperatures reached thirty-eight to forty degrees below zero Celsius. People used to say that the Russians had replaced the shortage of food, fuel and other goods with Siberian cold.

It was a fifteen-minute walk from our place to Uncle Shmuel's. During the night, a fresh blanket of snow had covered everything in sight. A frozen fog obscured the way. Not a soul was on the street; it was too early for people to start the day. When I arrived at my uncle's house, they already knew. A former employee of ours, a devoted friend, had been on his way to visit us and, from a distance, had seen what was happening and rushed to my uncle to warn him. From the looks on their faces, I could tell they had spent the night the way we had. My Aunt Etie, always neat and elegantly dressed whatever the time of day, was disheveled and shivering, terrified that the N.K.V.D. would come and take her husband, too.

They didn't know the details and were sure that Uncle Yaakov had been arrested together with my father. Hearing

that Uncle Yaakov had been spared gave them some relief. As it was Thursday, my aunt insisted that we should not prepare anything but spend *Shabbos* with them instead.

We arrived on Friday afternoon, shortly before *Shabbos*. My Uncle Shmuel and his two sons Shulem and Dodi had beautiful voices, but this *Shabbos* the *zemiros* were recited quietly. We spoke little. Our thoughts were with my father. Where was he now? In prison or still held at the N.K.V.D. headquarters for interrogation?

During *Shabbos*, I forced myself to suppress my feelings, but the minute *Shabbos* was over the whole weight of agonizing pain I had felt the day before returned with full force. My father! My father! How could you be taken from us? Dear, dear father, how you must be suffering at the hands of those bloodthirsty monsters! I knew then that unless I would see my father again, the searing pain in my heart would not diminish for many years.

The day after my father's arrest, waves of panic engulfed our town. My father had been arrested because he was a wealthy businessman, an "exploiter of the workers," and every person of means or position understood that his arrest would not be an isolated incident. Regardless of the tightly closed border and the severe cold, a frantic exodus took place. People went to smaller villages around Lida and hired peasants who took them by sled to the Lithuanian border and then on foot to the other side. Some were caught and arrested, some were lucky and escaped. Mostly, it was the young and the men who took the risk. Their families stayed behind, assuming that the Russians wouldn't harm women and children. They hoped that after the war, somehow, the men would rejoin them. Many others remained in town, thinking, in the way of human nature, "It happened to

someone else. Maybe I'll be spared." Some were, many were not.

The N.K.V.D.'s Black Marias became a familiar sight now. They abandoned the practice of working only at night and were rolling through the streets twenty-four hours a day. When the "upper class" was weeded out, the "liberators" started their harvest in the ranks of the many "isms" with which our town abounded. Right, left and in-between—it made no difference.

After my father's arrest, we stopped having any relationship with the people of the town. Besides my Uncle Shmuel's family, no one would visit us, nor would we visit any but our closest friends. Meeting people in the street was a painful experience, for even family friends and those whom I knew well would turn away when they saw me or even cross to the other side. On occasion, if we met at a friend's house, they would excuse themselves and mutter their apologies. I understood their motives; they were afraid. Clearly, it was as painful for them as it was for me.

Although the Jews under the Polish government were considered second-class citizens, they could still expect a certain measure of justice. In cases involving the government, there was at least a possibility of presenting evidence, calling witnesses and so on. Soviet justice was something else altogether. The whole world had had a glimpse of it not very long before the war, in the infamous prefabricated Moscow Trials of 1936-1937, when Stalin's hatchet sent the heads of his own kin rolling into the gutter. The execution of hundreds of thousands before and after the trial should have taught us something, but it didn't. We still couldn't believe that the Soviets, whom we saw walking, talking and looking like humans, might not be human. It was our mistake.

After a long deliberation with my two uncles, it was decided that I should see a lawyer. It was also decided that my two uncles should remain in the shadows. My mother was too heartbroken and sick now to be able to undertake any action, so it was up to me to act on my father's behalf.

In our business, we had never used a lawyer. If once or twice a dispute with a customer or a dealer did occur, it was settled between the two sides without any further complications. My father and Uncle Yaakov would come rushing into the house, open the *sefarim shrank* and take out the *Shulchan Aruch* (the Code of Jewish Law). Though they were both scholars well-versed in all the details of the laws, they would check the relevant passages meticulously again and again for only one purpose–that the other party should not be mistreated. With gentiles they were even more careful not to cause *chillul Hashem*. Contracts, when needed, were drawn up as simple agreements, without any confusing small print.

Nevertheless, I knew many lawyers in Lida, some of them personal friends of my father. I spoke to them. They were honest enough to admit that they were afraid to get involved in such uncertain circumstances. Their, or any, intervention might do more harm than good. They were right. Only one lawyer suggested that I write to Stalin himself, addressing the letter to the Supreme Soviet in Moscow, to describe the details of my father's arrest and plead for his release.

I wrote a long, heartbreaking letter, but it was as ludicrous as saying "please" when you ask a hyena to stop sinking its teeth deep into your neck. The sleepless nights, worry, sorrow and fear destroyed our ability to think clearly. Had I really believed that my letter would go further than the N.K.V.D. in Lida? Evidently, it did not reach Moscow but wound up instead in the hands of the prosecutor in Lida. A

few days later, I was summoned to his office.

The moment I stepped into the waiting room, I had an unpleasant surprise. It was an insignificant incident, but my tension and fright magnified it to disturbing proportions. The receptionist was a girl I knew well, though we weren't exactly good friends. Her parents were well-to-do people whom I also knew well, and I had never suspected her of having Communist connections to the extent that she should become the prosecutor's receptionist. I suppressed my surprise and said a friendly "good morning." She didn't answer. How quickly she had learned their tactics! Her face was cold and hard, and only her big gray eyes smiled a triumphant smile, without shame, showing delight in my agony.

She looked at the list on her desk and in a loud voice asked, "What is your name?"

I didn't answer her question. I just said that I had come to see the prosecutor. She made a mark on the list and turned to the next person.

When my turn came to enter the prosecutor's office, a ton of lead welded my feet to the floor. I felt the room spinning as I walked through the door. I faced a short, bald man, with a red, round face and slits for eyes. I remember only a few fragments of his words: "You are an enemy of the Soviet regime . . . will be sent away . . . no letters should be expected . . . go now to the N.K.V.D. department." I was in a daze. The bright daylight looked black. I had incurred the wrath of the Soviets, and now, the threat of exile like a heavy weight suspended by a hair. My letter had been a big mistake. It had placed me in jeopardy, and perhaps my father as well.

I remember standing in a big room, my eyes glued to a little silver purse in the shape of two clam shells. It was lying on the floor together with many other pieces of silver that had

belonged to us, like a pile of wilted leaves swept into a corner of a garden. Awareness returned to me. There were a few N.K.V.D. men in the room. Two boxes of *sefarim* were standing near the door. One of the men threw a small bundle on top of one box. I was still looking at the purse. Like a child pleading for a toy, I kept repeating, "This little purse was a present from my grandmother. Please give it to me." I couldn't tear my eyes away from it, as if everything we had lost was contained in that little purse.

"Sign the paper, take your boxes and your bundle and go," the man said, ignoring my pleas for the purse. On the paper was written that everything they had taken when arresting my father had been returned to us. They had taken almost everything, but I signed anyway. What else could I have done?

I found a man with a cart who took the two boxes with the *sefarim* to Uncle Shmuel. In the bundle were two tablecloths. Everything else they had taken—silver, furs, clothes, linen, utensils—they kept. We had to manage with the few daily items they had left around the house. Still, we were happy they hadn't burned the *sefarim*. At least that profanity was spared.

The days that followed were hard to bear. Many of the other prisoners were allowed to write letters and to receive packages, but my father was kept incommunicado. The thought that my letter might have been the cause of my father's harsh treatment constantly gnawed at my mind. For now, we knew he was still in the prison in Lida, but for how long? None of the arrested men was expected to be spared slave labor in Siberia, or worse. Families who communicated with the prisoners and knew the destinations to which they would be deported might have a chance of being reunited if

there should ever be an amnesty. But they had told my father to say good-bye forever, so perhaps his fate had been sealed from the start.

The pain was unbearable. For four months, my father was imprisoned in Lida. Hundreds more joined him. Every second Monday morning, the families were allowed to bring a parcel, which was checked thoroughly by the guards before being taken to the prisoners. In the fierce, bitter cold, a long line of women, or sometimes a man or a boy, each holding a bundle, waited for the gate to be opened. Only three or four at a time were allowed in. There was no talking in this line, only desperate, worried looks and sighs. I knew many of the people. Often, a woman lamenting loudly, another swaying and dissolving in tears, would leave the gate carrying the bundle she had brought. "The name was not on the list," they would say. "Who knows what happened? Was he sent away or taken to a punishment cell?" Without the food we brought, the warm winter clothing, the blankets, how were the men to survive the treatment in there? But unfortunately, my bundles were never accepted.

The prison was halfway between our apartment and Uncle Shmuel's, on the Third of May Street. Every second Monday, after waiting for hours at the prison gate, instead of going home, I would go to Uncle Shmuel's house, leave the parcel in the hall and collapse on the couch and cry until I was out of breath. How could I tell my mother or Uncle Yaakov? Shmuel was younger, healthier and not as attached to my father as Yaakov was. Only two times out of eight had the prison officials selected one small item and returned the rest, a sliver of butter from a bar, a few pieces of toast. But even this was a consolation. My father wasn't entirely forsaken.

Then one Monday, at the beginning of April, 1940, the

guard didn't open the gate. He just waved us away, saying, "Don't come any more. The prisoners were taken to another place."

How much suffering can a person endure? We were soon to find out. I never paid much attention to dreams, but one I had on April 11, just before daybreak, was different. It seemed like a telepathic message.

In my dream, I opened a door and saw a very large, completely empty room. I went inside. At the same moment, I saw my father entering through another door at the other end of the room. We were slowly moving towards each other and reaching the center of the room. I noticed a thin white net spread from wall to wall, dividing the room in two. Simultaneously, we stopped on either side of the net. My father, clad in white, didn't smile or speak. He only looked at me, raised his index finger and wrote the number "13" in the air. The room dissolved in a fog, and I woke up.

The dream seemed uncannily real, and it disturbed me deeply. I felt sure that it carried a terrible message, but I could not be sure what that message was. The authenticity of the dream was confirmed to me much later, when people who had been with my father in prison told me that his cell number had been 13. Clearly, my father had given me a sign that he was trying to communicate with me and that the dream was not just a figment of my tormented imagination.

I didn't mention the dream to anybody. It was too painful for me to speak about my father. The wound was open and bleeding.

CHAPTER 10

In the Dead of Night

ON FRIDAY, APRIL 13, A FREEZING COLD DAY TOWARDS the end of the interminable winter of 1940, I made one of my regular visits to Uncle Shmuel's and Aunt Etie's apartment to spend the night. It was a few days before *Pesach*, and I remember being very tired. I slept on the couch in the dining room. As it was Friday night and there were no maids to turn out the light, a single bulb was left burning all *Shabbos*. Thoroughly exhausted, I fell asleep immediately, grateful for the comfortable couch and unaware of the burning bulb.

Suddenly, I was rudely awakened. What was it? A thunderbolt? An earthquake? I tried to open my eyes, but a sharp beam of light was blinding me. A man was tearing at my arm and shining a flashlight in my face. I heard my Aunt Etie's

sobbing voice, "Dina, Dina."

"*Vstavay! Vstavay!*" the man ordered. "Get up!"

He took the flashlight away from my face, but pulled my arm again.

"*Vstavay!* "

There were three of them, carrying rifles with fixed bayonets.

Again, I was forced to listen to a long document with endless paragraphs. Toward the end, I heard the words, "And therefore, you are considered an undesirable and hostile element, and you have to be deported to a distant region of the Soviet Union."

"My mother," I cried. "Where is my mother?"

"Get up. We have no time. You'll see your mother later."

I looked at my wristwatch. It was one o'clock in the morning. They had come for me in the dead of night. I heard Uncle Shmuel's voice in the foyer. My hands were shaking, my teeth chattering, and my stomach was convulsed with cramps.

"Quick, quick, let me go to the bathroom," I pleaded.

"Where is it?" they asked.

"It's outside, on the backstairs landing."

Two of them followed me. One stood near the top of the staircase, the other held the toilet door handle.

"*Skorey, skorey*," I heard his voice, deliberately low-pitched so the neighbors shouldn't hear us. "Hurry up. It's late. Your time is up."

I went back into the apartment. Aunt Etie stood near an open suitcase throwing in clothing, shoes, whatever she could get her hands on. Uncle Shmuel was running from room to room, wanting to help but only getting in the way. Then he emerged with a toothbrush in his hand.

"Dina, don't forget this," he called agitatedly.

The stony-faced N.K.V.D. man laughed. "You'd better give her a loaf of bread," he said. "She'll need it more than the toothbrush."

Even in my half-crazed state, I saw the ironic truth in his words.

In the meantime, Aunt Etie was packing another valise, then a bag. One of the N.K.V.D. men ordered my uncle to take the valises downstairs quickly. My uncle tried, but they were too heavy. He tried again, and he dropped them on the floor again. Perhaps the fear had drained his strength. Impatiently, one of the N.K.V.D. men grabbed the valises and rushed out the door. My aunt threw a coat on my shoulders and put a bag in each of my hands. With a rifle-bearing N.K.V.D. man on each side, I went down the flight of stairs to the street.

I was aware of everything, but I felt as if I were seeing it from another planet, that I was split into two separate selves. Outside, an open truck was waiting. I saw people, bundles, valises, all thrown together in one pile. It was still dark, and I couldn't figure out how many people there were on the truck. No one was talking, but children whimpered and were hushed by their mothers. I turned to take a last look at the house. Two dark silhouettes, reflected in the half-moon, were standing inside the entrance and crying. I wondered why I didn't cry myself.

The truck began to move, but after a few minutes, we came to a stop. There were noises, and another heap of human cargo was loaded on top of us. Then it was straight to the railroad station. As we neared it, we were joined by more and more trucks. It seemed that the N.K.V.D. had been very busy that particular night. The trucks reached the station, but

they didn't go to the passenger entrance. Instead, they continued on and stopped about a hundred meters from the building.

People, bundles and children started dropping from the trucks like rubble in a demolition. Women were crying, and children were screaming uncontrollably. We were divided into groups, then we were herded with barks and roars to the station platform. There we saw a long line of heaps of bundles and people, spaced at even distances from each other. From afar, they looked like heaps of stones along a newly-built road. Dragging ourselves and pushing our luggage, hustled by guards and sentries, each group fell into a separate heap.

The night, as if ashamed, now let the day take over, and a pale orange glow appeared on the horizon. Children were still crying. Women were tripping, falling, losing their bundles. Soldiers' boots were pounding the concrete platform, their ankle-length army coats flapping in the air, one hand holding the rifle straps, the other holding big white sheets of paper. Names were called and checked. Finally, when we were told to stop in front of a huddled, shivering group of people, surrounded by their haphazardly packed and hurriedly gathered worldly goods, my heart leaped. I saw my mother sitting on a bundle.

My mother didn't see me. It was cold, and she had pulled her woolen cap low over her forehead. Maybe she had closed her eyes, not wanting to see the pandemonium around her. I touched her shoulder.

"Mama, I'm here," I said.

She looked up with an expression of bottomless sadness, which gradually changed into a faint, ethereal smile. It barely touched her lips and disappeared, and then she started to cry hot, heavy, silent tears.

My mother seldom cried and never complained. She wasn't strong physically, but she had an iron will and control. Her stamina and endurance, her rock-hard belief that every move a person makes, everything that happens to him, good or bad, is willed by the Almighty, sustained me more than my youth and health many times in the years to come.

"I told them where you were," she said quietly. "I gave them the address. I didn't know what to say."

"Mama, it was the only right thing to do," I comforted her. "I would have come to join you anyway. Do you think I would have stayed behind if you were taken away? At least, we'll be together."

"They came to us at eleven-thirty and gave me fifteen minutes. I didn't have anything in which to pack. Aunt Gittel made two bundles. This one I'm sitting on has the pillows and quilts. The other one, wrapped in the yellow bedspread, contains our clothing."

My mother kept her hand on the yellow bundle, and while she spoke, she unconsciously dug her fingers into it and tightened her fist, as if wanting to be sure she still had these last few possessions.

A scene flashed through my mind. It had not been so long ago, only about five or six months before the war. It was late afternoon, but there was still bright daylight. My father and a guest were sitting in the dining room drinking tea and engaging in an intense Talmudic discussion. A little notebook bound in black patent leather was lying on the table near my father. The guest was a *mashgiach* in a well-known *yeshivah*. He was one of the many *roshei yeshivah* and *mashgichim* who used to visit us regularly, always leaving with a sizeable contribution. A moment of silence interrupted the discussion. My father sighed.

"Mr. Shapiro, why are you sighing?" the *mashgiach* asked. "Look through the window. As far as the eye can see, all these are your properties. What do you have to sigh about?"

My father put his hand on the little black notebook, patted it and said, "These are my possessions. All that you see through the window—none of that is really mine. Only this I can call my own." And he again patted the little book. It contained the entries of all his donations. A prophetic vision! How truly it came to be fulfilled, just a few months later. All his possessions were confiscated, but the *zchus* of his *tzeddakah* and *chessed* could never be taken from him.

A sharp whistle from a locomotive brought me back to reality. Hissing and clanking, spitting smoke and steam, the engine, pulling a long chain of red cattle cars, slowed down and stopped at the other end of the platform. A fresh commotion erupted. Guards rushed about in all directions. Shouted orders crisscrossed each other in the early morning stillness. Wide, screeching doors opened to reveal dark, empty interiors, like the jaws of giant beasts ready to swallow the heaps of people sitting in front of them.

There were two guards in front of each car.

"Take your things and get into the wagons!" they bellowed at us.

I looked at the people around me. There were only women and children. I didn't know any of them. They were all Poles whom I had never met. Near other cars, I saw familiar faces, but there was no time to say a word. Jews, Poles, White Russians, we were all in the same boat. We hoisted our bundles into the cars and climbed in after them. The guards closed the doors and erased our past.

By this time, it was already six o'clock in the morning. Outside, a new day was being born. Inside, there was only a

timeless darkness. The few rays of light coming through the tiny windows didn't reach the floor. We trampled on the bundles and on each other's feet, bumping and tripping in the dense gloom. Slowly, our eyes adjusted to the darkness. We recognized our things and sorted them out. In the absence of bunks in the cattle cars, each family, or rather half-family, piled up its bundles against a portion of a wall to serve as seats and beds. Ours was the space nearest the door and under one of the four small windows. There wasn't enough space to spread out, and we realized we'd have to sleep sitting, if sleep would ever come.

My mother and I noticed we were the only Jews. *Pesach* was a few days away, and my mother suddenly realized she had forgotten to ask Uncle Yaakov for *matzos* to take along. Somehow, he had been able to get them for all of us, but in the rush of leaving, she had altogether forgotten about food, let alone *matzos* and so had Aunt Gittel. I checked the bags Aunt Etie had put in my hands. Thankfully, they contained food. A *challah*, a cooked chicken, their whole *Shabbos* meal. She had given it all to us. At the bottom, I found a bag of sugar, a cup, even plates and forks. The other bag was bulky but light. It was her pillowcase, tied in a knot. Inside there were *matzos*!

"Oh, Mama!" I exclaimed. "We have *matzos*!" We couldn't believe our good fortune.

One thing that Aunt Gittel had remembered was my mother's *siddur*, but we only found it later when we reached our destination. For the meantime, we were too disoriented to collect our thoughts to *daven*.

A sudden sharp jolt pulled our train forward, then backward, then a turn to the left and it stopped. I climbed on top of our valises, and looked out the tiny window. We had

only moved to a farther track, the fifth from the platform, according to my count. A few minutes later, a passenger train pulled into the station, blocking it from view. I turned away from the window. We were cut off, excluded from the outside world.

Time was passing. We were locked and bolted into our communal isolation. There were about forty people, including children, in the car. Judging from their appearance and dress, they represented a very diverse group. However, one woman, with an infant in her arms and a three-year-old, was noticeably different. She was unwashed and in rags, with an expressionless face, bulging eyes and saliva dripping from her mouth. She looked feeble-minded, as did her little girl. All her possessions consisted of one bundle, wrapped in a dirty, homespun cloth and a pail. From all sides, glances started to turn in the direction of the pail. Since there were no sanitary facilities, we saw in it our salvation.

"Yes, you can use it," she said with a lisp, visibly appreciating the attention she was getting.

We couldn't understand why such a person should be deported. She told us she came from a small farm village, that her husband was a farm hand, but even in such an obscure place, politics took their toll. Some time before the war, elections had been held for a *soltys* (village representative) in her village. Two candidates competed, both had supporters, and the elections ended in a tie. A fist-fight resulted, and each side spited the other by electing this woman's husband to be the *soltys*. He could barely sign his name, but when the Soviet authorities took over, they still saw in him a "potential threat" to the regime and arrested him. And so, this poor woman joined the other deported families of arrested husbands. She was taken from bed three days after giving birth. Listening to

her story I felt consoled; there was somebody worse off than I.

The day outside brightened and lent a bit more light to our wagon. The children, after crying all night, were asleep now. I counted the people. There were thirty-three adults and six children, the oldest a boy of about six. My mother and I had a neighbor only on our left side; to our right was the door, which couldn't be blocked, so we were not so cramped. We sat on the bundles just as we had on the station platform the night before. My mother leaned against my shoulder and dozed off. I saw the fatigue on her face. I kept my eyes open, unable to sleep. All the emotion, even the exhaustion, was gone. I felt a complete emptiness.

Many of the women opened bags and took out food. In one hand they held a piece of bread, in the other, a chunk of meat or cheese. I categorized them by the way they ate. One tore ravenously at the chunk she had in her hand, both cheeks bulging, stuffing in another bite before swallowing the previous one. Others held their food daintily with their fingers, took small bites and chewed slowly. I didn't understand how they could eat.

My mother, as if reading my mind, said, "Dina, it is *Shabbos* today. We are not supposed to fast. But first we must wash our hands and say *berachos*, at least. Will they bring some water?"

I looked at my mother in admiration. At such a time, to think so clearly! I knew it was *Shabbos*. We had just had a *seudah* last night, a lifetime ago. But to think of *Shabbos*? Of *mitzvos*? With my whole life just torn out from under me, I couldn't think past the bundle at my feet.

It was almost noontime. We waited. Another hour passed. We heard trains coming, trains leaving. I heard some sounds

outside our car. Someone was fumbling with the lock and the bolt. With a shake and a push, the door was flung open. The guard put his head in the wide opening and, impersonally, as if talking to a vacuum, announced, "Today you'll receive only water. Bread will be delivered tomorrow."

A sigh of relief fluttered through the air. Water! How precious it became when it was lacking! Soon, the other guard deposited two pails of water on the floor near the door. How smart of Etie to have included a cup. I pulled it out, but before I could get to the pail, dozens of hands already clung to the rim. Elbows were pushing, cups and bottles clinking, and in their haste, more water was spilled on the floor than was ladled out. I shed my reserve and vigorously pushed my cup into the pail. I steadied my wrist with my other hand and managed to extricate my cup, three-quarters filled, without spilling a drop. Thank Heaven for our place near the door; I didn't have to step over anybody's feet.

The pails were empty now. My mother carefully took the cup from my hand, bent over one of the pails and washed her hands. I did the same with the little that was left. Our neighbors looked surprised. "Why didn't you drink it?" they asked.

"First we had to wash our hands. There wasn't any left to drink."

They shook their heads, unable to understand.

The pails were taken away and the door closed. For the second time, we heard the clanking of our train's wheels as it moved. The train moved slowly, carefully, like a thief with stolen goods. After only a short while, it stopped. Again there was some tugging and pushing, and then all was quiet. A young woman looked out one of the windows.

"Oh, look there!" she exclaimed. "They've unhooked the

locomotive, and we are quite far from the station. They've put us on a side track. It seems we're not going to leave today!"

I couldn't see what difference it made. In any case, we were locked in, trapped in a cage. I couldn't eat. My mother took a few bites of some food, wrapped up the rest and put it back in the bag.

"I don't think it will spoil," she said. "It's cold here."

It *was* cold. Stuffy, but cold. It was hard to tell if the cold was real, though, or the kind that comes from within. I felt cut off from every life-sustaining source. The helplessness and the unknown chilled my blood. The Soviet people had experience being shipped by the hundreds of thousands from one place to another, but for us, it was something we still couldn't grasp.

The children, awakened by the commotion caused by the water, were crying again.

One pretty, little blond girl, about a year-and-a-half old, kept crying and repeating, like a broken record, "Mama, mimi mama, mimi."

"She wants milk," her mother explained.

As this was her entire vocabulary, and milk might as well have been somewhere on the moon, this cry was our constant background music in our mobile prison.

People say time is a healer, but time can be cruel as well. I looked at my watch. It was only three o'clock in the afternoon. When had they pushed us into the train cars? This morning, a month ago, a year ago? So many emotions overlapped! Despair, resignation, hope. Maybe I'd meet my father. Maybe they'd bring us to the same place where they took the prisoners.

I told my mother about the disturbing dream in which my father had appeared to me. She looked at me with her sad,

beautiful, dark, wide open eyes, and her only comment was, "It is a very unusual dream." My mother always spoke little, but she could express more in a few words than others could in long speeches.

Indeed, this wasn't the only time I felt in some way actually connected to my father. The intense pain I always carried in my heart seemed more a reflection of his suffering than an expression of my own sense of loss.

CHAPTER 11

East to Siberia

"LOOK, LOOK WHAT'S GOING ON OUTSIDE!" CRIED ONE woman who had been keeping watch at the little windows. I jumped to my feet and pushed my head under somebody's elbow to get a better look.

A chorus of far-off voices became more audible each moment, and a mass of people exploded like pent-up steam from behind the station and started running toward our train. It seemed they had been waiting a long time and just now were allowed to approach us. Men and women of all ages were running alongside the train, calling out names. Hundreds of names. Family names, first names, a cacophony of names and voices. Faces flushed, hands waving, desperate looks. Many stopped, evidently spotting those they sought, while others kept running.

I pushed my head further out the window, and I saw my cousin Shulem. He saw me, waved his hand and ran toward our car. At a distance behind him were his parents Uncle Shmuel and Aunt Etie. They stopped in front of the window, as did relatives of some of our fellow passengers. I saw my aunt and uncle moving their lips, but the pushing inside and the noise outside made it impossible to hear. I saw Shulem pointing to the setting sun and then at his wristwatch. I took it as a sign that they had found out that the train would soon depart.

Surprisingly, the guards were indifferent to all that was going on. Watchful and stony-faced, as usual, but not interfering. Here and there, I noticed a small package or a bag being thrown into some of the windows. As it became darker, the crowd started to thin out, and the noise subsided. My uncle and aunt left, but Shulem stayed nearby.

"Stay near the window, I'll be back soon," I could hear him say distinctly. Then I understood what he had actually meant by pointing at the setting sun–they would be back after *Shabbos*.

The "soon" took about two hours. They returned loaded with packages. I wondered how they had managed to carry so much. Though our train was far out on a side track, it was illuminated by the guards' searchlights. Shulem was seventeen years old at the time, strong and very tall. Fearing that the guards might change their minds, he started to throw one package after another through our window with lightning speed and impressive aim. I stood a bit back in the car catching them in the air so they wouldn't fall on anyone inside. When I had deposited the last package, I looked out to thank him, but he and my aunt and uncle were already far from our car, probably hurried away by the guard. There

weren't any other people around.

Shortly after, the water procedure started again. It was very welcome, and this time it was shared in a more orderly manner. But again, even though we drank our whole share besides a few drops to wash our fingers, it was not enough.

Soon, we had our first real taste of Soviet dehumanization. We were so shocked and humiliated that the only appreciation we could have for the "service" was that the first ordeal prepared us for those to come. Each car carried an average of two-and-a-half to three dozen adults. From each car, in groups of four accompanied by one of the guards (the other was watching the car door), we were led by the guard's bayonet down to the train tracks to answer nature's call. Even a dog on a leash is not hurried by its master. We were. And at close range. Later, the cattle cars would often stop just before reaching a station or right after leaving it for the same purpose, or more often, the procedure was carried out with our train on a side track.

We had to go through the same torment throughout the whole stretch of our route, twice a day, in the morning and in the evening. By Stalin's will, our systems had to be conditioned to meet this schedule. With one pail emptied twice a day, and six children on board, we adults did our best to cooperate with his decree. It was an order which made for a foul-smelling train car and no peace of mind, followed by a respite totally squelched by disgrace and disgust.

It was cold in the car, and we sat with our coats on. A dim light from a kerosene lantern, hung from the ceiling, transformed our heads, hands and bodies into long, scary shadows and filled the air with smoky fumes. Some were sleeping and even snoring, some sitting bent and dozing, others wide awake and looking at the ceiling and the flickering light. I

arranged our bundles as comfortably as possible, so my mother could have some semblance of a cot. Hours passed, but my mother and I were unable to sleep. At the end of the night, a slight slumber overwhelmed me, but it was soon interrupted by the early morning routine.

The new day found our train on the same side track on which we'd been left the night before. My cousin Shulem was back again. Besides the monotonous pounding of the guards' boots, there was complete silence, and at once, I recognized Shulem's voice calling my name.

I looked out and caught a bundle. Two more were lying on the ground. He was alone. The bundles were small, tightly packed to be able to pass through the window. It was about a kilometer and a half from their house to the station, and he made many trips there and back loaded with packages. Much later, when I opened them, I found items which had been in the boxes we had left with our friends. Evidently, Etie and Shmuel were busy recovering them. The practical Etie remembered to include two big burlap sacks and a colored tablecloth, so I would be able to make a few big bundles from all the small packages. On one small package was written a note, "Eat it at once, it will get spoiled." We "ate" more than once from this package, which contained money in rectangular bundles, neatly wrapped in handkerchiefs and tied with thread. They were sandwiched between two towels. We hid them securely.

The morning passed without incident. At noon, a plain wooden crate filled with brick-like loaves of black bread was placed on the floor near the door with the guard's dry order, "Divide in even portions among yourselves."

During our journey, the bread delivery was erratic. The first few days, it didn't matter. Almost everyone in the wagon

had enough to eat. The only exception was the poor peasant woman whom we all helped out as best we could, sharing what we had.

Late in the afternoon on the second day of our stay on the side track in Lida, our train awakened from its lethargy. Shaking, screeching and clanking, it moved back to the main track, further away from the station.

People from town found out, and I saw them gathered into a sea of human heads and waving hands. They had been permitted to come to the station, but they had not been permitted to come close to the train. I couldn't understand why the N.K.V.D. was making such a spectacle of the whole thing. Usually, such acts were performed secretly under the cover of night. But since tyranny had become a virtue, I believe it was done to inflict more suffering on the families who were left behind.

The crying and wailing of the human mass at the station drowned out our train's whistle announcing our departure. The locomotive moved slowly, and the wails outside penetrated every fiber of my body and soul until I felt thoroughly numb. I stood watching the receding station and the receding mass of people, until they faded into a colorless blur.

It seemed unbelievable, but I slept through the night. When I woke up, it was bright daylight. The train was stationary. I looked out and saw a passenger train facing ours. It was blocking the station building, so I couldn't see the name of the town we were in. One of the passengers in a window looked familiar. Yes, it was Kushner, the attorney from Lida. We recognized each other in spite of my tiny window, and he was close enough to ask me what had happened to us. Kushner had been away from home for a few days, and as our deportation was the first from Lida, he had

no notion of what had been going on.

The station was Baranovich, he told me, a well-known Lithuanian town, and his passenger train was going in the opposite direction from ours. I asked him to tell my uncles he had seen me. Much later, my aunts wrote that the same day he had given them regards.

Another day passed, and we reached the city of Brest-Litovsk. Here again, we went through the same routine of moving the train back and forth between the main track and a side track.

The train was kept on a side track all day, and late at night, after the familiar maneuvering, pushing and pulling, we were told to transfer to another train, a Russian one. Our first train had been of Polish manufacture, and the Polish cars didn't fit the Russian tracks.

The operation was carried out in the characteristic Soviet manner. We were awakened late at night, without advance notice, and mercilessly rushed. Disoriented children were crying as heavy bundles were thrown out of the car, one upon the other, and left for us to drag to the next train. The Russian cars were dirty, with a dusty, moldy smell and cracks between the boards on the floor and the walls and bars on the windows. But they had one advantage—they had bunks.

The lantern swinging from the ceiling provided hardly any light, and it was impossible to sort out the bundles. Exhausted, indifferent and resigned, we climbed onto the bare bunks.

That night was *Pesach*. No wine, no *seder,* no *Haggadah*. Just reclining on our bundles among the Poles. *Pesach*, the symbol of freedom; the turning point in our fate as a nation; our transition from slaves into a free people who were given the choice and privilege to accept the greatest gift ever

bestowed by Hashem–the holy Torah. *Pesach* was to be spent in Soviet bondage surrounded by filth.

Among the parcels brought by my cousin Shulem were some *Pesach* dishes. The most useful was an enamel, quart-size container with a lid and a handle to be carried as a little pail. It came in very handy during our long trip.

My mother and I didn't have our first taste of Soviet bread until about twelve days later. The first few days, our meals consisted of two or three bites at a time. Our throats were constricted, unable to swallow. Then, during the eight days of *Pesach*, we ate *matzoh* with water. I made a deal with the other women in the car. They could have our two portions of bread, and all of our leftover *chametz*, in exchange for letting us take two cups of water first, before they dunked their *chametzdicke* cups into the pail. They agreed and the deal was honored.

The next day, our train passed the old Russian-Polish border. The difference was striking. Although in comparison with western Poland, our region was considered a back country, after a century and a half of Czarist rule, the Russian countryside presented a far more pathetic sight. The long rows of freshly plowed soil and neat little houses with fenced gardens in our part of Poland, contrasted sharply with the overall neglect on the Russian side. The fields, villages and houses looked dried up from a flood–colorless, lifeless and sad. The train passed through vast stretches of Soviet territory, and everywhere, the view was the same. We had embarked on a road paved with ice.

Our cars were still locked. They were opened only for the deliveries of water or bread, or when the group "excursions" took place. They first let us out without close security only after we passed Kiev, in the Ukraine. There, they were sure we would not run away. Earlier, there had already been a few

cases of people escaping. Later in Siberia, I met two families whose daughter and two young sons had escaped during the group "convenience" trips. But this was when we were still close to home. Now, deep into Russian territory, none of us had any incentive to attempt it.

Halfway out of Poland, there was a memorable occasion. Our train stopped at an obscure, large station, with many crisscrossing tracks. The doors were flung open, and our guard called out, "*Vagon lavka*! Train store! If anyone wants to buy some food, go quickly to the last car on your left!"

We had left Lida two weeks before. Our daily rations consisted of bread and water. Just two weeks! How adaptable human nature is! We had already become used to our chains. Now, to be allowed to leave the train and buy whatever we wanted? It seemed too good to be true.

In the rush and excitement and the semi-darkness of the car, I put on two different shoes, a beige one of mine and a brown one of my mother's. Running to the *lavka*, I didn't notice the difference until someone pulled my sleeve.

"I see you have two pairs of shoes," a Russian woman was saying. "Will you sell me one pair?"

She was wearing some kind of uniform, and I assumed she was a train dispatcher or some other type of station attendant.

"*Proday, proday*" she persisted. "Sell, sell."

I heard these words hundreds of times during the time I spent in Russia, but this first encounter gave me a beginning of an understanding of the way people there were forced to live.

On the way to the store car and standing in line, I met many women and girls I knew from Lida and the exclamation, "You, too?" rang in all directions. Until then, the

deportees in one car hadn't known who was in the next.

There wasn't much to buy at the store. The few candies, the single can of tomato sauce and the very salty, dry herring they allotted each person couldn't be called a bargain, but just to be able to walk the length of the train and meet acquaintances and friends and exchange a few words was a refreshing and encouraging change–a balm to our atrophied limbs and minds.

"*Pa vagonam*! Into the wagons!" The call brought our brief respite to an abrupt end.

The train moved, and by reading the names of the stations we passed, we knew we were going east. I can't recall any more *lavka* stops, but we were let out to fetch water at certain stations, in groups accompanied by the guards. Our train made fewer prolonged stops now, and one morning when it stopped at Ufa, we noticed from afar a chain of mountains enveloped in a pinkish gray fog, like a vast curtain of ice. We were nearing the Urals. Siberia lay beyond.

Siberia, the valley of tears, the graveyard of thousands of tortured victims of maniacal, tyrannical whims. Siberia, a vast expanse of extremely fertile soil, thousands of miles of forests, coal mines, steppes, tundra and natural resources. Where mismanagement, lack of organization and initiative, and plain neglect had put to waste Heaven-sent riches, the Soviets now expected to exploit these riches by harnessing human robots, helpless, weak, hungry captives quartered in barely inhabitable holes. The captives would be forced to work until they dropped. There were plenty of red cattle cars to bring more.

When we passed the Ural Mountains, the natural border between Europe and Asia, one of the women in our car remarked, "I feel like I'm going to my own funeral."

Many agreed, but this was not my feeling. My mother took it all with great strength and equanimity, saying, "If this is the Almighty's will, we are not supposed to complain."

The Polish women couldn't understand her philosophy. They lacked the tempering the Jewish people have had in a long history of pogroms and suffering. The arrogant Polish anti-Semites of yesterday had just lost their country and, with it, their pride and beliefs. It seemed there was nothing left for them to hold onto. They looked with surprise at my mother. So fragile, eating so little, but so strong morally. It's been said, "The same fire that melts butter hardens steel." The fire of belief and trust in Heaven permits a hope, which in turn gives the strength to overcome situations which otherwise would be unendurable.

I, too, looked with admiration at my mother. In moments when my spirits sank, my mother's words lifted my mood. "Dina'le, have *bitachon*. Hashem can reverse the *gezeirah*, and we have to believe He will. Do not despair."

"Yes, Mama, I will be strong for you and Papa," I would reply.

In the long hours on the Russian train, the women developed a certain camaraderie. There was nothing to do; we hadn't packed books or knitting. When the shock wore off, after the first few days, they mostly took to talking, telling stories of what they had lost and of how they had come to be deported. My mother refrained from almost all conversation. She had never been one for talking, and now she clung to her *Tehillim*, most of which she knew by heart.

Most of the women were quite intelligent and well-educated. Their husbands were the higher officials in the town and the intelligentsia, which is how they had come to be arrested and their families deported. In Poland, their high

class had only made them snobbish. One woman I recognized from before had been the postmistress in Lida, an offensive anti-Semite. Now, having lost everything, they lost their pride as well, and many actually became considerate of even the poorest of the poor Poles in our car, and courteous to my mother and myself, as well.

I was neither interested in listening nor in talking, though their conversation often interrupted my thoughts. Our adverse circumstances, and as always my father's arrest and his undoubted suffering, were so freshly painful that I was often too distraught to speak.

As desolate as the countryside was in the European part, it was even more so in the Asiatic part of Russia. The only advantage we could see was that now our door was not locked. As we neared our destination, the water supply became very erratic. Then one day, water wasn't brought at all. We were told that the station where we had stopped couldn't spare any drinking water for our train. Thirst is more painful than hunger. Our thirst was exacerbated by the dry and salty herring, which had become a regular addition to our bread rations.

In Siberia, snow is not a rarity in May. It was melting now, leaving big puddles, which in some places looked like small lakes. We saw large stretches of land along our way, covered with marshes and puddles. As the second day came and again there was no water, we decided to take advantage of the puddles. When our train stopped in the middle of nowhere, as happened often enough with the human cargo trains which had no regular schedule, many took pitchers, pails or bowls in hand and carefully climbed down, as the water reached the base of the embankment. My little enamel pail came in very handy now.

Coming back into the car with the treasured liquid, we had quite a disappointment. An assortment of whirling and curling creatures was distinctly visible at the bottom of our pails. Many people in our car drank the water after straining it through a handkerchief. I also strained ours, but we used it only to wash our hands. The lack of water was extremely painful, but here again, patience and will power helped out. That evening, water was delivered, and a few stops later, in Chelyabinsk, we were taken to the station pump and permitted to drink our fill.

At the end of the first week of May, we arrived at a place called Tokushy. It was a big and empty station, colorless and lifeless. Attached to the station building with a separate entrance was a huge room where we were told to bring our bundles. Alongside it was another smaller room, resembling some kind of an office for the N.K.V.D., who now replaced the guards.

No gourmet dinner was prepared for our arrival, not even the claylike, odd-tasting, bluish-gray bread. There was water; we were told there was a pump at the station, and later in the evening, we could get *kipiatok* (boiling water) at the station's tea room. We had already forgotten the taste of something warm.

BOOK THREE

Islands in the Snow

CHAPTER 12

Deep in the Red Republic

OUR TRANSPORT HAD NEARLY ONE THOUSAND PEOPLE. A single woman doctor, assisted by a single nurse, now arrived to check every one of us to see if we hadn't smuggled some dangerous disease from the capitalist West into the Siberian wilderness. This process took the rest of the day, all night and the next morning.

The medical examination over and the lists of names completed, the human merchandise was ready for distribution. A swarm of horse-driven farm carts waited to pick us up. The occupants of each original train car were dispatched, each to a separate *kolkhoz*, as the Soviet collective farms were called. My mother and I were the only Jews in our *kolkhoz*, the first Jews many of the *kolkhozniks* had ever seen.

The *kolkhozy* were not all on an equal footing, and while

some sent large hay carts to pick us up, others could spare only one or two small wagons. Some of the *kolkhozy* were quite far, and they had to send their horse-drawn wagons back and forth three or four times until all the people were accommodated, the process often taking a few days. In the meantime, the cramped conditions and bread and water rations continued at the station, but the Siberian wheat bread was an improvement over the brick-shaped loaves of potato bread we had been fed on the train. Our group was lucky to be taken the first afternoon.

Besides the wagon-drivers, each *kolkhoz* was represented by its chairman, who took the job of receiving the deportees with great seriousness and harsh commands. In the high winds outside the station, they stood in their peasant pride, yelling at the Polish women, "Move! Get on the wagons. Throw your luggage in already. Move!" These were the first words of Ukrainian most of us had ever heard, and while the words were hard to understand, the tone was clear and harsh as a rasp. I never liked the sound of Ukrainian, even after I learned to speak it fluently.

We were assigned to the *kolkhoz* Sergeyevka, a village of about one hundred families, most of them Ukrainians. At the end of the last century and the beginning of the present one, the Czar's government had given free land, a cow and start-up expenses to all peasants who wanted to settle in Siberia. The Ukraine was overpopulated, and many Ukrainian peasants responded to the offer to relocate to Siberia. In the same vicinity, around Sergeyevka, there were also some Russianized German *kolkhozy*. The ethnic Germans had come from the region around the Volga River where they had lived for several centuries, since they had been imported by Peter the Great to upgrade the country. Now they were even poorer

than their Ukrainian neighbors.

It was thirty kilometers from Tokushy to Sergeyevka. Thirty kilometers of bitter, penetrating wind and pale, cold sunshine. Thirty kilometers of snow-covered endlessness. As the wagons plodded along, we felt sucked into a twilight zone, light years away from civilization and the world we had left behind.

The wagons stopped at the village hall. Numb from cold, hunger and exhaustion, we were ordered to go inside. N.K.V.D. men with sheets of paper, some yelling in Ukrainian, others in Russian, fulminated for about fifteen minutes, then commanded us to go back on the wagons.

Sitting in the back of the wagon, I stared blankly at the scenery. The village consisted of one long dirt street flanked by two rows of unpainted, ragged fences that hid half-sunken, clay-covered houses. Here and there sat a "palace," a log cabin. The only decent building, a big wooden house with shutters, was the village hall. Before the collectivization, it had belonged to the richest *kulak* (rich peasant) in the village, a man named Volochenko. He had been liquidated in the early Thirties, together with ten million other peasants throughout Russia who had opposed the confiscation of their land and livestock.

The wife of this Volochenko (the Witch Volochenko, as she was called by the villagers) now lived, together with two married children, in a much smaller half-wood, half-clay house. It was in her kitchen that the N.K.V.D. had requisitioned a corner for us to live. In addition to her degraded status, to have *zhydy* (Jews) placed forcibly in her house was too much for her to bear. One thing the Stalinist regime hadn't taken away from her was a venomous hatred of Jews, which she had brought with her from her native Ukraine.

The house had three rooms—a large entrance hall, an even larger kitchen and beyond it a *komnata* (room). Alongside the entrance hall, leaning against the house, was a cow barn.

"Do you think we're going to be living here?" I asked my mother in Yiddish, as we followed the N.K.V.D. men through the door of the kitchen and stood there, unable to imagine where, in such a house, he would find a place for us to live. To our left, under the windows, there were only benches and a large table. To our right was the oven.

The main centerpiece of every old-style Russian and Polish house was the big wood-burning kitchen oven. It was a structure six-and-a-half feet long, made of bricks plastered with clay. The furnace, at eye level, was big enough to hold eighteen large pots set into the coals or, when heated thoroughly and the charcoal swept out onto the shelf in front, eighteen large round loaves of bread. A brick chimney through the roof pulled the fumes and smoke outside. Behind the chimney, the roof of the oven, which was about two feet from the ceiling, usually served as an excellent, warm platform to sleep on, especially for the elderly or for children.

In Volochenko's house, the front of the oven was next to the door, and on the side of the oven, at the height of a regular chair, was the standard sleeping bunk running the full length of the oven, about four-and-a-half feet wide. Basically, it was a large shelf right in the middle of a peasant kitchen. The N.K.V.D. men pointed and told us to come get our luggage. The bunk was now our domain.

When we arrived, only the old Volochenko and a three-year-old grandchild were home; the rest of the adults were at work. She stood outside, hands on hips, with fire in her eyes as we unloaded our bags. She had recognized our Yiddish

from her days in the Ukraine, but what probably made her even angrier was the quantity of our luggage; by any Russian standards, we had an enormous collection of possessions. We put the bedding on top of the bunk, the valises and a few bundles under it. The rest of the bags had to be kept in the entrance hall.

I quickly took out a bedsheet and gave it to our landlady. It helped. The earthen floor in the entrance hall, where we were told to place our bundles, was wet. But because of the gift and her "respect" for the N.K.V.D., she produced two old pails and put an old door on top of them. In an instant, a dry place for our bundles was created.

Food, even for a "rich" peasant family like the one with which we were staying, was a very treasured commodity. After lengthy persuasion and for good money, she finally agreed to sell us a loaf of bread and a liter of milk, declaring that, next time, I should forage for food among the other villagers.

Our status was one of house arrest. We were allowed to move only within the confines of the *kolkhoz*. But without documents where could we go? Our names were on the N.K.V.D.'s lists, checked regularly once a month.

It was early evening, but after finishing our first "normal" meal since Lida—bread and milk—we were overcome by extreme exhaustion, and my mother and I retired to "bed." The bunk was wide enough for both of us. For the first time in almost a month, we were able to stretch out our legs and put our heads on a pillow! Too tired to fall asleep and too tired to stay awake, we lay in a semi-conscious condition, oblivious to everything going on around us.

With eyes closed, I heard as if from afar Volochenko relating to her children the happenings of the day. When had

they come in? I wondered. Then I realized that I had probably drifted off for a while. The sounds crowded in on top of each other. Feet shoving, dishes clanking, women's voices, a man's voice, slurping, burping, talking, whispering all at the same time. The word *zhydy* figured prominently in their strange dialect (a mixture of the Russian, Ukrainian and White Russian languages). I fell asleep.

Deep in the Red Republic, I woke up to a white world. A blizzard. A blizzard in May. Only in Siberia. And only someone who has been in Siberia knows what a Siberian blizzard means. I looked through the window next to our bunk. Bales of snow were churning in the air, as if propelled by the cogs of a giant wheel. Sky and earth changed places. The stabbing pain in my heart, my constant companion since my father's arrest, was particularly strong this morning.

"Look, it's a blizzard," the old Volochenko informed me drily, seeing my bewilderment at the scene in the window.

The logs in the oven were crackling, and a strong smell of cabbage permeated the air. The family members were all awake. The activity in the house was in full swing. One of the young women came in with a pailful of milk, strained it, filled a jug and put it on the table. The other cut a loaf of bread into big chunks and ladled out soup from a huge pot into a big bowl.

Through the window, I saw the blurred outlines of a tall man shoveling snow and clearing a path from the house to the gate. I wondered at the value of his exertions in the middle of a raging blizzard.

"Come here, we have to eat," one of the women called to him.

He came in, took off his ear-flapped cap and gloves and shook off the snow. The whole family sat down at the table.

I had never been on a farm nor inside a peasant's house before. I felt totally estranged from them, and if they didn't care to have me watch them, I certainly wasn't concerned about their privacy. There was something primitive about their behavior, sitting around the table, all eating from one bowl and licking the wooden spoons on all sides before dunking again into the soup. There was little talk this time. They were rushing to go to work. That was what the path was for. To work on a farm, on a day like this, I thought. Only in Siberia! But then I realized that the livestock needed to be taken care of.

The house was quiet now. Old Volochenko was washing the dishes and murmuring to herself. I glanced at my watch. It wasn't seven yet. My mother was still sleeping. I looked out again at the snow. Our world was reduced to this little corner in a peasant's kitchen, dependent on the old woman's well-paid mercy for a piece of bread, but we still had a pillow to lie on, a warm blanket, money and clothing. But my father? Where, oh, where was he now? I bit my lips so as not to cry out, but I could not restrain my tears which streamed freely down my cheeks.

"*Chevo platchesh*?" Volochenko asked sarcastically, as she passed. "Why do you cry?"

"I am crying because I don't think I'll be able to go out to look for food on a day like this!" I told her.

"When a *buran* starts, it lasts three days. Always!" she declared. In a land of brutal dictatorship, even the blizzards cooperate in providing hardship.

"Will you sell me some more bread?"

"Maybe," she replied.

The little girl started to call "Baba" from the other room, and my mother woke up. She looked at the storm with her

usual acceptance, and as soon as I managed to get some water from Volochenko with which to wash our hands, she dressed, *davened* and resumed saying *Tehillim* by heart as usual.

Another memory flashed by. I saw my mother, not here in Volochenko's kitchen, but in our house in Lida. Always dressed early in the morning, never in a robe, sitting at the dining room table and *davening*. Totally engrossed with deep *kavanah*, her *Shacharis* never lasted less than forty minutes. During the day, between guests, charity meetings, housekeeping and various other activities, she always found time for *Minchah*. A memory from another world, a world lost forever.

I looked out the window and sat down to think. It was the end of the week, and the blizzard was to last three days. We would need food, and enough of it to last over *Shabbos*.

As usual, my mother was thinking along with me. Presently, she said, "Dina, we should find something with which to *bentch licht*."

In the timelessness of a blizzard with nothing to do, hours can pass without your noticing it. I had to force myself to move. I started rummaging in our bundles, looking for something attractive enough to offer Volochenko for a lamp and food. Instead, I made a precious find—my mother's *siddur*, which Aunt Gittel had packed for her. My mother's delight was like the sun coming out. With a lift in my heart, I went back to the bundles.

There were no candles in Siberia. After the Russians took over, they had become scarce even in Poland, but inspired by another bedsheet, Volochenko produced a *kurnik*, a little tin lamp which burned kerosene. It was shaped like an upside-down funnel. The kerosene was poured inside, and a heavy cotton wick was stuck into the opening on top. It gave no

more light than a candle, but a glass of kerosene could last a month, which was a significant advantage. The *kurnik* was a far cry from the huge, three-foot silver candelabra, flanked on both sides by antique candlesticks, which together with the tray took up a quarter of our big *Shabbos* table at home. But a single flame on which to say a *brachah* was a lot to expect for a Siberian exile, and we were very relieved to have it. Guessing sunset early by our watches (the blizzard looked like dusk all day), my mother lit the *kurnik* and "*bentched licht*" on the small window sill beside our bed.

In a way, the blizzard was to our advantage. Being exhausted from the long journey and the lack of sleep, heartbroken and disoriented, it wouldn't have been easy for me to find bread, milk and eggs that first Friday to last over *Shabbos*. With old Volochenko's stony heart softened by the blizzard, my tears and a good price, at least we had these. Most of the day, my mother and I sat on the bunk in silence, afraid to talk. Lost and insecure, we sensed Volochenko's hostility and didn't dare antagonize her. We knew the Yiddish would irritate her, and she might understand anything we said in Russian.

Friday night, we were terribly pained when, as Volochenko made ready to climb up our bunk to her platform on the oven roof to sleep, she insisted that we put out the light. "I don't want my house to burn down because of your *Subbota*."

"We are not allowed," my mother said.

The old crone blew out the flame herself. It was the same every Friday night, except for the few when my mother didn't light candles because we couldn't get matches or because we had run out of kerosene. Volochenko had enough kerosene to spare, but she wouldn't give us any, no matter what we offered her.

When the skies cleared and it became possible for me to go out, the first thing I did was send a letter home. The village hall served as the place for all administrative functions, including the handling of mail. Once a week, a messenger would take the mail by sled or wagon to Poludieno and bring back the incoming mail. I knew it would take weeks to get an answer, if we would get an answer at all, so I turned my mind to other things.

The transition from winter to spring is not a long one in Siberia. The deep snow from the blizzard disappeared in a few days, leaving big puddles, which were soon absorbed by the fertile soil, prepared to do its duty. Practically overnight, the frozen world came to life again.

CHAPTER 13

I Learn a Trade

SPRING IS A BUSY TIME ON A FARM, EVEN MORE SO IN A *kolkhoz.* The members were required to work a certain number of days a year, and in the little time left, they attended to their own small gardens on the small pieces of land behind their houses, about one fifth of an acre, that each *kolkhoznik* was allowed to own. Each *kolkhoz*, according to its size, had to give the government a set amount of its produce each year. In a year when the harvest was good, the remainder was divided among the *kolkhozniks* in proportion to their workdays. When the harvest was poor, they were left with nothing after a year's hard work. Therefore, their main efforts were concentrated on the little that was their own. After working all day in the *kolkhoz*, one could see whole families working in their little gardens late into the night.

A *kolkhoznik* was also allowed to own up to three cows, from which he had to give the government a certain amount of milk and meat each year. He could also keep a few sheep or goats, a few pigs and chickens. Few *kolkhozniks* owned more than one cow, because of the difficulty of obtaining fodder. The richest of them, our Volochenko, had four sheep, three cows, two or three pigs, about forty chickens and a well-tended garden. Such riches could be achieved only because she was too old to work in the *kolkhoz* but still strong and healthy enough to take care of the household. She was the object of envy of all the other *kolkhozniks*, but she couldn't forget the hundreds of acres of land and the big flock of livestock she had owned barely a decade before.

As soon as the blizzard was over, she categorically declared that I shouldn't dare ask her to sell me any more food. Not even one glass of milk or one egg. So, in my high-heeled rubber boots, which were not too comfortable on slippery mud roads, furnished with a towel, a sheet or whatever I could extract from one of our bundles, I started out the first morning on a food hunting expedition.

I wasn't the only one. Our whole train car had been brought to Sergeyevka, and everyone wanted to eat. I started at the nearest house. An old, toothless man opened the door. He said his daughter was at work, he was watching the children, and no, they didn't even have enough for themselves. I waded through the puddles and mud to the next gate, where a huge dog on a chain jumped at me, howling. I remained outside the gate. One step further and a piece of my coat or boot would have been in his mouth. On to the next, but again no luck. Someone had gotten there before me. Is this the way our life will be in Russia? I thought to myself. Is it always so difficult just to buy a piece of bread even

when one has the means to pay? What kind of an existence is it? How do people manage? But they do—and we did, too. Finally, at the fifteenth house I went to, a woman sold me half a loaf of bread and a few eggs.

This was my training in door-to-door shopping, or rather, bartering. Money had no value. The government store was open only once in a very rare while, and even then, it had very little to offer. The city was far, and without a railroad station, nobody went except the mail wagon. During the long winter, the *kolkhoz* was an isolated island, and only usable goods had any value.

The first *Shabbos*, we had still been tired and bewildered, unable to think clearly enough to appraise our situation. During the week, however, I began to adjust to the business of everyday life. I would never let my mother trek through puddles when I could go myself, so I insisted on doing as much of the work as I could.

One of the four or five wells in the village was in Volochenko's yard, and she grudgingly allowed us to use it, as well as a big washtub in her barn, for a long overdue bath and laundry. She made faces, in spite of my presents, when I asked her if I could boil some water. On the wide shelf in front of the oven door was a tripod I could use, but I had to supply the twigs for the fire myself. This required another bartering expedition around the village, as the nearby forest was still too damp to be a source of firewood. At least, we had our own pots.

As soon as the weather warmed up enough and Volochenko's yard dried, she put a stop to my using her oven shelf. "Take your Jew-cooking far away from here!" she ordered the next time we happened to have something to cook. "You can cook outside."

At the far end of her yard, I built myself a little stove out of two large stones placed close enough together to support a pot, with a space between them for the fire. But on rainy days, I still had to rely on Volochenko's "gracious hospitality." The first time I asked her if I could bake some potatoes in the charcoal she had swept out to the front of her oven, she looked at me mockingly and with a gem of a remark said, "You can bake your potatoes in the coals. They are hot enough to roast a Jew!"

Sergeyevka was poor, and we had quite a few customers for our wares. I was pleased to find that a sheet, a towel or even a swatch of fabric could buy a week's worth of milk or eggs in installments. We could even buy bread, since the coals on the floor of the peasants' ovens *kashered* them every time they started them up. Occasionally, we were even lucky enough to get a kilo of potatoes, a few onions or a cup of barley or beans, some of them in installments, too. But that was about all the peasants could spare to sell us. We had to appreciate cold baked potatoes with hard-boiled eggs, sometimes even mashed up with a little onion, as a sufficiently filling *Shabbos* meal. We eventually got used to it.

But we never adjusted to the atmosphere. It was a sad fact that my mother and I were the only Jews in the village. In our isolation, our hearts overflowed with pain. There was so much to pray for. But how could we pray when there was often a piglet in the kitchen, a baby lamb or a chicken, bleating and squawking and leaving droppings all around the bunk? The only privacy we had was by lying on our bunk and pulling the cover over our heads. Our silent prayers begged Hashem for forgiveness and help.

Once my food-bartering became routine daily excursions, the next task was to supply ourselves with firewood for

our stove and for Volochenko's oven, since otherwise she wouldn't let me use it. The forests were government property. The *kolkhozniks* were allotted a certain amount of wood, but it was impossible for us to get any. As we could not obtain real wood, Volochenko made a concession. I could take her wheelbarrow, go to the forest and collect broken branches. This was legal. The ground was dried up by then and the weather was sunny, so I went. The forest was only about two kilometers from the village.

It was a trip to remember. The wheelbarrow was old and heavy, its single wheel rusted. Even empty it was hard to push over the narrow, bumpy dirt road and was constantly turning over; even well-greased it would have taken some practice to balance it on its one wheel. Somehow, sweating and panting, I made it to the forest. But the main trouble started there. My landlady hadn't warned me about the mosquitos. There were swarms of them in the forest. Millions. Now I knew why she had been so generous with her advice. She had surely sent me unprepared on purpose. In no time, my face and hands were plastered with the insects. I left the wheelbarrow at the edge of the forest. Oblivious to the stings and pain, I gathered whatever branches I could find and carried them in armfuls to the wheelbarrow. I was rushing to finish in order to get away from the mosquitos, but I still managed to pile the wheelbarrow high. As if that were not enough, worse was to follow on the way back.

Old Volochenko didn't suggest that I take a rope, although she had enough in her barn, and I didn't know to ask for one myself, so I had no means to tie up the branches. After a few steps, the wheelbarrow turned over, and the branches flew all over the ground. My face and hands aflame, I gathered them and put them back in the wheelbarrow, and so

I proceeded all the way home—a few steps and gather, and then gather again. When I entered the house, my mother cried out, "*Oy vey*!" It was the first time I had ever heard her react that way to anything.

The Witch Volochenko burst out laughing. My face and hands looked like giant raspberries. The pain was unbearable. On seeing the pile of branches through the window, though, the beast in her softened, and she gave me a homemade remedy the peasants concocted from dried plants, then cooked and strained. On my subsequent trips to the forest, I met women with their faces covered and their hands in gloves made from rags, and I learned to do the same. There was no way the witch would sell me wood. I had to go to the forest.

Davening turned out to be more of a problem than we had expected. Volochenko's house might have been spotless, but she clearly knew nothing about hygiene. The first time I saw Volochenko's daughter Katia waxing the kitchen floor, it seemed so repulsive that my mother and I went into the yard until she finished and the floor was completely dry. The kitchen had an earthen floor, and to make it water-resistant and keep it from being pulverized when walked on, she had impregnated it with fresh cow manure. The fresh manure was collected in a bowl and rubbed in with a rag.

"What shall we do, Mama, for making a *brachah* or *bentching*?" I asked. "How can we pronounce Hashem's name?" I was bewildered.

My mother, calm and resourceful as always, was silent for a while. Then she said, "The only way I can think of is to hold a napkin or a towel under our chins as if creating a *mechitzah*. We were never in such a predicament, and I can't be sure if it's valid, but what else can we do? At present, we find

ourselves in circumstances not of our own choice. It is by Hashem's will and decree, and we must accept it fully and willingly without questioning and complaints."

I saw my mother's faraway look, and I had the impression she was talking not only to me but to herself as well. Accepting, always accepting. The transition from riches and comfort to a peasant's kitchen with a manure floor seemed almost natural to my mother. "If it is Hashem's will, it must be for our good, and if it is for our good, then we have to be thankful," were her often repeated words. "We must thank Hashem with the same fervor for the bad as for the good He bestows upon us."

Basing all her actions and reactions on this belief, my mother wasn't at all shocked when old Volochenko told me to take my turn with the kitchen floor.

"You live in my kitchen," she said to me the second or third week. "So do the waxing."

"I didn't choose to live in your kitchen," I replied. "The N.K.V.D. has put us here."

"You don't like it, go complain to the N.K.V.D," she retorted.

She wouldn't exchange the pleasure of seeing me sprawled on the floor, wrist-deep in manure for anything I offered. I spoke to some of the other exiles, the Polish women, also kitchen dwellers, and they told me that not one of their "landladies" had asked them to do such a thing. It was only because I was a *zhyd* and she was the "witch" Volochenko. The only reason she didn't steal from us was that she was too proud of having been a rich peasant.

Volochenko's vicious anti-Semitism made our life miserable every day in other ways as well. A few outstanding incidents of the months my mother and I lived in her kitchen

corner remain vividly in my memory.

About a month after we arrived, one of her pigs bore a litter of piglets. In the morning, she found only two alive. She said the mother pig had killed the rest. She took the two newborns, put them in a basket, told me to remove my valises and shoved them under our bunk. For a few weeks, she fed them with a baby bottle. Their squeaking certainly wasn't music to our ears. At the same time, two dozen chicks were newly hatched. She spread feathers in a big sieve, put the chicks in it and put the sieve on the oven roof above our bunk. Another kind of music.

But this wasn't enough. The high point came when a new calf arrived. The custom in the *kolkhoz* was that as soon as a calf was born, it was taken away from the mother in order to save her milk. The calf was fed a thin concoction of flour and water mixed with a little milk. Old Volochenko had enough space in the entrance hall or in the adjoining sheds to tie up the calf. Instead, she decided that our bunk was more fitting. Two corners of the bunk were along the oven wall, while the third was against the kitchen wall, which left the fourth supported by a floor-to-ceiling pole. It was about six inches in diameter and also served as a support for the roof. She tied the calf to this pole.

A baby calf in the field is nice to look at as it bounces and plays, but to have it as a companion at your sleeping bunk is less than a pleasure. The cacophony not withstanding, I was asleep one night when I heard my mother's horrified scream, "Oh, my toe!" My mother slept on the outer side of the bunk, and as it was a hot night, she had probably uncovered her foot. The calf, looking for something to suck, had settled on my mother's toe.

That was enough. I sprang to my feet, ran to the door of

Volochenko's room and, in my loudest voice, at two in the morning, cried out, "If you do not take your calf away from our bed, I'll go to the Selsoviet in the morning and report to the N.K.V.D. that she almost bit off my mother's toe!"

They all woke up and hearing what had happened started to laugh. For days, it was a joke for them, but in the morning, the calf was in one of the sheds near the house.

Because of my walking from place to place in search of food and firewood, the walking shoes in which I had come to Siberia were falling apart. It was torture to walk in high-heeled, dressy shoes on the unpaved, bumpy roads. But what was I to do? I noticed that in free moments, old Volochenko would spin thick, white yarn from a fluffy pack attached to her spinning wheel. At first, I thought it was wool, but it turned out to be cotton. "They bring it to the store sometimes," she said.

The store was a two-meter shack open only when "merchandise" was delivered, which happened once in a few weeks. The merchandise was very unpredictable. Sometimes it would be a dozen frying pans, sometimes a sack of salt, a few packages of tobacco, a small bolt of inferior material or a container of cooking oil. The people, somehow, would find out in advance and wait on long lines for hours before the opening of the store. The merchandise which most often appeared on the two crooked shelves was vodka and cotton wool. Volochenko had gotten some of this cotton wool and was now spinning it into yarn.

Looking at the spinning wheel, an idea struck me. If I could only get some yarn like this and a hook, I'd crochet uppers, try to get something for soles and make myself a pair of flat shoes. I had better start right away, I thought.

I offered Volochenko a deal. "Sell me a ball of yarn, and

in return, I'll crochet you whatever you want."

Surprisingly, she agreed. She had a whole basketful of yarn. She gave me a big ball for myself and another for herself for a shawl.

White would be impractical, I thought. I'll have to dye it some darker color. It turned out she also had a few packets of dye. I think the only quality product in Russia at that time was dye for dyeing wool and cotton. I unwound the ball into skeins, dissolved the brick-colored dye in cold water, dipped in the skeins, put them on the fence to dry and started to look for a way to obtain a hook. Some women had hooks, but they would never lend them out, as they were difficult to obtain.

My inventiveness carried me a little further. If I can't buy one, why not make one myself? Regular hooks are made from tempered steel, but that was out. Perhaps I could make one from wood. It would have to be hardwood. The village was surrounded by huge forests, mostly birch. I had made a few trips there already. Now, with the idea of producing a hook, I experimented with many twigs. They had to be dry, strong and not too brittle. I had a little pocket-knife with four very sharp folding blades that my father had once given me. I had kept it in my pocketbook, so it wound up with me in Siberia. I treasure it to this very day. Without this little pocket-knife with its very fine blade, I wouldn't have been able to succeed in my new profession—hook-making.

Carefully shaving off the thinnest layers, I carved out a few hooks of different thicknesses, rubbed them with sand and oil to make them smooth and put them to the test. One snapped at the first try. The head came off another when I tried to pull the yarn through. I didn't let myself get discouraged, though. I kept carving one after another, making dozens of them until I had a collection of perfectly strong and

workable hooks with which to crochet the uppers for my walking shoes.

The uppers finished, I started the search for soles. Early one morning later that week, when I went to collect my half-liter installment of milk, I returned with a treasured "find"—a piece of thick felt, an upper from an old boot called a *pim*.

"Mama," I called, running into the house. "Mama, I found a *pim*!"

My mother looked at the old, filthy piece of heavy felt in my hand and smiled, sharing my glow of pleasure.

A memory flashed. "Mama, do you remember how last year—how long ago it seems!—when I had my new, raspberry-colored suit, I went to Vilna to look for shoes which had to be exactly the same shade and couldn't find them? Then I went again and ordered them at Rabinovitz's elegant shoe store. I wore them once or twice, and now they are in one of our bundles packed away and useless."

"You see, Dina," my mother said. "Our actions are similar. We spend our time and effort in chasing the wrong goals. We must realize that life is not given to us just for the moment's pleasure. We must strive to acquire something more durable than material possessions. Now, let's get to work on your *pim*."

Pimy were felt, knee-high boots made from sheep's wool, first boiled and then pounded around a wooden form. They came in one piece, about one centimeter thick, and were very warm and strong. For the long Siberian winters, during which the snow never melted, they were the only answer.

For the moment, I was happy with the old piece of felt, the calf part of the *pim*. It was like a tube, and hard like thick leather. So I reversed the process, soaked it in water to make it soft, split it lengthwise and rolled it with a rolling pin until

it flattened. After it dried, the real process of "shoemaking" began. Tracing the insoles from a pair of my fancy shoes, but much larger, I cut out two felt soles.

The idea for the next step came in stages. In my first door-to-door wanderings around the village, I had come upon a little clay house. As soon as I looked in the door, I wanted to turn back. Nothing to barter here. An old man was sitting on a low stool, patching an old shoe. On the earthen floor stood an old wooden box containing his tools.

"Come in, come in," he said. "Do you want to fix your shoes?"

"No, I want to sell some clothing for food," I replied, although at the time I did not realize how ironically inappropriate my answer was.

"Oh, we barely have enough for ourselves," I heard a voice say from behind the oven.

I turned and saw an old woman sitting on the bunk made up as a bed, covered with an old but clean, homespun spread.

"See, my husband is an invalid," she explained. "He lost a leg in the last war. We are too old to work in the *kolkhoz*. We live on what people bring for repairing their shoes or *pimy*."

There was a gentleness about them, and they spoke pure Russian, not the Ukrainian slang most of the villagers spoke.

I reminded myself now of the cobbler. He had tools! From the clumsy patches I had seen, he was not much of a specialist. I'd do better borrowing some of his tools and making my shoes myself. I rushed to his "shop," explaining what I wanted to do. He gave me a skeptical look, but he agreed to lend me an awl, a wooden shoeform, some twine and wax. When I asked him how I should pay, he surprised me by asking for money! He explained that when occasionally some merchandise would appear in the village store, his

wife had no money with which to pay.

I had seen a shoemaker at work once, and I had always had a knack for copying things, so as soon as I came home I went to work. The old Volochenko was laughing, and even called in a neighbor to share the fun. They stopped laughing, though, when they saw the product of my labors. They offered me potatoes, eggs or milk, asking me to make some pairs for them, too. The cobbler shared his tools with me more than once. The first time I returned them, he wanted to see my work.

"Look at my feet," I said.

He couldn't believe it, and I had to take off one shoe for him to see. He examined it from all sides and shook his head.

"I need a helper," he said very seriously. "Do you want to work for me?"

The little shoe-making I had done was more than enough not to tempt me into repair work. Siberia was a good school, though. If I wanted to count the number of "trades" I learned there, I'd probably have to borrow a few fingers.

CHAPTER 14

More Encounters

TIME PASSED, AND SOON, *SHAVUOS* WAS UPON US. IN THE rush of adjustment and the toils of daily life, I could almost have missed the date if not for my mother, and my faithful counting of the *Omer*. There was nothing much we could do for *Shavuos*, in any case. Since we had no flame we could keep on over *Yom Tov*, we could look forward only to two days of cold eggs and potatoes. Fortunately, Volochenko was interested in our linen, and softened by such "presents," she had begun letting me bake bread in her oven.

Volochenko would bake bread once a week, using a sourdough starter and twenty kilos of flour. There was no room left in the oven for any of my bread, so I would have to bake on a different day. This meant starting up the oven again just for me. Since the fuel was all my own wood, she was

willing and even "happy" to let me use her oven and her kneading bowl. This way, she got a warm house for free. I usually baked only five kilos of flour, if I could obtain it. Still, the whole-wheat flour of Siberia was truly excellent. It was so hard, it had to rise overnight, but it made an exceptional bread. From then on, we always tried to have *lechem mishneh* for *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov*.

After *Shavuos*, unlike Jewish custom the world over, I continued counting days. I was waiting and hoping for an answer to my letters to Lida. And then, about two weeks after *Shavuos*, six weeks after our arrival in Sergeyevka, we finally received an answer in the form of an envelope, crumpled, cut open at one side and carelessly pasted together. It had obviously been censored, but we didn't care. It was a letter from home! It was from family, that was all that mattered. The uncles and aunts, the cousins. Everyone wrote a few lines. A few careful, casual lines. They knew what was at stake. Then it struck us that Uncle Yaakov's words were missing! Was he sick? Or maybe . . .

A week later, another letter arrived. Aunt Etie wrote that she had mailed a parcel and that Uncle Yaakov had gone to visit his younger brother. Uncle Yaakov had only two younger brothers—my father and Uncle Shmuel. And Aunt Etie surely wasn't writing to tell us that Uncle Yaakov had come over to their house. Clearly, she was implying that he had suffered a fate similar to my father's. The tragedy we had expected and feared had happened, and our sorrow knew no bounds.

About two weeks later, we received a tear-stained letter from Aunt Gittel, telling us the details of the horrible news without bothering to disguise her words for the censor's sake. Uncle Yaakov had been taken in a new wave of arrests, eight weeks after our exile, six months after his brother. And so

came the end of the saga of the Shapiro brothers. That fortress of *tzeddakah, chessed* and *mitzvos* was torn from its foundation, waiting to be raised to a higher form of existence, eventually to reappear and continue on its path in future generations. Meanwhile, my mother and I were still mired in our much lower form of existence. If only we could see them. If only we knew where they were. But we despaired of ever seeing them again.

Aunt Etie's parcel arrived a few days after her letter. After all the roll-calling and name-checking and snooping of the N.K.V.D., at least the Soviet mail system worked. Even with an incorrect address, as long as a letter or a parcel had a name on it, it usually got to its destination in a few days. The Soviets always knew where you were.

The first parcel had some clothing we had left behind, a few lengths of fabric from Uncle Shmuel's liquidated business and an assortment of food items. Everything was cherished as a touch of home and a poignant reminder of our dearest losses. We kept what we needed and bartered the rest. The parcels, as it turned out, were easier to send than letters, as they were never censored. Before long, they were arriving every few weeks, more often than the letters by which we kept in touch the entire time we were in Sergeyevka.

At about this time, Volochenko's granddaughter, a thirteen-year-old girl, was attending school in Petropavlovsk. She was Volochenko's daughter's only child, and her mother wanted to give her a better education than was available in the village, where there was only a one-room grade school. One positive thing must be said about the Soviets. They eradicated illiteracy. Even in the most remote of villages, there were grade schools, and attendance was compulsory.

One day at the end of June, as I was sitting and crocheting,

my mother beside me, with her *Tehillim* in her hand as usual, the young people in the fields and the "witch" working in her garden, I noticed someone opening the front door just a slit and quickly closing it again. A few minutes later, the same thing happened. I wondered who it was, and I went to the door to open it. In the entrance stood a pretty young girl, her huge dark eyes frozen with horror. She was immobilized from fright. Nearby stood a wooden box with a carrying handle. This must be the student daughter coming home for vacation, I thought.

"Are you Katia?" I asked her, smiling to ease her fear. I knew she had the same name as her mother. "Why don't you come into the house?"

She didn't answer, but I noticed that her eyes kept moving toward the top of my head.

"You've had a long journey," I said. "You must be tired. Your grandmother is working in the garden, but you can come in. What are you afraid of?"

She lowered her eyes, sighed and moved slowly to the door. Then she saw my mother, and again her eyes went to the top of her head. The *tichel* my mother wore made her particularly suspicious.

I saw that something was bothering her, so I tried to make conversation by asking how she liked school in town, with whom she stayed, if there were other girls from Sergeyevka attending school there, and so on. I saw her fear disappear, giving way to an expression of wonder. She didn't answer even one of my questions, as if she hadn't heard them at all, and then with the same expression of wonder she put forward a weighty question.

"Are you people the same as all other people?" she asked. "Grandmother used to tell me that Jews are half human and

half devils, with horns growing on their heads, doing evil things to all the people in the world. On the way home, I met someone who told me that the N.K.V.D. had put Jews in our house. I never saw a Jew, so I was afraid to come in."

I started to laugh, took her hand and let her touch my head to find the horns. When her grandmother came in, I told her what had happened.

"Of course you are half human and half devils," she said. "You killed our god."

"Wait a minute," I said. "If a god can be killed then he is not a god, and besides, if he was killed, it means he is dead. You converted from paganism to Christianity about one thousand years after his death, so who forced you to choose a dead god?"

To engage in a theological discussion was a little too much for her, but she still kept repeating, "Yes, yes. Jews killed our god."

Then the young student, enlightened by the communist drilling from kindergarten on, came to my aid.

"*Babushka*," she said. "Our god is Stalin. There is no other god."

The discussion ended happily with a bowl of borscht for the *babushka* and her granddaughter. I went back to my mother and my crocheting.

Being the only Jewish exiles in the village, we had plenty of other opportunities to experience anti-Semitism, but since Volochenko was the worst, the others seemed mild by comparison.

Volochenko's own children, her daughter, son and daughter-in-law, were quite pleasant to us during the few hours a day they spent with her. The other Polish exiles were also fairly sociable toward us, probably because they felt we were

in the same boat as they—the first time in their lives they had ever thought of Jews that way. They would drop in occasionally, hiding their anti-Semitism for an hour or so, and I, to be polite, and needing company myself, would return their visits. Real friendships never developed, though. We were too much like oil and water. The thing we had most in common was our hatred of the Soviets.

No pretense of friendship ever developed with Volochenko. In the daytime, when the young people were out, she would work around us in the kitchen, speaking only infrequently to her three-year-old granddaughter, or else she'd be out in her garden, the child puttering after her. At night, the whole family was usually out in the garden or, on occasion, sat around in the *komnata*, where Volochenko clearly intended for us never to enter.

The *komnata* was a big room. It had a wooden floor (unlike the kitchen and entrance hall), four windows with curtains and a hand-loomed rug. The main attraction was an oak sideboard with a shiny, nickel *samovar* on a tray and a framed wall-mirror above. It was probably a remnant of her lost grandeur. Also, an obligatory portrait of Stalin graced one of the walls. I can imagine what she wished for him as she looked at his likeness every day. She must have hated Stalin as much as I did, although that common bond never improved our relationship.

Her daughter's husband Vania, who was hardly ever home, now ruled the house. In the good old days, he had worked as a farm hand on her farm, and with a woman like Volochenko as his boss, he surely harbored a few grievances. At that time, her pretty young daughter Katia was far beyond his dreams, and the witch had undoubtedly let him feel it. The collectivization and the arrest of her husband had reversed

the situation. Volochenko's son, his wife and daughter worked in the *kolkhoz* locally, but Vania was in charge of a tractor brigade serving several *kolkhozy*, including Sergeyevka. Now he was the one with an important position, and Katia and the house were his. He would come home only on his day off, which incidentally was on Sunday, though without any religious meaning. Or at least, so it was in 1940, before the German army invaded Russia. After that, it was a straight seven-day work week.

Usually, Vania was a decent, quiet man. On the weekends, when he was home, he would go hunting for small game or rest. One Saturday night at the beginning of July, he arrived with a half dozen of his brigade comrades to celebrate some accomplishment at work. Old Volochenko always had a larder full of homemade sausage, borscht, sauerkraut, pickles and so on. That's why she was the object of envy and hatred by the *kolkhoz* people, who were not able to manage so well. Along with all the goodies she put on the kitchen table, a half a dozen bottles of vodka were added by the guests.

My mother and I were already in bed, across the kitchen from the table. The long kitchen benches were filled with men, and for the occasion, a few chairs were also brought in from the other room. All I saw were burly backs eagerly bent over the bowls of food, arms reaching for the bottles. Old Volochenko was busy tending the guests, and the two younger women joined the party. It started with laughter, jokes, eating, elbows pushing, clanking glasses, singing. Though the three windows in the kitchen were open, it became chokingly hot. As the party progressed, the noise and drunken singing and clapping became too overwhelming for my mother and me, and we pulled the cover over our heads.

As the contents of the bottles went down their throats, the

laughter and animated backslapping changed to screams, curses, bottle smashing and fists pounding the table and each other. I had never witnessed such a spectacle, and my curiosity overcame the revulsion I felt. I pulled the sheet back just enough to uncover my eyes. Some of the guests were wrestling, barely keeping their balance. Old Volochenko bravely tried to separate them. Vania, heavily drunk, turned his fists on his wife Katia, who let out a deafening shriek. This enraged her drunken husband even more, and with a wild roar he started screaming, "Where is my rifle?"

The guests, intoxicated as they were, knew what a loaded rifle in the hands of an angry drunk meant, and half swaying, they made it to the door. My mother and I were shivering with fright. Then I saw Katia jump through the window into the garden. Vania ran after her screaming, "I'll kill you!" At the same moment, I saw the witch holding a rifle, which she pushed under our cover on my side of the bed.

"Be careful," she said. "It's loaded."

I was numb with terror, but I instinctively stopped trembling in case the slightest movement might pull the trigger.

From the garden the screams of "I'll kill you" were heard a few times, but it was only Vania's voice. His wife had probably been able to hide somewhere, and he couldn't find her. He came back through the door. His rage unabated, he ran straight to the *komnata*. Soon, I heard a sharp bang and a loud crash of breaking glass. He had smashed the *samovar* against the mirror, destroying both. He had probably seen in the *samovar* and mirror a symbol of riches in contrast to his own pitiful standing as a farm hand who slept not on soft pillows but on hay in the barn, and in his drunken state he had taken revenge for his old suppressed grievances. Afterwards, he collapsed on the floor and fell asleep. Old Volochenko

quickly took the rifle away and went outside to hide it somewhere in the barn.

In the morning, my mother told me she had kept her eyes closed the whole time and hadn't seen what was happening. She didn't know that we had had a third occupant in our bunk, a loaded rifle. Katia didn't show up again until Sunday night when Vania, after sleeping all day, went back to his job.

The next day, my mother and I decided to look for some other place to live. I knew that the more affluent peasants were the ones burdened with sharing their kitchens with the exiles, not of their own free will, of course, but by order of the N.K.V.D. Most of the peasants lived together with their married children, so it wasn't easy to find a place. But before I had much time to look, I ran into a little problem.

The *kolkhoz's* huge sheep shed had to be cleaned in preparation for shearing the sheep, and the exiles were sent to do the job. Our pay was the cleaned out manure! It was a very prized item. Mixed with straw and hay, as it already was, and packed by the trampling of hundreds of sheep's hooves, we cut it into squares, slid a shovel under each square, piled it on wheelbarrows and took it home. There we laid the squares out in the sun to dry, and they turned into excellent fuel.

It was a burning hot July day, and we were in a hurry to finish before the flock would return from pasture. I pushed the wheelbarrow loaded with manure home and right back again, to continue over and over. Sweat streamed into my eyes, nostrils, ears and mouth. We worked barefoot.

The next day, instead of continuing my search for a place to live, I was shivering in my mother's care under a pile of quilts and blankets. Despite the burning heat of the torrid Siberian summer, I was shaking and shivering from cold. My

temperature was forty degrees Celsius (one hundred and four Fahrenheit). The headache, discomfort, nausea and pain lasted twenty-four hours, followed by twenty-four hours when I was weak but my temperature was normal. Then the pattern repeated itself.

It turned out to be malaria. Not the deadly yellow fever but a benign variety the people in Siberia called the "every-other-day malaria." It lasted a whole month.

Every once in a while, the authorities would send a paramedic to make the rounds of the *kolkhozy*. This supposed doctor, a young girl, gave me a few packets of aspirin and a bitter, yellow powder called *kchinin* (quinine) and left me shaking and shivering for another couple of weeks. I know my mother's prayers helped more than their aspirin and *kchinin*. Siberian medicine was so backward that the villagers were astounded at our Polish thermometer. The authorities had never provided one.

Old Volochenko defrosted a little during my illness, and for a sizeable piece of material which Aunt Etie used to include in every parcel, she agreed to sell us milk, bread and eggs. Her granddaughter Katia, after the initial shock, became a great friend of mine. For a pair of good city shoes, she used to do errands for me, like picking up and taking back parcels or letters to and from the Selsoviet or collecting the installments from the *kolkhozniks* for the clothing I sold them. Old Volochenko pretended she didn't know her granddaughter was running errands for a *zhyd*.

As soon as my health returned, I resumed my search for a new place to live. It seemed the N.K.V.D. would not object to our renting a place in Sergeyevka, as long as we stayed in the *kolkhoz*. Moving out of the village, though, was out of the question. Our status as exiles, as well as the status of the many

thousands of other exiles spread over the immense stretches of Siberia, was uncertain. My mother and I, like the rest of the twenty-odd Polish families, had been brought to Sergeyevka and put in peasants' houses and left to fend for ourselves, but we had no documents and were strictly forbidden to leave the *kolkhoz*. Each month we were called to the Selsoviet, the village hall, where a few N.K.V.D. men sent from the district office conducted a head count. It seemed the authorities themselves didn't know what to do with us. In a crisis though, we were often called upon to help the *kolkhozniks* with their work. This is what had made me ill at the sheep shed job, and this is what interrupted my househunting, as soon as I was well again.

CHAPTER 15

Private Quarters

SPRING AND SUMMER ARE VERY SHORT IN SIBERIA, BUT given the excellent soil, the plentiful water from melted snow and rain, and the short but very hot summer, the time between sowing and harvesting is but a cat's leap. With many of the men in the army and machinery constantly breaking down, the Soviets found a handy work force in the exiles. Wherever help was needed, the able-bodied exiles were sent to work. Only elderly women and children below the age of twelve were exempt. The village chairman was authorized by the N.K.V.D. to make his own decisions as far as we were concerned.

My first encounter with farm work itself was cutting wheat by hand with a sickle. The *kolkhoz* combine, a machine that cuts and threshes simultaneously, had broken down. The

wheat was ripe and, if left uncut, would go to waste.

Most people don't realize the amount of work it takes to put a slice of bread on the table. Of course, mechanical harvesting makes it easier, but for generations people harvested by hand. When one has to do it for the first time, however, particularly someone who previously has seen a farm only in pictures, the physical strain is indescribable.

Each harvest day, about fifty women had to be out in the field at six in the morning. At every place and kind of work, there were supervisors and informers. The supervisors divided the field into separate strips, assigning six people to each strip, in two rows of three with about a meter between the women in each horizontal line. Many of us were seeing a real sickle (not the one on the Soviet emblem) for the first time in our lives, though some of the Polish women in our group were very adept at this type of work. The supervisor placed the novices in the second row, as stackers. The cutters had to grab an armful of wheat stalks with a circular motion and, holding the sickle with the right hand, swiftly cut as close to the ground as possible, placing the cut stalks in a uniform position, cut side facing their feet. Our job was to follow them and pick up three armfuls of stalks, lean them against each other, cut side down and bind them, forming a tripod.

After the first few steps, we realized how hard it was. The cut stalks were like sharp thorns tearing at our feet, and our bleeding hands and elbows brushed against the ground while gathering them. To manipulate three loose armfuls, and put them upright against each other, was a job for a juggler. Some of us, besides the *kolkhozniks*, were quicker, but others quickly fell far behind. I was one of the latter. After two hours, bathed in sweat, hands and feet bleeding, we were told to take up the sickles. Two hours of training was enough, and we changed

places with the cutters. Now, the situation was reversed. The hardened and experienced *kolkhoz* women were at our necks. The situation became chaotic. Instead of an armful, we were barely able to cut down three or four stalks, with a sawing rather than a swift motion. It was a disaster. The supervisor was running from row to row, fuming and screaming. And the *kolkhoz* women were also angry. We were ruining their day. The normal quota would not be filled. Finally at noon, the weakest workers were sent home, myself among them.

By that time, I had gotten to know almost every family in the *kolkhoz* and had become friendly with some of them, thereby enlarging our food supply. In addition, every week or two a parcel would arrive from our family and friends. But we still had not found new quarters. Apartments, or rather kitchen corners, were scarce.

In the beginning of August, I finally found a new place, and my mother and I became paying, private tenants. All the Polish families were still living in the same kitchen corners where the N.K.V.D. had placed them. We were the only ones with enough incentive to move. Our new landlord had a horse and wagon, and he offered to move our belongings to his house. He gave us the *komnata*, while he, his wife and two young children moved into the kitchen. As part of the deal, he had to supply the wood for the little iron stove which stood near the window through which the smoke pipe from the oven was fitted to lead outside. We had our privacy. The room was clean, with a wooden floor, though very scantily furnished. We still had to keep our clothing and all the rest of our belongings in bundles on the floor, but it seemed like heaven after Volochenko's kitchen. Not for long, though.

A week after we moved in, we were awakened in the middle of the night by the swish of a car under our window

and a screech when it came to a halt. The sound of a car in the middle of the night meant one thing only, the N.K.V.D. coming to claim their victim.

"It stopped in front of our house," I said to my mother through clenched teeth. "What could it mean?"

Those who lived in the Soviet Union during Stalin's reign know what it was like when an N.K.V.D. car stopped in front of someone's house. We lay still in frozen expectation. Some voices, stomping and shoving were heard from the other side of the door. Suddenly, the door was flung open, and a strong beam of light fell across the floor, lingered for a while on our bed, went wandering around the walls and finally stopped in the corner where our bundles lay. I saw two pairs of black boots with shiny spots reflecting the flashlight and two long, stiff coats. I was afraid to raise my eyes to the blue caps, the N.K.V.D.'s trademark.

"Open your bundles," I heard an order. "What are you hiding there?"

Before I was able to reach for my dress, our valises were pried open and the contents spilled on the floor. The bundles were torn apart and kicked with the boots. Evidently not finding what they were looking for, the N.K.V.D. men left the room without another word. Then we heard doors banging in the other part of the house, bolts screeching, a loud triumphant exclamation and a woman's cry as if from the bottom of hell.

It turned out that our landlord, who was in charge of the *kolkhoz* sheep house, was the guilty party. Many of those in charge of something often wound up in prison cellars. Our landlord was responsible for the safety of the sheep, the sheared wool and the sheepskins. An informer, the biggest plague in the Soviet Union, had apparently dropped a word

in some official's ear that sheep skins were missing. And now they had been found in his barn, hidden in the hay. He was pushed, together with the evidence, into the car. A short roar of the motor, and the night swallowed them up.

After a few hours of wailing, his wife came crawling into our room, her head banging the floor and the walls, hysterical with grief and despair. The children beside her were also crying. My mother and I lay still as stones. We were veterans of grief. We knew that no words would comfort her.

A voiceless cry tore my heart. Where was my father now? It was nine months since his arrest and not a word, not the slightest hint from anywhere. Nine months! Two hundred and seventy five mornings waking up with a dull pain, like a heavy stone weighing down my heart, my whole being.

As the days went by, living there became more and more traumatic. The landlady kept crying and saying that Heaven had punished her because she let Jews into her house. The same superstitious anti-Semitism.

By the end of the month, my now frantic search for another place bore unexpectedly good results. Again, we were offered the *komnata*. The owners didn't use it at all. The family consisted of an elderly man and his second wife with her twelve-year-old boy. The man was a night watchman in the *kolkhoz*, and the boy attended the village school. The woman was pleasant, always smiling and not afraid of Jews. On the contrary, she liked Jews. She had also come from the Ukraine, but as a young girl, before the revolution, she had served as a maid with a Jewish family in Odessa. She had been happy working there and had learned all the Jewish customs. The only disadvantage was that the *komnata* was bare, except for a little table and the small, round iron oven with the inevitable smoke pipe through the window.

As we were preparing to move, I asked our unfortunate landlady whether she would be willing to sell the iron bed on which my mother and I had slept. Yes, she said. Left without a breadwinner, she'd sell it for whatever goods I'd pay her. She also offered to sell us the big, wooden trunk. I hadn't had the courage to ask for the trunk, but since she offered it, I grabbed at the deal. It was old, the black lacquer cracked and rubbed out in many places, but it had metal corners, two strong handles and a latch to put a lock through. Besides holding a substantial part of our bundles, now arranged in order inside, it served numerous purposes. During the day, it was a place to sit; at night, spread with blankets on top, it was big enough for me to sleep on.

With our own place and a gracious landlady, we started to feel at home for the first time since coming to Siberia. As we unpacked our bundles, sorting and stacking them into our trunk, we made some heartwarming finds—more *siddurim*, *machzorim* for both of us and, in one of the train window packages, my father's *tallis* and *tefillin*! Aunt Gittel must have thought as she packed them that maybe we'd meet him in Siberia. If only she were right.

My aunts had sent us a calendar in one of the mail parcels, and only a few days remained before *Rosh Hashanah*. It was our first *Rosh Hashanah* in Siberia, away from home, from family, away from everything that constituted our previous world. Our *seudos* were far from *Yom Tov* fare. There was nothing to ease the pain in our hearts. But my mother and I were full of gratitude just for the quiet, empty room, cold as it was, with the clean wooden floor, where we could pray in peace, undisturbed. My mother didn't cry while *davening*. As always, her concentration and *kavanah* were so total that there was no place for tears. Mine were flowing in streams.

"Oh, Hashem!" I cried. "Don't bring more punishment on us. Please, Hashem, reverse the *gezeirah* from last year, and free us from the bondage of Soviet cruelty. And above all, O Almighty, reunite us with my father. Let it even be here behind the ice curtain, in cold and hunger, but let us be together."

When I came to the place when the *shofar* was to be sounded, I became transfixed. My father always used to blow the *shofar* in our own *shul*. I was sure I heard the sound, so clear and strong, just as I had heard him blowing the last time, on *Rosh Hashanah* of 1939. My heart, which was always full of pain and longing for my father, overflowed. Where are you now, my father? Are you well? Are you able to *daven*? I collapsed on the bed, unable to continue. My mother let me cry.

CHAPTER 16

The Grain Silo

A FEW DAYS LATER, A NEW SURPRISE AWAITED ME. IT WAS the beginning of October, and the Siberian autumn frantically prepared to make way for the Siberian winter. The winds, bored by their forced retirement during the spring and summer, unveiled their ghostly wings, sending low, dark clouds to unload accumulated treasures of rain. Sharp needles crisscrossed each other, slashing the air, pounding the roof, the window panes and, when we were forced to go outside, our faces, as well. Big, lacy snowflakes chased one another, going up, sideways, then pairing off and falling slowly, slowly, to the ground. Sometimes, the sun would make a feeble attempt to brighten the gloom, but it would quickly hide again behind a cloud, as if ashamed of its untimely intrusion.

On one such day between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, at noontime, I was in the shed behind the house, breaking up branches for firewood with which to heat our little oven. As I approached the house, carrying an armful of the branches, I noticed a big, horse-drawn farm wagon standing near the open gate. When I entered the kitchen, I saw two N.K.V.D. men talking to my mother and pointing to a list of names. The freezing fall weather could have saved itself the trouble. Those four initials were enough to chill my blood.

When they saw me, they said, "Take bread, a can or a bottle, a blanket and some clothing, and come with us."

I started to tremble and dropped the kindling on the floor. Our good landlady stood wide-eyed and pale. Only my mother, my dear mother, delicate and insulated her whole life, remained calm. In every moment of crisis, she put all her faith and trust in the Almighty, who gave her strength and kept her from breaking down.

By then, I knew that asking questions was useless. The only answer one could get was grinding teeth and a stony look. About a dozen women, all exiles, were taken from Sergeyevka, also many from other *kolkhozy*. When our caravan reached its destination, I recognized the station in Tokushy to which we had been brought when we came to Siberia six months earlier. Cold, wet, tired and bewildered, we were herded into the same tremendous room where a group of about forty men were sitting on the floor, small bundles beside them. Nearby stood several guards with rifles. A shudder, like an electric current, went through all of us.

"The men there are prisoners, probably in transit to another prison," said one woman quietly.

"Then it's possible we are also being taken to some prison," said another.

A nagging thought started buzzing in my head. Why hadn't I taken some paper and a pencil? My brave, dear mother, how could I let her know? Winter is starting, how would she manage? Panic enveloped me like a snake, paralyzing my whole body. I saw my father in the shape of those prisoners. His pain and suffering gripped my heart with claws of steel, echoing my own fears. I no longer saw or heard what was happening.

"Move! Are you dead or alive?" A sharp elbow stuck in my back and I regained my senses.

The man who had prodded me wore a long military coat and blue cap and was now standing in front of us, speaking.

"Tonight you'll sleep here in this room," he said. "Tomorrow morning you'll be taken to the grain silos to shovel and air out the grain. Now we're going to the station buffet where you can buy hot water. Move."

When you expect the worst, bad becomes good. My panic subsided. We were all led to the buffet, including the group of prisoners, where we stood in line to get the precious hot water called *kipiatok*. Can one imagine how delicious a dry piece of bread and boiling water tastes after a day's ride in snow, rain and wind in an open wagon and, worst of all, not knowing what awaits you?

We spread our blankets on the bare and dirty floor, put the bundles under our heads and, fully dressed, wet coats and all, curled up to sleep. It turned out that the N.K.V.D. wasn't taking us to prison. Actually, they had brought the prisoners to us. The group of prisoners was to work with us airing out the grain. They occupied a separate corner of the room and were evidently familiar with sleeping on dirty floors, because their snoring soon filled the air. The bare electric bulbs burning all night didn't bother them, either.

Even in tragic situations, some humorous incidents occur. Among the women from Sergeyevka were two sisters. One was the wife of a Polish judge from Lida who had been arrested, and the other was her younger sister, who happened to be visiting with her at the time of the deportation and so wound up with her in Siberia. My place on the floor happened to be near these two women. I noticed that the younger one had an elegant little overnight bag instead of a plain bundle like the rest of us. She opened it and took out a pink silk nightgown, a mirror, a cosmetic bag and some other paraphernalia that elegant women use. Her older sister, the judge's wife, shivering in her coat, was admonishing her, "Wanda, you'll freeze to death. This is no place for a silk nightgown!" To no avail. Old habits die hard. In the rest of us, they had died already, but not in her. She put cream on her face, played around with her hair curlers and asked her sister and me to shield her so she could change. It was freezing in the room in spite of the crowd, and soon I could see her shivering and reaching for her coat.

The glaring bulbs, the prisoners' snoring and the air filled with mold and vapor from the wet clothing were not conducive to restful sleep, but somehow, I dozed off. I was awakened by a loud voice. "Get in line for *kipiatok*!" I looked at my watch. It was six o'clock in the morning. In two minutes we were all on our feet. Poor Wanda had no time to take out her curlers and get out of her pink gown, and in such attire, she had to start the first day of grueling work.

By then, I had had a taste of hard work more than once, but the job we were assigned to do now was plain torture. The silo, a tall, round structure like a huge barrel, about three stories high and nine or ten meters (about thirty feet) in diameter, was filled two-thirds high with grain. An exterior

staircase wound around the silo leading to a narrow door which was supposed to be well above the level of the grain, but the previous year's good harvest had filled the silo higher than usual, covering the stairs inside. As soon as we stepped through the door, we fell as if from a springboard straight into quicksand.

The supervisors were plodding through the grain with three-meter-long thermometers, sticking them deep into the grain and shaking their heads in horror. When left in compact masses for a long time, grain starts to ferment, producing high temperatures which lead to further fermentation, destroying the grain. Their three-meter-long thermometers reached only the top level; the deeper layers were literally burning.

There were several silos in the elevator complex near the station, and the supervisors were running from one to the other with the long thermometer sticks, like prehistoric hunters holding spears in front of them, ready for the kill. The *natchalnik* (head supervisor) of the elevator was beside himself with anger. More likely, he was covering his fear. In no time, he could join another group of prisoners for a failure like this.

We were given large, wooden shovels and told to turn over the grain, from one side of the silo to the other, reaching all the way to the bottom so that the intense temperatures would be reduced and the grain would not ferment. It was an impossible task. As soon as a shovelful was lifted, the emptied space was filled with grain again. How would we ever get to the bottom?

The silo had skylight windows, but as it was raining outside, they were tightly closed. The dust and heat inside were impossible to bear. The overseers were furious. They

divided our group into four rows. The first was positioned against the wall in a quarter-circle and, working closely together, had to throw the grain to the next row. The next was to throw it to the third, and so on. We had to work with lightning speed, before the grain slid back. Soaked to the skin, not from rain but from sweat, our nostrils and mouths clogged with moldy dust, eyes burning, heads whirling, we became living automatons.

The deeper we had to dig, the hotter it became. Time stood still.

"More, more, to the bottom, to the bottom," said a voice from above.

My group was the one against the wall, the lowest down. The shovels hit something hard. It was the floor.

"Thirty minutes rest now," said the same voice. We collapsed against the wall. The workers in the second row fell into a heap right in the middle of the grain where they were working, sending a wave of grain and dust over us, burying us to the waist. My body was a lump of throbbing pain. Uncountable seconds passed.

"Now we'll start on the next side," we heard the overseer say.

We were in the worst position. We had to climb up half a mountain of grain to reach the next quarter section, where we were to start working again. Trying to pull ourselves up, we just slid down again. The workers above us, scrambling to their feet, pushed a heavy mass of grain on our heads. I had grain everywhere—in my boots, in my stockings, up my sleeves, on my back. It stung. It itched. It scratched. There was no way to escape. I caught somebody's foot, someone caught my hand and started to pull. I had no foothold. It was quicksand all around. But somehow, pulling each other, we

managed to stand up. I kept my mouth open to breathe; my tongue felt like wood, my palate like rusted iron, my eyelashes like heavy clay pasted together by sweat and dust.

"Start on the next side now!" the supervisor commanded.

We dragged ourselves to the next quarter-circle section of wall, feet sinking into the grain with each step. At noon we had another half hour rest, which included lunch. I had bread and hot water. I gave the watery cabbage soup to one of the women. During the afternoon, until seven o'clock, we made two more turnovers, completing the circle.

After work, we had the pleasure of waiting in line for more *kipiatok*. It cost only a few *kopeks* a liter, and many people from the village itself used to come to the station to buy some and save their own fuel. Exhausted and in pain, I tried to find a comfortable position on my feet and shifted my bundle of meager belongings, which I always carried with me for fear of its being stolen, and my little blue enamel pail from one bruised hand to the other. Anxious to sit down, I leaned forward to see how many people were ahead of me in line, when I saw a familiar face.

"Freidele!" I called out. Little Freidele Shmulovitz, of all people! She was only fourteen years old.

She looked back, saw me and immediately ran to her mother to tell her the news. One didn't converse in public in Communist Russia.

Her father, a wealthy businessman, had eluded the Soviets and fled to Vilna, so her mother Liba, her brother Lazar and she were exiled to Siberia. Before the war, my acquaintance with Liba had been casual. I knew her because she belonged to many of the charitable organizations in which my mother was active, but she was closer to my mother's age than to mine.

We had both been exiled to Siberia in the same transport, but we only discovered that after we arrived. We were in different boxcars on the train, and on arrival in Siberia, the occupants of each boxcar were sent to a different *kolkhoz*. Liba's *kolkhoz* was close to Tokushy, while mine and my mother's was quite far away.

Shortly after Liba's arrival at her *kolkhoz*, the exiles there were given the option of becoming seamstresses at the Tokushy workshop nearby. Liba grabbed the opportunity and moved to Tokushy with her daughter Freidele and her son Lazar.

The work at the elevators lasted a month, and without Freidele and Liba, it would have been a nightmare. Lazar worked in the office of the elevator, so through *protektzia*, at lunchtime I was allowed to climb outside the silos, where Liba was waiting for me with a dish of warm, homemade soup. With their help, I was also able to send a few letters to my mother.

Considering the indescribable difficulty of the work, due in large part to the clouds of moldy dust we were breathing and swallowing twelve hours a day, I don't know how I could have survived without her help and support. And it was the most natural thing for her to do. Wherever help was needed Liba offered an outstretched hand.

In every circumstance, Liba was brave and courageous to the utmost. In our first year of exile, under Stalin's tyrannical regime, she organized a Friday night and *Shabbos minyan* in her small one-room apartment in Tokushy, which she shared with another couple. Not a morsel of unkosher food was brought into her home during the entire six years of our exile. But above all was her goodness, her friendliness, her understanding. If anyone had a problem or trouble, the first name

that came to mind was—Liba.

If anyone ever commented on her outstanding qualities she would look surprised. How else should it be? In all of the years I knew her in Siberia, I never heard a word of complaint from her, even though, like the rest of us, she was struggling just to have enough food to eat. In all those years, I also never heard her say a single unkind word about anybody. In her righteousness, she couldn't see any bad characteristics in anyone. Indeed, it seemed as though Liba did not even hate the Russians! I never saw her excited, angry or despairing. She was always calm, level-headed, logical and smart. She always had a calming effect on those who came in contact with her.

Yom Kippur was approaching, but I knew I could do nothing to avoid working on that day. We worked in small groups and were under the constant watch of the N.K.V.D. sentries. Names were checked when leaving and entering the sleeping quarters at the train station and when entering and leaving the silos. A sentry stood watch on the stairs outside, and under his scrutinizing gaze, I would gulp down the soup Liba or Freidele used to bring me. There was no way to escape. Papa, Mama, *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, forgive me! On the eve of *Yom Kippur*, at the usual lunch hour, Liba brought me a double portion of soup—home-made noodles cooked in milk. Together with the slice of clay-like bread, our lunch portion, it was a filling meal. It had to sustain me until the next evening.

It wasn't the burning thirst or the hunger. It was the pain and the horror that on the evening of *Kol Nidrei* I had to hold a shovel instead of a *machzor*. That whole long day of *Yom Kippur* I cried with tears disguised as grain. In each grain I saw

a tear, hundreds, thousands, millions of them. My eyes were dry. Too dry. Burning. My heart was crying. Crying and begging forgiveness. I worked in a daze, hands gripping the handle, arms lifting the shovel. My physical presence was there, but my soul and mind were in a place a million miles away.

Suddenly, I was in a different time, a different place. *The curtains are tightly drawn. From the other side I can hear the hoarse voice of our baal tefillah Reb Hirsch Leib, finishing the last lines of Avinu Malkeinu. I am sitting near my mother in the women's section, Aunt Gittel next to my mother on the other side. A sudden stillness descends upon all of us, the last quiet sobs by a few women in the seats around us muffled by their wet handkerchiefs. A tremor, as if touched by an electric current, goes through our bodies. The Tefillas Neelah is starting soon. My father, always the baal tefillah for Neelah, is speaking. "Ribono Shel Olam! Did we merit your chessed? Will our prayers bring us a year of health and happiness?" The moments are short. The heavenly verdict is soon to be pronounced. "Forgive us, O Almighty, for the sins we committed knowingly and not knowingly. Grant us the chessed to bring our tefillos before You at this same time next year and during the coming year. Have pity on us–O Hashem!–in the name of our fathers." My father's voice, so soft, beautiful, penetrating, pleadingly carries all our prayers to the Heavenly throne to be sealed in the Sefer Hachaim. I distinctly hear the blowing of the shofar. I hear the words, "Leshanah Habaah Biyerushalayim."*

"Ona zemdlala! Ona zemdlala!" I heard a voice saying. "She passed out! She passed out!"

I felt four hands under my arms trying to pull me up, but instead, the two Polish co-workers trying to help me fell down themselves, becoming half-buried in the grain beside me. All three of us were harshly reminded by a loud bellow from the

sentry that it was not yet rest hour.

Late in the evening, Liba herself brought me a full portion of noodle soup to break the fast.

CHAPTER 17

Winter in Siberia

AFTER TWO WEEKS OF BACK-BREAKING, LUNG-SEARING shoveling, the supervisors decided we needed a little fresh air. Long trains of freight cars entered and left the station daily, and they had to be packed with the grain. These cars were better equipped than those in which we had been brought. No open slots in the walls and floors, the doors tightly fitted and no bars on the windows. As always in the Soviet Union, any merchandise was worth more effort and investment than human beings.

As soon as the rain and snow stopped, the sun, half-hidden, opened her treasure of gold, sending brilliance and light, her rays reflected in the half-frozen puddles, bouncing back as if afraid of being contaminated by the hundreds of tired feet in dilapidated shoes which trampled them from

early morning until dark. On the first dry day, we were out loading the grain.

During the whole month at the elevators, there was one thing for which we were thankful. The N.K.V.D. kept the group of prisoners working separately. In the evenings at the station, and later when we were working at the loading platforms, we could see the prisoners at a distance. Their pale, expressionless faces, ragged clothing and resigned, miserable looks were distressing. They seemed to be small-fry, short-term convicts (three to five years). They had committed petty crimes such as *progul* (missing a day's work), reporting to work drunk, taking a spool of thread, a few nails or a few cards for bread rations from work. Everyone did those things—until caught. I looked at them with pain. My father must look like that. His crime was much bigger. He was a capitalist and consequently, in the Soviet's eyes, a counter-revolutionary, an enemy of the regime, an undesirable element. Shoveling grain would be too lenient a punishment for such a dangerous criminal.

We were assigned two women to each silo chute, four to each train car, two to each little window. As the doors had to be tightly closed so the grain wouldn't slip through, the inside workers of each train team had to climb in through the high, small windows. A board about two feet wide, with planks nailed across about a foot apart, was placed like a slanted ladder from the ground up to each window. Each silo had a few little doors with slanted chutes about four feet above the base. A sack held by two women was slipped over the mouth of the chute, the little door was opened, and in seconds, one hundred twenty pounds (about fifty-five kilos) of grain would slam into the sack. There was no time nor twine to tie the sacks. They were just twisted a bit by hand and held tightly so

as not to spill. The two women lifted the sack onto the shoulder of a train team's outside worker who, carrying the load on her back and holding on desperately to the gathered end, climbed the board, balancing carefully so as not to slip, and on reaching the top, put the open end of the sack into the window and emptied it into the car; it was like an incongruous circus act. The one who stood inside had to shovel the grain away to make place for the contents of the next sack. We alternated our functions constantly.

Often during our lunch break, Freidele, Liba or one of the other women I knew in Tokushy came to commiserate with me. By all means, they advised, my mother and I should try to come to Tokushy where life would be a bit easier. Although we all knew we were not allowed to leave the places where we had been put, just talking about it made me feel better.

In two weeks, the silos were empty, ready to be filled with grain from the new harvest. There were surely more sophisticated methods of preserving and loading grain in the condemned, capitalistic world, but why bother? The N.K.V.D. provided enough cheap labor.

The work finished, I was allowed to go back home. I was neither wiser nor richer, just very tired and more hardened to meet the onslaught of our first Siberian winter.

The grain shoveling was the last work before the winter. Now, there was nothing to do. I read the few books available in the *kolkhoz* with very little enthusiasm. They were all communist propaganda. Most of the time, I knitted and crocheted. By then, I had obtained many balls of cotton yarn, and as the winter approached, my "production" of knitted mittens, stockings, shawls and sweaters helped overcome the cold. Many nights we slept with stockings and gloves on. And

surprisingly, though cotton, they were very warm and strong. I made many and still kept knitting as if anticipating the next winter's need.

As November rolled in and the world around us became insulated under a thick layer of hardened snow, my mother and I realized that our *komnata* wasn't such a bargain after all. The little iron stove had to be fed around the clock to keep at least its immediate vicinity at a bearable temperature. We moved the bed to the middle of the room, because the walls were soon covered with an inch-thick layer of ice. The windows grew a white bouquet of exotic foliage encased in brilliant crystal. But still, we were lucky. We had a good landlady. She supplied us with food, milk, flour, potatoes and sometimes a few eggs. I, in turn, kept transferring things, little by little, from our trunk to hers.

During the fiercest months, from December to March, my mother didn't go outside at all. I went out only to pick up a parcel or mail, or to supplement our food, which our landlady wasn't always able to provide. Occasionally, on warmer days, when it was only forty degrees Celsius below zero or so, I would visit one or another of the Polish families, to borrow a book or catch up on the news.

The year 1940 advanced to 1941. The letters from the family didn't reveal any details, but their sadness and uncertainty was obvious. The contents of the parcels were a good barometer. The letters were always censored, the parcels left intact. As the months went by, the food items got poorer, and the other articles soon followed suit. And then, out of the blue, Aunt Gittel sent a package containing long forgotten, unheard-of goodies—a jar of jam, honey and candies. We knew such things were not available in Lida at that time.

My mother's younger sister Mina had lived in Vilna for

many years. After Vilna, by the grace of the Soviets, became the capital of Lithuania, which was a Soviet satellite, travel permits were given to workers and students on both sides to cross the border and visit family. Aunt Mina had an only daughter named Yocheved, then twelve years old. As Yocheved told me much later, Aunt Mina loaded a big knapsack with all those treats still available in Vilna, and Yocheved, with a student's permit, brought them to Lida for my aunts to send to us.

I liked Aunt Mina very much. She was quiet, devoted and undemanding, a woman with a heart of gold. She, her husband Uncle Abe, another sister of my mother's and many cousins were killed in Vilna in 1941 and 1942, after the Germans invaded Russia. Yocheved is the only survivor of my mother's whole family. She now lives happily married, with two married daughters and six grandchildren in Eretz Yisrael.

Another excellent parcel I remember receiving with great surprise in the middle of the winter was from my good friend Dina Myshkin, who lived in Novogrodek (Novardok), a town close to ours in Poland. Her husband's family had had a leather business before the war, and the parcel contained, besides some food items, two pieces of black leather and soles for boots. The leather was priceless.

There was no electricity in Sergeyevka, and no candles. Everyone used carefully hoarded kerosene. I was sitting and knitting, as I often did, in the kitchen where our hosts had a kerosene lamp. It was not a big lamp, but when kept on the table, it was light enough to read or knit by. In our *komnata* we had no such luxury. First, where in the world could I get such a lamp or the kerosene? Kerosene was brought from time to time to the store, but as one never knew which merchandise would be brought at any time, only the *kolkhoz*

women had the patience and endurance to wait in line from three in the morning, wrapped in all the shawls they had, only to find that the items for sale were not something they particularly needed. For most *kolkhozniks*, the main source of kerosene came from the *kolkhoz* supplies. Petty thefts made their existence somewhat more endurable, but very miserable if they were caught.

In the *komnata*, we still used the very efficient little *kurnik* from Volochenko, which shed just enough light to help us see our way around the room. It was a far cry, I reflected one evening, from the antique, solid silver chandelier in my father's study, a present from my grandmother from her parents' home in Vitebsk, or the beautiful candlesticks my mother used to *bentch licht* over on Friday nights. I had last seen all these on the floor of the N.K.V.D. headquarters in Lida and, among them, the little silver purse, two clam shells held together with a ruby clasp, which my grandmother had given me before she died. I had begged the N.K.V.D. for that purse, but they did not return it.

All these memories! Like a fantasy that had never existed. Like frozen images from a distant past. I pulled harder on the yarn and broke the hook.

At seven in the evening it was already quite late; in January, it got dark at three in the afternoon. My mother had gone to sleep already; it was much warmer in the kitchen than in our room, but it was even warmer under the down quilt.

At the other end of the table, the landlady's son was struggling with his math. The old man had gone to his watchman's job, and the landlady kept droning on and on about the good old days when she had been a maid in a rich Jewish home in Odessa. I was thankful for her chatter, as it kept my own thoughts at bay. I was even happier when the

boy asked me to explain common denominators. He had difficulty with fractions, and I could see he was no genius. Finally, he grasped the concept and solved the problem, and his mother, overjoyed and in great excitement, ran to the larder and came back with a chunk of butter wrapped in a piece of clean cloth.

"Take it, take it," she insisted. "But don't tell my husband. He doesn't like my boy."

In February, I came down with a very bad cold. I had a temperature of forty-one degrees Celsius (one hundred and six Fahrenheit), pain in my side and a cough. During the winter months, the "doctor" didn't come to Sergeyevka. The work in the *kolkhozy* slackened, so if someone got sick, it was too bad. My mother, however, had the best medicine—*Tehillim*.

I was delirious for most of the first week. I was no longer in our room with its ice-coated walls, but floating in a vacuum rimmed with rosy clouds. I heard my father's voice. Some invisible magnet pulled me toward it. Such a heavenly, ethereal feeling. But oh! My head! The ringing! The pounding! A sharp stab in my chest erupted in a cascade of coughs. I felt hands raising my pillow to give me more comfort. I caught my breath and, exhausted, fell back.

"Take the aspirin." My mother held a tablespoon of liquid with a whitish scum on top. There were no aspirin tablets then. The aspirin came as a crystalline powder, which didn't dissolve but had to be taken with water. My aunts used to include little packets of it in every parcel, as well as pyramidon and some eucalyptus tablets for minor throat irritations. This was all we had to treat my illness, which my mother and the landlady diagnosed as pneumonia.

As the temperature, cough and pain persisted, our good

landlady, who used to sit for hours near my bed so that my mother could have a little rest, suggested that the only thing that would help was "cups" (*bankes* in Yiddish). In my childhood, I remember them being prescribed by doctors for every cough with fever. At the first slight cough, on our doctor's advice, a nurse would arrive carrying a little black case containing those dreadful little glass cups, which I hated. They were ball-shaped with a slightly narrowed mouth about an inch and a quarter in diameter. A piece of cotton swathed around the end of a short metal stick and soaked in spirits was held ready. The cup was held in the other hand some five or six inches from the chest or back, and the cotton ignited. In a swift movement the flaming end was stuck into the cup, withdrawn and the cup placed on the skin. Now empty of air, the cup would stick as if glued on, sucking up the skin almost halfway in. About fifteen cups were put on the back, side and chest, each application lasting fifteen or twenty minutes. It wasn't painful, just unpleasant. I am sure many modern doctors have never seen such cups. In the pre-antibiotics days, it was a common practice, which apparently helped.

"Is there anybody here who has cups?" my mother asked.

"No, they don't," the landlady answered. "But let me do what everyone does here when we have such colds."

My head was spinning. No more rosy clouds, but dark and heavy ones descended on me from all sides. I heard a voice screaming—it was my voice. My mother held my hand. I thought it was my mother, but I wasn't sure. Then she put something wet and cold on my forehead. Oh, yes, of course it was Mama, her lips moving in silent prayer, her eyes penetrating mine. They wanted to reach the very depths of my soul and beg me to stay, to stay. The cold pack lifted the dark cloud from my head a little. I saw clearly now. I didn't

know how late it was. The lamp from the kitchen stood on our little table.

The landlady came in with a two-quart clay jar in one hand and half a potato in the other. She put them on the table and went back into the kitchen for the rest of her equipment. My mother looked puzzled, forlorn. The landlady, evidently experienced in what she intended to do, carved out a hole in the rounded top of the potato, soaked a tightly rolled piece of cotton in alcohol and stuffed it into the hole. She told me to turn over on my stomach and told my mother to uncover my back. The little oven was almost melting from burning all day, but my mother hesitated, since the walls were still covered with ice.

"*Nychevo nye budyet*," the landlady assured her. "Nothing will happen."

My mother obeyed. The landlady ignited the cotton ball in its potato cradle, put the flat, cut side on my spine and the two liter jug on top of it. At first I felt nothing, but as the air in the jug became thinner and thinner, it started to pull my skin like a suction pump. The size of the jug caused a searing pain.

"It hurts!" I moaned.

"*Dobre, dobre*," I was told. "It's good if it pulls. It's good."

I couldn't breathe or cough. Any move was like the stab of a knife. Finally, she pressed hard with her hand on my spine and with a jerk pulled away the jug. I couldn't see my back, but I heard my mother exclaim, "*Oy!*"

The landlady reassured her and said, "We'll wait a while, and then I'll do the same here." And she touched me under my shoulder blade.

The procedure was repeated on my lower left side and then on my chest. I submitted to the excruciating pain, half-

conscious and delirious. What happened beyond that I don't remember. I just remember a big, purple-black circle on my chest which stayed for weeks after I recovered.

It was really remarkable that my mother, always of fragile health, who had gone to resort spots and taken mineral baths, drunk various mineral waters which doctors believed to be vital, and had always been protected and cared for, survived the first Siberian summer and winter, as well as the second and third, without the slightest detriment to her health. She never felt ill. Only from the third year on, did she start to have trouble.

I, on the other hand, after my first two encounters, with malaria in the summer and the supposed pneumonia in the winter, had only one or two more trivial illnesses, and hardly an occasional sneeze afterwards.

Meanwhile, in Sergeyevka, the winter made desperate attempts to linger on. March, in Siberia, or at least in Northern Kazakhstan, has special privileges. The winds are given a free hand which they take advantage of to their utmost delight. The temperature is no higher than in February. In fact, while walking down Sergeyevka's street on a sunny day in March, an approaching woman told me, "*Tri tvoy nos, byelyi, otmorozhenyi.* Rub your nose, it's white, it's frozen." I knew what I had to do. I quickly grabbed a handful of snow and started rubbing my nose until I felt a stinging pain. When a toe, a finger or any part of one's face freezes, nothing is felt at the beginning. Only when it starts to thaw does the pain occur. I was very lucky that day that somebody came my way and noticed just as it had started, and so I caught it in time. Not everyone was so fortunate. There were severe cases of gangrene caused by frostbite.

In March, the winds reigned in a tug of war with the sun.

Deprived during the short winter days of showing her full glory, the March sun didn't miss a chance to force her way through and take a closer look at our planet Earth. Sometimes she succeeded. The snow was still rock hard, the frost still fierce, but in the moments of the sun's triumph, the world around us was transformed into a blinding, white nirvana. The air was crisp, fresh and clean, free from smells of either people or animals. You wanted not only to inhale it, but to lap it up until you felt your lungs inflate like a balloon, and you were lifted and carried into the endless heights of creation. Miseries and hardships were forgotten. You were in a trance.

These were rare moments, though. The winds, not wanting to be outdone, unleashed their hidden power. A swish, then a roar and an instant transformation took place. The sun, caught by surprise, didn't even have time to hide. The winds were quicker. They enclosed the world in a grayish-white blanket from horizon to horizon. The blizzard had announced its entrance. As old Volochenko once told me, as a rule it would last three days. Then, anger spent, the wind slowed down for a while, in its generosity even letting the sun peer through the white clouds, until with doubled force it picked up again. No need to pulverize the clouds now, there was enough snow on the ground to throw around, like the people in this country, back, forward and sideways, swept in piles, bounced, then packed in humps and left to freeze and be thumped by human feet.

Five or six times a winter, the blizzards would rage, leaving in their wake six foot drifts which would soon become trampled and packed into a solid three-foot layer of ice, coating the world. Many times, doors would get blocked, and a few times we were dug out by our luckier neighbors. Then,

another blizzard would blow through, and we would be the ones returning the favor.

The parcels from home continued to arrive, though irregularly. *Pesach* was approaching. My mother and I worried about obtaining *matzos*. Aunt Etie mentioned in one of her letters that she had sent a parcel with clothing and had included some *matzos*, but that parcel, for a change, didn't arrive so fast. It did come, but only a month after *Pesach*. All the letters were censored, as Aunt Etie knew, but she had forgotten it when writing this detail. A mark must have been made somewhere, and the parcel was delayed. Our few *matzos*, it seemed, were detrimental to the Soviet ideology. So we had potatoes and eggs, and our landlady was cooperative in every way. During the long winter, she had tended our little oven every *Shabbos*, and now on *Erev Pesach* and on *Chol Hamoed*, she milked her cow, every morning, into our *Pesach* pot. We also had some sugar sent from home. It was not bad at all.

Our year's confinement to the *kolkhoz* boundaries neared its end. At our last head count by the N.K.V.D., we were told that we could leave the *kolkhoz* if we were able to find work elsewhere, but only within the Poludieno district. There were only two choices, Tokushy or Poludieno. All the other places were *kolkhozy* like ours. In Tokushy, I had Liba Shmulovitz and other friends with whom I had stayed in contact during the winter, and they kept encouraging us to move there. The Polish women preferred Poludieno. It had a better school, a hospital and workshops (called *artels*), so it could offer more work opportunities. There were also some Polish families who decided to remain in Sergeyevka, who didn't believe they could better their lot by moving. My mother and I,

however, were anxious for the opportunity to be among our own people.

In many ways, the decision to move affected our fate during the next few years. It seemed then that we were making our own decisions, but it was not so. We were guided by the Almighty's will, and in every instance, even the most unbearable situations, evaluated in view of their outcomes, turned out to be to our advantage.

CHAPTER 18

Conditions Improve

I WAS AMONG A GROUP OF EIGHT WOMEN WHO DECIDED TO undertake an exploratory expedition. The only way to reach Poludieno or Tokushy was on foot. It was thirty kilometers to Tokushy, forty-seven to Poludieno in a slightly different direction, both by dirt road. The Polish women wanted to go to Poludieno, so if I didn't want to get lost going alone, I had to agree. Although my first preference was Tokushy, I could at least seize this opportunity to see what Poludieno had to offer.

The thick layers of snow weren't concerned about our plans, and took their time melting and soaking into the ground. So, we were only able to start out at the end of May. Again and again, we checked the route with the village people, writing down every detail. In one place was a narrow

side road, in another a large cut-down tree trunk, a big forest to the right, a lake to the left and other similar landmarks. The road also cut through a small forest for about two kilometers.

We left early on a Monday morning, taking only enough food and water to last for the day. It is difficult to march forty-seven kilometers burdened with heavy bundles. Though it added extra weight to my bag, I was glad my mother had insisted that I take her old, flat rubber boots. "Just in case," she said. And "in case" came as a big marshlike puddle through which we had to wade. It was a sunny day, and until this point the road had been dry. The birch trees on both sides of the road, still without foliage, hinted with their sharp, raw fragrance of the soon to unfold reaches of their green crowns. A hum broke between the branches as we caught a bird in flight, unprepared to be disturbed. A light breeze, great-grandson of the not-so-long-past storm, a helpless infant, played hide and seek with our hair.

We walked briskly, stopping only for a short rest on a fallen tree or stone. We followed our home-made map without difficulty, finding all the signs.

Late in the afternoon, we arrived in Poludieno. There were quite a few families from Lida living there. Like those in Tokushy, they had been allowed to stay on from the beginning of their exile. Their arrested family members evidently had lighter sentences. Among the people I knew were the wife and two young daughters of an engineer named Munia (Emanuel) Hurvitz from the rubber factory in Lida. I knew their address, and at the entrance to Poludieno, I left the Polish women and headed to them.

After spending the evening there, they put me up in the quarters of the Baykalski family, friends of theirs, very hospitable warm people from a little town near Lida. It was

a great pleasure to be with our own people once again. Talking to people with whom I had something in common made me realize all the more how anxious I was to move.

In the morning, I went to visit an old acquaintance Dora Kaplinska, with her eighteen-month-old daughter. Her husband Leon was among the tragically famous group of several thousand Polish officers taken prisoner by the Soviets at the beginning of the war and killed in the Katyn Forest in White Russia. He was a doctor, the only profession by which Jews could become officers in the Polish army. The Soviets claimed the Germans had killed the officers, but it was later proven that the murders took place before the Germans invaded Russia.

The main problem with moving to Poludieno, I discovered, was the impossibility of getting a room or even a corner. I decided I would have to try Tokushy, which was only fourteen kilometers from Poludieno by direct road without going through Sergeyevka. After a day of fruitless searching for a place to move, the Polish women went back to Sergeyevka on Tuesday afternoon, taking word to my mother of my plans. I hitched a ride to Tokushy on a farm truck.

When I got to Tokushy, I found Liba as hospitable and helpful as ever. She, her daughter Freidele and her son Lazar, together with an elderly couple named Mikulitzki, whose son had been arrested, lived in a rented *izba* (a small peasant hut) on their own. The housing shortage was just as much a problem there as in Poludieno, but Liba wasn't one to give up without trying. We walked, literally, from house to house, and just as we were ready to give up, we were told that a teacher in the school for tractor operators was being transferred and was willing to rent his *komnata*, leaving his mother to live in the kitchen. We almost ran to his house. It was a nice,

wooden, corner house, the *komnata* fully furnished. The price was unheard of though—one hundred *chervoncy* a month plus my own heating.

"Take it," Liba advised. "After you move, you'll have time to look for something cheaper."

The landlord also wanted a month's rent in advance, and as I had only a few *rubles* (one *chervonetz* was ten *rubles*), Liba went home, brought the money, and I signed an agreement.

It was Wednesday, and I wanted to go back to Sergeyevka as soon as possible. To find a ride to Sergeyevka was out of the question, but I didn't know the way to walk. The only solution was to go back to Poludieno and from there on foot to Sergeyevka. On Thursday morning, Liba's son Lazar arranged a ride for me to Poludieno. I stayed over again with the Baykalskis. They asked me to remain over *Shabbos*, but I decided to leave Friday morning. Judging by the trip there, I assumed it would take the same ten hours or so. The only difference was that now I had to walk alone. I remembered the way well. It had only been five days since we had made the trip to Poludieno, and I had memorized every detail.

It had been a hectic week, and I was very tired. I slept through the night like a rock, and early in the morning, the two Baykalski daughters, identical twins, walked me to the edge of the townlet, where the road to Sergeyevka branched out. It was shortly after sunrise. I clutched my bag with the rain boots and some food and water Mrs. Baykalski had given me. I said good-bye to the girls and started my march.

I can't say I wasn't afraid. I was. It was early, and I knew if I walked quickly I'd arrive before *Shabbos*, but I was plagued with the fear of taking a wrong turn. There were three smaller roads branching out to other *kolkhozy*. Then I thought about the two kilometer walk through the forest. Why had I been in

such a rush? Couldn't I have waited for the mail wagon even if it meant staying in Poludieno for a few more days? He couldn't take eight women, but he could have taken one! My feet were in competition with my thoughts, and I didn't notice when I began to run. My fears and my feet were chasing each other, and the sun seemed to join in the race.

I stopped suddenly to catch my breath. As far as I could see no one was ahead of me, no one behind. I was all alone on a Siberian dirt road, empty fields on both sides, the sun bright and shining above. Alone? No, I am not alone, I told myself. The Almighty is watching and guiding me. What better companion could I ask for? My fear disappeared. I resumed my normal pace, all my attention on the road. I recognized the trees, the stones, as if it were my daily route.

The road was bumpy. The grooves left by the wagon wheels in the dried dirt made the walking harder. The work in the fields hadn't started yet, and all around were empty, barren stretches. I walked, took a sip of water and walked. All of a sudden, I stopped, mesmerized, not by the fact that I had taken a wrong turn but by an old grain thresher, lying on its side, abandoned. My eyes were glued to it. In every detail, it was identical to the thousands that had been produced in my father's factory. Even the pinkish orange paint, faded now, was the same. It was some distance away, and I fought the temptation to go nearer and find the brand name.

I turned back toward the main road and started to run again. I ran from the irretrievable past, from the overflowing emotion. The sun was high now, past noontime. I collapsed on the nearest comfortable stone, and suddenly, I felt hungry. I knew there wasn't enough time to rest, but I quickly ate the cold pancakes and took another sip of water. Then, with renewed effort, I straightened up and started to march again.

I couldn't estimate exactly the distance which lay before me, but according to my watch, there should have been about sixteen or seventeen kilometers left.

Did I hear something? Yes, it was coming closer and closer. I turned around and saw an approaching *britchka*, a peasant's open vehicle for carrying people, not goods, pulled by one horse. Usually, they had four seats including the driver's. Bigger ones had a folding bench for two more. In my time in Russia, peasants weren't using *britchkas* any more. They were reserved for the *natchalniks*, the officials. I barely managed to step aside when the driver abruptly pulled in the reins and stopped. Beside him on the front seat was some kind of civilian official, as was evident from his better dress.

"Where are you going?" he asked me. It didn't take him long to see that I was not a *kolkhoznitza* but rather one of the *zapadniks* (westerners).

"Sergeyevka," I replied.

"I am the chairman of the *kolkhoz* Litvinovka," he introduced himself with a certain measure of pride. "Get into the back seat, and we'll let you off where the road to Litvinovka turns off from the main road. It's about ten kilometers from here."

I thanked him and gladly accepted his offer. Litvinovka was a small *kolkhoz*, seven kilometers from Sergeyevka, so my estimate had been correct. During the ride, although he sat with his back to me, he managed to tell me that in his *kolkhoz* there were also a few Polish families and that they were so happy there that none of them wanted to move anywhere else.

"Judging from your courtesy in offering me a ride," I said, "I am sure you are concerned about their welfare. That's why they are happy with you."

His back straightened; he seemed pleased. The carriage soon turned into the forest, then through the now partially dried puddle. Around two in the afternoon, I was back on foot. I thanked him again and, with fresh energy, continued my march.

After an hour's walk, the tall chimney of the *kolkhoz* flour mill, which was on the outskirts of the village, greeted me from the distance with a big puff of black smoke. As I came nearer, I saw a village boy playing in the field, turning and running in a whirl of hands and feet toward home. In a place the size of Sergeyevka, everyone's business is public knowledge. The journey of the group of Polish women to Poludieno was a topic of conversation in every kitchen. As it had also become known that I had stayed behind, when the boy saw me he ran to the house where we lived to bring the news, so when I finally entered, my mother was expecting me. I still had time to wash away the dust before *Shabbos* started.

The details of our departure from Sergeyevka and the means by which we accomplished the move escape my memory. I do remember how pleased my mother was with the new accommodations, especially with the freedom to be together again with our Jewish friends and acquaintances.

Tokushy vis-a-vis Sergeyevka was a different world. The main street even had sidewalks! Not the whole stretch, of course, just here and there a few squeaky boards put at the side of the road and called sidewalks for civic pride. The town had a public school with two more classes than in Sergeyevka, ending with the eighth grade. It also had a big flour mill, a central railroad station, an *artel* employing close to two hundred workers and, above all, the pride of Tokushy, a school for tractor operators, with a real, academic engineer as principal. About two years later, I learned that the student

body consisted of eighty percent girls, sent from the nearby *kolkhozy* to learn to operate the tractors. Considering the vodka consumption of the men, the operation of the tractors by women probably ran more smoothly and with fewer breakdowns.

A few days after settling in Tokushy, I found work at the grain elevator. Not loading and shoveling the grain this time, but in the office. There were about twelve people working in the same room, which was big, light and airy, and each had his own desk. The accounting system was familiar—the same clumsy, complicated one used in Poland, but there were also other novel shortcomings.

Can anyone visualize accounting ledgers made from old newspapers bound in soft covers? We had to line them with lead pencils vertically into separate columns, and then across the page for each entry. But there were no ballpoint pens at that time, and in Russia, no fountain pens either. Each desk (actually a plain table) had in its right upper corner a hole which held a glass inkwell. Little metal nibs attached to wooden, pencil-like shafts had to be dipped at every third or fourth word into the ink. The metal ends were tapered and split for holding ink and writing. The newspaper, yellowish and of the worst quality, had hairy specks and wooden splinters which caught in the tip of the pen as soon as the pen touched the paper and had to be removed. What was worse, the paper was thin and absorbent like blotting paper. When one had to add a long column of figures, it was quite a problem deciding if a number was a 0 or a 6, a 3 or an 8, because as soon as the pen touched the paper, no matter what was intended, a round black blob would appear. Let the accountant worry, we decided as we went along. She had a highly sophisticated piece of equipment—an abacus.

The schools were also supplied with copybooks made from newspapers. "*Voyennoye vremia*," they used to say to explain the ingenious invention. "Wartime." Regardless of the pact they had made with Hitler, the Soviets had considered themselves in a state of war since the invasion of Poland.

The number fudging, though, wasn't the reason my office job lasted only two weeks and three days. I started on Thursday and the first *Shabbos* I had a toothache, the second a stomach-ache, the third a headache. The director of the elevator spared me the anguish of inventing an excuse for the fourth. After the third *Shabbos*, he called me to his office. My crime was grave, but it was my luck that the director was a mild-natured person.

"*Slushay*," he started. "Listen. I know you haven't reported to work on three consecutive *Subbotas*. It is a very grave violation to miss a day's work without a special permit for a justified reason. What you have done is a double transgression—one, abiding by religious customs, and the other, being absent from work in *voyennoye vremia*. Either one entails a severe punishment. I am taking a risk being fair with you, but I'll give you a choice. Either you continue to work every day, including *Subbotas*, or you are fired."

"Thank you very much for being understanding," I said. "I'll take the second option."

I said good-bye and left the office.

The day happened to be June 21, 1941. The next morning a thunderbolt struck the world, and its reverberations penetrated the ice curtain and reached even the most remote parts of Siberia.

BOOK FOUR

The Ice Trap

CHAPTER 19

Exile within Exile

IN THE BEGINNING, IT WAS JUST A MURMUR, A WINKING OF eyes, a disbelief. There were no newspapers, no news bulletins, no radio broadcasts. In a few days, though, it became common knowledge that the Germans had invaded Russia. There was talk that, on the first day, German aircraft had penetrated deep into Russian territory, bombing cities as far away as Kiev.

How the news reached us, we didn't know. The blitz, the surprise, the impact was so overwhelming that some hidden, atmospheric waves must have brought the news on the wings of the winds.

The exiles from our part of Poland had never seen the Germans. From 1939 on, when Hitler and Stalin divided Poland among themselves, we knew only of the Russians and

what they were doing to us; the worst of German atrocities, the mass deportations and gas chambers, were still unknown. Witnessing and experiencing, for a year and a half, the plight of the Russian people, the reduction and ruin of the individual as a human being, held in check only by the bayonet and the open barrel of the gun, we earnestly believed an all-out war against Russia would bring an end to the tyrannical regime. We believed it would collapse from within as well as from without, buckling under its own weight of oppression, inefficiency and waste.

Now each day, more tangible evidence convinced us the war was for real. The Soviets kept a big, if not their biggest, contingent of military forces and armaments in Vladivostok, a port on the Pacific, close to the Chinese border. Those thousands of men were now rolling day and night in endless echelons down the Trans-Siberian railroad from the far east to the west. Tokushy was a transit stop. It was pathetic and distressing to see how in the span of only a few short weeks, long trainloads of wounded now made the return journey on the same tracks to the hospitals in the Siberian towns. In no time at all, the villages and *kolkhozy* were left without men of military age and fighting ability. Women replaced them in every kind of work.

The ammunition factories now worked around the clock. There is a big industrial city located on the Ural River, at the base of the Ural Mountains on the Asian side, called Magnitogorsk. The ammunition factories there required large amounts of coal. There was no shortage of coal mines in Russia, but the problem was how to bring the coal to Magnitogorsk quickly and efficiently. Karaganda, a coal-rich region in southeastern Kazakhstan, is only eight hundred kilometers from Magnitogorsk. Previously, the existing train

lines were sufficient to transport coal to Magnitogorsk. Now, as the main trans-Asiatic railroad was busy carrying trainloads of soldiers and hardware, a direct line from Karaganda to Magnitogorsk was of vital importance.

Plans for building the Karaganda-Magnitogorsk railroad had been made some time earlier; the initial work at certain points had been started and, for reasons unknown to us, interrupted. Now, with the Soviet men drafted into the army and the Soviet women replacing them in every kind of work, the Soviets decided to resume the construction of the railroad, using the labor of the "parasites," the exiles.

Until this time, the exiles had been under the jurisdiction of the dreaded N.K.V.D., but by the standards of Soviet morality, the N.K.V.D. was still too mild. Something more scrupulous and satanic had to be introduced. And so one day, shortly after the German invasion became bitter reality, a group of green-caps arrived at the Selsoviet in Tokushy to join their blue-capped N.K.V.D. comrades. They were the infamous K.G.B. Those three initials stand for Kommisariat for Government Security. Security for the Soviets was a very serious business, especially in *voyennoye vremia*, wartime. Now, the exiles, as "spies" and enemies of the regime, were put under the jurisdiction of the K.G.B. They became our new masters.

A new exile within exile began. The management of the new railroad was desperate to go through with the project, workers were badly needed and the K.G.B. was ready to provide them. They began to gather people from all the towns and *kolkhozy* all over Northern Kazakhstan. They were selective. Women with small children, the old, the weak and those who worked were spared. We were among those selected.

We and countless other exiles were again loaded into the K.G.B.'s apparently inexhaustible supply of loathsome cattle cars, more crowded now than on the trip out of Lida. Still ignorant of their plans for us, we were brought to an empty place alongside the railroad tracks, somewhere in the middle of a vast barren field.

An image comes to mind of my mother and me, and all the others from the train, sitting on our bundles piled up beneath a railroad embankment while K.G.B. green-caps and civilian overseers kept a close watch over us. Where were we? Where were they taking us from here? Why had we been told to detrain in the middle of nowhere? But in the presence of the K.G.B., you ask no questions. For once, however, they volunteered an answer on their own. We were waiting for tractors and equipment, which were arriving from Akmolinsk. That was it. No more details. Which tractors? Which equipment? What for? We had no notion. For two days and two nights, we sat on our bundles or walked in circles, waiting, wondering and worrying. It was July, and the heat during the day was an inferno. In the middle of the first day, a Kazakh appeared on a camel, pulling a large, wooden barrel of water on a two-wheeled cart. One liter per person, no more, was the command. It was better than nothing. We were grateful for what we got.

On the third morning, the tractors arrived. Each tractor pulled several platforms, trailing behind and rolling on tank-like treads.

"Are they sending us to fight the Germans?" the only Jewish man in our group asked, looking at the mammoth machines. "*Az och un vey tzu zey*. Then I feel sorry for them." He spoke in Yiddish so that the K.G.B. men wouldn't understand.

This man, whose name was Aaron David Rabinovitz, his wife Elka, their two teenage boys and a daughter were the only complete family among a throng of women whose husbands had been arrested. Aaron David and his family, who were also from Lida, were exiled because of a younger daughter, aged eighteen, who was an active Betarist and as such was arrested when the purge of the politically affiliated took place.

On orders to board the tractor-drawn caravan, we helped each other carry our bundles to the platforms. We had been allowed to take our worldly goods with us, and my mother and I had a great deal of luggage, including the trunk and the iron bed, our Siberian acquisitions. Aaron David and his boys were most helpful.

The tractors with their human cargo started to move away from the railroad tracks and into an endless, wild terrain. Now we understood why regular trucks wouldn't have been able to negotiate this kind of terrain. As far as the eye could see, there were no trees, no bushes, no roads, just the sky above and the endless steppe.

The tractors and platforms moved slowly on their caterpillar feet, unaware and unconcerned. We were sitting on our bundles on the open platforms, unprotected from the elements. The platforms had two-foot-high sideboards on all four sides, which, except for the leading side, could be lowered, or raised and latched. We put our iron folding bed upright against one sideboard, and so were able to pile our bundles high one on top of the other.

We were on the road for about half an hour when dark clouds started gathering over our heads. The bright, sunny morning started turning darker by the minute, and everyone went scrambling, looking for something to cover his things.

One was able to pull out an oilcloth, another a raincoat. My bundles piled high were a handicap now. I couldn't find the bag containing my mother's raincoat, and we both huddled under mine. Then, lightning and thunder, appearing simultaneously, pierced the air with a primordial roar. It seemed so close that, ignoring the big raindrops, awed and frightened, I craned my neck to see if it had struck somewhere nearby. The raindrops turned to streams, as if a huge water hose were directed at our platform from above. There was no escape. Sharp, fiery zigzags split the sky on all sides, followed by crackling thunder. We felt the water everywhere, on our heads, running down our spines, our shoulders, our feet.

Unlike the endless drizzles of September, summer storms in Kazakhstan never last more than a few hours. Soon the hot, end-of-July sun was bright again, drying our soaked clothing and us. Our destination was a cleared swath of land where we were told to put up tents. Some of the platforms held equipment, among which were half a dozen tents, rolled up around support poles.

While waiting for the tractors to arrive, a few families from Lida, including Aaron David's family, my mother and me, had found each other among the hundreds of people assembled by the K.G.B. Our group also included the Ganuzovitz family from Lida, a mother with a young daughter and a fifteen-year-old son, and the Shymentchik family from Molodenchno. Now, as the tents were unloaded, we decided to try to stay together.

Our group from Lida numbered eighteen people, and since the tents were of different sizes, we asked for the smallest, hoping to be by ourselves.

"The smallest is for twenty people," our overseer said.

We argued that our elderly women, if placed in a cramped

tent, might get sick and cause serious trouble for all of us. We got our tent.

The other tents were much larger; the largest was for one hundred and eighty people. No matter how extraordinarily hard the labor and the conditions were during our eighteen months of conscription for the railroad-building work, we were forever grateful to have our tent to ourselves and Aaron David as our leader. We were one family, and he was the father of the whole tent.

Supervised by the overseers, every group set up its tent, first digging holes for the poles and then packing the earth tightly around them. The smaller tents came in one piece, without windows, with a hole at the top reinforced with tin, inside and out, for the smoke pipes of the *tieplushka*, the little round iron oven. A wooden door made from thin boards had to be fastened to the wooden frame in the canvas with cheap tin hinges. There was no lock.

It was late afternoon when we finished erecting our dwelling. While we were working, additional tractor loads were arriving with folding army cots and straw mattresses. Bread was delivered the same way. Water, we were told, would be brought twice a day, only one quart per person each time. For laundering and washing—if we ever had the time—there was a lake half a kilometer away, about a twenty-minute hike through the twiggy shrubbery.

When the cots were set up, the oven in place and the bundles brought in, there was barely enough space to move. My mother had her own bed, and I had the trunk, so we didn't take the cots. Each family separated its domain with a sheet strung on a rope or piece of wire, or anything that would hold it, for privacy. Later, when we were at work, the sheets were pulled aside to let the air circulate.

Late that first night, after two practically sleepless nights in the empty field, a horrendous ride through the rainstorm, a soaked day of sweating, constructing our tents, arranging our belongings and finally settling, we were treated to an evening of enlightenment and culture. A well-fed and well-rested *politruk* (political organizer or coordinator), or in plain language, Communist propagandist and K.G.B. informer, lectured on the importance and privilege of contributing to the holy cause of the most revered, beloved and idolized monster, Stalin, and the *rodina*, the mother country.

Each of the three hundred and sixty workers, numb from fatigue and exhaustion, would with great pleasure have thrown a hammer, a shovel or whatever we were working with during the day, at our guest speaker's smiling, self-satisfied face as he droned on to deaf, resentful, hostile ears. We were treated to such lectures once every two weeks, and the only information of value we gained was our approximate location, what we were supposed to be building and why.

After the meeting, we were given instructions about the next day's schedule. At six in the morning, we would hear a gong (a hammer banged on a piece of tin fastened to a pole). At seven, the workers would be given shovels and led to the work site.

Groups of exiles like ours, gathered from many regions in Siberia, were spread along eight hundred kilometers of the proposed railroad. Besides the Polish exiles, there were also Russian women, wives of arrested husbands. Ten thousand women and children building a railroad! And it was done—with sweat, tears, despair and, in some cases, death.

CHAPTER 20

Earth, Ties and Rails

ONLY FOURTEEN PEOPLE FROM OUR TENT WORKED. Youngsters over twelve were forced to work like the adults, and the women were drafted up to the age of fifty-five. My mother, Elka and two boys about eight or nine years old were left to stay in the tent. We had no documents when we were brought to Siberia, and the N.K.V.D. registered our ages as we gave them. My mother and others of her age had added a few years, just in case, so now they stayed in the tents, which were chokingly hot in the summer and numbingly cold in the winter.

The surveying work had been done some time earlier, the route was laid out and in some places the embankment had been started. Each brigade, comprising a few hundred workers, was called a work station. Our work station was assigned

a twenty-five kilometer stretch somewhere in the middle of the eight hundred kilometers of railroad. The path of the railroad passed about one hundred meters from our tents, but those workers who had to start at the further points were taken to work by tractor. We were part of this group. As we rumbled along, we saw mounds of sand and earth, evidently brought long ago, eroded now by wind and rain. Also, the partial embankment was, in many places, washed out by rain to the level of the ground. As it turned out, the people in our tent had to start work at the farthest end of the twenty-five-kilometer stretch, and all along the way, we saw platforms piled high with earth awaiting our shovels.

The work stations were divided into smaller groups of twelve or fifteen supervised by a *desiatnik*. *Diesiat* means ten, and a *desiatnik* was originally a supervisor of ten. Supposedly, the term was inherited from the Czarist Siberian prison camps.

It turned out that our tent worked as a unit, and so together we were able to establish a good relationship with our *desiatnik* and his superior, the head supervisor. Of course, good is a relative term. Our bosses could only bend as far as their orders allowed. And the *desiatnik's* job was to make sure we worked nonstop, didn't talk to each other, didn't lean for a minute on the shafts of our spades, didn't stop even once to catch our breath. In spite of that, however, our *desiatnik* was a simple, understanding person. For a few grains of tobacco, he would let us stretch every once in a while. He seemed to have been a prisoner of sorts himself.

Our first job was to empty the platforms by shoveling the earth to the ground and then piling up the embankment. Our workday was fourteen hours long, seven days a week.

The same horror I felt when taken by the N.K.V.D. to air

the grain in the Tokushy elevators on *Yom Kippur*, I now felt when I took the spade on *Shabbos* and was forced to work on that holy day whose desecration is so strongly forbidden in the Torah. Each desecrated *Shabbos* put an additional pain in my heart and a heavy load on my conscience.

The K.G.B. took good care of us; we were their "proteges." From noon to two in the afternoon was rest time, including lunch. Lunch was bread and water which we carried to work. There were no cooked meals for the workers; those from our tent wouldn't have touched it anyway, but the other workers were outraged.

Every worker had to fulfill a certain quota of work a day. It was measured and checked, and if it was short in any way, even though she had worked from seven in the morning until nine at night, a check next to the worker's name would deprive her of her daily ration of bread. A worker's ration was a kilo of bread a day, plus half a kilo for each dependent. A kilo a day wouldn't have been so bad, if the bread could have been called bread. It was the same stuff we had had on our first train ride out of Poland—bluish-black, moist and heavy, probably made from potato peels and bran; a kilo was a three inch slice. When we had lived on it on the train, we had been sitting still. Now, we were doing hard labor fourteen hours a day.

After a while, our rations improved. Every second week, a tractor *lavka* (store) would bring additional supplies for the workers, not for the dependents. These consisted of unrefined poppy seed oil, a kilo of very salty, dried codfish, hard as a piece of old wood, sometimes a little sugar or a can of tomato sauce. On rare occasions, there would also be vodka and tobacco. The last two items were treasured like gold. They could buy almost anything, and we needed them if we were

going to get off for *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur.*

Meanwhile, it was only the beginning of August, and the hot weather carrying over from July lingered in the air. After the first long day of work, no transportation was provided to take us back to our tents. We were the furthest, so we had to walk ten kilometers after fourteen hours of grueling work. Our two-hour lunch break, sitting on the ground under the burning sun, with the little water and the piece of hard bread long finished, could hardly be deducted from the day's work.

Returning from work, we walked alongside the railroad route, where the ground was cleared from the sharp, dry steppe grass. In the morning, we had been warned by our bosses that the terrain abounded with various types of snakes, some of them poisonous, and that while sitting on the ground during the rest period, one of us should always be on the watch with a spade, ready to strike. Hardly a very encouraging or relaxing prospect. Now, walking from work in columns of four, we kept our spades blade side down, like the blind with their canes, pounding the ground. It wasn't dark yet, since in Siberia night falls late in the summer, but walking quickly we couldn't distinguish between a snake and a fallen stalk. Here and there we heard a hiss as someone's spade struck or frightened a snake in time.

The tent where bread was distributed was, for some reason, set up a half a kilometer away from the last of the tents. Tired, hungry and thirsty, we had to wait in a long line and, after submitting our names and the number of our dependents, each of us finally clutched in her hand the precious, hard-earned piece of bread.

It was close to midnight on that first day when I finally drew the curtain and stretched my aching bones. Every inch of my body was like an open wound. My mother saw how I

felt, but spoke only with her eyes. "You'll see, *mein kind*, Hashem will help." I wanted to kiss her good night, but I was unable to move. My entire body was a clump of pain. How would I be able to rise at the sound of the gong? Sleep stole the answer.

Youth and health, necessity, the K.G.B. and, above all, *lehavdil*, the *Ribono Shel Olam* made rising possible. It took me a while to grasp the reality after the sharp clang pierced the silence. Oh, Heaven forbid, another day like yesterday? Is Papa also awakened every morning like this? Where is he now? Will he ever see us again? The pain aroused by my father's fate overwhelmed any feeling for my own. As always, the aching and longing for him continued throughout the day, in concert with our torturous labors.

The tent became a beehive of activity. A piece of bread and water for breakfast, a piece of bread and water to take to work for lunch, then spades over the shoulder, rifle style, we stood outside to start our second day of railroad building.

Besides our *desiatnik*, we were also accompanied by technicians, railroad specialists and engineers armed with all kinds of instruments, measuring sticks and levels. All day, they ran back and forth, consulting charts and blueprints and giving instructions. From their harassed faces, we saw that although they didn't have to wait in line for their piece of bread, their position was even worse than ours. Any small error on their part and a train might derail, and then their heads would roll.

Above all, we were haunted by the rush. Tractor-driven platforms of earth crawled along our stretch of road throughout the day. Three workers were assigned to each platform, and given fifteen minutes to empty it. Then the earth was shoveled to the embankment. Earth is very heavy. The

embankment had to be two meters high. To throw shovelfuls of earth this high under the constant nagging of the *desiatnik* required more strength than we could extract from our undernourished bodies. There were moments when I felt I'd collapse under the next shovelful, before I could raise it from the ground. What crime had I committed to deserve such punishment?

"*Rabotat! Rabotat!* Work! Work!" the *desiatnik's* voice was constantly urging, reminding us of the urgency of our task. Piling earth and packing it, piling and packing. The packing was done with pestle-like wooden clubs. As we finished one section, we moved on, working inch by inch closer to the camp, leaving a finished embankment behind us. Slowly, the embankment grew, built by women and teenagers living on meager rations in subhuman conditions. Water was still delivered to the tents twice daily by a Kazakh on a camel and rationed, a liter in the morning before leaving for work and another late at night after returning to the tents.

The Kazakhs are an Asiatic tribe, the original inhabitants of Kazakhstan, and their way of life put them in a separate category outside the Soviet norm. Moslems by religion, they look like a mixture of Tatars and Chinese, with slanted eyes and yellow skin, but they are much taller and more muscular. The younger generation, sucked into the flow of the Communist tide, was sent to schools, served in the army and police and was integrated into the general Soviet society. The older generation, though, preserved many of its customs and traditions. We didn't see any Kazakh *kolkhozy*. They lived in individual homesteads, kilometers apart from each other. With three or more wives and numerous children, each Kazakh was a king in his household; being Moslems, they adhered to their old custom of polygamy, and it was not a rare

sight to see a Kazakh walking proud and dignified, followed by three women carrying heavy sacks on their heads. Agriculture and gardening weren't for them. The endless steppes provided enough pasture space, and they raised sheep and goats, using camels for transportation. They were fearless, fierce and strong, like the Siberian steppe and its blizzards.

Our tent became friendly with a water-delivering Kazakh. He said he lived ten kilometers away and that if we had tea he could bring goat or sheep cheese and grain. The Kazakhs were addicted tea drinkers. We didn't have tea, they didn't drink vodka, so we settled for tobacco. He trusted us and became a frequent visitor to our tent at night, long after the other tents were sound asleep. Sometimes, he would bring another Kazakh, a friend of his, to share the business.

"We and you are brothers," he would say. "Abraham was a father to both of us."

"Yes, yes, of course," Aaron David, who was our main dealer, would "agree."

On rainy days, when work had to be interrupted, we used to walk in groups of three, for safety's sake, the ten or twelve kilometers to a Kazakh's house to exchange some item for goat's butter. Their houses were built from earth and clay mixed with dried grass; no wood was used at all, since there weren't any trees on the steppes. To enter such an abode, one had to climb through a long, narrow and low passage like a tunnel, and then through an enclosed yard into the dwelling, which consisted of a large room where the women lived and worked and a second where the boss dwelled. Right inside the entrance was a clay oven, with a furnace at floor level, where we would always find several women sitting on the floor baking *pitas* and cooking *shashlyk*. The only furniture we saw in the whole house was a big, round, very low table around

which they ate their meals sitting cross-legged on the floor.

Once, when we came in and showed them the three towels we had brought and asked for butter, one of the women, evidently the matron, stood up and, holding the items like a banner, went to the other room, inviting us to follow. The boss of the household was sitting on a pile of colored cushions, leisurely smoking a *narghile*, a long pipe with a water receptacle used for smoking tobacco by Turks, Arabs and other Muslims. He examined each towel and, after a heated tirade, gave them back to his wife. She shook her head indicating that he didn't want the deal. When we came back into the first room, there were only two towels, one was missing. When we showed three fingers, indicating that we had brought three, not two, the women and their children raised such a tumult, yelling and screaming, that we hurriedly climbed back through the tunnel fearing a bodily assault.

Another time, we came to a different Kazakh's place just when they were settling down to start their meal. Their custom is to invite anyone who comes during a meal to join them. To refuse is a terrible insult, and being very impulsive, they could even start a fight. We assured them we had eaten just before we came, and we finally settled for tea which was served in deep Chinese-style bowls. After our two-and-a-half-hour walk in the mud and rain, it was torture to sit cross-legged on the floor and sip the scalding brew, but the alternative would have been worse.

The grain and flour they used to bring us secretly at night was surely stolen, because they usually offered great quantities, far more than we were able to buy. When the tobacco ran out, they were happy to take anything else—clothing, money or even vodka. Ironically, when we left the camp after eighteen months on the railroad, our tent carried off three

hundred kilos of wheat and flour.

In our tent, the grain was the common property of all the tent-members. When we split it, we divided it equally among ourselves. From the first day until the last, we lived like one family, sharing the smallest item we were able to obtain on the side, even one onion. The togetherness, the sharing, gave us all tremendous moral support. The other blessing in our tent was that we all kept kosher. Though there was one family and another married woman among us who were not observant, they went along with the rules we had set at the beginning. The Kazakhs who delivered the water used to bring other things to the tents, like camel's milk or horse's milk, sometimes pieces of lamb meat, and the women from other tents used to fight over it. But our tent spurned these non-kosher items.

As our rations grew and our purchases began to fill some of the space in our larder, each family started to cook its own meals—home-made *farfel* or whole wheat grains—outside on stones in the summer, and on top of the iron oven in the winter. Our *Shabbos* meals consisted of cold *farfel* or *kasha* made from whole wheat flour cooked in boiling water. But as I recall, not one drop of unkosher food was ever brought into our tent.

The authorities didn't know that real communism was being practiced in our tent more effectively, with justice and discipline, than they had ever managed with their propaganda and terror. Above all, ours was without sacrifices and casualties. Had they been in the practice of learning anything, they could have learned something from us. In all fairness, however, had we lived in a bigger tent where the majority were Poles with some Russian exiles, arrangements like ours would never have been possible.

The work at the railroad became an exercise in speed and endurance. After the embankment was finished, checked and approved, platforms with oak ties replaced the earth loads, and a new, back-breaking task was assigned to us. Track ties, very heavy long pieces of oak wood, about ten inches wide by eight inches thick, had to be carried from the platforms and placed across the embankment, evenly spaced a half meter apart and parallel to each other. That took ten days. Ties in place, another, even harder task awaited us—the track rails.

Over five meters long, the T-shaped steel rails had to be carried to the top of the embankment and placed over the ties. Ten workers had to pick them up from the ground, put them on their shoulders, climb the height of the embankment in step, and lower them in two perfectly parallel lines on top of the ties. The technicians and engineers were also perspiring, more from anxiety than from work.

Some of the rails were slightly bent, and before lifting them, we were told to straighten them out. When the *desiatnik* first gave the order, we were bewildered. How could we straighten out such heavy, thick steel rails? He meant what he said. He told each of us to take a pike from the pile of equipment. Positioning five workers along one side of the rail toward one end and five along the other side toward the other end, he told us to drive our pikes into the ground across the rail from us and as close to it as possible. Holding our poles with both hands, on his command, "*Raz, dva, vziali!* One, two, move it!" we were to pull the pikes and the rails with them toward ourselves with all our strength.

The first time, however, the pulling wasn't coordinated, causing the *desiatnik* and the technicians to fume.

"*Raz, dva, vziali!*" he shouted again. This time we did it.

The technician applied his level. It was not level enough. One more pull. After checking again, he waved his hand in the direction where the rail was to be placed. We didn't believe it ourselves.

From that point on, joining the rails and fastening them to the ties were the jobs of the technicians, under the scrutinizing eyes of the engineers.

Though our insides were wrenched like twisted rails, our arms burning, our palms swollen, we had to continue. Most painful was the lack of water, but our pleas that water be brought to the work sites went unanswered during our entire "tour of duty."

During August and September, our whole group, *desiatniks* and technicians included, moved camp three times. Further sections of the railroad had to be built. The same pattern all over again—earth, ties and rails.

CHAPTER 21

Winter Ordeals

ON ONE OF THE FIRST EVENINGS IN THE TENT, WE HELD a council of war about what to do. We were keeping track of time with Aaron David's little Jewish calendar, and the *Yamim Noraim* were approaching. The forced labor continued straight through the week, and there was no question of stopping on *Shabbos*. Late Friday nights, we would try to make *Kiddush* over our bread rations and bring some *Kedushas Shabbos* into our tent. *Shabbos* morning we were out at our work site as usual. In spite of the hard labor, we were full of tears for the *chillul Shabbos*. But we thought perhaps we could do something for *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*.

One night, as the supervisor passed our tent, Aaron David approached him to sound him out and make our request. The flat "no" was no surprise. The supervisor had a supervisor

over him, and so on up the line. His own life was at risk for such a thing. Even one day of work missed was an incredible audacity; how much more so for us exiles, forced laborers, to take a day off for obviously religious reasons in the atheistic Soviet empire. But we were not deterred. Aaron David spoke to him every time he found him alone. Finally, when he felt confident enough that the Russian wouldn't turn him in, he approached him with a tightly-packed package of one bottle of vodka and two or three packages of tobacco and our proposal. The rest of us *davened* with more intensity than we had since the forced labor started. But the supervisor would consider sparing us only on *Yom Kippur*. The Soviets would sell their souls for vodka, but they weren't suicidal. Nothing we tried would move him further.

From then on, our uneasiness centered on *Rosh Hashanah*, but the Almighty took better care of us than we ourselves could have ever arranged. It rained for two days, and our entire camp was confined to our tents. Then eight days later, right on schedule, on *Yom Kippur* it rained again. Perhaps the supervisor wouldn't have dared go through with our deal. We did our part and Hashem took care of the rest.

The following year, I was ill on *Rosh Hashanah*. It was one of the only two times I was sick after the first year in Siberia. I had been *davening* all *Elul* to get sick, and like a miracle, the first morning of *Rosh Hashanah* I woke up with forty degrees Celsius (one hundred and four Fahrenheit) fever. The supervisor came into our tent himself to check if I was faking; he probably knew it was *Rosh Hashanah*. The next day, he checked my temperature again, and the third day I was completely well. *Yom Kippur* had been "bought" long before, and this year the bribe worked.

My only other illness was a case of sunstroke that July

during work. I was sent back to the tent on foot by the *desiatnik*, and I walked the whole stretch like a lunatic, falling into bed with forty degrees Celsius fever, which lasted two or three days.

In October, the heavy rains became frequent, and with the first snows, they slacked our work a bit. Even in the supervisors' opinion, there were days when working was impossible, not on account of our comfort, of course, but because of the irrationality of building a railroad with mud.

Life in the tent became very miserable on rainy days, with just the muddy ground underfoot. The door had no catch, so we had to improvise our own. Two screws taken without permission from the technicians' supply, and a string from our bundles held the door in place. Despite the penetrating cold, the iron oven couldn't be used, because the long-promised coal had not yet arrived. Cooking was impossible. The one benefit we had from the rains was plentiful water. Pots, pails, bowls and whatever else could hold water were put outside, so that at least we could save a little for what was lacking on the dry days.

When we worked from dawn to midnight (including the walking and the bread line), hurried along, pushed around, tired and exhausted, there was no time for reflection. But now, sitting huddled in a wet, cold tent, we contemplated the hopelessness of our situation. We sensed from the behavior of the supervisors, the political officers and the K.G.B. men, who often came to check on their charges, that the war with Germany was still going on. Otherwise, we were isolated from the outside world. No news, no letters, not even any communication with our friends in Tokushy. What was happening to the family back home? It would soon be two years since my father had been arrested; where was he now?

What was he suffering? Would we ever see any of them again?

"*Kinderlach*, why are you so gloomy?" said Aaron David. He called everyone in the tent *kinderlach*, his children. He was always encouraging, never letting a sigh pass anyone's lips. "We have a little rest now, so let's sing something." He and his children had beautiful voices.

"It's not *Shabbos* now," Etia Rafalovitz remarked. Her husband and daughter had crossed the border to Vilna, so she and her two young boys were deported. She soon became one of our closest friends.

"Is it a sin to sing during the week?" he retorted. "I think it's more of a sin to sulk and cry! What's happened to all of you? Don't you know that we have a Master up there who watches over us? We are, *baruch* Hashem, alive and not starving, so stop your sulking."

His wife Elka, however, couldn't be so jolly. Her younger daughter had been arrested, and two older sons had gone into hiding when the family was deported. Now they were in territory occupied by Germany—no cause for rejoicing. In his heart, Aaron David surely felt the pain no less than his wife, but whenever he could, he tried to dispel any desperate look or any depressed mood in any one of his *kinderlach*. He was a simple man, but a *tzaddik*. He was the backbone of the little community in our tent.

Sometimes on Friday nights after supper, Aaron David and all the boys would erupt in a heartwarming and heartbreaking nostalgic song, such as a song by Yossele Rosenblatt, the world famous *chazan*, called *Aheim Kumt, Kinderlach, Aheim*. The song pleads with the children of Israel to leave *galus* and go to Eretz Yisrael. How appropriate it was in our situation! Seldom was a professional singer able to put so much feeling and emotion into a song as they did at those

moments. Singing, like a tranquilizer, provided much needed relief from our ever-present despair. We all let our hearts get swept along by the singing.

The dim lantern light reflected the tears in our eyes as we were carried along from one song to another. Just as the Modzhitzer Rebbe composed one of his most wonderful songs during a serious operation on his leg without anesthesia, thus not feeling the pain, so did the singing dispel the trauma of our hardship and misery. The *natchalniks'* tent, well-heated, well-lit and well-equipped, happened to be not far from ours, and whenever we sang, all of them would spill out and stand outside to listen. "*Yevreyskaya palatka payot,*" they would say. "The Jewish tent is singing." It became an attraction for them, and was proof that we were happy. Luckily, they didn't understand the words.

The long-awaited coal finally arrived; actually, the *natchalniks* had already had it for weeks. A platform full of coal, pulled by a tractor, emptied its load in a pile a short way from the tents, and the occupants of the closer and further tents alike had to carry it in pails or pots back to their ovens. In no time even the black dust was swept up.

Once we had the coal, the water delivery was discontinued, as we were expected to melt snow. It was the purest water I have ever drunk. We did no laundry and took only rare, spotty sponge baths through the whole, long winter. How could we have done otherwise? We had to wait until the following summer when we could go to the nearby lake. But although the bitter cold numbed our bodies as well as our minds and souls, it also spared us many illnesses and epidemics which befell the exiles and took many lives in the warmer, southern regions.

After our final move before the real cold started, all the

other workers were instructed to build themselves a few wooden barracks. Our group preferred to stay by ourselves in our tent. That was when we learned how to build an igloo. While the other workers were busy constructing their barracks, we, under the supervision of our *desiatnik*, built our igloo. The snow all around was frozen solid, our spades were sharp, our muscles hardened, ready to start. We had to finish the same day, as one "day off" was enough! We cut even squares of frozen snow, laid them tightly, bricklike around the base of the tent. We melted snow on our little iron oven and spilled the water over the snow bricks. They were sealed on the spot into a solid mass. Above the first row we built a second, then a third, and so on until the tip. The higher rows were done by the boys, who were quicker to climb the slippery sides of the igloo.

When we started, Aaron David was skeptical about whether the poles supporting the canvas could hold the heavy weight of the ice.

"*Nie boysia,*" the *desiatnik* assured him. "Have no fear." And he was right; the poles were strong.

The frozen snow cemented with water became a strong, solid structure, insulating our tent and holding back the blizzards and wind, but I wouldn't say it was cozy and warm. The earthen floor was frozen rock hard. In the coldest months, we had to sleep fully dressed, with even our coats on, and scrape the frozen breath off our blankets so it wouldn't scratch our faces. The little stove had to be kept burning around the clock, and we took turns tending it.

As the Siberian winter set in, our main task was the battle against the snow. The immense, open terrain was heaven for snow drifts. Day after day, from dawn to dusk, we shoveled snow from the top and sides of the embankment, so the snow

would not accumulate and, when it melted in the spring, wash away the unfinished railroad.

At the end of December, after two months of shoveling, the railroad authorities came to the conclusion that something more radical had to be done. We would have to put up high fences along both sides of the track to keep the snow out.

In temperatures reaching fifty degrees below zero (minus fifty-eight Fahrenheit), we were forced to dig holes in the rock-hard, frozen ground for the poles to which the fences were to be fastened. The prefabricated fences, boards nailed to crossbars, as well as the poles, were brought on tractors and deposited alongside the tracks. The holes had to be one half meter square by one meter deep. In order to reach such depth, we had to add two or three steps at the start, taking up another half meter square. The steps helped us get a better foothold, made it easier for us to dig as deep as we had to in the frozen earth and gave us a bit more room in which to swing the pickax and shovel out the broken ground. The ground was frozen three meters deep. With each hack, only a tiny fragment could be removed. The hardest part was to reach the one meter depth in a half meter square hole, with barely any place to stand and no room to swing the ax. The norm was a pit a day. It was measured, and if it was an inch short—no bread for the day.

As in the summer, we were taken to work on tractor platforms, but we had to return to our tents on foot. At least, there were no snakes now.

The reason our hands and feet didn't freeze was the unusually hard work. We worked without interruption (the rest hours were left for the summer), because a few minutes without movement would numb our limbs. Our lunch, a piece of dry bread, was kept wrapped in a handkerchief on

our chests under our coats. The moment it was taken out, it froze into a whitish-gray stone which had to be gnawed like a hard bone. A drop of saliva turned to ice the moment it touched the air.

Unlike in the army, the authorities didn't issue quilted clothing to us, and as the Siberian winter closed in and we were expected to continue working outside, we made do with whatever we had which could be layered or used for long underwear. During the first year in the villages of Siberia, when packages from home would arrive and family and home were still words pronounced with hope, most of us had received packages with warm clothing, so now the biggest problem was protecting our feet. Layer upon layer of old towels or rags wound around our shoes, plus the constant strenuous work, kept our feet from freezing. Gloves were also homemade, from any kind of warm material. Here, my compulsive knitting of the winter before came in handy.

According to Soviet law, at 57°C below zero, Soviet citizens were not required to work. And sure enough, one day our supervisor declared that that day we were staying inside. The thermometer the *natchalniks* kept outside their barrack showed 57°C below zero. At 56°C below zero, it was acceptable to work twelve hours outside. After all, it was wartime, and Stalin cracked the whip. The difference between a polar bear and an undernourished woman was marked by just a few degrees on the thermometer.

Typical of the Soviets' faulty planning and mismanagement, the fences along the tracks, instead of being put up in the summer when the job could have been done with a fraction of the time and effort, were left for our forced labor in the depth of the winter.

More often than not, after a grueling day's work, the

excavated pits would be filled by a heavy snowfall during the night, so a part of the next day was taken up with the task of plowing through the snow and poking the ground with the iron pikes to find the filled-in pits and empty them. At least, shoveling the snow was easier than hacking at the frozen earth. We alternated between digging the pits and cleaning them out, and shoveling the snow from the tracks which, still unprotected, were constantly being covered over with high fresh snow. In this way, the winter passed. Even in Siberia, winter comes to an end.

As could have been foreseen, the hundreds of pits we had dug with so much frozen sweat were soon filled with water from the melting snow, and we couldn't have put up the fences in them even if the authorities had wanted us to. Our deep narrow pits would take weeks to dry, and in the meantime, we were moved farther down the track–and the piles of unused fences were left to rot under the mountains of snow, now melting in the sun.

Why should people be hungry in Russia? Why is there a chronic shortage of goods in a land with so many natural resources? In our pits and fences, we saw the answer. Lack of good management, of organization, of motivation and of sincere personal involvement characterized the Soviet ship; instead, it was run on fear and jealousy, and it foundered on over-centralization of functions. If a bolt or some other minor part in a tractor broke, it took weeks to replace it, delaying, in the meantime, important work. The bolt had to be approved by assorted bureaucratic offices, and when it finally arrived, the machine itself had rusted and was beyond repair. We witnessed such occurrences time and again.

The transition to spring was no better than winter itself.

When our snow house started to melt, there was no escape from the streams of water. The floor became a muddy puddle, with mud and water everywhere. Luckily, it didn't last long. This was one period when we were thankful for the strong winds, the shivering notwithstanding.

Looking back at the winter, the hardest ordeal had been *Pesach*. We hadn't even had potatoes! We had to work, but what would we eat? We saved up as much salt fish as we could, and eventually, we decided that the wheat grains we had bought from the Kazakhs could be roasted dry and not become *chametz*. We roasted them over our stove until they became crisp and edible, and with this for breakfast and more in our pockets, we went out to our twelve-hour work shifts.

With the advent of spring, the work on the railroad resumed its hectic pace. We kept moving our tents further and further, finishing the work started by other brigades and leaving ours to be finished by those who followed us. It was a logic understandable only to the authorities. Or perhaps, again, it was to inflict additional hardship and misery by draining our strength with moves and tent-pitching, instead of achieving higher productivity by leaving us in one place. The political officers and the K.G.B. were the bosses, and we were their tools. We were not sure of our exact location, but as kilometer after kilometer was built, it became clear that we were moving toward Magnitogorsk. The coal region of Karaganda was further south, and the cold there was less severe.

With the rails in place on the ties, all that remained were the finishing touches. But first—the trial run. One afternoon, the stillness of the steppe was disturbed by distant screeching and clanking. Turning our heads, we saw a wonder—the first train making its maiden voyage on our tears-and-sweat-

soaked railroad! It was moving extremely cautiously and slowly, and besides the locomotive, there were only two cars, but just for a moment we forgot the hardships of the past year and felt something like an ironic sense of pride and accomplishment.

The finishing touches turned out to include the most strenuous and dangerous task of all. The embankment was built with tightly packed earth, the oak ties and rails resting on top. Earth can be washed away by rain and wind, so a protective layer of tightly packed gravel had to be added.

So as not to disturb the work during the day, three times a week trains containing thirty to forty open platforms of gravel would announce their arrival with a sharp whistle at one o'clock in the morning. After two or three hours of sleep, we had to climb on top of the platforms, three people to a platform, and we had to empty each one in thirty minutes. As the gravel had to be evenly distributed along the tracks, the train kept moving while we shoveled it to the ground. In addition, when we finished one platform, we had to climb over the coupling pins to the next, while the train kept moving. It was a sheer miracle and the Almighty's *chessed*, that none of us ended up under the train wheels.

The unloading usually lasted four to five hours. The only compensation was that those workers who worked at night (the youngsters didn't) could start the next day at ten o'clock instead of the usual seven o'clock. Entitlement to this privilege was scrupulously checked.

The final phase of railroad building was *shtopka*, packing the gravel tightly with special, narrow, wooden spades under each tie and rail, and between the ties on all sides. In comparison with the previous work we had just done, this was easy. We often heard the screeching of passing trains carry-

ing gravel to further points. And occasionally during the day, supply trains started to pass, though still moving very slowly.

A big event was when the first train store stopped at our station, bringing some extra rations for this occasion. The tractors were now dismissed. All deliveries came by train. And when we saw the first trainloads of coal, moving slowly northwest, like snails across the vast steppe, we finally knew that the lines had been opened from the coal mines of Karaganda.

CHAPTER 22

Breaking Away

DURING THE SUMMER OF 1942, WE MOVED OUR TENT about six or seven times. It was the same grueling work, the same routine, the same water delivery in barrels by camel, only now by other Kazakhs, with whom Aaron David made acquaintance.

Toward the end of September and in October, we noticed that some of the trains going southeast to take on coal had one or two red cattle cars with people in them. The trains didn't stop, so we didn't have a chance to take a closer look or exchange words. We just stepped aside to let them pass. The passengers had pale, emaciated faces, shaven heads and ragged clothing. We assumed they were prisoners being taken to the Karaganda coal mines.

Besides the track builders like us, there were separate

brigades to build what were called bridges, which were actually tunnel-like openings in the embankment, reinforced with brick and concrete. Their purpose was to let the accumulated water from the melted snow in the spring flow freely onto the steppe, instead of washing out the embankment.

One time, a few kilometers ahead of us, a train passed over a bridge, causing it to collapse, and killing four people. After that, the passing trains would slow down to a crawl when approaching a bridge, which gave the workers inside the tunnel a little time to get outside. On one such occasion, some workers had a chance to exchange a few words with the prisoners on the train.

What they found out was a shocking surprise which sent waves of excitement along the tracks. Upon hearing the extraordinary news, the recipient would drop his work and run like a courier to the nearest group of workers, and from there someone would run to the next, and so on. By this chain of communication, we learned that certain groups of prisoners from Poland had been released. Those prisoners who had been allowed to write and knew the location of their exiled families were even able to join them. Much later, rumors circulated that General Sikorski's Polish government-in-exile, functioning in London, had organized an army battalion under the leadership of General Anders and, through diplomatic channels, had prevailed upon the Soviets to release the prisoners to join his army and fight the Germans. There were also rumors that many Jews released from prison had headed south and, after a while, had made their way to Palestine via Persia or Turkey.

We had no news broadcasts, no newspapers, just rumors. But it inflamed our fantasy and gave us hope. A feverish mood overwhelmed us. The news stirred hope—maybe, maybe

one of ours would be in one of those wagons. But the authorities were uncommunicative. The supervisors pressed even harder now, squeezing more and more work from us, as if afraid they'd get stuck with an unfinished railroad. The K.G.B. and political officers continued their frequent visits and "enlightening" lectures.

We were still prisoners, still awakened every morning by the sound of the gong. For us, nothing had changed. New pit digging, endless snow shoveling. Why hadn't they thought of putting up the fences before this winter? Didn't they learn from their mistakes? Our tent was again transformed into an igloo. New blizzards, again the numbing cold. How would we survive another winter in this infernal ice trap called Siberia?

And so one day, at the beginning of January, 1943, a day when Soviet law allowed us to stay out of work, an unlikely idea was voiced by our own *desiatnik*, Aaron David.

"*Kinderlach*," he said. "There's been an amnesty for prisoners, if not for all, at least for some. We don't know the details, but we saw them. It is real. And if there is amnesty for prisoners, so *kal vachomer*, how much more so for exiles like us! So I say we should not go to work any more. The railroad is finished, trainloads with coal are passing day after day. Let's demand that they send us back where they took us from—Tokushy."

What he said was so unthinkable, so unrealistic—a strike under Stalin's rule?

His wife Elka and his children gave him a shocked and worried look; had he lost his senses? The rest of us, sitting huddled around the little oven, were also speechless. We were shocked and scared.

"Do you realize the consequences?" said Luba Tureska, the first to regain her voice. She was a young, pleasant woman

whose husband had been arrested shortly after their marriage. They were both Communists, and the disillusionment with their ideal made her more wary of the danger such an act might entail. The rest of us also expressed doubt about the practicality of such an idea.

But Aaron David wasn't one to be easily dismayed.

"What are you afraid of?" he said. "That they'll send us to Siberia? That they'll put us in fifty-degree-below-zero weather in tents? That they'll force us to work twelve to fourteen hours a day on a piece of dry bread? The only thing that can be worse than the conditions we are in now is death. I don't believe they'll shoot us."

We sat shivering from cold, each weighing Aaron David's words, knowing that he had always cared for the whole tent as if it were his own family. He was smart, good-hearted and sincere. He was our leader, and he was older and wiser than any of us.

His gaze, impatient and somewhat angry, was moving from one face to the other, while we were still undecided. We were afraid to agree, yet no one dared disagree either.

"What's happened to all of you?" he prodded. "Are you all suddenly unable to talk? We are going to strike, and Hashem will help us. One thing only, and this is very important. Do not say one word about our decision to anyone in the other tents." Though the decision had not yet been put to a vote, he spoke of it as if it were an accepted fact. *"Nu?"*

We took the plunge.

The next day's gong was ignored. We remained in the tent. The *desiatnik*, not seeing us lined up, shovel in hand, came inside.

"We are not going to work any more," we all said.

In disbelief, he ran out and, in five minutes, was back with

the supervisor.

"We are not working any more," we repeated. "We request to be sent back to where you took us from."

Once we had made up our minds, we stuck firmly to our demand to be sent back to Tokushy. The other tents, working in wind and drifting snow, didn't notice our absence.

The next day brought two more *natchalniks*. We repeated our demand. For two days no one came, and we didn't leave our tent until late at night when we gathered snow for the next day's water. As we didn't receive our bread rations, we cooked wheat grain or flour which we had accumulated from our dealings with the Kazakhs. The gruel was our only food for the duration of our strike.

After two days of silence, two K.G.B. men, plus two *natchalniks* whom we hadn't seen previously, came storming into the tent, almost tearing the door off its hinges. They were fuming with anger, threatening the worst, but we noticed that they spoke in low voices. Evidently, secrecy was as important to them as it was to us. We told them we had heard there was an amnesty, and that we wanted to be set free. Fuming with anger, they left. The door swung back and forth, and so did our minds and pounding hearts. We had chosen to gamble, and now we could only wait and see the outcome.

A few days passed without seeing or hearing from anyone. Then early one morning, our *desiatnik* appeared saying that three representatives from our tent should come to the supervisor's barrack.

Aaron David, Etia Rafalovitz and I were the three. The same two *natchalniks* and two K.G.B. men were sitting at a table. They didn't ask us any questions. They just handed over a sealed envelope and on a slip of paper wrote the address of the main railroad management office in Akmolinsk. The

three of us had to be ready in half an hour as a train going in that direction would be passing our post and would take us there. Evidently, they wanted to get rid of us fast to preclude the same action by other workers. It also seemed that, for reasons not known to us yet, we had to be set free, as the amnesty applied to labor camps as well.

Can a voyage on an open, empty coal platform in the middle of January in Siberia be described? I just remember sitting in a corner, leaning against the sideboard of the platform, wrapped in a blanket pulled over my head.

We arrived in the late afternoon in Akmolinsk, a big, dilapidated city. The three of us, wearing our blankets over our coats, powdered with coal dust mixed with melted snow, presented a sight not often seen on big city streets. But here in Siberia, it was normal. We went straight to the station superintendent to inquire about the railroad administration office for the newly-built railroad. Looking at the address, he said it was very far; it would close before we'd reach it. Hungry, thirsty and tired, we decided to sit out the night in the station building.

It was a busy station. Throngs of people, not looking any better than we did, many soldiers, some peasants, were pushing, rushing in and out. We didn't know what to do first—find a corner on the floor to sit down, or stand in line for *kipiatok*, the only commodity available at most stations. We hadn't had any bread to take along and there was none in the station to buy, so we sipped the scalding water. It warmed our chilled bones, but it didn't satisfy our hunger.

After a while, through the big, murky window, we saw a woman carrying a covered basket, walking outside the station building. Instantly, she was surrounded by a dozen people pushing money into her hand. Before Etia and I could look

around, Aaron David was among them. He returned beaming, with both hands full—two cold baked potatoes and two hard boiled eggs. We hadn't seen either since we left Tokushy. Etia and I shared an egg and a potato and let Aaron David have one of each for himself, ignoring his insistent pleas that we share equally. Late at night, the crowd thinned out, and we even found a place on a shaky bench.

In the morning, after a breakfast of *kipiatok*, we started in search of the office. The day was bright and sunny, and after many inquiries and climbing over slippery, frozen bumps and potholes, we finally reached it. The audience itself was of little significance. Aaron David didn't know Russian and Etia was terrified of Soviet *natchalniks*, so I had to be the spokesman. I didn't have much persuading to do. After reading the letter we brought, the official to whom we had finally been directed told us to wait in a nearby room. The panic of that wait has blotted out my memory of the details, but I remember coming back to the station, clutching a sealed envelope, a note to the station supervisor and cards for bread rations. We were free!

Aaron David was ecstatic. "You see, I was right!" he whispered to us triumphantly. We received the bread at the station as railroad workers.

Again we had to spend the night in the station building, waiting for a coal train going back toward Magnitogorsk. On the way back, we were invited to the train engineer's little cabin, which was next to the locomotive, and the heat there forced us to take off not only our blankets but also to sit without our coats, something we hadn't done for a long time. We returned to the railroad work site with hope in our hearts.

After we delivered the reply from Akmolinsk, our bread rations were reinstated and feverish preparations for our

departure began. The preparations consisted of the need to equip a freight wagon for us. Unaware of what had transpired, the rest of the workers pitied us, certain we were being punished and sent to an even more rigid place.

An old, shabby, red cattle car, with its bunks and the familiar little iron oven, with holes patched up with tin or boards, was ready a few days later. We loaded our possessions, and this time we had a whole wagon just for the eighteen of us, rather than for the usual thirty or forty. It still wasn't too roomy. We had, besides our own belongings, the three hundred kilos of grain and flour which we had bought from the Kazakhs. We were also given coal and kindling for the little oven and bread rations to last until Akmolinsk.

In the excitement and happiness over our success, we didn't realize the hardships which awaited us. When our wagon was hooked up to a coal train, the supervisor summoned us three representatives and handed us the same envelope we had brought from Akmolinsk. It contained papers saying that our group of railroad workers had completed our work and was returning to its original place of residence—Tokushy. A list with our names was included. A special note to the superintendents of the stations we had to pass through stated that "when possible" our car should be connected to a train going in the right direction. Until Akmolinsk, our own railroad served us well. The coal trains ran with a speed matching the need. In Akmolinsk, as we had to take another direction, our car was unhooked, put on a side track and the proviso "when possible" became a nightmare.

It was the last week of January. The cold inside competed with the numbing frost outside. For the three of us mentioned in the letter as representatives of the group, the daily

bureaucratic wrangle became an endless torture. We had to run from one place to the other, first to report our arrival and get the superintendent's signature acknowledging it, then to another place to get our bread rations approved. After negotiating piles of snow and ice to arrive at the *natchalnik's* office, we were usually told he was somewhere else. After waiting half a day for him, or chasing after him through the cold to some other office, we had to struggle through more snow and ice to the ration office and then on to the bread lines. By then, the bread for the day was usually gone. And then there was the daily chasing of *natchalniks* to be sure our car eventually got hooked to another train.

By normal travelling, the distance between Akmolinsk and Tokushy could take two or, at most, three days. It took us over three weeks. In certain places, our car was pulled far away from the station and left for days, as if forgotten.

One particular event, repeated more than once in Siberia, gives me nightmares to this very day. One evening, after a hard and exhausting day, when we finally got hold of a *natchalnik* of some large station, and our car had been placed on a distant track waiting for a train, the dispatcher assured us that the very next morning our car would be connected to a train going part of the way towards Tokushy. The bread rations having been taken to the car by one of Aaron David's sons, the papers, our only documents, signed and properly hidden in Aaron David's coat pocket, the three of us decided to fetch water at the station pump. (We always carried a pail or tea kettle when going to the station.)

It was a cold and quiet evening. The half moon was an arc of white fire, and the stars spread their eternal brilliance over the frozen, blindingly white snow. We walked slowly, carefully stepping over the icy tracks, trying not to spill the water.

Suddenly, we saw that the place where our car had been stationed was empty.

Aaron David stood silent, contemplating.

"My children, my children!" Etia Rafalovitz broke out in a wail.

"My mother, my mother!" I joined in.

It was a big station, with many crisscrossing tracks. Trains were running in both directions. We spilled out the water and started running toward the station, sure that our car had been hooked up to some other train by mistake. Without papers, without documents, what would happen to our people?

After three years in Russia, fear and panic were familiar companions, but nothing compared with this moment. On the way, bruised from frequent falling, without catching our breaths, we noticed a railroad worker with a lantern in his hand. We ran to him.

"Tell us, did you see a wagon pulled from a track over there?" we asked, giving him the wagon number.

"*Nyet, nye vidiel,*" he replied. "No, I didn't see it."

For the first time, Etia's and my own crying didn't provoke any admonishing remarks from Aaron David.

Finally, we reached the station. A woman dispatcher was standing on the platform, signalling with her lantern to an approaching train. We repeated our question, all talking at once, Etia and I still crying, and Aaron David in his broken Russian.

"I can't understand you," the woman yelled at us, perplexed. "Let one of you talk."

Aaron David showed her our papers.

She compared them to her own list in the lantern's light and said, "Yes, the wagon with the railroad workers is scheduled to leave early tomorrow morning. That's why it

was brought to a closer track. It's right over there." She pointed.

For a moment we were unable to speak, or breathe. We were too overwhelmed with relief.

During our three weeks on the road, these shocks happened more than once, when, while away to attend to our business, our train car was bounced from one end of a station to the other.

In the middle of February, 1943, twenty months after being taken to the railroad, we arrived back in Tokushy. Not all of us in the labor camp had been taken from there, but now we all decided to remain in Tokushy together. We reported to the station superintendent and were given two days to vacate the train car. The station was very large, and our car was moved to a distant track.

The allotted two days brought no results. The superintendent threatened to evict us, insisting that we must find apartments. They couldn't keep people living in a train car in the station. Hardened from our ordeals, we carried our banner high.

"We are railroad workers, not just ordinary people," we said. Suddenly, we became proud of our status!

With our friends in Tokushy, we started a marathon apartment hunt, and on the fourth day, we surrendered the train car, the papers and our "career."

CHAPTER 23

Saved from Karaganda

NOT ALL OF US FOUND PLACES TO LIVE. SOME MOVED IN temporarily with the families who had remained behind in Tokushy. My mother and I were lucky to find a room not far from the station. It was in the home of a Russian woman whose husband, a big shot at the elevator, had been accused of stealing grain. He had been arrested and had disappeared, leaving her with seven small children and without any means of support. She packed all the children onto the oven platform and rented out the main room. I paid her a month's rent in advance with a *pud* (sixteen kilos) of grain. Oh, how ironic is life in Russia, I thought, that now I was the one making payments in grain, instead of receiving payments in grain from the Kazakhs! We ended up staying there only two weeks, however. The woman herself was

honest, but the children, like hungry cats, grabbed and devoured our food right in front of our eyes. Her spanking them and their painful cries were very sad to witness, but we were not in a position to feed seven hungry mouths.

At the time, Etia Rafalovitz was staying with a friend, and about two weeks after our arrival in Tokushy, while trading door-to-door for milk, the woman mentioned that she wanted to sell her *izba*, a little peasant hut. The woman's husband had been killed in the war, and she was left with two small children. Unable to manage, she was moving in with her parents-in-law on a nearby *kolkhoz*. With a face flushed with excitement, Etia came rushing to our house. Hearing the news, we became just as excited as she.

"Our own house! Can we manage it?" I marvelled with utter disbelief. "In Siberia?"

"We can afford it, Dina," Etia reassured me. "She doesn't want money, she wants clothing."

My mother gave me a free hand, and without losing any more time, Etia and I went to have a look at the *izba*. It was in the center of the village, right next to the village hall. It was an earth house, half sunken below ground level, the upper half built from earth bricks. It had two rooms—a nice size *komnata* and a large vestibule, which had originally served as the kitchen but which now contained only the base of the large oven. The oven was now in the *komnata*. All the windows were on sidewalk level, two in the vestibule and three in the *komnata*, and looking out, only the feet of the passersby could be seen. But the windows were on the southern side, exposed to sunlight all day, and when we came, the room looked bright and very clean. Moreover, the *komnata* had a wooden floor.

Another advantage was the excellent water situation.

There was, of course, no running water in any of the Siberian towns. For livestock or for laundry, there were some salty wells around town. For drinking water, there were just two pumps in all of Tokushy, and one of them was right across the street!

The young owner took us around to see the extras which came with the house. Attached to it was a barn and a little shed, and in the back, now covered with snow, was a vegetable garden, about one fifth of an acre, fenced and with a latched gate. Her husband seemed to have been a good caretaker.

She didn't wait to be asked the price, but spreading the fingers of her left hand, she counted off the things she wanted—a winter coat, a warm quilt, a dress, three sheets and fabric for clothing for her children. In Siberia in wartime, a warm quilt and a winter coat represented a fortune. But so did a house. We agreed without hesitation or bargaining, assuring her we'd be back with the items she wanted. On the way, we decided how to arrange the payment. Etia had a spare quilt and I had a black coat with a skunk collar and cuffs. Etia contributed the sheets, I contributed the material and dress.

When the woman saw the things her face shone. A pink brocade quilt! "*Bozhe moy!* Oh, my Lord!" she exclaimed.

She had never seen such luxuries.

"I will also leave you the pile of dried manure bricks, so you won't have to worry for the first few weeks about fuel for the oven," she offered, overwhelmed with her good fortune.

Not losing time, we left the payment in her house, and all three of us went to the village hall to write up a contract. The selling or buying of property was another one of the village hall's functions, and the sale also had to be approved by the village chairman. I wish I had saved the contract. With its list of items paid, it could have gone on record in real estate

history. Unfortunately, it got lost in our ensuing wanderings.

The next day, we received our deed, and so, unexpectedly, less than three years into our exile, we became owners of Siberian property. It took a few days until the weather was good enough for the woman's father-in-law to come and take her, the children, the cow and her trunk with the newly-acquired treasures, but by the end of the week, we were in our own house.

The deal on the house included the furniture—an oversized bed with a pull-out section, a plain raw wood table, one sleeping bench, two long sitting benches, a corner shelf and the tools for operating the Russian oven. We were quite satisfied. Any of these items would have been impossible to buy. My mother still had her old iron bed, and I had the trunk to sleep on. Etia and her nine-year-old slept on the oversized bed, and Etia's fourteen-year-old took the sleeping bench attached to the oven. By day we took turns at the small table, and so the five of us fit into the two-room house splendidly.

We had not been a week in our new paradise when a messenger from the Selsoviet brought a summons for me to go there without delay. The chairman remembered me from the contract signing. He handed me a piece of paper which he had just received from the K.G.B. in Poludieno, the district center. The mere mention of the K.G.B. was enough to darken the brightest day and make my knees buckle. The room spun. I couldn't read a word. Outside, the cold air refreshed me, and though our house was next door, it was a few minutes before I went inside. In one anxious voice, looking at me with the paper in my hand, my mother and Etia asked, "What is it?"

"I don't know. I haven't read it yet." I could hardly control the shaking of my hands and voice.

My mother took the paper from me, and Etia, peering over her shoulder, cried out, "It's a draft card to the coal mines in Karaganda!" Yes, in the Communist paradise, women achieved full equality, including railroad building and coal mining.

At that time, conscription to the coal mines in Karaganda was equivalent to a death sentence. While working on the railroad, we had heard about hundreds of casualties in the coal mines due to the absolute lack of safety precautions. But there was no lack of prisoners and other undesirable people. For every miner killed, the K.G.B.'s red railroad cars were ready to bring ten more.

My mother didn't utter a word. She just put her hand to her forehead and remained sitting, silent, transfixed. Etia, on the other hand, started boiling over like a kettle.

Hands flapping, she sprang to her feet. "Dina, why are you standing like a stone? Let's go to our friends. Find out! Ask advice!" She pulled on her coat—mine was still on—and started to lead me out of the house like a sleepwalker.

We first went to see Liba. She had been in Tokushy the whole time we were in the railroad camp, and she knew people. She was still the smart, clever and very warm Liba who had supported me during my work in the silos. She took one look at us and didn't even have to ask. Etia showed her the paper. Her solemn expression awakened me to the grave danger I was facing. The shock, my mother's pain and Etia's hysteria had numbed my senses, but Liba's realistic fears put me back on my feet.

"Lena," Liba suggested. "If anyone, Lena can advise."

I had heard about Lena, who was also from Lida, but I had never met her. She was also an exile, the wife of a Polish Communist who had been arrested for not being sufficiently

leftist; the Communist uprising in Poland had not yet been attempted, and the Polish Communists had to pay for that failure. Lena worked as a seamstress in the Tokushy *artel*, a combination of several shops under one management.

"She is still at work, so you'll have to wait until she comes home," Liba continued, implying that we would, of course, wait those few hours in her house.

Liba had an open house and was very hospitable; people were always coming and going. In many ways, she was like Aaron David. Everyone who came, each one who left, was told of my predicament in hushed voices, so that perhaps someone might offer a lead, an idea, or would know whom else to contact. In the meantime, it was a great relief just to talk to people, to converse with fellow Jews. Eventually, Etia decided to go back home to her children. The draft card stated that in two days I had to report to the police in Poludieno. One day was almost over. I was left with one more day to save my life.

In the evening, I went to Lena's house and told her what was happening. She remained silent for a few minutes, concentrating.

"I have an idea!" she suddenly exclaimed, snapping her fingers. "My boss, the *artel* manager, likes two things, vodka and praise. I think you'll be able to supply him with vodka, and lots of it, but praise he can get only by introducing improvements and innovations in his *artel*. He is a party member and must prove his ability to develop new ideas and achieve higher productivity. I know you knit well—I saw the beautiful vest you crocheted for Freidele, Liba's daughter. Ninety percent of the production of the *artel* goes for the army. They have truckloads of wool, all for the production of felt boots. You can suggest to him that he hire a few women

to spin some of the wool, and then you can knit vests or socks for the army. His sewing room is big, and he has the room for such an operation. Come to the *artel* in the morning and tell the secretary you have to see the manager about a very important matter. From there, I'm sure you'll know how to proceed."

Reaching the manager in the office was easy. Not mentioning the draft card, I told him I was a released railroad worker and that I was looking for a good place to work where my ability to crochet and knit could be put to good use. Then I outlined how easily my idea could be carried out. His sewing room was so big that there was plenty of room for some ten or twenty spinners and knitters. Every woman in the village had her own spinning wheel, and the older women would be happy to work in a warm place, receive good rations and earn some money.

"In addition," I told him, "as far as I know, this *artel* would thus be the first in the whole region to produce such important articles for the army as socks, mittens and vests."

"*Da, da, prekrasna*," he said. "Yes, yes, wonderful."

I didn't have to convince him any more. Instead, I just casually mentioned that working on the railroad I had accumulated a stock of vodka and that the occasion of adding such an important department to the *artel* surely called for a little celebration. In spite of his being a party member, he was a friendly, easygoing man and a little naive—a true rarity. When I mentioned the vodka, he became even more enthusiastic, and smiling and clasping his hands, he told me to come the next morning to start the preparations for setting up the knitting department.

"I certainly will," I said. "But there is only one problem." I took out my draft card and showed it to him.

"What? In the coal mines? Nonsense!" he spluttered. "I'll write a letter to the police in Poludieno that you are employed in my *artel*, producing important articles for the army. I'll prepare the letter, and you may come in the afternoon to pick it up and personally deliver it to the Selsoviet to be sent to Poludieno."

I understood what he meant. From the old Czarist times, there remained a saying, that when a policeman can't be bribed, then he must be feared. In Soviet Russia, every manager or petty official could be considered a policeman.

That afternoon, I filled a basket with a few potatoes and half a liter of milk. Underneath, covered with a towel, I put a bottle of vodka. As if coming straight from shopping, I entered the *artel* and, after waiting a while, was admitted to the manager's office. The exchange completed, I delivered the letter to the Selsoviet and, for the time being, had peace.

All day long, my mother had been saying *Tehillim*. She didn't cry, never became hysterical. She put all of her faith in Hashem and was sure of His help. Thankfully, her faith was rewarded, and I was reprieved.

In two weeks, spinning wheels were whirling, knitting needles flashing and piles of khaki colored socks and mittens accumulating, waiting to be picked up together with khaki quilted pants and battle jackets.

The work started at seven in the morning and ended at seven in the evening, seven days a week. In wartime, there were no days off. Attendance was compulsory, regardless of the weather. In a blizzard, walk backwards, sideways, glide, slide, fall, fall again, pick yourself up, lose your breath, catch your breath, leave the house two hours ahead of time, but come on time.

The whole *artel*, in one large compound, employed about

two hundred workers, the sewing shop thirty, the knitting shop eighteen. But I was the only one with the audacity to leave work on Fridays at sunset and to be absent on *Shabbos*.

After giving a third bottle of vodka to the manager, I felt I was on safe ground. Since the knitting was done by hand, and a quota was set at three socks or mittens a day, I devised a plan.The first Friday, about two hours before closing time, I took some yarn home to knit all night after *Shabbos* ended, and on Sunday morning, I brought in the completed work. The manager saw, understood and looked away. The Jewish workers were sympathetic, the Ukrainians grumbled, but the quota was filled, so there was no loss to the *artel*. It was I who sacrificed a night's sleep, but the satisfaction of being able to observe *Shabbos* made the sacrifice worthwhile.

During this time, I used to buy vodka whenever I could, from anyone, for any price, since I had to keep the manager in steady supply. For eighteen months, I was probably the biggest vodka "dealer" in Tokushy. It saved my *Shabbos*, and it saved me from Karaganda. Two local Russian girls had been drafted to the coal mines at the same time I received the card. One was killed when a shaft collapsed, the other was brought home to Tokushy badly crippled.

I owe Lena a debt of gratitude. We were good friends until the end of the war. After the war, we each went our separate ways, absorbed in trying to rebuild our lives, and we lost contact.

CHAPTER 24

Rumors and Reports

WE HAD BEEN OUT OF TOUCH WITH THE OUTSIDE world since our exile-in-exile to the railroad camp. The war with Germany had cut off all contact with our families left behind in Poland, and we were deeply concerned about how they must be suffering at the hands of the Germans in the middle of a war zone.

Every tangible evidence of Allied help in the war made the thought of peace and reunification with our families seem more real. The amnesty was, in fact, the result of an agreement between the Soviets and the Polish government-in-exile, as well as the pact between the Soviets and the Allied forces. As further evidence of Allied support, a big shipment of clothing and food was sent from the United States to the newly organized Polish Committee in Moscow. It was then

distributed among all districts where Polish exiles and refugees were located. We received some sugar, rice, powdered milk, army surplus sweaters, jackets and blankets. Unfortunately, the committee was closed down by the Soviets when they suspected that large numbers of General Anders' Polish army, which was meant to join the Allies in North Africa to fight against Rommel's German troops, deserted. The items we received were very welcome, but it was only a one-time occurrence.

We had been back in Tokushy for two months, and *Pesach* of 1943, our fourth since we were deported, was approaching. At the time, there were about thirty Jewish families, all exiles, living in Tokushy, ten or twelve of them observant.

Late one evening, Aaron David called a meeting in our house for all those who wanted to participate in *Pesach* preparations.

"*Kinderlach,*" he said. "It's time we made a *brachah* over *matzos*. For three years we have been denied the *zchus*."

We all endorsed his proposal with great enthusiasm, and a flurry of activity resulted. Everyone had to contribute something—wood, a *kashered* bowl for kneading the dough, a few new rolling pins (one of the workers in the carpentry shop in the *artel* "supplied" them secretly). The spiked wheel for puncturing the rolled-out dough was made from a gear of an old watch fastened to a small stick—an invention of one of Aaron David's boys.

There was a flour mill in Tokushy, and Aaron David undertook to collect grain from every participant and make freshly ground flour. The baking lasted a whole day and through the night. The older people worked during the day, and the younger ones, who were employed during the daytime, took the night shift. We alternated functions, except

for Aaron David, who was the *mashgiach* and *zetzer*, the one who put the *matzos* in the oven. This task had to be done very carefully so the *matzos* wouldn't fold and become *chametz*.

While he was busy organizing people, Aaron David also set up a *minyan* in our house for *Yom Tov*, which continued afterwards on Friday nights and *Shabbos* mornings. The *Shabbos* morning *minyan* had to be held very early, since unfortunately, many people had to work on *Shabbos*. There had previously been a *Shabbos minyan* in Liba Shmulovitz's house, but when the owner told them to move out, it had been discontinued.

There were usually twelve or more men, and sometimes as many as twenty, to *daven b'tzibbur*. Although there weren't many men exiled to Siberia, there were some who came later, fleeing the Germans, as well as many boys who had come of age in exile. There were also released prisoners who were travelling through Kazakhstan after the amnesty, looking for their families. It tore our hearts to see these men, who had been through so much suffering and torture, homeless but hopeful, asking everywhere about their wives and children. During the summer, it was a rare *Shabbos* that we didn't have a guest.

The "refugees" were a story of their own. While we were in the railroad camp, many people in the Polish border towns and a few people from Lida had miraculously managed to escape at the last moment, when the German bombs were exploding and the towns were in flames. They clung to the trucks of the Soviet army, which made a hurried withdrawal in panic and confusion. After long months of travelling by any means they could, joined on the way by many Soviet Jewish refugees, they came to Siberia, some of them finding compatriots in Poludieno and Tokushy.

One of these was a young man named Haikel Brodatch. Before the German invasion of Russia, he had already known that some deportees from Lida were living in Tokushy, so that was where he headed. He arrived in the early summer of 1943, a few months after we resettled there from the labor camp, and he married Aaron David's daughter Feigel.

The disturbing rumors the refugees brought with them of the Germans' treatment of Jews in the lands they had already occupied sent shivers through our bodies. Could things really be so bad? The reports fit in every way with the intentions declared in *Mein Kampf,* and the events in Germany beginning with *Kristallnacht.* We hoped against hope that the rumors were exaggerated. We had had no word from our families for two years because of the war. Were there other reasons as well? We couldn't stop thinking about them.

The *minyan* was conducted very quietly, but still, twelve or fifteen people gathering twice a week was a risky thing to do in Stalin's Russia. Our house was next to the village hall, and it didn't escape the chairman's attention. After a few weeks, he called me to his office, where a couple of other "dignitaries" were present, and demanded an explanation of the meetings that took place in our house. Vasiliev, the chairman, was known in the village as a very strict and devoted party member, and people tried to avoid confrontation with him. We Jews also considered him an anti-Semite, although officially anti-Semitism was outlawed by the authorities.

I explained that the only purpose of the gatherings was to pray that the war should end with a victory for our mother country and the Germans should be beaten to a pulp.

The chairman exploded in a terrible outburst of rage. "We don't need your prayers! Our army is the strongest in the world! I don't want to see any more gatherings!"

After that, whenever he met me or Etia in the street, he would yell at the top of his lungs that this was his last warning, we must stop the gatherings! The police from Poludieno, and the K.G.B. as well, used to come often to the village hall, and whenever we saw them, Etia and I would shiver with fear. But there it ended. None of us was ever called. Vasiliev continued yelling, and we continued praying. We took a chance, because the *zchus* of having a *minyan* overwhelmed the fear and the risk.

About a month and a half after my first confrontation with the chairman, at the beginning of June, I decided to leave the knitting of the socks to the village women. I owed the manager a lot for saving me from Karaganda and for letting me keep *Shabbos*, and I thought it was time I did him a favor. During a "consultation" with him, preceded by a bottle of vodka, I suggested that it was time to introduce a new line. I had noticed that the wives of the village dignitaries and some of those from the surrounding villages had special privileges in obtaining *pimy,* the sturdy Russian winter boots, and here and there a dress was sewn instead of a battle jacket.

"You have such excellent, white wool," I told him. "Why not try to make a few nice ladies' sweaters? I know how to knit them. You can hire a local woman for socks and mittens."

It took him a while to digest my idea, then he grasped what I meant. Favors from some of these dignitaries would do no harm.

"It's quite a good idea," he said. "How long would it take you to knit a sweater?"

"It depends on the size and the style, but on the average, one a week," I answered.

"Okay. Start knitting."

I told one of the spinners to select the finer wool and spin

it thinner than for the mittens, and I also decided to dye a few skeins pink and light blue, the Soviet ladies' favorite colors.

Once a week, there was a market day in Tokushy. Peasant women from the surrounding *kolkhozy* used to bring their garden produce for sale and buy whatever they were not able to obtain at home. During the winter, the attendance was low, but now at the beginning of summer, the market was very busy. The day the wool was ready, I went to the market to buy dye. I chose a few packets and was ready to pay, when a booming voice made me jump. There he was, the village chairman, not alone, but with a policeman.

"*Ty rabotnitza ili spekulantka?*" the chairman roared at me. "Are you a worker or a speculator?"

The policeman looked on, condemning.

To "speculate," to trade for profit, was a crime whose punishment ranged from three years to a death sentence. It was the same as being a capitalist or a counterrevolutionary. Policemen often used to circulate on market days to catch speculators selling articles they had obtained in a store at government prices, for prices ten times higher. The chairman considered it his duty to assist the policemen in this patriotic endeavor.

Pointing his finger at me, the chairman continued in the same loud voice. "And remember all the previous warnings I have given you."

Saying this, he marched away, not letting me explain the valid reason I had for being at the market.

With the word *spekulantka* ringing in my ears, I ran back to the *artel* and went straight to work, expecting the worst. After work, when I returned home, my eyes searched my mother's and Etia's faces for some expression of alarm, but it seemed that all was well. My mother, as usual, put a piece

of bread, a bowl of soup and some vegetables on the table for my dinner. Etia was busy, mending the boys' clothes again. I didn't mention the encounter I had had with the chairman. Why add fear to our daily sorrow? Maybe it was only more of the chairman's peculiar attempts at intimidation.

Actually, life in our house had begun to take on a semblance of normalcy. Etia was a very pleasant housemate and a real friend. I had known her well before the war, as her youngest sister Hadassah was a good friend of mine. Now, whenever I wasn't home, Etia helped my mother with whatever had to be done in the house.

At the same time, my mother was a role model for her in moral strength and *bitachon,* as Etia was an easily-excited person who often cried hysterically and berated herself for not joining her husband and daughter in escaping to Vilna. She felt it was her fault for lack of daring that her two boys had to spend their formative years without their father's guidance and without any schooling. She was heartbroken that her older boy Zalman had been forced to work at the age of twelve in the railroad camp and later as a lumberjack together with coarse, rude peasant people. Her younger boy Moti, although only nine years old when brought to Siberia, was extremely mature and clever, and often expressed views and observations which surprised the adults with their logic and clear reasoning.

Etia wasn't the only one with young children among our exiles. Their mothers' guidance and loving care, and the hard knocks of the Siberian reality, were these children's education for the six years of our exile. Most of the teenagers from twelve and up were working, but at least in Tokushy, they were lucky to have a very special employer in the person of a man named Ravtzov.

The forests in Siberia supplied timber and firewood for the far and wide regions of Russia, and a special department had been set up under the supervision of Ravtzov—a party member and a big shot. He lived in Petropavlovsk where he had his main office. From there he supervised a number of posts, primarily near railroad stations, hiring local people, mostly young boys and women, to do his lumberjacking. He took a special interest in the Jewish workers. He was an assimilated Jew, but with a warm Jewish heart, and a few times, when he happened to be in Tokushy on *Shabbos*, he used to come to our early *minyan*.

"Pray for me too, my brothers," he would say. "In the *treife velt* where I live, I need your *tefillos*."

Haikel Brodatch, Aaron David's new son-in-law, was the first of our acquaintances to work for him. A businessman before the war, Brodatch decided to continue in the same vein. *Spekulant*, the authorities would have called him, adding a ten-year sentence for good measure, had they known. Brodatch was officially on Ravtzov's list as one of his workers, but the only work he did for him was unofficial. He used to sell dozens of leather skins, boots and other items to the names on Ravtzov's "other" list, with contacts provided by Ravtzov as well.

More than once, a valise would be dropped in the middle of the night from the window of a passing train before it reached the station. More than once, Brodatch scared the wits out of us, knocking at our door at two o'clock in the morning, asking to borrow one hundred rubles to help pay for a "bundle" which cost him one hundred thousand. He refused all offers from Liba and Etie, and he certainly didn't need the pitiful amount I could give. It was just that he genuinely believed that whenever he borrowed money from

me, be it even ten rubles, it gave him luck for making a good profit and protection from getting caught. Indeed, it happened many times that he borrowed money from me for this reason. When I needed help a few months later, he and Ravtzov repaid me with favors which could not be measured in terms of money.

Shortly after *Pesach*, with the well-compensated cooperation of my *artel* manager, I took off from work on the pretext of some illness and made my first of several trips to Petropavlovsk, the capital of Northern Kazakhstan. After the amnesty for the Polish prisoners, some vague rumors and unfounded reports had reached me that someone had heard about someone who had been in prison or labor camp together with a Shapiro from Lida. Usually it was Brodatch, who would pick up the rumors on his business trips to Petropavlovsk and pass them on to me. Even with the amnesty, the Soviet prisons were a taboo subject, so I couldn't just make an appointment with a released prisoner to talk about my father. Brodatch gave me the physical descriptions and the whereabouts of the released prisoners purported to know something, and then by discreetly asking around I would seek the persons out, usually finding them peddling in the market. Carefully, I would broach the subject of my father and wait anxiously to hear what they might tell. I was always disappointed. Pained but determined to try again, I would clandestinely make my way home. The caution was for the ex-prisoners' sakes as well as for my own. Indeed, there were cases where released prisoners were rearrested.

The following winter, I finally heard a first-hand account of my father's first ten months in prison from Emanuel Hurwitz, the engineer, who had come out of prison and found his family in Poludieno. He had become a wagon

driver, and on a trip through Tokushy, he stayed overnight in our house and told us the story. He had been in the same cell as my father for four months in Lida and six months in Minsk. After that, they had been separated and sent to different gulag prison camps in northern Siberia.

My trips to Petropavlovsk brought only one small piece of hearsay, from a man by the name of Greenberg from Cracow. His account was from the summer of 1942, months before the amnesty. He himself hadn't seen my father. He had just heard that a man by the name of Shapiro from Lida had been taken from a nearby gulag and sent to some unknown place. The punishment was supposed to be the consequence of finding a *shofar* in his belongings. My father always used to blow the *shofar* in our own *shul*. It was a very beautiful one and he loved the *mitzvah*, but how he could have obtained a *shofar* in prison never became clear to me. Everyone who knew of him confirmed that my father never ate *treife* food, always exchanging it for a piece of bread or a cube of sugar.

Through all the hardships I experienced myself, during the first three of my years in Siberia, the pain and longing for my father followed me every moment of my waking hours. It never lessened, never weakened for even a single day. Where is he now? How is he now? When will I ever see him again? These were the strongest thoughts in my mind and the strongest feelings in my heart for three solid years.

One morning, close to *Purim*, when we had just come back to Tokushy from the railroad work, I woke up with an unusual feeling. For the first moment, I couldn't figure out what it was. And then I realized. The sharp pain in my heart that I had felt for the last three years, day and night, was gone. Instantly, my thoughts went to my father. I had no doubt what my empty heart meant. It was his suffering I had been aching

with for three years. His sufferings must now be over. My first impulse was to wake my mother. Shouldn't we start *shivah*? I lay convinced of it for a long time, but I hesitated to move. And then a small voice inside scolded me, "On what grounds? How dare you give up hope?" This, of course, was true. And so, I continued to hope against hope, forgetting the conviction which my feeling provoked. And so I have continued until this day. I never received word confirming my father's *petirah,* but I also never saw him again.

I heard the tragic news about my Uncle Yaakov from Zalman Steinberg, a neighbor and friend of ours from Lida, whom I met after *Pesach* in Poludieno, where he had a niece. He had been arrested together with my uncle, and they had been together through all the various prisons. The day they were released from prison in Tobolsk, after walking only a few blocks, Uncle Yaakov's weakened body gave out, and he returned his holy *neshamah* to the Almighty. I never told my mother, nor did Zalman Steinberg, who was rearrested and disappeared, like millions of others, without a trace.

We knew almost no facts about the prison camps, but Stalin's murderous methods were secretly discussed. When even the highest K.G.B. officials could be thrown into Siberian labor camps overnight, proof of dedication to the Communist Party became imperative, and it was measured, among other things, by the officials' support of the government's harsh treatment of so-called counterrevolutionaries. Thus, every official, from the heads of the prison camps to the interrogators to the cooks in the prison kitchens, was anxiously proving his loyalty to his country by tyrannical zeal in making the prisoners suffer.

Further details supplied unwillingly by our imaginations paled before the reports we eventually received of the horror

and brutality of the prisons and the camps. Fifty or sixty inmates packed tightly in cells made for thirty; filth, cold, dark and damp, relieved only by fourteen-hour-days of work and rewarded with a single bowl of some murky liquid called soup and a small piece of bread, and even that meager sustenance denied should the work quota fall off by the slightest amount; nightly interrogations with beatings and all other imaginable tortures to force the prisoner to confess to crimes never committed and inform on others as innocent as himself. Very few survived the conditions in the camps and the tortures and beatings of the interrogations. And most of those who did were unwilling to tell what they had suffered.

CHAPTER 25

Of Gardens and Trees

AT THE END OF MAY, WHEN OUR NEIGHBORS TOOK OUT their spades and rakes, Etia discovered that our previous owner had left hers in the shed.

"We have a garden, why not try to plant some vegetables?" she suggested.

I had seen how the old Volochenko worked her garden, and Etia also had some experience from her *kolkhoz*. We bought some seeds at the market and went to work. Since Etia and I both had jobs, our gardening had to start at five in the morning for an hour or so and then continue after eight o'clock at night. Many nights we worked until one o'clock in the morning.

Our neighbors, *kolkhozniks* who worked on the Tokushy farm, had a good laugh. Jews, due to the Czarist restriction on

owning land, hadn't engaged in agriculture for centuries, neither in Russia nor in Poland. The first to announce the hilarious news that the Jews had planted a garden was our next door neighbor Lysenko, a Ukrainian, of course. The news spread quickly, and soon, the whole village was laughing. Whenever one of us met a villager, his first question was, "How is your garden?" They couldn't believe that city people, Jews in particular, could succeed at working the soil. As it had been their occupation for centuries, Russian peasants identified themselves with the earth on which they walked. They were part of it. Hence, their fierce opposition to Stalin's collectivization, when millions of them chose death rather than surrender their land. For rootless Jews, as they saw us, to play gardener was as bizarre as a person walking on the moon.

Nevertheless, our desire to succeed overwhelmed the ridicule and fatigue. The initial work of preparing the soil and sowing wasn't that hard. We divided half our garden into long narrow strips, leaving a space between them wide enough to walk through while watering and weeding. The other half we planted with potatoes. Most vegetables are sown with seeds, and our selection was small. We put in a few rows each of beets, carrots and onions, and along the fence on all sides, we planted cucumbers and tomatoes. Here and there, we also spread a handful of pumpkin seeds. The seeds were cheap. We took a chance with the potatoes, because we had to cut up whole potatoes, making sure that each piece had an eye. The same had to be done with the onions; we cut them in quarters or, if they were very small, in half, leaving a part of the head on each piece to take root. We wanted to get the best results possible from our little garden.

If there was no rain, we carried water in pails from the lake

a third of a kilometer away, using a shoulder yoke, Dutch milkmaid-style, making as many as ten or twelve trips a day; the local wells were too salty for irrigation, and the pump water was limited. When the first, light green, delicate shoots pushed their way to the surface of the earth, we celebrated their appearance with a loud hurrah!

Our neighbor Lysenko, though originally not too enthusiastic about having Jews next door, mellowed as time passed and even became helpful, giving us some practical advice. Our main problem was distinguishing the weeds from the plants. To our inexperienced eyes, all young shoots looked alike. But once we learned the difference, we took good care. Careful weeding, regular watering and nothing less than an actual miracle produced a harvest the likes of which the village had never seen before.

The summer is short and hot in Siberia, and things grow literally before your eyes. The real harvesting began at the end of August, but all summer long, the little garden supplied us with carrots, young beets, scallions, small fresh cucumbers and fresh new potatoes. Such opulence! But the main surprise came at the end of the summer when it came time to bring in the harvest. The biggest and most unexpected success we had was the pumpkins. We collected fifty-five pumpkins, so huge that it took two of us to carry each of them into the house. Next were the carrots. There were many the size of a tea glass in diameter. The potatoes were the size of small melons.

Just as the first news that the Jews had planted a garden had rocked the village, so did the results of our planting. Old peasant women, who from the cradle on had spent their lives around their gardens, came to buy pumpkin seeds and single carrots for replanting purposes. The more superstitious were

sure we had used some charm. One woman even asked me to teach her the secret.

Each house had a cellar dug out underneath it, usually under the kitchen. In our house, it was under the *komnata*. It was six feet wide by eight feet long, and six feet deep, and it was reached by a trapdoor in the floor with an attached ladder leading down. We filled our cellar up to the door and sold or gave away the rest of the produce. Thus, we no longer had to beg the neighbors to barter a towel for a bowl of potatoes. It was achieved, though, with hard work. Extremely hard work.

That year, for the first time in Siberia, we had a *minyan* for *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*. The *artel* chairman's weakness for vodka and Ravtzov's most generous help made it possible. It was also the only year we were able to fulfill the *mitzvah* of preparing festive meals for *Yom Tov*—all vegetarian, but with quantity and variety. I remember how excited we were making *tzimmes* with our own carrots—such a sweetly significant reward for our long hours of hard labor! We thanked Hashem for giving us the strength and endurance to survive so far, and we begged for further miracles to enable us to celebrate future *Yamim Tovim* without the bitter taste of the Siberian *galus*.

On *Sukkos*, I worked in the *artel* only on *Chol Hamoed*, taking home the work for *Yom Tov* and working twice as hard to finish the quota. It was probably a miracle that I was able to do two days' work in only one night.

Since introducing the sweaters, my work had doubled. The wives of the dignitaries developed a taste for them, and some of them started to come to me privately, offering things in exchange that I desperately needed and couldn't get otherwise. The hours spent in the garden in the spring and

summer were now spent knitting. Besides, I couldn't risk refusing the wives of the dignitaries, since an angry wife could be as dangerous as a satisfied one could be helpful.

We were still using our little *kurnik*, the tiny kerosene, funnel-like lamp which we had gotten from Volochenko and which gave no more light than a small candle. After everyone in the room was asleep, I would stay up, bent over my needles, head almost touching the wick, knitting, knitting, another row, another row, my eyes burning, half closed. How could I refuse an offer of a big lamp with a glass cover and kerosene to last for a year from the station superintendent's wife? Another sweater. Then how could I refuse a pair of new *pimy* from the *artel* warehouse supervisor Shura? I'd been waiting three years for such an opportunity. Two sweaters, one for her and one for her mother, not *artel* wool but pure camel angora, in a natural, light tan color. She gave me two huge balls, each the size of a beach ball. "Keep the rest for yourself," she said. "You'll have the *pimy* next week. But don't tell anybody, of course." I didn't. Besides getting the *pimy*, it was good to be friends with the warehouse supervisor.

With the big lamp now illuminating the quiet room, it was easier to knit, but staying up night after night until two o'clock, three o'clock, with only three hours of sleep before starting another long day at the *artel* caused me endless exhaustion.

But I could not take the risk of leaving my job at the *artel*. Moreover, I had apparently fallen out of grace with the K.G.B. Maybe it was for demanding our release from the railroad work, maybe it was for the *minyanim* held at our house every *Shabbos*. Etia had two young children, my mother and Aaron David were elderly people, so for whatever reason, I was the one marked for punishment. Work had saved

me from the Karaganda coal mines, and I had to stay employed to protect my freedom. Where would I be able to find easier work and not violate *Shabbos*? And days off? There was no such thing in Russia as leave from work, except for severe medical emergencies. To leave work without permission meant jail for five years. So I stayed on and knitted.

The winter started early, with snow, wind and blizzards—the usual Siberian treat. In the beginning of December, a friend of Etia's, a woman called Kreina Matetzka, also a deportee from Lida, was told by her landlady to move. With two small children and an elderly mother-in-law, she had no place to go.

"Move in with us," we told her. "We'll make room."

And so our room expanded, absorbing four more people. They brought their own beds, and our shifts at the table got a little shorter. As far as hardship is concerned, there was no such thing as impossible in Russia. Everything was possible.

Possible, though, doesn't mean pleasant or even less painful. Looking back from a distance of forty-five years, one can take a more measured view of one's own hardship, but at that time, our days held more tears than even pale smiles. Etia, in particular, was given to outbursts of sobbing, while my mother was much more stoic. Kreina was a subdued, reserved person. While staying with us, she learned that her husband had died in a Soviet prison, and from then on, she closed up even more. Only once, when Etia was in a crying mood again, was Kreina unable to remain passive any longer.

"Are you the only one who is separated from her husband?" she said quietly. "At least you have something to hold on to—hope! After the war you may be reunited. He isn't dying in a Siberian prison; he might be hiding somewhere, surviving. My Solomonchik will not come back when the war

is over. He is dead! Do you hear, Etia? He is dead!"

"From what we've heard about the Nazis," Etia replied ruefully, "there is very little hope for those in their clutches, either. I do not have much hope for my husband. Whenever there is a war, we Jews pay the price."

Etia wiped away her tears, as if finding relief in recounting the plight of the Jews, then she continued.

"I remember when I was a young girl after the end of the First World War. Lida changed hands four times, going from the Poles to the Bolsheviks and back, and each time, dozens of Jews were shot by both sides, which accused them of siding with the enemy."

Etia and Kreina both fell silent. My mother closed her *Tehillim*, put it to her lips and, clutching it with both hands, looked from one to the other.

"Life and death are in the hands of the Almighty," she said quietly. "Do we choose to be born? We don't belong to ourselves. We come into this world not of our own will, and in the same manner, we will depart. From the moment we are born, we are nearing the end. The years between are just a transition period. We can't change our fate. What affects and influences us is the way we adjust, accept and behave during that transition. Self-accusation and self-pity will not change the decree. You both have young children. They need you. You are entrusted with a great treasure. Your duty is to take care of them and leave the rest to the Almighty."

Similar conversations took place from time to time. Feelings had to be vented, but the immediate need of feeding ourselves, protecting ourselves from the cold, enduring and clinging to life didn't leave much time or energy for frequent deeper exchanges.

That winter, my mother's health started to fail. One cold

followed by another developed into pneumonia. Luckily, Tokushy now had its own doctor. A family of Turks from Odessa, with two daughters minus the husbands and a little grandchild, had recently been exiled to Tokushy. The younger daughter was the doctor. A wonderful person and a good doctor, Zaira Akimovna became my friend. Being persecuted herself, she knew the misery of a Siberian exile. Although not Jewish, she attended my mother with extraordinary care and compassion.

With my mother's illness, the importance of keeping our room well-heated became critical. During the summer, we had been able to accumulate a certain amount of fuel—branches, bark and a log or two. In the middle of January, taking stock, we realized we had only enough for two more weeks. The village was surrounded by huge birch forests, but as government property, they were forbidden for private use. The law only allowed the taking of loose, broken branches.

Etia's and my search for wood proved unsuccessful. Our third partner Kreina also failed. Ravtzov was away from the district, so we couldn't turn to him for help. We decided our only choice was to try our own bit of lumberjacking. The old forester had become ill and was replaced by a nineteen-year-old boy. Strong and healthy, he had probably escaped from being drafted into the army by *protektzia*. We approached him for permission to go into the forest to collect branches.

"But only branches," he warned with a slight smile. He seemed to be an easygoing person.

Now started the search for a sled and an ox. Most of the Tokushy peasants used oxen instead of horses. They were more docile and easier to handle. We found one, but the peasant couldn't decide whether he should trust inexperienced city people with his treasured means of transportation.

He himself wouldn't go to the forest with us. He was too busy working in the *kolkhoz* and not eager to "break the law."

After long negotiations and settling on a good price, the final arrangements were made. Etia's older son Zalman, a fourteen-year-old boy whom everyone called Ziama, and I were chosen to go. Zalman was already an experienced lumberjack from his work for Ravtzov.

When we arrived at the peasant's house, the ox was already harnessed, the shafts attached to the yoke, and a heap of hay, an ax and a big, five-foot long, two-handled saw lay on the sled. The peasant gave Zalman the reins, and as he pulled on them, the ox, head down almost to the ground, one leg clumsily stepping over the frozen snow followed by the other, moved the old, shaky, screeching sled. We were finally off. I walked alongside the sled, with Zalman holding the reins. It was a very cold evening, but without the slightest breeze. It seemed that even the wind had frozen in anxious expectation.

"Are we going to the same place where you work?" I asked Zalman.

"No, it's too far. They take us to work in trucks. We'll go in the direction of the lake. The nearest forest is just behind it."

I knew where the lake was. I had made many trips there during the summer. But now, as soon as the last house disappeared from sight, the entire landscape became one white, endless expanse. In the summer, when I drew water or washed my laundry in the lake, always in the evening, the forest looked like a beautiful, dark green canopy overhanging the opposite shore, almost touching the water. Now, the smooth, white bark of the birch trees and the leafless branches covered with two-inch jackets of snow blended completely

with the whiteness around us. Even the sky looked white, waiting for the moon to bring out its royal blueness.

The ox plowed on, head down, eyes half closed with lashes like swabs of white cotton, not changing his pace whether we pulled on the reins or just directed him. Zalman pulled harder on the reins, imitating the wagon drivers encouraging their horses to move on. The ox remained unimpressed with Zalman's skills.

And so, inching our way, frozen to the bone, we arrived at the edge of the forest. Tying the reins around a tree, we decided to start right there. At the edge of the forest the trees were not so dense; why carry the heavy logs any farther than we had to?

The snow was three feet deep and rock hard. The tree we picked was about thirteen feet high (four meters) and one foot across at the snow line.

"The best part of the tree is under the snow, so let's start as low as possible," Zalman, the expert, said.

Bending down, holding the big, heavy saw parallel to the ground, we tried to make the first incision. The trees were rock hard, and it wasn't easy. At the first attempt, I brought the saw too quickly at the tree and it bounced off like a spring. I had sawed firewood many times before whenever I had managed to obtain some larger pieces, but then the log had been lying on a sawhorse, and I was sawing vertically, a much easier direction to coordinate.

Now, half-lying on the snow, our only illumination the moon, the stars and the whiteness surrounding us, my apprehension at not being able to do the job, at not finishing in time, the strain, especially because of the reversed position, all combined to put me in such a sweat that it thawed my frozen limbs, causing a burning sensation on my back. The

sweat on my face alternately froze and melted.

"Let's start again, but slowly," Zalman said.

When we reached the center of the trunk, and the saw had to be pulled back and forth through the entire thickness of the tree, the really hard labor began. There was no other choice but to continue. The saw was clamped in, and scraping the sharp teeth forward was the only way to move it. Little by little, with extreme exertion, we passed the center and neared the other end.

Now the dangerous part began. Snow laden branches are very heavy, and these trees were tall. If one were cut all the way through, it could topple over and hit or even kill the cutters. No tree is even; there are always more branches on one side. We had kept this in mind and had started from the thinner side. Now stopping about four inches from the end, we started to push the tree. It didn't move. After sawing a little farther we tried again. This time it gave and was pulled by its own weight. As we jumped backward just in time, the tree, with a tearing crash, fell over, leaning its crown on another tree. The saw, released, fell to the ground. The leaning position was to our advantage. It was easier to cut the five-foot logs we wanted to take home if the tree was leaning rather than lying flat on the snow. The second log was also easier, as the tree narrowed. To chop the branches off the crown was another experience. They are extremely tough. We had only one ax and had to take turns.

All in all, we cut down three trees. I didn't take my watch, but the position of the moon indicated the passing of time. We loaded twelve logs of assorted thicknesses and covered them high with branches. The ox chewed his hay or cud with total indifference and, with the same apathy as before, started home.

As we walked back, I was overwhelmed by the indescribable beauty of the Siberian winter night, with the full moon and the still, frozen air. The sky was a velvety royal blue, punctuated with myriad blinking stars. The moon was a million-watt blinding balloon, twice as large as in all other skies. The snow all around was an endless expanse of multifaceted diamonds, as if in compensation for the ugly reality of life under the Soviet system.

It must have been very late; it was so quiet all around, nothing but the crunching sounds of footsteps. We were almost home. A few dozen feet into town, then a turn to the left, and our house was the second from the corner.

Just as we turned the corner—disaster! Heading towards us were the young forester and his friend. The old forester was surely snoring now on his oven platform, but the quiet night had brought out this young man and his girl for a stroll. Were he alone, without a witness, a bribe would have settled our criminal act, but in front of the young lady he had to show his worthiness as a devoted member of the *Komsomol.* In a very loud voice and strict manner, he ordered us to deposit the contents of the sled right next door, in the yard of the Selsoviet. My pleading and begging and telling him that I had a mother sick with pneumonia in a freezing house gave him an opportunity to show off to the young lady his human heart, and he graciously let us take some branches and one log.

When we came home after returning the ox and sled to the peasant, it was four o'clock in the morning.

CHAPTER 26

New Migrations

ONE MORNING AT THE END OF MARCH, 1944, OUR VILLAGE awoke to a deluge of strange-looking people literally taking up every available space. There were tall men in long, black sheepskin coats and huge fur hats like overturned pails, and women in balloon pants under tiers of multicolored skirts, with short, quilted, multicolored jackets, heads covered with two or three shawls, one on top of the other.

The Soviets are marvelously efficient at uprooting people, plucking them like weeds and depositing them in far-off places among unfamiliar surroundings. In this case, a whole tribe called Tchetchentzy, numbering five hundred thousand people, were given the customary fifteen-minute notice, taken forcibly from their homes, loaded into wagons and

brought to Siberia. The reason was alleged disloyalty to the Soviet Union. They were dispersed over Northern Kazakhstan to be settled there for good. They were to receive some assistance from the government—a piece of land to build a house on and one cow per family.

They were a Muslim tribe who had been living from time immemorial in the Caucasus Mountains near the Black Sea. Adhering to their ancient customs, they grazed their flocks of sheep on the slopes of the mountains, and their women, like their forebears for generations before them, carried water in tall, beautifully carved silver jugs on their heads.

Their houses and flocks of sheep had all been confiscated, and the most that some of them had managed to take in the allotted fifteen minutes were their distinctive fur hats, their elaborate silver link belts studded with rhinestones and their daggers with elaborate silver handles, items traditionally passed on from father to son for generations. The women took their collections of colored skirts and silver jugs.

While the resettling was being arranged, those brought to Tokushy were packed into all the government buildings, schools, warehouses, the railroad station and even barns. They stayed for a month, until they were sent to various *kolkhozy*. The crowded, unhygienic conditions bred disease, and a typhus epidemic broke out among them, which spread rapidly among the local people. Typhus had been unknown before in the cold Siberian climate. The epidemic took many lives, among them our dear Dr. Zaira. No other doctor was sent to Tokushy after her death.

One year earlier, three hundred thousand Germans, who had been living in Russia in the Volga region for centuries, were also brought in a similar manner to Siberia, the dumping ground for all undesirables. The Volgas were not trusted,

so with the advance of the Nazi army, they were moved elsewhere. Some of them stayed for a short time in Tokushy, en route to further regions. I remember one distinctly. He was a deposed K.G.B. official, still wearing his K.G.B. uniform, the long coat, but without the buttons, with the shoulder straps ripped off at one end swinging loosely, reminding him with each flap of his lost devil's paradise. On his head, he still wore the green banded cap, without its horrific emblem and star. Good for him, I thought, and wished that all K.G.B. would look like this one.

Meanwhile, the winter of 1944 neared its end. With the Almighty's help and my mother's own strong will and boundless faith, she overcame the pneumonia, and when *Pesach* came, she had recovered completely.

Pesach brought some joy. Even in Siberia, we shook ourselves loose from our continual misery in honor of *Yom Tov*. Every year we renewed our unshakable faith that "*leshanah habaah bnei chorin*; next year we shall be free."

Before we had a chance to begin deliberating amongst ourselves about whether or not we wanted to risk baking *matzos* again, Brodatch brought us *matzos* from Petropavlovsk. We were astounded. Where had he gotten them? The answer surprised us even more. They were Manischewitz *matzos*! He had bought them on the black market. They had originally come from the Joint Distribution Committee in America, which had been allowed to open a "Jewish Committee" in Moscow through the International Red Cross after the Allies had joined Russia in the war. Since the receipt of the Polish shipment a year before, this was the first sign we had of contact with the Allies. I had no idea how the *matzos* had gotten onto the black market, but it didn't matter. It was a touch of the free world. There were people who knew about

us and cared! Even the blue and yellow colored wrappers were exciting.

Brodatch offered them to us for his cost price, and we bought one package. It contained ten or twelve *matzos*, barely enough for the nights of *Yom Tov* and *Shabbos*. We also had no wine, *marror* or *Haggados*, so our *seudas Yom Tov* seemed more like a potato supper than a *seder*. But we sang whatever we remembered, told the story of *yetzias Mitzrayim* as best we could and prayed that *leshanah habaah b'Yerushalayim* (next year in Jerusalem) and that we should be able to observe *Pesach* with all its practices and not just with our hearts.

CHAPTER 27

Culture, Siberian Style

ONE THING WHICH MADE WORK IN THE *ARTEL* A BIT more bearable were the radio speakers hung up high on one wall in our work room. The *artel* was one of the few establishments in Tokushy which had electricity (there were outlets provided only for the speakers). These weren't regular radios with dials and separate stations, only speakers like inverted plates. Whatever was broadcast on the one official station was what we had to listen to. Mostly, it was a constant flow of propaganda or music, but it was still a link with the outside world.

The war was still raging. When the going was rough, they played loud and happy music to mislead the people and keep the morale high. When the enemy was beaten, we heard high-spirited propaganda. There were no other clues as to the real

situation. At times, when the Soviet army recaptured an important town and pushed the German army back, the music and propaganda would be interrupted with an announcement that such and such a city was liberated. We were shocked to find out that the Germans had penetrated so deeply into Russian territory.

About two weeks before *Pesach*, the *artel* manager asked me to knit a sweater which he intended to send to Petropavlovsk to the yearly exhibition of the products of the more competitive *artels* in Northern Kazakhstan. "Make something special, and after the exhibition is over, you'll get the sweater as a present," he said. I did, indeed, get a present out of it, but not quite as the manager had promised.

Since he had asked me for something special, I realized how badly he wanted his *artel* to excel. Though a large part of my earnings were spent on supplying him with vodka, I had to consider how much I had benefitted from him. I was spared the coal mines, I was able to observe *Shabbos*, I wasn't separated from my mother, and I had many other benefits. I felt the manager deserved my best effort. I asked him to allow me to knit at home so that the wool would stay clean and to give me one week, as for any other sweater. He agreed. I chose the finest, purest white wool and decided to crochet a lacy design. I also decided to make it in a large size, because I knew that, regardless of his promise, the sweater would go to some official's wife who was probably on the heavy side. I must admit it came out special. It drew many ooh's and aah's when I brought the finished product to the *artel*.

A week later, it was on display at the exhibition, along with their usual merchandise like *pimy*, axes, barrels, quilted army pants and jackets. It was the only *kulturny* item there, to use the words of Shura, the warehouse manager. The new rulers

of Siberia had come from the lower classes, and they loved to apply high-sounding labels to anything with the slightest sophistication. The word *kulturny*, meaning cultured, had a special attraction. Every town had a park for "culture and rest." For recreation, there were a few half-broken benches, and culture was usually represented by a *kiosk*, a stand selling not newspapers and magazines but beer. For those lucky ones who were first in line, it often ended in drunken brawls, leaving bleeding noses and purple eyes. Culture, Siberian style.

The manager of my *artel* had his moment of triumph, and the *kulturny* sweater contributed to it. The wife of a juror probably admired it and the *artel*, for the first time, won the citation for "higher achievement."

There is, however, no place for joy in Russia. Evidently, some other *artel* also wanted the citation, and jealousy is a dangerous weapon there. A wink, a word, and somebody's head falls. About a week after the exhibition ended, when we came to work in the morning, a short, stocky man in a military uniform, with buttons and shoulder straps missing, appeared before us, introducing himself as the new manager of the *artel*.

Nobody asks questions in Russia. But sometimes, answers present themselves without asking. Observing our new manager, we noticed two things—the missing buttons and the flapping shoulder straps, both of which did not attest to an honorable discharge. Even in the middle of a raging war, the slightest transgression could cause a high-ranking military man to be removed from the army. As he probably hadn't been able to obtain a civilian suit, he had no choice but to wear the evidence of his disgrace. The cut and material of his uniform indicated a higher rank, so the job as an *artel*

manager in Siberia must have been his exile and punishment.

To rehabilitate himself in the eyes of the authorities, the new manager went to the utmost extreme in strictness and zeal. From the first day, I realized that the vodka business was finished. It wouldn't work with this manager. The *artel* sweater orders also came to an abrupt end. I went back to the socks and mittens. At the end of the first week, on Friday at sunset, I took some yarn and went home as usual. Sunday morning, I brought the finished quota. No reprimand, no being called to the office. I didn't know what to expect, and I was afraid to approach him. I was sure his strictness wouldn't tolerate my independence.

By then, I knew the general rule that wives can influence their husbands. More than once I had used the back door method for one thing or another; why not try now? In his zeal to prove himself, the new manager would remain in the office long after the workers had gone, and this gave me the opportunity to go see his wife.

I had seen her once in the street. She was an attractive, urban-looking woman, not the Siberian village type. I took a pair of my good, high-heeled shoes, the likes of which had long not been seen in Russia, even in Moscow before the war, and went to her house. They lived not far from us. She was a good housekeeper and had already transformed her plain village hut into a cozy home, with white curtains, a few pictures on the walls and a lot of needlework. She was thrilled with the shoes and tried them on. They were just her size. When she asked the price, I told her I was a worker in the *artel*, and this was a present for a good start in her new home. She was very excited and said she was really glad to meet such a nice person in Tokushy. She asked where I lived and promised to visit me and reciprocate with one of her needlepoints.

Evidently, when her husband came home, he didn't share her enthusiasm, because the next day when I returned from work, I found the shoes lying on my trunk. My heart sank. My mother didn't make any remarks. She never liked to discuss unpleasant things. Etia and Kreina were also silent.

At the *artel* the next day, it was business as usual. The new manager used to go through the different departments several times a day, which the previous one seldom did. When he came into our room, I kept my eyes on my work and didn't see his expression. On Friday, I did the same as always. Sunday at noon, the girl from the office appeared at the door and called out, "Dina, go to the manager." I didn't expect to hear compliments from him, but I also wasn't prepared to see a policeman with a rifle.

When they're sent as *politruks* to indoctrinate, they can spill hundreds of words a minute, but when they're sent from the K.G.B. with rifles, the Soviet policemen become mute. I knew a question wouldn't be answered, so instead of asking I said, "I want to let my mother know."

"You come with me. You are under arrest."

The girl from the office brought my sweater. I wasn't even allowed to go back to the room where I worked.

My mother didn't have to wait until the evening to find out. Kreina, a half-liter bottle of milk in her hand, was returning from some "business deal." She saw me being led into the street by the K.G.B.

The K.G.B. man brought me to the train station, looked at the clock on the wall and remained mute. I knew our destination was Poludieno, home of the local K.G.B., the police station and the prison. After fifteen minutes, a passenger train arrived. The policeman showed a paper to the conductor, who respectfully let us enter the car.

A half-hour later, I was led through a long and narrow hall to a small cell. A rifle-bearing soldier opened the big, rusty lock. I stepped quietly inside and the door closed behind me. The cell was barely five feet wide by ten feet long, and all it contained was a narrow, three-foot wooden bench, a small, barred window on the far wall, directly under the ceiling, and next to the door, a tin pail. A burning bulb was suspended on a wire, and there was no switch inside the cell. I sat down on the bench, leaned against the wall, looked at my watch and closed my eyes.

CHAPTER 28

Arrest and Interrogation

MY FATHER! HOW MANY DAYS, NIGHTS, MONTHS HAD HE sat in similar isolation in a prison cell? I looked again at my watch. It struck me that it had been a present from my father on my fourteenth birthday, a small, excellent, gold Longines. Even the original band was still intact. How was it that I hadn't thought about it all these years? I pressed it to my heart. My father had held it in his hand. I thought about his joy when he bought it, his joy when he gave it to me. The cell disappeared. I was with my father again, feeling his soft, brown eyes looking at me, his warm, reassuring smile.

Yes, Papa, I promised silently, I will not disappoint you, I'll try to be strong. But don't leave me. You always cared so much. You knew my every wish, my every thought, as I knew

yours. My yearning and longing to see you, to hear your voice, transcended the hundreds or maybe thousands of kilometers that lay between us. They reached you, I know, as yours reached me.

Papa, for over a year now, I haven't felt the intense pain I had the first three years. I felt when your *heilige neshamah* went to heaven, when your suffering ended. Hashem has compassionately freed you from the confines of the Soviet prison and the pain they inflicted upon you.

You fulfilled your share of *mitzvos* and *tzeddakah* which you gave with so much warmth and readiness. Your sensitivity to the needs of others had no equal. It was a *zchus* to be endowed with a nature like yours. It was Hashem's gift to you. And you worked on yourself to bring it to the highest perfection. Why didn't I write down and learn by heart all those things you taught me, how you dealt with people. Did I learn enough? Papa, I know you see me now. I have *bitachon*, Papa, just as you always had.

My gaze wandered to the little window. It was grayish-blue now, not the light yellow it had been when I entered. I realized I was still pressing my hand with the watch to my heart. My hand had fallen asleep, and now it stung when I moved it.

Was it possible? I thought. Had I been sitting here for four hours? Yes, it was six o'clock now.

From the hall, I heard the monotonous, measured steps of the sentry. Four steps forward, four steps back. Had he been there all the time? I looked at the length of my cell and realized I would also be able to take four steps. I picked myself up, stood for a while, went to the door and back to the bench. All of a sudden, I felt drained and hungry. The bench was hard and narrow, the wall felt cold, the bulb too strong and

too low for such a small area. I was thankful that at least I didn't suffer from claustrophobia.

Time was passing. The little window became black now. My head started to throb, and I tried not to think. I just sat with my legs stretched out. I turned my head to one side, then to the other. There was no escape from the glaring bulb. I wanted to move the bench away a little, but it was fastened to the floor. I stopped looking at my watch. Time seems to slow its pace when checked too often. I just sat glued to the bench, atrophied and numb. I felt my inner tension, discomfort, exhaustion and hunger disappear. Everything vanished. I fell asleep.

A sharp screech from the lock and the sentry's voice woke me. "*Zavut k natchalniku,*" he said. "You are called to the supervisor."

I jumped to my feet. Reality started to dawn. My watch told me it was one o'clock in the morning. I had often heard from surviving prisoners that K.G.B. interrogations are always in the middle of the night, when alertness and resistance are at their lowest. It's easier to break a person's will, even make him admit crimes he never committed, when he is disoriented. I went to the door, blurry-eyed, stepped into the hall and started walking. The soldier with the rifle directed me from behind. One turn, then another, all on the same floor in the same building.

"*Zdyes,*" he said. "Here it is."

I saw a bright beam of light from an open door forming a rectangle on the floor, and I entered. A huge oak desk stood on a Persian carpet in the middle of the room, flanked by four upholstered chairs. I regained my full awareness and took in every detail. Against the wall to the right were bookcases filled with folders of varying thicknesses. To the left stood a

couch. On the wall opposite the door, next to a large clock was the familiar portrait of the tyrant Stalin. There was no desk lamp, only a light fixture with bright milkglass bulbs hanging above the desk.

Three chairs were occupied. Facing the door was the K.G.B. head, in a very regal uniform and cap, to his right, a stenographer with a pad and pencil in hand, and to his left, another K.G.B. man leafing through a three-inch thick folder. Both of the K.G.B. officers were in uniform but capless. The *natchalnik* had all the usual desk accessories in front of him, plus a pistol on each side of the desk pad. I was calm enough to wonder if he shot his prisoners with both hands at once. On a small table near the bookcases was a telephone, the first and last one I saw in Siberia.

He motioned to the chair opposite him, and I sat down; the soldier with the rifle remained at the door. He gave me a quick look, verified my name and, pointing to the thick folder, said, "You see, this is your case. You'll have to answer for all your crimes."

I heard what he said, saw the folder, but somehow remained detached, as if it were not my fate that was at stake. Thoughts flew through my head. How could I remain so calm? Was I really sitting here? Or was I still in my cell? Then I remembered that I had promised my father to be strong, not to disappoint him.

He leaned back, both hands on the arms of his chair as a signal for the assistant to take over. The assistant opened the folder, turning page after page, shaking his head, his expression changing from horror to wonder, with an occasional "tsk! tsk!" as if lost in an ocean of crime, not knowing where to begin.

Finally, he stopped leafing, slapped the open folder,

raised his eyes and fixed them on me.

"Do you know what sabotage in wartime means?"

This question was followed by a litany of paragraphs and articles and the punishment they entailed. The list of crimes was long. The weekly prayer gatherings in our house which were illegal, counterrevolutionary and severely punishable. My leaving work on my own every week for religious purposes, one of the most blatant offenses, which set a bad example to one hundred and eighty workers, all producing army articles, and could be understood only as provocation to revolt and sabotage. The *matzoh* baking, which was considered "commercial activity." He read on, page after page, citing the grave punishment for each crime separately. The stenographer was busy flashing his pencil, interrupting briefly to turn a page.

The litany over, he stopped and closed the file. The *natchalnik* remained silent the whole time, but his cold, piercing look did not leave my face. He was planning his strategy according to my expression. He expected panic, fear and confusion. My face didn't register any of these. As he remained silent, I assumed he was waiting for some explanation on my part. The calm didn't leave me, and in a quiet but firm voice, I started to refute point by point the accusations leveled against me. He let me talk for about ten minutes and then, all of a sudden, raised his fist and let it fall on his desk with a powerful thud, causing the inkwell, pens and pistols to jump.

"Enough! Stop! I know your kind!" he roared.

Hashem gave me courage. By no means could I have mastered it myself. His tactic was calculated. I remained calm. After a few minutes of silence, he took one of the pens, started to play with it, moved his chair to the desk, leaned

both elbows on it and the mask of a wild beast turned into the mask of a smiling gentleman. The stenographer was ready to start, he knew the order of business.

Still playing with the pen, the *natchalnik* began in a confidential, fatherly tone. "You heard the accusations against you. They are facts, and no explanation will alter them. You'll get a long prison term with hard labor in one of the Arctic labor camps. We know that your mother is sick and depends on you. You will never see your mother again. It is wartime now, and regulations are strict." He stopped for a while, then continued. "There is one way out for you, though, and I will use my influence to help you. It is very simple. You will work for us. You know Polish, Russian, Yiddish and German. All you have to do is listen to what people say, and once a month, you'll come here with a report. You'll be paid very well, and you'll get the best rations."

He was smiling, assured that the prospect of well-being would be tempting in comparison with the severe punishment he had detailed. He didn't expect my categorical "No!"

"What? You refuse? You'll be very sorry!" He opened the drawer of his desk, took out a paper, held it up high, repeated more of what he had said before and added, "Just sign it, and in the morning you can go home worry-free."

I tried to appear simple-minded and kept repeating, "No, no, I am not good at it. Besides, I am a sleep-talker. We live together with two other families; in my sleep I might tell what I'm doing, and then people will avoid me and not talk around me. What good will it do?"

He gave me a sharp look. "Whom do you think you're fooling? We are not here to play around. Either you sign or you are arrested."

"I will not sign. I will not become a spy."

The expression on his face became an interplay of masks—wild rage to scare me, smiling politeness to subdue me. I remained unbending.

It was four o'clock in the morning when the sentry locked my cell door from the outside. I went to my bench and fell asleep immediately. The screech from the lock woke me up. The door opened a little. A pint size tin cup of milk, on top of it a pita bread and a tin jug of water were placed on the floor near the door. The pail was taken away and in a few minutes brought back. It was seven a.m. I washed my hands, said *Modeh Ani* and, like a desert wanderer, couldn't satiate my thirst until the jug was three-quarters empty. The milk and the pita were the only food for the day. I didn't touch them.

During the five days and four nights I was incarcerated, I drank only the water. Each morning, a fresh cup of milk and pita were placed on the floor and yesterday's taken away uneaten. I wanted the K.G.B. head to know that the hunger strike was an expression of my determination, but at the subsequent audiences, he never mentioned it. I suspected that the sentry ate the food himself and didn't report it to him.

I was probably in a special category. Who had ever heard of prisoners being fed milk and pitas? True, it was only once a day, but it was still a treat, a treat to tempt me into the trap. It was still early morning. I knew that during the day I would be left alone. Alone, yes, but watched. The door had a tiny opening with a sliding panel outside. Many times during the day I heard the sound of it moving and even caught sight of the sentry's eye and a part of his forehead.

The tightly wound coil in me from the night before started to unwind. I sat on the bench, the thoughts trapped in my head vying for priority. One thing I knew for sure—I

would not agree to become an informer. A *moser*? Even if my very life were at stake, it was only one life. How many lives would I endanger by becoming a *moser*? My saintly mother would understand. Not a word of *lashon hora* had passed her lips since I could remember. To talk about anyone in general was taboo in our house. My parents adhered to the rules of *shmiras halashon* totally. Should I now break them? And in such a way? Never! I knew it would be very hard to withstand their pressure, their tricks, the threats which they might carry out at any moment. The K.G.B. head had his superior in Petropavlovsk, who in turn had his superior in Moscow. Each of them wanted to prove his efficiency. Spying, terrorizing, arresting and torturing were the tools that made the regime tick. But come what may, my decision was firm. I prayed to the Almighty that He help me be strong, not to waver even for a moment.

I knew what had happened to two people who preceded me. I knew them very well. One was a woman from Poludieno, a mother of two young girls whose husband had just been released from prison. Unable to withstand the pressure, she agreed to become an informer. Shortly afterwards, she was taken to the hospital after suffering a nervous breakdown. The K.G.B. then "invited" to their office a middle-aged man who, together with his wife, had been deported to Siberia. He was a sickly person and after returning from the K.G.B. office in Poludieno, openly admitted his failure to stand up to the K.G.B. His words on return were, "I have one request from the Almighty—that He take me before I have to go back to them." His wish was fulfilled. After two weeks, he passed away. Another Jewish grave in a Siberian cemetery.

I closed my eyes. I knew my mother was saying *Tehillim* at that moment. She did every free minute, even before I was

taken to jail. Her eyes never cried, only her heart. The intensity of her prayer was very deep, even though she shed no tears.

Oh, please Almighty G-d, I prayed silently, accept our combined prayers! Hasn't it been enough until now? Enough! *Dayenu!*—a reversed *Haggadah*. Isn't it enough that my father was arrested? Isn't it enough that we were dispossessed, robbed of everything we owned? Isn't it enough that my father's *heilige neshamah* had to expire somewhere in a Siberian gulag? Isn't it enough that we don't know the date of his *yahrzeit* or the place where he is buried? Isn't it enough that we were exiled to Siberia? Isn't it enough that for a year and a half we were forced to live in tents in temperatures reaching fifty degrees below zero? I know, Hashem, that everything You do has a purpose. Am I being tested now? Please give me the strength to withstand Your test!

CHAPTER 29

An Insidious Offer

I PROBABLY DOZED OFF, BECAUSE WHEN I OPENED MY EYES, most of the day was gone. A sudden pang of hunger made my head turn involuntarily in the direction of the door. I averted it quickly. After a while, I took a few sips of water and went back to the bench. I wanted to save my energy for the midnight encounter. A surge of anger erupted suddenly in me at that K.G.B. scoundrel who justified his sitting in a warm, carpeted office by gathering information about innocent people, which was just as often invented without even any proof by the victims' envious rivals. For him and his ilk to succeed in their jobs, they would send a parent of small children to jail for imaginary crimes.

A whole sophisticated system of internal spying was invented by these moral perverts. The whole machine of the

powerful K.G.B. was geared to sustain the Soviet regime through terror and fear. Teachers in grade schools were urged to extract information from students about their parents. In their innocence, unaware of the trap and wanting to please their teachers, the children told what they heard, often exaggerating as some small children might do, adding fantasy to facts. The practice became known, and parents became afraid to talk freely in front of their own children. A person couldn't even be sure of his neighbor's intentions. Co-workers didn't trust each other. Siblings were afraid to confide in each other. Everyone suspected everyone.

I didn't know what kind of persuasion or threat the *natchalnik* would try on me this time. There was no doubt he'd be persistent, determined to succeed. I decided to match wits with him, to play along with his game. But then, maybe he'd skip a day to tire me out emotionally and physically. Maybe he wouldn't call me at all.

I could recall times when there weren't enough hours in my day, but now it seemed to take endless hours to turn this day into night. Did my little watch deceive me? I took another few sips of water, stretched my aching legs and arms, leaned against the door and remained standing there for a while. If the sentry happened to open his little window, he wouldn't see too much this time. Another couple of hours passed. I was sitting on the bench again, my eyes burning from the lack of sleep and the glaring bulb.

The inquisitors knew how to torture their victims. They confined a person into a space less than three meters square with nothing but a small bench to sit on, a bulb burning day and night, scanty food and water, locked in, left to guess what the next move would be. All this was done in order to break a person and then mold him into a mindless automaton.

They didn't skip a day. At one o'clock in the morning, I was again brought into the interrogator's office. I made up my mind to remain entirely passive. Ever since I first saw a K.G.B. agent, four years earlier, walking the streets of Lida, just the sight of their uniforms used to send needles along my spine. But now, trapped in their cage, brought face to face with the harshest threats, nothing moved me. I was calm and composed. The K.G.B. head noticed it and was puzzled himself. His fox's instinct told him that screaming and fist-pounding would not convince me. Instead, he applied his eloquence. For two and a half hours, a deluge of words assured me of the bliss I would share if I would agree and the doom I'd bring down upon myself and my mother if I'd refuse. I let him talk. He stopped a few times, just to hear my firm refusal. This time, he didn't rage. He remained calm and continued talking. The stenographer was busy. My tormentor needed proof of his effort.

I felt that my composure was becoming superficial. Inside, I started to feel a whirl of fear, uncertainty, despair and, above all, anger. My father had taught me that anger is one of the worst *midos*, but at this moment, I felt a relief in my anger. It gave me more incentive to fight. No, he wouldn't have it so easy with me. When he stopped after some weighty argument to hear my reaction, I asked him if he would give me more time to think it over. Of course, I hadn't the slightest intention of agreeing, but whatever would happen to me, let the *natchalnik* have it the hard way. His face registered triumph; he was sure I was giving in. He motioned to the sentry, and I was sent back to my cell.

There I could be myself again, but I couldn't sleep. My calm disappeared. My decision not to sign was firm. It was the alternative that drilled like a sharp screw deep into my mind

and heart. I could easily believe I would not see my mother again before being imprisoned and sent away. It was a long-practiced method. Thousands disappeared in a similar way. I sat on the bench, feelings and thoughts in a wild race. I cried and prayed. Would I merit Hashem's pity for my mother's sake? Why was I doubting? I had promised to be strong. "Adhere to your *bitachon*," a voice inside me murmured. "Hold on, hold on."

The glare of the bulb was competing with the first, unsure rays of light stealing through the barred window. Little by little, the K.G.B.'s perversion of light had to surrender to the overpowering "Let there be light" of the Creator. So will it be, I said to myself. The light of the Creator will guide me in the darkness of human degradation.

I looked at the little window, and as it became lighter and lighter, my hope and strength rose. I heard the door opening, the changing of the milk and pita. After two days without food, I didn't feel hungry any more. I drank some of the water and returned to my seat on the bench.

The morning turned into day, the day into night. I still couldn't sleep. The screech of the lock and the sentry's voice telling me to come to the *natchalnik* didn't scare me so much now. In total isolation and stillness, even the barking of a dog is a welcome sound. It was two o'clock in the morning this time. The K.G.B. expected me to sign and get it over with—a short session.

When I entered the room, the set-up was the same as on the previous two nights, the K.G.B. head in his place at the desk, the other two on both sides. The sentry remained at the door. Without any preliminary talk, he took out the paper, turned it upside down and, holding the tip of his pen on the line where I was supposed to sign, motioned to my chair and

waited. As I didn't stir, he assumed I wanted to read what I was signing first. He tried to be helpful.

"You want to read it yourself, or should I read it to you?" he asked.

"Neither," I said. "I will not sign, and I will not become an informer."

My declaration struck him like a thunderbolt. He jumped from his chair, and with the look of a hungry tiger teased with a slab of meat beyond his reach, gave a roar to the sentry, "Take her to the cellar!"

During Stalin's reign the K.G.B. cellars had a reputation of their own. I don't know if there were eyewitnesses to tell what happened there, because I doubt if anyone ever survived. The sentry stood ready, waiting for me to come to the door.

My mind exploded. I had to think quickly, on the spot. A fraction of a second could seal my fate. I turned, took a quick look at the distance between the desk and the door and decided to try. There was nothing to lose. As I neared the door I threw myself on the floor, hands and feet thrashing, my whole body convulsing violently, eyes almost closed. Through my slitted eyes I watched for the reaction. I had witnessed an epileptic seizure once, and I was sure I was copying it correctly. The only thing I couldn't reproduce was the foam around the mouth. It went unnoticed.

Thrashing continuously, I caught sight of the K.G.B. head going to the phone. He spoke quickly, replaced the receiver and sat back down at his desk. I didn't hear what he said because my thrashing blocked out his words, but I could see he was nervous. If it happened in the cellar it was perfectly acceptable, but a death in his office might carry an unpleasant aftertaste.

After about ten minutes, a short, middle-aged woman, carrying a black satchel came rushing in. I didn't stop thrashing. She sat down on the floor near me, took my pulse, raised my eyelids, opened her bag, took out a syringe, filled it with some liquid from a tiny bottle, pulled up my sleeve and injected it into my arm. For a moment, a wild thought passed through my mind. Maybe she had injected something lethal! My shaking now became more real than faked.

She looked around the room, turned to the K.G.B. head and asked if he'd allow her to transfer me to the couch. She wanted to make a closer examination.

"Don't move," she said. "We'll help you."

I suddenly realized that she had seen through my act and decided to play along with me.

The two assistants left the room, but the head interrogator was still at his desk. She asked for two blankets. The sentry brought them. She folded one, put it under my head and covered me with the other.

She held my hand as if checking my pulse again. I saw how she felt for me and how, in her limited way, she was trying to help. She put the stethoscope to my chest, asked about illnesses in the family, my health history and so on. I didn't stop shaking. I was in pain from the effort, but I decided to play it as long as possible. My answers through chattering teeth were barely audible. The doctor didn't need them. When she finished the examination, she gave me two pills, and talking to nobody in particular, she said that I must lie completely still and in four hours take another two pills. She knew that four hours of rest on a soft couch would do me no harm.

The *natchalnik* left the room together with the doctor. As he passed the sentry, he told him something which I didn't

hear. The big light fixture was ablaze, and the sentry remained at the door. I tried not to fall asleep and to keep shaking all the time. I stole a look at my watch; it was almost four o'clock in the morning.

Sometime later, I heard someone talking quietly to the sentry. I didn't hear the question, but I heard the sentry's reply, "Still shaking."

Still shaking and still trapped.

Shortly before eight, the sentry told me to get up and take the other two pills, then he escorted me to my cell. The fresh pint of milk and the pita remained untouched. I wondered idly what the doctor had injected. Probably vitamins, as most likely were the pills. Regardless of the shortage of basic goods, vitamins were easily available.

I was sitting on the bench. I preferred to sit. Walking back and forth made me feel like a butterfly trapped between a double window, flying from one glass pane to the other, up and down, again and again, desperately looking for the smallest crack through which to escape. Sitting, although it was no less tiring, made me feel more assured. I was in possession of something, if only the narrow, cold bench beneath me.

What next? I asked myself. The same game twice was unthinkable. But what else? How long would my endurance hold up? How long would his patience restrain him? If not yesterday, surely it would be today. The K.G.B. basement seemed to be my inescapable destination.

Time became something unreal, elusive. I felt a fog envelop my head. It was swathed in a cloud of white cotton, which became bigger and bigger, like a huge ball of cotton candy; I myself became small and thin, like the stick that holds it.

When I woke up, the little window was dark gray. My watch had stopped. I had forgotten to wind it. It didn't matter anyway. Time had different dimensions in jail.

It took me a while to revive my stiffened limbs. How long had I been sleeping? I wondered. Probably the pills in the morning were sleeping pills, and I had been sleeping all day. The doctor knew the K.G.B. schedule.

The next drilling session started at one o'clock in the morning as usual; I could tell by the clock on the wall. It already felt like a routine procedure. The previous night's incident wasn't mentioned. He was angry, rude and, after two hours of spitting venom, infuriated. On hearing my only reaction, a firm refusal, he grabbed one of his pistols, ran over to the place where I was sitting, and when I jumped to my feet, sure that he was going to shoot me, he dug the barrel of the gun into my side and with wild force pushed me out of the room. In half a minute, I was back in my cell. My side hurt so much when I sat down that I stood the rest of the night leaning against the wall. Despite the pain, I felt a great relief. The slightest flick of his finger would have meant the end.

At one time during that day, I remember standing with my forehead resting against the wall, both hands raised, praying with my own words, with all my heart and soul, with all my being. I prayed in total forgetfulness of my surroundings. I was oblivious to the pain in my side, the thirst, the hunger, the tiredness, to the cell itself, to the K.G.B. head down the long hall. Everything disappeared. Time stopped. Every fiber of my soul and body was totally absorbed in prayer. I felt that a part of me was floating out of the cell, carried away on the wings of prayer to the very gates of Heaven.

When the door opened, I was sitting on the bench again.

It was ten o'clock in the evening. Unusual. Why so early?

"To the *natchalnik*," the sentry commanded.

I went, expecting the worst.

There were the three of them as usual. The head held a sheet of paper in his hand and, saying only one word, put it on the desk in front of me. "*Podpishy*," he said. "Sign."

"I can only say what I have said the last four times. I will not sign."

"This you will sign," he said.

"What is this?"

"Read."

I read. It contained only three lines. "I obligate myself never, to anybody, under any circumstances, to disclose what took place here during the last five days."

"This I will sign." I put down the date and signed my name. He motioned to the sentry, and I was led outside the front door of the building. And although I did not feel bound by this promise extracted from me under extreme duress, I actually refrained from discussing my experiences with the K.G.B. in Poludieno until I left Russia.

BOOK FIVE

Frozen Images

CHAPTER 30

A Fugitive in Petropavlovsk

IT WAS A CLOUDY AND MOONLESS THURSDAY NIGHT. I ASKED the sentry the way to Tokushy. Surprisingly, he answered and even gave me some good advice, probably because of the milk and bread I had left him during my hunger strike.

"Go to the station and proceed alongside the tracks to your right," he said. "The road used by trucks and wagons leads through a forest, and in the darkness you may lose your way."

I thanked him and did as he advised.

I tried to walk alongside the tracks, but the ground was muddy and uneven. Between the rails will be easier, I thought, and I climbed up the embankment. It was easier, but every ten or fifteen minutes, a train behind me or in front of me forced me to climb down and wait until it passed. Despite not

having eaten for days, I managed to walk the fourteen kilometers to Tokushy, although it did take me ten hours. I suppose I inherited my physical strength from my father and from my Grodno grandfather who could break a horseshoe with his bare hands.

When I knocked on the door of our little house, it was six o'clock in the morning. My mother was up and dressed, as if she were expecting me. Her control was remarkable. She showed no surprise or emotion. With her remarkable perception, my mother knew it wasn't the right time to talk; she would question me later. She hurried to give me a glass of milk and quietly said, "Go to sleep." I always admired my mother's usual perception, deep understanding and insightful evaluation of every situation. She never uttered an unnecessary word, but always said the right thing at the right time.

I went to bed and fell asleep immediately. The activity in the room—Etia with her two boys and Kreina with her family—was kept to a minimum so as not to disturb my sleep. When I awoke, I saw that they were making final preparations for *Shabbos*. It took me a while to realize where I was. The week spent at the K.G.B. headquarters seemed a wild nightmare. My whole body hurt. My side, where the *natchalnik* had stuck the gun barrel, felt sore to the touch. I felt very weak and hungry.

"I would like something to eat," I said to my mother.

She went to the big oven, pulled out the pot containing the *Shabbos* meal, put some in a bowl and gave me water to wash my hands. Still in a daze, I sat up and finished my meal in no time. Now I started to see things more clearly. I saw my mother, Etia, Kreina and her mother-in-law *bentch licht* over the single, glass-covered kerosene lamp which was placed for *Shabbos* on the corner shelf and turned down low. I saw the

table covered with a white cloth. All were silent, not looking at each other or talking. I couldn't pinpoint what it was, but I felt a certain tension, an unease. I was too tired to think about it any longer, and I turned to the wall and fell asleep again. My mother allowed me to stay in her bed and used my bed on the trunk instead.

Usually, all of us were up early on *Shabbos* morning to prepare the room for the *minyan*. But this *Shabbos*, I woke up late and nobody came. I stayed in bed all day. The room, always a beehive of activity, was quiet and still. I got sympathetic looks from Etia and Kreina, but no one spoke.

When I came to the *artel* on Sunday morning and took my usual seat, however, the women and girls with whom I had worked so long and become friends avoided my eyes and wouldn't utter a word. I understood the reason. They were afraid. If I had been kept in K.G.B. headquarters for five days and released, it probably meant I had agreed to become an informer.

At home, the relationship normalized. The K.G.B. episode was never mentioned. Etia and I continued working in our garden late into the night for the second year, expecting the same results. Liba moved to Petropavlovsk with her daughter Freidele and son Lazar. Kreina and her family stayed with us.

My mother never asked me what had happened in Poludieno. She knew that as soon as I could, I would tell her myself. A few weeks later, I felt up to it.

Once the subject was broached, she told me how Etia, who was terrified of the K.G.B., had insisted on going to Poludieno to look for me, with no idea of what she would do should she find me; in her intensely impulsive way, she had felt compelled to do something, no matter what, and had

actually walked the whole way to Poludieno to find me. In Poludieno, she consulted with friends of ours, who, of course, knew nothing about my being there. She even considered knocking on the doors of the K.G.B. building itself, but fortunately, she was dissuaded from that approach. She came home not having learned anything about my status or location. Not surprisingly, my mother had worried even more, but she had had *bitachon.*

Meanwhile, I became like an outcast among our own people. Whenever I happened to enter a room, the conversation would stop immediately and nervous glances would be exchanged by all present. I well understood their reaction. I knew the fear which pervaded Russia. But it hurt.

The Friday night and *Shabbos minyanim* were discontinued. People preferred to stay away from me.

Four weeks after I returned from Poludieno, on a Wednesday evening, Brodatch, Aaron David's son-in-law, appeared at our door. I was surprised because even he, a good friend, had curtailed his visits to us.

"I want to ask you something," he said to me, ignoring the puzzled looks of everyone in the room. He inclined his head indicating that I should come outside. It was after ten o'clock, but in the north, the summer days are very long, and at that late hour, it was still light enough to read outside.

"I was just walking in the street," Brodatch began, "and I was stopped by Vasiliev, the village chairman, who showed me this card and asked if I knew the person whose name is written on it. He said he'd never heard of such a person. Although the name on the card is yours, I replied that I also didn't know who it was, but if he let me have the card, I'd ask around. If I found the person, I'd deliver it."

The peculiarity of this conversation—Vasiliev and Brodatch

both knew that each of them knew me—didn't surprise me a bit. It only showed how serious the matter was. With trembling hands I took the card.

"Thursday, 25 June, ten o'clock in the morning," I read. "Dina Shapiro is to report to the police in Poludieno in order to be sent to a hard labor camp in Yakutia in the Arctic zone. Take along a change of clothing and bread." The Poludieno K.G.B. head had kept his promise.

"Can you imagine?" said Brodatch. "Vasiliev, whom we all considered a beast and an anti-Semite, should walk around Tokushy for three hours after closing his office in order to meet someone he could trust and who knows you, just so he could warn you?"

"So all his shouts and threats were just a cover up!" I said in wonder. "And how afraid I was of him!"

So insidious were the corrupting effects of the Soviet regime that in order to appear a devoted Communist one had to hide one's humanity and act a beast!

"You must run away and hide," said Brodatch. "The place to go is Petropavlovsk, to Masha. She'll find a place for you. Trains pass through our station every half hour or so. You must wait until it gets completely dark, and when a train stops, climb aboard between the cars. Remember to jump from the train as it slows down before it reaches Petropavlovsk. If you need money, I'll lend you a few hundred *rubles*."

I thanked him, but I didn't need the loan. He wished me luck and left.

I came into the house as if nothing had happened. To camouflage my nervousness, I took some yarn and started to knit. This was a familiar enough sight. My mother went to sleep, the others as well, but Etia was still up. After knitting a while, I put a hand to my cheek and started to complain of

a toothache. The supposed pain increased by the minute, and my moaning woke my mother. I couldn't tell my mother I had to hide, but a sharp toothache was an understandable reason to go to Petropavlovsk. I was sure my mother suspected a more serious reason, and she also knew that without a permit, my travelling would be less than comfortable. Nonetheless, it wasn't in her nature to despair and become hysterical. Her calm and strength sustained me.

Etia went outside and motioned to me to follow. I didn't want to tell my mother and cause her a distressing night. Someone ought to know, I thought, and so I told Etia the whole story. We decided that in the morning she would tell my mother that it was appendicitis that had forced me to go to town and see a doctor. I was sure there would be inquiries from the police. My mother would give them the same answer, that I was hospitalized in Petropavlovsk with appendicitis. With their visits, everything would become quite clear to my mother and everyone else, but until then, not one word was to be said about it to anyone.

I left the house after midnight, empty-handed. I took only a few hundred *rubles* tied in a handkerchief and secured with a safety pin inside my dress. Luckily, it was a moonless night. I waited for a train at a distance from the station building, outside the perimeter of light from the two pole lamps.

The war was still in full swing, and dozens of trains carrying military equipment and soldiers went through Tokushy and Petropavlovsk every week on the way from the Far East to the European front. But to board a train carrying soldiers was too risky, since every car had a guard. Passenger trains to Petropavlovsk were also out of the question, since they passed our station only twice a day, both times in full daylight. The only possibility was a freight train.

My heartbeat matched the click-clack of the rolling wheels, as I stood in the shadows waiting for a freight train. The freight was usually armaments, and although they didn't have guards on every car, getting caught on such a train meant a bullet on the spot. But I had no choice. I recognized the next freight train as soon as the hissing, smoke-and-steam-enveloped locomotive passed. The train was long, a combination of closed boxcars and open platforms covered with khaki canvas, showing the contours of its lethal cargo.

Tokushy was a big station, and every passing train stopped for at least a few minutes. I chose a place between two boxcars, as there was less exposure there. My railroad training proved to be helpful now. Bending low, I ran from my shadowed hiding place to the train, grabbed a coupling pin with both hands, put one foot on the chain which connected the plates of the two boxcars and pulled myself up. Just in time, I stepped with both feet on the pin and caught a protruding rod from the side of the car when the train started moving.

The pins were round and slippery, the train was shaking, and the rusty piece of iron, which I held tightly by turning slightly sideways, rubbed my hands like a file. My head and side were plastered to the wall of the car, and all my attention was on my feet. I was afraid to close my eyes, but I couldn't keep them open either. Accustomed to the darkness now, the sight of the flitting landscape—trees and shadows, the gravel, rails and the view all around—made my head whirl like a propeller.

When will the train stop? I thought. When will this hell end? But I didn't dare wait for the train to stop. What had Brodatch said? That I should jump when the train slowed down before it reached the station. Meanwhile, it just sped

along. A blur. All my muscles were as tightly strung as a wire, numbed by the tension and effort to keep my balance and by the whirlwind on both sides of the train and around me between the cars. Then a burst of sparks, steam and smoke from a train going in the opposite direction on the next track almost swept me to the ground and under the wheels. It was good that I was wearing a dark dress; it made me invisible.

The train, like myself, was a fugitive, I from the K.G.B., the train from the night. The darkness dissipated, and through the foggy, pre-dawn grayness, I could see that Petropavlovsk was close by. I prepared to jump at the first indication of the train slowing its tempo. From afar, I noticed the contours of buildings. Instinctively, I felt that the instant I let go of the rod I had to jump, otherwise I'd lose my balance and fall between the cars. Another kilometer rolled by before I took the plunge. The moment came. With eyes closed, I found myself rolling down the embankment, the grinding rumble fading away overhead. The train passed. I was still lying on the ground, waiting for some pain or sign of injury, and at the same time watching the disappearing train with great relief. No one had seen me.

The ground felt damp and cold. I stood up, feeling my legs, sides, arms. Thank Heaven, not a scratch. I had put my trust in Hashem and was rewarded with a miracle.

The day grew brighter, and I started into town. I knew Masha's address; I had stayed there a few times while looking for information about my father. She and her two young daughters were refugees from Kharkov in the Ukraine. Like many other Soviet Jews, they had fled from the Germans. Her husband was in the army, and to supplement her meager pension, she shared her two-room apartment with short term boarders. She provided no food for her boarders, of course;

food was too scarce. The boarders had to be trustworthy people, recommended by friends. Brodatch was a frequent guest, as his business often took him to Petropavlovsk. Ravtzov had recommended him to Masha, and he had recommended me. After two hours, I reached her apartment, covered with dust and soot. I told her I had to hide for a while.

"Not in my apartment," she insisted. "I don't want to endanger myself and my children. I'll give you a note for a woman I know who lives on the outskirts, on the other end of town. She can be trusted." She quickly scribbled a few words on a piece of old newspaper and told me the address which I had to memorize, so there would be no written evidence in case I was caught. She was visibly eager to get rid of me, but she offered me just a glass of water before I left.

Tired, dirty and hungry, I started my first day as a fugitive. Petropavlovsk is a big, dilapidated Siberian town, and after another two hours of walking around and asking directions from elderly *babushkas*, I finally reached the woman's home. It was a lot like a peasant's hut, with a fenced vegetable garden and an attached barn.

I came into the yard and knocked on the door. A loud bark was the first answer. Next, a tall, slender woman, shoving away a big black dog, stepped outside. I gave her the note. She read it, nodded and led me inside. In the note, Masha had written only that she was sending a boarder. The rest of my story I had to repeat myself. No details, of course. For a good price, she provided her boarders with food also, like bread, milk, vegetables and eggs.

"At the moment, my boarders are away, so you can wash up and eat," she told me. "But you cannot stay in the house. Nobody should see you. I'll make you a place in the barn. You

can stay there as long as you have to. With food, it will cost you a hundred *rubles* a day."

"I will eat only bread, milk and vegetables," I said. "Nothing cooked."

"It makes no difference," she answered. "I'm taking a chance hiding you."

I agreed to her conditions. After three days, she doubled the price. Again, I agreed.

Refreshed from the wash and the meal, I followed my landlady to see the barn. My new roommates were a big black cow with white spots and a number of chickens, including a rooster. Spiders, beetles, flies and all kinds of creeping creatures were frequent but temporary visitors. The cow's stall occupied the space to the right of the door. Above, two rods, fastened across the width of the barn wall to wall, served as a perch for the chickens. On the left side in the near corner was a stack of hay. The far corner was to be my domain.

After sweeping it clean, the woman brought in an old barn door from a shed nearby and jammed it tightly between the two corner walls, forming a triangle. Behind this partition, she put a straw-filled mattress covered with a thick homespun sheet, and a small stool. Then she brought in a small pillow and another sheet as a cover. That was it. My room was ready. To get in or out, I had to climb over the partition. I preferred the exercise to being trampled by the cow's hooves in case she ever decided to leave her stall and take a walk around the barn, although the woman assured me this wouldn't happen. During the day, the barn was empty. The cow was out in the field to pasture, and the chickens were all over the yard.

I thanked the woman and climbed in. The moment my head touched the pillow, benevolent sleep wiped out the

barn, the train, the K.G.B., the dog and the cow—my whole current world.

A cacophony of mooing, barking and squawking brought me right back to reality. I opened my eyes, and in the semi-darkness of the barn, from my place on the straw mattress behind the partition, my first sight was of a fluttering of gray, black and white wings and a tangle of yellow feet and claws positioning themselves on the perch under the barn ceiling. I was too tired to sit up. From the sounds, I knew exactly what was going on. I heard the cow charging through the door, rustling to a stop in the hay and then lapping the water the woman had prepared for her in a big, deep, wooden basin. Soon after, I heard the measured sound of the first streams of milk hitting the tin pail, becoming duller as the pail filled. I heard the door of the house close and open again.

I was sitting on the little stool, my feet on the mattress, when the woman came to my corner.

"I brought you milk and bread," she said. "Do you want anything else? My boarders are coming any minute, and I don't want them to see that I'm taking food to the barn."

"Just bring me a pail with water, a cup and a towel please. Are you sure the cow won't come here? I'm afraid of her horns."

"I tied her up to a hook," she reassured me. "She can't reach you."

She brought what I asked, as well as an additional blanket, one of the large, heavy wraps the Siberian women used for everything. I heard her bolting the door from the outside. Soon, footsteps, voices, the opening and closing of the door to the house and the guard dog's barking indicated the presence of her boarders.

The bread she had brought me, a big chunk, was wrapped

in a towel smelling of fresh air and sun. The milk was strained and still warm in a liter jug three-quarters full. It was a meal fit for a king. (Interestingly, when she raised the rent three days later, the food portions diminished in reverse proportion.) I ate slowly, enjoying every bite. It had been a long time since I had experienced such calm and serenity. The immediate past and future were completely blocked out. All I had or cared about were the here and now. I liked my corner, I liked the cow, and I liked the chickens. Why can't cows and chickens rule the nations of the world? I asked myself. How much happier and safer people would be!

The swishing sound of the cow's tail fending off the creeping and flying insects brought me back to my most immediate reality. As long as she only fanned herself, it didn't bother me. It was the thought that maybe she'd decide to extend her hospitality by flapping her tail in my direction that worried me for a moment. Now that my eyes had adjusted to the semi-darkness, I took a closer look. Seeing the distance that separated my corner from the cow, I finished my supper relaxed and unperturbed.

The night set in. Every place has its own noises. Here it was the occasional twitter of a sleeping chicken, the cow chewing her cud, a barely audible swish in the hay, probably from a field mouse, the zoom of a mosquito, and probably many more sounds which the human ear is not equipped to detect. The air was a cloud of odors. The delicious, strong smell of freshly cut hay and the barely detectable currents of crisp, unpolluted air coming through the slits between the boards of the barn wall contrasted with the heavy, steamy odors of the cow, the manure and the chicken droppings.

I couldn't fall asleep for a while, not because I had been sleeping all afternoon, but because the creeping insects

disturbed me. Ever since I was a child, when playmates had once dropped a beetle down my dress and responded to my cries with delighted shrieks, I felt a revulsion for anything that crawls. It seemed, though, that half a day's rest really wasn't enough. Overwhelmed with fatigue, my anxiety gave way, and I fell asleep.

In a household with domestic animals and birds, the day starts early. Most zealous of all is the rooster. Flapping his wings and crowing his unique cock-a-doodle-doo, every morning he races the rising sun. In no time after his alarm, the activity in the barn got hectic. The cowherd came early to collect his charges. In Petropavlovsk, a town of about one hundred thousand inhabitants, most of the families, excluding refugees, kept a cow. The milking had to be done quickly and the cow led to the gate. The chickens were again let out into the yard, and the now empty barn was all mine.

My breakfasts were late, after everyone left, and my suppers early, before they all came back. During the day, some wanderer would occasionally stop by, so my movements were restricted, and I seldom left my corner. But it was all fine with me. My landlady provided adequately for my needs, and there was nothing I wanted to do elsewhere.

On Sunday, a very welcome guest appeared in the barn. It was Brodatch. Over one arm he had my light brown jacket and a change of clothing; it was safer that way, since a wrapped package could arouse suspicion. He also brought some money as a loan, which I gave to the woman for a week's advance, and another precious item, a stub of pencil and a piece of paper. My mother already knew the truth, Brodatch told me. Three days in a row—Thursday, Friday and Saturday—policemen from Poludieno had come to look for me, and not just for my staying away from work without leave.

I wrote a brief note, which Brodatch delivered to my mother the next day. A letter exchange between my mother and me began. The letters consisted of only two or three words so as not to be incriminating. We just wanted to see each other's handwriting. This became a weekly routine.

In between my mother's weekly letters, my life was one long stretch of boredom and monotony, broken by an occasional minor disaster. One night I awoke to find myself soaked, together with my pillow and mattress. An unusually stormy rain had sent torrents of water through the slits in the barn walls at my corner. The ground became a mud pool. The only thing I could do was to put everything over the top of the enclosure and sit on my stool until the rain and the night were over.

The instinct of self-preservation is probably the strongest element in human nature. The most important difference between my barn corner and the Poludieno jail cell was the peace and security, but as far as isolation went, they had quite a lot in common. In order to save my sanity, I instinctively transported myself to another world, another time. What is time anyway? Is it only a sum total of minutes, days or years? Or is it the intensity of events? Is it the passage from one second to the next, or the passage from one event to another?

Time and thought. Both are substantial and real, both elusive and indefinable. Can the speed of thought be measured? Its direction determined? Is the present moment real, or the remembrance of it?

CHAPTER 31

Journeys into the Past

MY MEMORY TOOK A GIANT LEAP, AND I WAS BACK IN MY childhood. Long forgotten images and happenings took on form and shape and brought back to life a childhood spent in a warm cocoon of comfort and love. A picture of my room filled with toys appeared before my eyes, then it was instantly swept aside by things which interested me more. What I liked best was to see how things worked and to watch things happen. I was curious about everything. On the cover of one of the children's books my mother used to read to me was a picture of a little kitten, and I tore the glossy paper off the cover. When my mother asked me why I had done it, I told her I was looking for the kitten. I was sure it was inside the cover.

My curiosity knew no bounds, and each new discovery in

the world unfolding before me filled me with delight. My mother, however, did not always share my sentiments.

"Mama, guess what I have in my hand?" I remember calling out as I came running into the house one summer afternoon, perspiring and excited, with my fist tightly clenched. It wasn't easy to guess, and my mother asked to see. I opened my fist and out jumped a baby frog, right into the middle of the dining room floor. Instead of sharing my delight, my mother was horrified and revolted.

I had found the frog in a small pool, no longer in use, behind one of the factory buildings. The pool, overgrown with vegetation and always damp, was a perfect breeding place for frogs. A few steps led to the bottom. I had been curious to see what was going on down there, and on the bottom, I had spotted the frog and caught it. Indeed, I wasn't afraid of cats, dogs, birds, frogs; quite the opposite—they were more fascinating because they were alive.

What a wonderful, carefree life I had enjoyed as a child! Little did I dream that just a few short years later I would be sharing a Siberian barn with a cow and reminiscing about better days. My memory took another turn, and suddenly I was face to face with many of the fascinating people that had populated my golden childhood.

My mother's father came to live with us when I was five-and-a half years old, and my Aunt Sarah came with him. She stayed only one year before taking a job as a high school teacher in Vilna, near her sister Mina. As I was not yet in school, she took upon herself, with my parents' permission, the roles of educator, guidance counselor, teacher and disciplinarian.

Rather than attend Aunt Sarah's lessons, though, I was always escaping on adventures. There were so many exciting

things to see. In a little house down the road lived an elderly Jewish couple, a potter and his wife. He made clay pots and jugs, which his wife sold to the peasants on market days.

From the day I discovered this wonder, Usia, our Polish maid, knew where to find me. For hours, I would watch the potter throw the clay on the potter's wheel. He pushed the drive wheel around and around with his bare foot, constantly and steadily, while his hands formed the clay into the desired shape. It was sheer wonder to see how a ball of clay was magically transformed into a tall jug or a pot. When they were finished, he would transfer them to a big tin tray, which he put in a very hot oven, much bigger than ours.

"When our cook Sorel bakes cakes, she also puts them on a tray in the oven," I offered my comment.

"My child, I don't eat cake," was his reply. "I'm happy I can buy bread after I sell these pots."

I was shocked. A *Shabbos* without cake? Economics and sociology were way beyond my scope.

My parents knew about my escapades, and I told my mother about my discovery. On my very next visit, my mother gave me a bundle to deliver with the message, "This is for *Shabbos*."

The *Shabbos* packages for the potter continued long after I lost interest in the pots, having discovered new wonders. One was a shoemaker. He kept my attention for three days, until I found out that just two houses away from us there was a cheese and butter production plant. The plant had only two hand-operated machines—a centrifuge and a butter churn. It was also run by an elderly couple. They were patient and friendly and answered my endless questions, sometimes remarking that it would be more fitting for a little girl to play with dolls than to be interested in machines.

More often than not, in the middle of a very interesting moment, Usia would come to take me home. If it was dinnertime, I wouldn't mind, but when it was on command from Aunt Sarah, as was more often the case, I would get annoyed.

"You didn't do your homework again today,"Aunt Sarah would say. She was right. I hadn't read the two sentences she had assigned me, and now I was stumbling over every letter.

Her questions fell like stones on my head and rolled past deaf ears. What is Babele Landau, the cheese and butter maker, doing now? I was thinking. Is she putting the jugs with fermented milk in the lukewarm oven to curdle? Or is she filling the churn with sour cream? At the time, these things seemed far more important than reading, history and geography.

My memory shifted again, and suddenly, incongruously, I found myself thinking about childhood ailments. In those far-off, pre-antibiotic days, aspirin and a strong raspberry brew were the prescribed remedies for colds; castor oil and a week-long diet of barley or oatmeal water were the prescribed remedies for stomach-aches.

My mother never panicked when I took sick. She was matter-of-fact, did what she thought was right and went about her usual business. It was my father, my strong, heroic father, who would be beside himself with worry whenever my temperature went a degree above normal. And if it was a cold with fever, my room soon became a miniature hospital. First came the doctor with his inevitable black satchel and a self-satisfied air of importance. He took his time taking my temperature, which my father had invariably taken at least five times already. Then, he put his stethoscope on every inch of my chest and back, turned me from side to side like a hot

potato, poked me with his fingers, told me to breathe, hold my breath, breathe again, and finally, when my father was almost out of breath himself, pronounced his verdict—cups, or *bankes*, as they were called in Yiddish.

Usia was sent with a note to the Jewish hospital, only a ten minute walk from us, and a nurse would soon arrive with the box of cups. I hated it. In an hour, my night table was full of bottles containing various concoctions, which helped about as much as a glass of plain tea. In the end, it was always the long-tested treatment of aspirin and raspberry brew, which caused profuse sweating and cured the cold in three days.

Although having fever and a sore throat is not much of a pleasure, I liked those days. I had my father all to myself. Forgotten were the business and the office. All appointments were relegated to my uncle. For hours, my father sat next to my bed, read and told me stories, played games with me and told me jokes to make me laugh. Only my father could make me take bitter medicine or drink the horrible tasting castor oil.

I loved my mother very much, but it was my father to whom I would run with an injured finger or a skinned knee. His caress, his smile and reassurance took away the pain like magic. When I started school, it was my father who would always check my homework. If he was satisfied, he would smile. If he remained serious, it meant I had to try harder. He never criticized outright. If criticism was needed, it was always conveyed through a story, an example or a moral.

There were times, however, when I had to be punished. I remember only two such occasions, both during the year before I started school. Once, I wandered off with a neighbor and her children to the Lidzyeika River, about half a kilometer from our house. I didn't ask my mother, knowing that she

wouldn't let me go, so my guilt was twofold. The place we went to wasn't suitable for swimming; the bank was overgrown, and there was turbulence in the water, caused by a nearby railway bridge. Even wading was risky, at least in my parents' opinion. After a two-hour search, I was found standing knee-deep in the water. The neighbor had assumed I had asked permission to go.

My father held my hand and walked me briskly home. My sandals were unbuckled, my socks were lost, and sand and gravel were scraping my wet feet. I remember lying on the couch in my father's study while he gave me a well-deserved spanking. I cried very loudly. Afterwards, my father sat down in his armchair and took me, sobbing quietly, in his arms. In an emotion-filled voice, my father explained to me why he had done it. I think he must have been holding back tears himself. I remember lying in bed later, my mother sitting with a glass of milk, at my bedside. She didn't send Usia with it. She wanted to be with me when I fell asleep.

I had received a similar punishment a few months earlier for telling a lie about someone. Those were the only two times I was physically punished, but it was enough. My love and respect for my father after the spanking didn't diminish; it increased. I adored him and was in awe of him.

Perhaps it was my singular devotion to my father that sparked my curiosity about mechanical things. My father's factory just next door was an endless source of interest, made all the more compelling by the knowledge that my father worked there, but I was sternly forbidden to enter it. Once in a while, after begging him constantly to show me these unusual wonders, he would take me to one department or another. Holding tightly onto my father's hand, I was awed

by the sight of the huge, noisy machines, the constantly rolling transmission belts moving the interlocking wheels of rows upon rows of smaller machines, where workers holding oddly-shaped pieces of iron produced showers of sparks as they shaped them on the turning wheels.

A magnetic force pulled me there, until I once sneaked unnoticed to the most restricted and forbidden room, where my father never wanted to take me. On the door was a sign stating, "Entrance Forbidden." Even if I had been able to read, it most likely would not have stopped me; its being forbidden would have made it all the more interesting.

The door was unlocked, and I went in. The enormity of the grumbling, hissing giant with its huge, churning wheels and its dozens of dials and knobs frightened and mesmerized me. For a while, I just stood there, staring at it. It was so big that it couldn't fit on one level. The bottom part with the giant wheels was standing in a deep pit, all faced in white tile. A narrow metal ladder led to the bottom. Of course, I couldn't be satisfied with just looking from a distance. Intuitively, I felt that this must be the thing that made all the other machines tick.

Curiosity pushed me closer to the ladder heading down to the turbines of the generator, its most dangerous part. I was just about to put my foot on the ladder, when I heard a horrified "*Don't!*" Then two strong hands lifted me and carried me outside. Only two people were allowed in there alone—the main engineer and his assistant. It was the latter who had rescued me. One moment later, and I wouldn't be writing about it now. Later, I heard my parents mentioning the words *goimel bentchen*, but I didn't know what it meant. From then on, the grounds of the factory were absolutely off limits.

My childhood curiosity extended beyond construction work and electrical generators. Among other things, I liked to observe the cook preparing holiday dishes. The first cook I remember was Sorel, a young orphan girl who, like many poor and orphaned Jewish girls, had taken a job as a domestic with a prosperous Jewish family. She was my confidante and friend. While eating *kreplach* on *Erev Yom Kippur* the year I was five, I wondered how the meat got into the dough, as it was closed on all sides. I went into the kitchen, found Sorel and asked her my question.

"I'll show you," she said. "Wait until *Hoshanna Rabbah* when I'll make them again."

Sorel was devoted, good-hearted and very scrupulous, but a slow worker. On the day before *Hoshanna Rabbah*, from the morning on, I followed Sorel's every step, annoying Usia, the Polish maid, with my constant presence in the kitchen.

First came the baking, which was very interesting. This was supervised by my mother. I particularly liked the moment when my mother covered the *challah* dough and, tearing off a piece, made a *brachah*, formed a ball and threw it into the big, Russian-style oven onto the still-burning logs. I climbed on a chair to look at the ball of dough sizzling in the fire, burning and finally turning black as coal. When the oven was heated enough and the *challos* were put in the forms, my mother let me have a piece of dough, and I made my own little *challah*. Sorel watched them so they wouldn't burn, and she was no less delighted than I was. I squealed with joy when she took them out, puffed and golden brown.

The day went by, many dishes were prepared, but still no sign of *kreplach*. After supper, Sorel stole a moment when no one was nearby and told me that she'd make the *kreplach* later. I could go to sleep, and when she was ready to start,

she'd wake me up. She kept her word. At midnight, she came quietly into my room. I wasn't sleeping anyway; the excitement of the adventure had kept me awake.

"Don't make a sound," she warned me. "Don't talk, just sit quietly."

I saw her kneading and rolling the dough, cutting it in squares, putting a teaspoon of prepared ground meat on each square, folding the squares and, dipping her fingers in water, pressing the edges tightly to form a triangle.

Forgetting all precautions, excited at finding out the secret, I cried out, "Let me make one. I know how!"

"Sh, sh, sh! I told you to be quiet!"

But the noise had already awakened my mother, and she came into the kitchen, eyes squinting, totally speechless. I jumped up from the chair, ran to my mother, put my arms around her knees and looked up.

"It's not Sorel's fault," I pleaded. "I wanted to see how she makes it, and she promised to show me."

My mother led me to my room and ordered me right into bed. Concerned that Sorel not be scolded, I listened to my mother's footsteps. I wasn't relieved until I heard her closing her bedroom door.

The spinning dial of my memories now focused on my mother, my wise and sensitive mother. How subtly yet firmly she had directed my formative years!

When I was six or seven years old, the branch of philosophy, so eminent now, called psychology, was barely emerging from its cradle. My mother, though well-read and learned, hadn't applied it in my upbringing. She had her own methods and rules. Robust and active as I was, and not overly responsive to Aunt Sarah's efforts to discipline and educate me, my

mother detected in me a measure of empathy and sensitivity to other people's pain.

In my early childhood, my mother never used direct admonition or preaching when she wanted to teach me something. She would just tell or read to me stories with a moral which could achieve the desired effect. This was one of my mother's ways of instilling in me belief and moral values.

One Friday evening, when I was about six years old, I started to cry at the memory of a poem my mother had read to me a day before. I recall the poem to this very day.

It wasn't in a children's story book, rather she had read to me from a thick volume of neatly handwritten papers bound in hard cover. The poems were in Russian. My mother chose one particular poem for its clear meaning and message. She read it to me a few times without explanations, letting it sink in and allowing me to draw my own conclusions.

Until then, I had assumed that all Jews led similar lives to the one I observed in my home. But the poem revealed something entirely new to me. It was about a *frum* Jewish couple with an only daughter. She was the apple of their eye. In time, the daughter married, moved to a faraway place and became very rich. The parents' thoughts and longing for her were always in their minds and hearts.

Years passed before they finally made the long trip to see their daughter. When they arrived, they couldn't believe their eyes. She lived in a palace with mirrored walls, glittering furniture and beautiful objects, the likes of which they had never known existed.

To honor her parents' arrival, the daughter had prepared a welcoming party to which she invited the closest of her circle of friends. The table was ablaze with silver and crystal. Uniformed butlers and servants glided by quietly on antique

rugs, carrying trays with elaborate dishes. The parents were overwhelmed with happiness and pride. Their initial discomfort at seeing their son-in-law's uncovered head gave way to total shock when they were asked by the butler if they preferred roast pork in cream sauce or wine sauce. The mother fainted and was carried to her room. The father, desperate and totally broken, remained at her side. Without even unpacking their things, they departed the same day.

Their world had collapsed. After that, the sun never shone for them again.

When I started to grasp and understand the message of the poem, I threw my arms around my mother's neck. Bitterly crying and kissing her, I kept repeating, "Mama, Mama, I will never, never do such a thing to you and Papa."

I cried many times thereafter, visualizing the pain inflicted on her parents by the daughter's turning away from the Jewish religion and their way of life. The poem made a powerful impression on me.

Later, when I learned to read, I liked this poem more than any other in the book, although they were all of a deeply religious nature. When I was older, I inquired about the author of the poems, but my curiosity was never satisfied. Then the book disappeared.

Years later, while working in my father's office I found it in the vault together with bridal portraits of a beautiful young girl. At first, I thought it was my grandmother, but then I realized that it was her oldest daughter. The tragedy of her early passing at the age of twenty-one and my grandmother's illness which was the result of it, made it too painful for my father to leave around.

The poem was an allusion to the tremendous devastation the *Haskalah*, the Enlightenment, had wreaked among those

circles of Jews, who by reaching higher levels of financial and intellectual standing, abandoned religion and Jewishness.

Another thing I learned from the example set by both of my parents was the importance of acceptance of and acquiescence to the Divine Will. Whenever a prized or expensive item would break in our house, my father would always say "*Gam zu letovah*" with an expression of satisfaction on his face. My mother, though she cherished and took extreme care of all her possessions, would say the same.

Once, a bird flew into our dining room through an open window, and my mother, in an attempt to wave it back outside, swung her hand and inadvertently knocked over a beautiful vase, which fell to the floor and broke. "*Gam zu letovah*," my mother said.

My childish logic couldn't grasp it, although I understood the words. Always curious, I asked what these words meant.

"It might have been in exchange for something bad that could have happened to one of us," my mother said. "For instance, I myself could have fallen, *chalilah*, and hurt my leg or arm. Isn't it better that the vase broke instead? It is *hashgachah pratis*, divine providence, the way Hashem protects us from injury or pain. Everything that happens is ultimately for the good."

Sometime later, my father had to go to Warsaw on some very important business. It was a cold and stormy winter day. The night before, my father had ordered a sled to come pick him up early in the morning as the railroad station was at the other end of town. My father wore eyeglasses. Being always organized, he took an extra pair wherever he went. This time, it happened that he had forgotten to do so. On the way to the station, shielding his face from the strong wind, my father accidentally pushed his eyeglasses and they fell into the deep,

freshly fallen snow. My father's and the sled driver's efforts to find them were in vain. Without the glasses, he couldn't continue the trip and had to return home.

I can still see my father entering the house covered with snow, in his fur coat and Persian lamb, boat-shaped cap, squinting his eyes and smiling.

"Although my business in Warsaw was very important, my losing the glasses is *gam zu letovah*," he said.

A few hours later, terrible news reached our town. Due to the storm, the train to Warsaw had derailed, causing many casualties. It was then that I understood the meaning of *gam zu letovah*.

My memories now shifted to idyllic scenes of summer. As a child, until the age of twelve or thirteen, most of my summers were spent at home with my parents, though twice we all went to the country, once to Aunt Gittel's place in Novoyelnia and once together with my Grodno aunts to Pyshki. I liked the times when Aunt Mina would join us together with her little Yocheved. She was such a delightful child, who always insisted on sleeping in my room, and in the middle of the night, she would queitly sneak under my covers.

Aunt Gittel had a bungalow in Novoyelnia where she spent every summer with Sonia and Mendel, trying to put some weight on their bones with fresh air and sunshine. Of course, they had a wonderful time, but they always came back just as thin as they had left.

Once when I was about ten or eleven, my parents went to a resort, leaving me in Aunt Gittel's care. My stay there was heaven. Every bungalow teemed with children of all ages. At home, we lived in the factory compound, and all my school

friends lived a good walk away from me. Here, however, I had friends everywhere I turned. The family next to Aunt Gittel owned a croquet game. Only their older children, who were closer to Sonia's age, used to play, but they let Mendel and me join, too, which made me feel very privileged and grown-up.

The reel was winding and unwinding, bringing pictures and memories back and forth in time, a kaleidoscope of a life lived eons ago, condensed into a pattern of invisible traces somewhere in the brain called memory. On its screen, flashes of long-forgotten scenes appeared again, so live and clear that they seemed to be taking place all over again.

CHAPTER 32

Glimpses from the Past

THE SPINNING DIAL OF MY MEMORIES NOW SETTLED ON Grodno. Every *Rosh Chodesh*, my father, Uncle Yaakov and Uncle Shmuel from Suvalki visited their parents in Grodno. The closeness and devotion of the brothers and sisters to their parents and to each other was unmatched. Before I started school, my father often took me along on these visits, but my uncles seldom brought their children. My grandmother was ill, and they didn't want to disturb her with too much noise and commotion. For me, those were the most cherished days I can remember. We left our bags in Aunt Julia's or Aunt Tania's apartment, which was nearby, situated on a square block of park-like grounds which had been my grandfather's parents' property.

I remember the excitement I felt before entering my

grandparents' house. I also remember the instructions Aunt Julia used to give me. Don't make any noise, don't run around and don't touch anything. Even my father and uncles, who had grown up in this house, would enter it with respect. A live-in, middle-aged couple with two teenage children took care of the household and all my grandparents' needs.

I remembered the big, square foyer and the very long, narrow dining room. The drapes were always drawn, which made the half-lit room gloomy. In the foyer were several doors, but as I was told not to roam, I never saw what was behind them. I knew that one door led to my grandfather's room, because when we entered he used to come out and greet his sons with a handshake. This was one of the rare occasions when he smiled. He also smiled at me and called me "little kitten." He took my father and uncles to his room, but I never went there. Instead, I was led through the long dining room to an even darker salon, and from there through another foyer to my grandmother's room.

It was like the bright sun suddenly appearing among dark clouds. I don't remember how the dining room and living room were furnished, but I recall every detail of my grandmother's room. It was an echo of the grandeur of her younger years. The whole house was still furnished with the luxury her parents had provided for her when she married, lacking only the things she had given to her children.

But it wasn't the furnishings that made the room bright; it was my grandmother herself. Only in her room was the regality of her presence felt, because she herself was there. Each time I saw her, I thought this must be what an angel looks like. She was very weak. I never saw her walk or even stand. In the short time I was allowed to spend with her, she always sat on a high-backed wing chair, upholstered in petit

point with a matching stool under her feet. On a small, beautifully carved table nearby was a *siddur* with a frayed cover, testimony to frequent use. In a corner was a four-poster brass bed, each post so thick and elaborate it could stand as a decoration by itself. The bed was unmade, because a few times a day she was carried from the chair to the bed for a rest. On the floor was a worn but still beautiful antique rug, and against one wall was a big bureau with many delicate objects on it which, remembering Aunt Julia's warnings, I never dared to touch.

My grandmother was petite and delicate, with a sweet, ethereal smile which never left her face. When I entered her room I didn't run, although I wanted to, but slowly walked to her chair, put my head on her lap and kissed her hand. I felt her trembling hand caress my hair. Had I been allowed, I could have remained for hours just standing near her. My grandmother also called me "little kitten."

After spending some time with my grandfather, my father and the uncles would come to see their mother. Though there were several chairs in the room, they never sat down. They would stand in a semicircle in front of her chair and bend to hear her words spoken in a low, soft voice. The reverence, respect and love they had for her filled the room with sunshine.

Her children admired her greatly for her willingness to forego the trappings of high society she had known in her parents' home in order to have a husband who was a *talmid chacham*, dedicated entirely to Torah. Having been raised as an only child, surrounded by extreme luxury, living on a silver cloud, she raised her children in a strict and decisive manner, imbuing them with the highest values and ethics of *Yiddishkeit*, with *midos tovos* and adherence to *mitzvos*.

She bore nine children. Three passed away in infancy. Her oldest daughter died during childbirth at the age of twenty-one. The tragedy broke my grandmother's heart. Her health started to fail and brought her to the condition in which I saw her, sitting in her beloved chair. Of course, at that time I didn't know all of this. Years later, Aunt Julia told me the story of my grandmother's life.

Meanwhile, each visit to Grodno was a holiday. When she was weaker, my father and uncles would carefully keep their visits to their mother short, only a few minutes, so as not to strain her. But when she felt a little stronger, my grandfather would join them, and then they would spend a longer time together, reminiscing about their grandfathers' and great-grandfathers' greatness in Torah learning and good deeds.

My grandmother, always smiling, would remark, "My children, it is clear that you can be proud of your grandfathers, but my wish is that, by your righteous life and good deeds, your grandfathers should be proud of you."

"Julia, can you show me the album with Grandmother's pictures?" It was a long overdue promise. I called all my aunts and uncles by first name only. The only exceptions were *Tiotia* (Aunt in Russian) Gittel and *Diadia* (Uncle) Yaakov. Aunt Gittel was always *Tiotia* to me, even in my letters to her from Siberia.

Julia, the serious, practical, logical, smart, strong-minded "man with two heads," as she was called by the family, was extremely sensitive and sentimental about everything that concerned my grandmother and her family. Her younger sister Toby Esther, whom we called Tania, was a complete contrast to her in looks and disposition. Soft-spoken and quiet, she was more concerned with the present than with the

past. She wasn't interested in the albums. From all her mother's treasures, she chose the collection of knick-knacks. Every room in her apartment contained little corner shelves, display cabinets and vitrines filled with carved ivory, mother-of-pearl, amber and rare porcelain. She also had the paintings that had first adorned my grandmother's room. Her apartment looked like a small museum.

Aunt Julia had no interest in decoration. Her seven-room apartment, filled with big, heavy furniture, had a formal, masculine atmosphere. She did have one decorative item from her mother–a corner etagere of rare, intricate, filigree-like work in solid silver. On the top shelf stood the *Shabbos* candelabra; the three lower shelves were empty. It was beautiful on its own, without anything obstructing the lacy design.

I was about six years old the first time Aunt Julia took the two heavy, gold-embossed, leather-bound albums out of her bedroom closet and put them on her dining room table; except for Aunt Julia, nobody on either side of the family was a photograph enthusiast, so she had a monopoly. It was the first time I saw pictures of my grandmother as a young girl. Her photograph was inserted on the first page of the album.

The impression it made on me then, though I was unaware of it at the time, revealed itself decades later in two things that even today make me sad–the sight of wilted flowers and the sight of photographs of people when they were young and then of the same people fifty years later.

I had just come from my grandmother's house. She was sweet and smiling as always. Her hands shook, her face had deep wrinkles, and she was dependent on someone's help to put her to bed or in the chair. This was my grandmother as I knew and loved her. But now I was looking at the picture in

the album of a stunningly beautiful young girl, a diamond tiara supporting a high pompadour which fell in long banana curls to her shoulders and back. Under her high ruffled collar she wore a diamond necklace, wide as a bib. She stood full height, with one hand resting on the back of a chair. A ring with a huge stone seemed to cover half of her small hand.

"This is a picture of your grandmother when she became engaged to your grandfather," Julia told me.

I envisioned my grandfather in his deep carpet slippers, in his dark brown *chalat* (robe) tied with a belt, which emphasized his bent back; I saw his serious face, his sharp look.

"Your grandfather was also young, only one year older than Grandmother." Aunt Julia, like her father, could answer questions before they were asked.

"Is there a picture of Zeide like this?"

"No. Your grandfather never let himself be photographed," Julia told me. "He was against photographs."

"I want to see more pictures of Grandmother," I declared.

"After she married, there were no more pictures. This album contains photographs of your grandmother's family, and also many of her as a child and growing up, but we'll look at them another time." She saw how shaken I was, and decided I was too young to grasp the reality of life, that a beautiful young girl can turn into a sick, wrinkled and helpless old woman.

Likewise, my Lida Zeide had no photographs of himself, except a few taken in his later years, on his obligatory Polish passports. My mother and father shared the same indifference to taking pictures. There were no photographs of me until the age of eight. Then one day, my mother told me to dress up nicely, and we went to Mr. Glauberman's, the best

photo studio in town. I was very excited looking at myself in my white velvet dress, hair parted in the middle with two long dark braids reaching almost to my knees. Since I had started school, my father seldom took me on the monthly visits to Grodno, and my grandmother had asked for a picture.

The last time I saw her, she wasn't sitting in her chair, she was in bed. She always gave me little presents from her chest, treasures such as a carved ivory fan in a silver frame or a miniature amber inkwell in the form of a carved flower. I treasured them all, but the one dearest to me was the little silver change purse which she gave me when I saw her for the last time. It was in her bureau drawer, and she told me to take it out. It was the same little purse that, years later, lay together with all our other silver items, mostly presents to my parents from my grandparents, on the floor of the N.K.V.D. office in Lida.

The same angelic smile my grandmother always wore didn't leave her face at the moment of her death. All her children were at her bedside. Her last words were, "Do not cry. I am dying the happiest mother in the world, knowing that I'm leaving children such as you."

After my grandmother passed away, my father and uncles continued the monthly visits. When they coincided with a day off from school, I would go along, but it was not the same. The house seemed even darker and sadder. It was probably so for my grandfather, as well. From then on, I don't remember him ever smiling. He seldom left the house, immersing himself totally in learning Torah, which he had been doing all his life anyway. Among the visitors, besides the family, was the famous *gaon* and *rosh yeshivah* Rabbi Shimon Shkop, who until the end of Grandfather's life used to come every *Shabbos* afternoon to discuss Torah matters.

A few years passed, and one cold February evening, Uncle Asher, Julia's husband, phoned us. Early the next morning, my father and Uncle Yaakov took their *talleisim* and *tefillin* and went to Grodno. My grandfather had passed away.

A year later, my father came home from the office carrying a flat, wrapped package. It contained my grandmother's picture, a copy of the one I had seen on the first page Aunt Julia's album.

"I have to go to Warsaw tomorrow, and I want to give it to a good photographer to make five enlargements, one for each of her children," my father said. My father also arranged to have all of them framed.

When the picture arrived, a huge portrait in a wide, gilded frame, it was hung above the piano, in the best view from the entrance.

"Why did you hang up a portrait of a princess?" one of my father's acquaintances asked on a visit to us.

"She was more than a princess," my father replied. "She was my mother."

"Why did you hang up a portrait of a queen?" asked my friends when they first saw it.

"She was more than a queen," I replied. "She was my grandmother."

These were the same questions I had wanted to ask Aunt Julia, leafing through the albums, when she finally showed them to me nine or ten years later, when I was in my middle teens. Aunt Julia was the unofficial registrar of my grandmother's family. She knew the names and connections of all the aunts, cousins, uncles and grandparents, and the in-laws of every one of them. They were all in the albums. There was such a display of riches and elegance, it could have been mistaken for royalty.

"This is my grandmother, your great-grandmother," Aunt Julia said, when I was looking at a picture of a *grande dame* in a stunning outfit—the hat, the ostrich boa, the pearls, the dignified bearing. "And this is my grandfather," Aunt Julia continued, when I turned a page and saw a gentleman in a top hat, goatee and coattails, holding a slim, elegant cane.

"This is . . . and this is . . ." I heard names, famous names, the richest and most distinguished Jewish families in Czarist Russia. "This one is your grandmother's first cousin, who married Goetz's son from Kiev, who was the brother-in-law of Wysotzky from the tea empire . . . and this one is your grandmother's aunt, who married a Brodsky from the sugar empire . . ."

My desire to know everything was insatiable, and Julia was glad to have someone with whom to share her enthusiasm and pride. Neither her own daughters nor any of the other cousins showed any interest in our family history.

"This is your grandmother with her governess on a ride to the park," she said.

I saw a pretty, blond girl of about eight or nine, in a bonnet with a big bow under her chin, gloved hands, flared dress, sitting in an open carriage next to a young woman also in a bonnet. The coachman in his ornate livery could have been mistaken for an emperor.

"Do you see the handles on both sides?" Aunt Julia continued. "They are to grasp when you step up or descend from the carriage. They and the corner ornaments were all solid silver." She quickly turned a few pages. "Oh! Here is another carriage, a closed one for rainy days or for privacy. Here you can see the silver ornaments clearly. The elaborate harnesses for the horses were also silver."

There were pictures of people in carriages, in sleds,

wrapped in sables and foxes, people in shimmering satins and taffetas with open, frilly parasols, with closed parasols, strolling on wide promenades, in parks and in the most fashionable European resorts.

I finished the last page and turned back to the first—my grandmother as a bride. It was an enigma to me. I sat silent. There was something I wanted to ask, and I was thinking of a way to phrase my question. I knew that revolutions dethroned kings, made beggars of barons, uprooted venerable, seemingly indestructible establishments. But my grandmother married about half a century before the Bolshevik Revolution, when her family was at the height of its prosperity and glamour. My grandfather's father was also a rich man, highly respected and a big *talmid chacham*, from a different financial and social stratum.

Again, Aunt Julia anticipated my question. I always admired her lightning-quick mind, her razor-sharp logic and keen intuition. In her looks, she was like her mother, only taller; in her nature, she was like her father. More than their siblings, Julia and my father had inherited my grandfather's quick mind and sharp logic. And my grandmother's compassion, compatibility, subtlety, goodness and determination had found a faithful copy in my father, as well.

"Your grandmother's father was a very wise man." Aunt Julia put both albums in one corner of the couch where we were sitting, folded her arms, leaned back, and began to explain. "He came from a long line of esteemed rabbis and Talmudic scholars. In his youth, he studied Torah. When he married the youngest daughter of a Vitebsk millionaire named David Kerlin, he turned his brilliant mind to commerce, rather than continuing on his forebears' path. His father-in-law, himself a descendant of rabbis and *talmidei*

chachamim, maintained a mansion of forty rooms. Therefore, he decided to keep his two youngest daughters near him. When they married, he gave each of them a wing in his mansion and took both sons-in-law into his business as partners.

"Your great-grandfather's brilliance soon made its mark in the business. It grew from year to year, and the millions multiplied. Your grandmother, as you know, was an only child, and so was her aunt's daughter, who was a year or two older than she. Her cousin also married at seventeen, and the young couple settled in Vitebsk. To his horror, your great-grandfather soon found out that his brother-in-law's daughter and son-in-law had started following their Kiev and Moscow cousins' lifestyle. His mind was made up. He would look for a *shidduch* for his only daughter only from among those circles still strongly adhering to Torah. He'd look for a young man who would not be smitten by luxury and gold and the evil it hides if not utilized properly.

"Far from Vitebsk, in the town of Grodno, just where we are sitting now, lived a man by the name of Reb Mendel Shapiro," Aunt Julia continued. "He was a scion of a long line of *geonim* and Torah giants. He himself was also a *gaon* in Torah learning, who coincidentally had a business similar to one of the many owned by his future *mechutan* in Vitebsk. He himself wasn't active in the business. It was run entirely by his extremely clever and capable wife, your grandfather's mother, my grandmother. The business consisted of supplies for the government and was considered a very prestigious one. Only men of notable stature were given licenses for it.

"Reb Mendel Shapiro, besides his considerable, though not excessive, wealth, had a much greater treasure. He had three sons. The most promising, brilliant and devoted to the

study of Torah was Aryeh Leib the oldest. He was named after his great-grandfather Reb Aryeh Leib, the Vilna Gaon's *chavrusa*. At the age of seventeen, he was widely known as an *illuy*. Your grandmother's father chose him as his son-in-law. Both fathers agreed that it would be wiser for the young couple to settle in Grodno, farther from the influence of the 'enlightened' cousins."

I listened, enchanted. The fact that my grandparents were both no longer living didn't make it any less interesting. I noticed that when my cousins Luba and Rachela, Julia's daughters, came home and heard what their mother was talking about, they went quickly to their rooms. They probably knew every word by heart.

Aunt Julia couldn't resurrect her parents, but she kept their past and their spirit alive.

Throughout most of my teenage years, on my visits to Grodno, my most frequent topic of conversation with Julia was about Grandmother and Grandfather. Little by little, a story of failure and heroism started to unfold. My grandmother's father, after the death of his father-in-law Reb David Kerlin, was the main pillar of the enormous business, but unfortunately, his health started to fail and he passed away in his middle age. Shortly afterward, my grandmother's mother also passed away. My grandmother became the heiress to a huge fortune. Her late father's partner, his brother-in-law, wasn't as gifted as her father had been. His son-in-law and his only daughter were spending fortunes on luxurious travels and balls and were leaning away from the traditional way of Jewish life. He suggested to his niece, my grandmother, that my grandfather, who was known for his brilliant mind, join in the operation of the business. My grandfather didn't aspire to this; his only desire was to learn

Torah, and my grandmother fully shared his view. For several years, her share of the profits would arrive unfailingly. Then her uncle became more insistent that her husband participate in the business, hoping that this participation would help him restrain his own children from the extravagant spending which could eventually bring them all to ruin. This meant that my grandparents would have to move to Vitebsk.

After many exchanges, my grandfather finally agreed to take over the part with which he was somewhat familiar from his parents' business, but only on the condition that they remain in Grodno. In Torah learning he was brilliant and sharp, but in business one failure followed another. At the same rate that his uncle's children were spending millions, he was losing them. It came to a point, Aunt Julia told me with a deep sigh, that my grandmother had to sell her beautiful jewelry and some of their antiques, which brought in only a quarter of a million *rubles*, in order to prevent a bankruptcy in the branch in which my grandfather was active. The Vitebsk branches were also hit with huge losses, and finally, it was decided to salvage what was left and liquidate the business.

When my grandmother received her share from the liquidation, Aunt Julia assured me, it was still enough to last for a lifetime. It contained a sizeable portfolio of shares in a few very successful enterprises. My grandfather went back to the only thing he wanted to do—learn Torah. My grandmother, busy with raising her children, was satisfied with her lot. The income from the shares provided enough for a comfortable life. They had a housekeeper, a maid and a summer home in Pyshki, a country place near Grodno.

Of course, it was a far cry from the luxury my grandmother had known before she had married, but Julia always

remembered her being content with whatever she had. She had no complaints. But my grandfather was pained by his own failure. That his wife had had to sell her jewelry, which he knew he would never be able to replace, caused him anguish and pain. His pride was deeply hurt. Her assurances that she was happy with the way they lived didn't console him. He felt he had failed to provide for her on the level to which she had been accustomed.

One day, in the middle of another installment of my grandparents' story, Julia jumped up from the couch where we were sitting.

"I want to show you something," she told me, her eyes wide, anticipating my surprise and delight.

Realizing suddenly that she had been leaving out, all these years, an important detail from my grandmother's past, she practically ran to her bedroom. She came back carrying two garments on hangers, wrapped in sheets and smelling of naphthalene.

Aunt Julia unwrapped one of the garments and held it up high for me to see. It was floor length, made from cream-colored satin, simply cut and covered all over with tiny pearls.

"This is your grandmother's wedding gown," Aunt Julia told me. Over it came a three-quarter length coat, not embroidered, but with a foot-wide border of sable at the hem and cuffs.

"Did you wear it to your wedding?" I asked absentmindedly.

"Don't you see that it is too small? Your grandmother was petite, and I am tall. I did have something of your grandmother's on my wedding gown–the beautiful, lacy jabot on my pale blue dress, and the brooch. You saw the picture," Aunt Julia added, a little offended that I hadn't

remembered her picture as a bride.

The other garment was a long, royal blue, crushed velvet cape with a hood, all lined in ermine. After so many years the ermine was yellowed, but not one little black tail at the end of each skin was missing.

"But velvet capes lined with ermine are worn only by kings and queens at their coronations," I said, unable to contain my wonder. "At least, red ones . . ."

"That's why your grandmother had it in blue, so as not to appear too conspicuous."

Julia fastened a few packets of fresh naphthalene inside each garment, wrapped them up in the sheets and carried them back to her bedroom before continuing her stories about the past.

When my grandfather's two older sons were nearing marriageable age, Julia told me when she returned, he decided to establish a steady source of income for them. His own experience of depending on his in-laws' support taught him how unreliable it was, and his youngest brother's fate was a close copy of his own.

Golda Leah, wife of my grandfather's youngest brother Binyamin, was also from a very rich home. Their only child passed away in infancy, but Golda Leah was a very strong person in character and health and devoted all her life to charity and *chessed.* In her eighties, she was able to run up a flight of steps like a ten-year-old girl, and many individuals benefitted from her energy. Her husband Binyamin was like her in character and energy, but he applied his strength only to Torah. Like my grandfather, he had to depend on his wife's inheritance for their support, but though Golda Leah's fortune might have been even larger than my grandmother's,

it was all lost in the First World War, and my grandfather and his second brother Tuvia became their main source of support.

Tuvia was the only one endowed by Hashem with a brilliant mind for both learning and business. He also married into a very rich and prominent family in Kovno, where he first learned Torah and then joined his father-in-law's firm, contributing to its further success. It was to him that my grandfather turned for advice on setting his sons up in business, and Uncle Tuvia suggested building a factory for agricultural machines.

My grandfather found the town of Lida to be the most suitable location. Uncle Binyamin and Golda Leah offered to move to Lida to take care of their two young, unmarried nephews, my father and Uncle Yaakov. Uncle Tuvia sent some of his experienced workers and one of his best managers from a similar factory of his own to organize the business and initiate his young, inexperienced nephews into the procedures and details of operating the factory. In 1899, the factory started to operate. It was a success from the start.

A few years later, Uncle Yaakov married Reb Yudel Emes's oldest daughter Gittel. Reb Yudel Emes was the greatest *talmid chacham* in Lida, and until his death at eighty-six, there was no one to match him. He was also a man of considerable wealth. Five years after Uncle Yaakov married, my father married Reb Yudel Emes's younger daughter Rivka. Both dowries helped expand the business, but all was soon overwhelmed by the First World War. At that time, both my grandfathers lost their entire fortunes. After the war, the factory recovered and began to grow in size, production and turnover.

My father's youngest brother Shmuel didn't join his

brothers. Instead, he married the youngest daughter of a wealthy merchant in Suvalki and took over his textile emporium. He was very successful, and in charity and *chessed*, he fully matched his Kovno uncle and Lida brothers.

Uncle Tuvia, who had left business for real estate, expanded his interests and became a multimillionaire, shuttling between holdings in Kovno, Berlin and Paris. Far from making the acquisition of riches his main interest, he used his fortune to help countless people in varied and innovative ways. With Uncle Tuvia providing the funds, Uncle Binyamin, who had moved back to Grodno after his nephews had married, set up an arrangement to provide for needy scholars. In those days, serious scholars depended on the support of their fathers-in-law. There were no alternatives for a man who wanted to continue learning Torah after he married. Uncle Tuvia and Uncle Binyamin undertook to support serious, needy scholars, giving them generous stipends and even providing dowries for their daughters.

With Uncle Tuvia's backing, Uncle Binyamin also provided refuge for young *chassidim*, escapees from Soviet Russia, finding temporary shelter for them in his home and in the homes of other families in Grodno, and eventually setting them up permanently in places safely across the border. Uncle Binyamin's wife Golda Leah also did her share, setting up a meal service in her own house, with a large kitchen and a few cooks, to prepare tens of meals daily for the lonely and sick of Grodno. The meals were sent, as often as not, without the recipients knowing their source.

Uncle Tuvia's philanthropies were not all big-name operations. The distinguished mention he was given for a modern old-age home he built was an exception, and most of his other projects of that sort were unknown. Even we in the

family heard of only one of his most generous works by accident, from an article in a Warsaw Jewish paper, *Moment*, describing the hundreds of houses he built for the poor Jews of Kovno.

Aunt Julia never ran out of material; she was the family chronicler. Uncle Yaakov, always absentminded, preoccupied with his meetings, his mind rushing in many directions, didn't have the time or patience to dwell on things decades past. Likewise, Uncle Shmuel, on his short visits to us, spoke about his business, current events or, more often, a *Gemara pilpul*. My father was the only other person in the family who had any sentiment for the past, but he was interested more in the spiritual side than in the distinguished connections and the stories of wealth. I liked my father's stories even more than Aunt Julia's.

"Someone once mentioned the *arba chayos*. Who were they?" I asked my father one Friday evening after supper. "I asked Aunt Julia, and she told me to ask you."

The *orchim* had already left with a hearty "*a guten Shabbos*," and Zeide was dozing at the head of the table next to my father, his head almost hidden in his milky white beard. How I loved those long, winter Friday evenings! The table was cleared, the candles in the big candelabra and in the gleaming candlesticks were still flickering, hanging onto their last breath, not wanting to depart from the holy, peaceful atmosphere of *Shabbos*.

"The *arba chayos,* the four creatures," my father said, "were four brothers named Reb Velvele, Reb Berele, Reb Hershele and Reb Leibele, which mean little wolf, little bear, little deer and little lion. Reb Leibele, whose name was Aryeh Leib, was Zeide's great-grandfather; Zeide is named after him. At one time, Reb Aryeh Leib was the Vilna Gaon's

chavrusa in learning. The four brothers lived in the town of Ciechanovce, near Bialystok. They were counted among the great Torah giants of their time."

"Tell me, Papa, tell me more." I never tired of the stories.

"All right," my father said. "It is a story about a marriage. In those days, marriages were arranged by the parents of both parties without the children seeing each other until a few minutes before the *chuppah*. In this case, both *mechutanim* lived in towns a great distance from each other. It was long before the railroad was invented and people used to travel by horse-drawn wagon. Large, closed carriages were used for longer distances, and travelling took days, with stops at inns for rests.

"To make the tiring trip more convenient for both families, the *mechutanim* decided that the wedding would take place in a town halfway between both sides. The *chassan* had a large family, including older and younger siblings. He was fourteen years old, as was his *kallah*. The older children were, of course, married, and as there was no room in the carriage for all of them, the parents decided to leave the younger children home. Boxes with wedding attire were loaded as well as a supply of non-perishable food. Finally, they were all settled and off they went.

"After a long ride, they stopped at an inn for the night. When they all alighted and the boxes were carried inside, they had an unexpected surprise. The *chassan's* younger brother, just past his *bar-mitzvah*, who was supposedly left behind, had hidden himself in a corner of the carriage behind some boxes and, in the hustle of departure, had remained unnoticed. As they were already far from home, there was no choice but to continue. Since the boy wasn't supposed to attend the wedding, no new attire had been made for him. So,

to his parents' great displeasure, he would have to attend the wedding in his weekday clothes, which looked shabbier than ever, having been worn while he was hiding under the boxes.

"Finally, they reached their destination, as had the bride's family. The day of the wedding arrived. All preparations had been arranged, the tables set with festive dishes, the guests glowing with pride and anticipation, and the *lechaims* from the *chassan's* room echoed throughout the house. The *chuppah* was set up and the *kallah* was waiting for the *chassan's* glance. Then something terrible happened.

"After a fleeting glimpse at her, the *chassan* announced flatly, 'I don't want the *kallah*.'

"An electric shock went through the room—then a paralyzing silence. He was an *illuy*, a promising *gaon*. How could he so painfully hurt and embarrass the *kallah*?

"Both sets of parents stood by helpless and totally broken. Then a thought flashed through the father's mind. He called in his younger son, in his shabby wrinkled clothes, brought him in front of the *kallah* and asked, 'Do you want to take this girl for a wife?'

" 'Yes,' he answered.

"The *arbah chayos* were their grandsons. After a long and happy life, they both passed away on a Friday afternoon a half-hour apart. He was ninety-six, she ninety-seven.

"Can there be a better example of *hashgachah pratis*?" my father asked, after he finished the story.

"Tell me, Papa, after whom are you named?" I had never heard of anyone named Eber besides my father.

"He was a great *tzaddik*, a great-uncle of your grandmother's called Reb Eber Bychover. My middle name is Avraham, after another great-uncle."

"Tell me, Papa. Tell me more."

"Too much at one time isn't good for you. You'll get gray hair if you try to know too much."

Zeide had had his nap and was now learning by heart, ignoring our conversation. On Friday nights, he always learned by heart, with his eyes closed. For some reason, he wanted to learn only by daylight or candlelight. He believed that all modern inventions were a curse.

On a different occasion, my father told me about my mother's Uncle Lipe, my grandmother's brother. Everyone in the family called him Uncle Lipe, even his grandchildren. When I knew him, he was short and frail and in his nineties. I remember once when he came to us to visit his brother-in-law, my grandfather. He mixed his tea for a long time, until the last grain of sugar dissolved, but he didn't drink it until it was almost cold. He spoke so quietly that only the movement of his lips was visible, and his words were sparse, as if he were weighing them and considering if he should say them or not. I also remember my father bending before him, in respect for his age and *tzidkus*, to hear his few words.

Uncle Lipe didn't have *mazal* in his life. One tragedy followed another. His first wife had passed away, leaving him with six young daughters. His second wife had passed away even younger, leaving him two small sons. His third wife, widowed from her first husband and left with three children, passed away in childbirth with their second child, a girl. Never complaining, he accepted all the tragedies as if he deserved them. If it was Hashem's will, that was the way it had to be.

His older daughters took care of the smaller children and also attended to the family's leather goods business. Uncle Lipe himself seemed to live in another world. His world was

the *beis midrash* and the *Gemara*. With all his being, he devoted himself to *mitzvos* and *avodas Hashem*. He was pure and innocent as a child. A true *tzaddik*, my father would say. My mother and aunts used to tell me about the way he ran his business in his younger years.

He was never rich. Riches would have been an unnecessary burden for him. It was said about him that he couldn't distinguish between a *kopek* and a *ruble*. His first wife, a smart and capable woman, respected him and wanted him to feel that he was the boss. She, therefore, let him go to Vilna to buy the merchandise from the manufacturer. After five days, he would return empty-handed with a little less money in his pocket due to expenses and *tzeddakah*.

Time after time, the same story repeated itself. He used to take the early train to Vilna to be in time for a *minyan* for *Shacharis*. But which Jew runs right after the morning prayers to buy merchandise? You have to learn a *blatt Gemara* first. Then it was time to go to the *achsania*, the boarding house, to eat breakfast. After breakfast, which was already lunchtime, he always learned for an hour or two, so why should Vilna be different? After learning, it was time for *Minchah*. Between *Minchah* and *Maariv* he also learned. What sense would it make to rush to the manufacturer now? Which decent, self-respecting Jew would do such a thing? After *Maariv*, it was already late. The place was probably closed by now. He'd better go to the *achsania*, eat supper, learn a few hours, and tomorrow, *b'ezras Hashem* he'd attend to his business. But tomorrow was no different.

Upon his return, his wife would take the same early train and return in the afternoon, all purchases made.

Sitting in the barn in Siberia, in the company of the cow

and the chickens, I was comforted by the memories of the stories I had heard from Aunt Julia and from my father. But at the same time, I felt a sharp stab of pain at the thought that these glimpses from the past represented a world that no longer existed, a world shattered beyond repair.

CHAPTER 33

The Power of Words

THE REMINISCENCES WERE FLASHING, OVERLAPPING each other, and a detail from a few years later appeared on the screen. I was grown then and refurnishing my room shortly before the war. I had ordered a bureau and a wardrobe closet from a Polish master craftsman to my own specifications and design. The wood I chose was the most expensive, blond wood with natural black specks. The carpenter was a perfectionist and it took a long time, but when he delivered it, it was even better than I had expected. Admiring the pieces standing in my room, I asked the carpenter what I should pay him. He mentioned an exorbitant price.

"*Tak drogo*?" I exclaimed, caught by surprise. "So expensive?"

My father heard me from the other room. He called me over and said, "Did you ask him what it would cost when you ordered it?"

"No, I didn't," I confessed.

"Then how can you know it's too much? If you don't agree on a price before ordering, you have to pay whatever he asks. Only he himself can appraise his work."

It was a lesson for me in justice and in dealing with people for all the years to come.

My father was also very careful not to throw words around. He didn't make empty promises. Maybe and probably didn't exist in his vocabulary. "I will try," he would say. And in such cases he did try, and very hard. "I will do my best," he would sometimes say, but not as empty words spoken now, forgotten later. He did his best until he got results.

He was extremely careful not to hurt anyone's feelings, but on the other hand he was not generous with undeserved compliments. *Chanifah*, flattery, was one of his taboos. The same caution he used in performing business transactions, he applied in his speech. To mislead someone with a word or to evoke someone's trust by deception was *gneivah*, theft. Guarding his speech was one of his strongest principles. The following event illustrates the extent to which he practiced it.

My hearty appetite was cute when I was small, but in my teens it caused me anguish. Diets were short-lived. During the year, I exercised irregularly. Each summer, my parents and I would go to a resort place, my mother for mineral baths, my father for a vacation, and I for exercise programs of all kinds. The resort I liked most were the cascades in Druskieniki, the only resort place in eastern Poland. The resort was between Bialystok and Grodno in a scenic location along the Niemen

River, which formed a natural border between Poland and Lithuania.

The cascades were man-made waterfalls in an enclosed section of the Niemen River. The pools were built with walls for privacy and with railings along the sides for safety. The dams were of different heights and so was the strength of the falling water. There were separate hours for men and women, and attendants were always present to guard against accidents.

Fifteen minutes daily under a constant pounding of hundreds of cubic meters of water did take off a few kilos, which I compensated for, however, by a ravenous appetite.

In Krinitza and Truskavietz, resorts in southwestern Poland near the Carpathian mountains, there were enclosed solariums with swimming pools and all kinds of exercise equipment. It was an expensive program, paid for a month in advance and lasting four hours, five days a week. I was good at all the exercises except swimming. I could never learn to swim. But all that work was to no avail. After the summer was over and the home cooking was too tempting again, the traitorous pounds found their way back.

"Bicycle riding would be good exercise," someone suggested.

There were no stationary bicycles at that time, and obtaining a bicycle became an obsession.

"I'll buy you whatever you want, but not a bicycle," my father said after repeated pleas.

I had had a tricycle when I was six or seven years old, but at fifteen? Who ever heard of such a thing? I continued to plead.

"You know what," my father finally said, half-joking, "if you win the lottery, you can buy one yourself."

For years, my father and Uncle Yaakov had been buying lottery tickets, but they had never won. Julia's husband Asher, in Grodno, had a license to sell government lottery tickets—a big privilege—and he used to mail a few tickets to my father twice a year, when the drawings took place.

"Papa, is it a promise?" I asked.

"If you win," my father said, smiling.

Impatiently, I waited for the first day off from school and asked my parents if I could go to Grodno. I visited my relatives there often, so no objections were made. I took the early bus in order to be able to return the same day. In Grodno, I went straight to my Uncle Asher's office. He was surprised to see me and even more surprised when I told him I wanted to buy a lottery ticket.

"I sent your father the lottery tickets two months ago," he said.

"I want to buy one for myself," I declared. "But it has to be a secret."

My uncle laughed, took out a packet of tickets and said, "Pull one out."

I closed my eyes, fingered the tickets and, as if in a trance, tried to find the right one.

"What a long time it takes you to pick!" he exclaimed. "I sell ten thousand tickets each drawing; if they all picked like you it would take me ten years to sell them." He laughed at me as I hesitantly pulled one out. "Do you want a whole or a quarter?"

"How much is a whole?"

"Fifty *zlotys*."

"I'll take a quarter." I didn't want to press my luck. "But it's a secret."

"I can't promise to keep it a secret if you win," my uncle

answered, still laughing.

Whenever I remember my Grodno uncles, I always remember them laughing. Uncle Asher was a delightfully happy man, and when Aunt Tania's husband Uncle Moishe came for a visit, he made us laugh to tears. He was a jolly, happy-go-lucky person who thrived on practical jokes, sometimes, for example, sending my Uncle Yaakov a registered, express letter (which could only cause concern) containing only one word, "Smile!"

My business finished, I had just enough time to run to see my grandfather, my aunts and my great-aunt Golda Leah. She was the wife of my grandfather's youngest brother Binyamin. She had no children, and I was her beloved grandniece. I called her Golden Leah.

Back home, I had a late supper and did my homework. For the next few months, I followed my usual routine.

After dinner, my father always had a few glasses of tea. I was usually in my room at that time.

"Look, Eber," I heard Uncle Yaakov say one day. "I found this telegram from Asher in the office saying that one of our numbers won two thousand *zlotys*. I checked, but it's not one of our numbers. He probably made a mistake."

"It's mine! It must be mine! I won!" I jumped into the room, wild with excitement.

My parents and uncle looked at me. "How? When? When did you buy a ticket?"

"Papa, do you remember when I asked you for a bicycle, you said that if I'd win the lottery I could have one. The last time I went to Grodno, I bought a quarter."

It turned out that the whole ticket was worth two thousand, and that one of Uncle Asher's employees had written the wrong amount on the telegram.

"Yes," my father said after a long pause. "I do remember, and I will keep my word. It is not a coincidence. It is surely meant to teach us all a lesson about how careful we have to be with words and promises. A word, before you say it, is your slave. After you say it, you become its slave."

A few days later, a money order for four hundred *zlotys* arrived in my name. My quarter of a ticket had won five hundred, but twenty percent was deducted by the government for taxes and the agent's commission. I asked my father to exchange it for cash and to take off forty *zlotys* for *tzeddakah*, according to the laws of *maaser*.

With three hundred and sixty *zlotys* in my pocket, and my father's cautious and conditional approval, I went to Mr. Goldwasser's sports and bicycle store.

"I have three ladies' bicycles," he said. "Polish, Italian and British."

"Which is the best?" I asked.

"The British, but it is the most expensive. The Polish is two hundred *zlotys*, the Italian is two hundred and eighty, and the British is . . ." I held my breath as he paused dramatically, ". . . three hundred and sixty."

The bicycles hung on chains suspended from the ceiling, and with a long stick, he pointed to the special advantages of the British model over the other two.

"I'll take the British," I said.

He told his helper to take it down. It was really a beauty. The handles and frame were shiny nickel, the rear wheel was covered with a multicolored net, and on the center upright bar was a bell.

"I guarantee it is the best there is," he reassured me. "And any time you need adjustments or . . ." I gave him the money and didn't even hear the rest of his assurances.

It was dark when I brought it home, and a drizzle covered the shiny nickel with a net of tiny, pearly dots. Off the porch was a big, empty room with a roll-up roof used only once a year for a *sukkah*. I put the bicycle there.

I couldn't explain what it was. I had gotten what I wanted and in a most unusual way, but still I had an uneasy feeling. During supper, I couldn't hide my guilty look from my father. He was bound by his word, but in a way I had imposed it on him. The bicycle stayed in the *sukkah* for a few weeks until I was ready to start. I had to have a special dress made from material heavy enough not to flutter in the wind and long enough to cover my legs to the ankle. I chose a tan colored, denim-like material, took it to the dressmaker and told her what I wanted, not revealing its purpose.

"What will you do with such a dress?" she asked.

"Please make it just like that," I insisted.

But the dressmaker was not content to make it "just like that," and she did make it more attractive by adding brown leather buttons and a brown belt. When it was ready, I sewed a hook and eye at the hemline in front and in back to make it more secure.

The main conditions my father requested were that I never ride in the direction of town, and not at all on market days, and that I be very careful when crossing the railroad tracks.

The road to Vilna passed alongside our property. The traffic in those days was minimal. Twice a day, a bus to and from Vilna passed, aside from an occasional truck or a peasant's wagon. The road was smooth and even. On both sides, for about two kilometers, were rows of wooden houses set back from the road with front gardens, inhabited mostly by our workers and some poor Jewish families. I never

ventured further, but often, I went back and forth several times to the end of the houses.

The desired miracle didn't occur, but it was good and healthy exercise and it gave me a lot of pleasure. And there was rarely a ride on which I did not contemplate the importance and power of words.

My memory dial turned back, and I was five years old again.

"Mama, I want to *daven* like you do in a big *siddur* with many, many words," I said to my mother one morning.

She was sitting at the dining room table, eyes closed, swaying slightly back and forth, deeply engrossed in a *tefillah* which she recited by heart. When she finished, my mother looked at me with surprise and smiled. It was the first time in all of my five and a half years that I had expressed a wish to learn to pray.

By then I knew *Modeh Ani*, all the *berachos* on food, the first two *berachos* of *bentching* and the first *parshah* of *Krias Shema*, all by heart, but these were achieved with my mother's endless patience and effort.

"If you will sit still for ten minutes, we can start the *alef-beis* right after breakfast," my mother said.

After breakfast, I ran to the couch, snuggled comfortably in my beloved corner and looked on with enthusiasm as my mother opened the cover of the big *siddur*. On the first page were the mysterious letters of the *alef-beis*. It was so cozy to sit near my mother and repeat each letter again and again. She constantly moved her index finger back and forth to see if I remembered the *alef* after learning through *daled*. My mother was surprised that after thirty minutes I was still sitting quietly.

The following year, I was very proud to stand each morning near my mother and recite the *Shemoneh Esrei.* At the end, watching her closely, I tried to bow as she did, take the three steps backward, bow and kiss the *siddur.*

My mother, by nature, never taught me by lecturing or explaining why I had to do things. She let me learn for myself about social and economic differences among people and the importance of *tzeddakah* by giving me neatly wrapped packages to deliver to needy families.

As a very young child, when I had brought the *Shabbos* packages to the potter, I was sure they lived in their little house because they liked it. Most of my childhood friends were from comfortable, middle class families. The only poor people I encountered were those who came to our house asking for help or those I met in the street.

But when I was twelve or thirteen years old, my eyes opened, and I had a better understanding of what life was like for others. Once, my mother handed me a package and told me to take it to the people whose name and address were written on it. I found the place and entered a crowded and untidy room. A number of small children were sitting on the platform of a Russian-style oven without any shoes. I recognized the woman, because I had seen her at our house a few times. After that, the trips with the packages became a weekly routine.

Another place my mother sent me with packages was to a widow with an eighteen-year-old daughter. They were from another town and had no family in Lida. The girl did beautiful hand-embroidery, and her earnings were their only source of income. Then tragedy struck. The girl contracted tuberculosis and was unable to work. I saw the mother come to us a few times, a fine and gentle woman, always departing

with a sad smile. I knew my mother had helped her.

Every Thursday afternoon, regardless of the weather, I took a large bundle to their end of town, a poor neighborhood where they lived in a tiny, spotless attic. This went on for a long time. And then a miracle happened. The girl recovered completely and married a fine boy who was a good provider.

I realized that I had benefitted from delivering these packages as much as the recipients had, if not more. My mother could have given them money to buy whatever they needed, which would have been much simpler. But this was her way of teaching me about poverty and human suffering and, of course, about the importance of *tzeddakah*.

I learned another powerful lesson when I was ten, on one of Uncle Shmuel's visits. We were drinking tea after dinner, Russian style, and were engaged in lively conversation. Not wanting to be left out, I caught a moment of quiet and repeated something I had seen at a friend's house, where I had visited earlier.

My few words caused quite a stir at the table. My mother gave me a sharp look, Uncle Shmuel moved in his chair, raised the teaspoon he held in his hand and seemed ready to say something. But my father, his color rising, more agitated and angry than I had ever seen before or after, stood up and leaned over in my direction.

"Don't you know that *lashon hora* is one of the worst sins?" he asked in a strict voice. "Talking about what is happening in other people's houses, what other people eat or say or do is one of the worst kinds of *lashon hora*. It is even worse than a bullet. A bullet can only go so far. *Lashon hora* can kill a person thousands of miles away. I don't want to hear any talk

about anyone ever again."

My father sat down, and Uncle Shmuel's voice broke the silence. His question was directed at me.

"Tell me, what is the difference between a smart person and a stupid one?" As I remained silent, he gave the answer himself. "A smart person knows what he says, and a stupid one says what he knows."

I understood what he meant. Even after so many years, having lived through so many events, my uncle's words and my father's severe reprimand are still burned into my memory.

My mother exemplified these teachings. She hosted many meetings of the various charitable organizations in which she was active. When tea was served after finishing the business at hand, my mother gently reminded the ladies in attendance that any topic was welcome except talk about people and their doings.

I couldn't control my memory. Picture after picture raced through my mind. One moment I saw myself at the age of fifteen, then a clear image flashed of an event that had occurred when I was five or six. The scenes were constantly shifting back and forth. The passage of time lost its significance. I lived again on the other side of the rainbow. If only I were there, I thought. This is just a nightmare, a bad dream. Soon I'll wake up and be home again.

CHAPTER 34

Summer Breezes

NOT ONLY INDIVIDUALS FROM VARIOUS SOCIAL AND intellectual levels were attracted to my father, but children and toddlers, led by their natural instincts, were drawn to him like a magnet.

One summer, after a very hectic period, my father felt he needed a quiet place for a few weeks of rest. Novoyelnia, the resort where my Aunt Gittel had a bungalow, was just the place; it was only one hour from Lida, with huge pine forests and fresh, clean air. We rented half of a newly-built bungalow a short distance from the village. The bungalow had two apartments. The large porch, onto which the branches of the pine trees persistently encroached, had to be shared with the other family. We had decided on it late, and nothing else was available.

The day we arrived, the workers were still finishing the shutters. The fresh smell of wood and pine permeated the air. The day was sunny and warm. The other family was already there. They turned out to be a nice couple, a schoolteacher from a neighboring town with two small children, a boy of about four and a girl of about one-and-a-half. Each end of the porch had a built-in corner bench and a table. As soon as my father sat down on the bench, the boy ran to him and climbed on his lap. His little sister followed and struggled to get her share of my father's knee. From then on, it became an established routine. Even when the little girl was sitting with her mother, the minute she saw my father, she slipped away and ran to our side of the porch.

We brought along hammocks and fastened them to the trees right beside the house. The moment my father lay down in his, those two little children were on top of him, and, as if from nowhere other children appeared. Like flies attracted to a jar of honey, the hammock became a beehive. They found out something else—his pockets were full of candies. Whenever there were children around, he had candies waiting for them. He let them poke his ears or pull his nose. He caught their little fingers in his mouth, causing them to shriek and laugh. The children had a good time, but my father didn't have his much-needed rest.

We spent our summers in different resorts, such as Pyshki, Novoyelnia, Druskieniki, to name a few. In Pyshki, we had the company of all our Grodno relatives, and those were wonderful summers for all of us. I believe, though, that the best time we had in Pyshki was once on the ride home.

It was probably the only summer that my Aunt Gittel had been persuaded not to return to her beloved Novoyelnia. My mother and Aunt Gittel and my two Grodno aunts had

decided to spend the summer together. We stayed in a small hotel and spent the days hiking, relaxing and boating. Uncle Yaakov was abroad, and my father and my Grodno uncles would come for *Shabbos*.

When the summer was over, and it was time to go home, the Grodno cousins and aunts and Uncle Moishe all came to see us and Aunt Gittel off at the train station. When my father travelled himself, he would usually go third class, but for the family he preferred second-class compartments for six, with upholstered seats and curtained windows, clean and quiet. The whole clan helped us with our luggage, and as we opened the sliding door to the compartment, we saw our sixth travelling companion, an elegant Polish lady in a big hat and gloved hands, busy reading her newspaper. Only five of us were travelling, my mother, Aunt Gittel, Sonia, Mendel and I, but on hearing all the commotion of our extended family, the lady looked up with unconcealed rage and anti-Semitism.

"What's all this, are all of you travelling?" she asked with seething anger.

Uncle Moishe, in a mock-serious manner, bowed courteously. "No, most esteemed lady," he said. "A few more people have yet to join us."

It was very funny, and we all burst out laughing. That was the last we heard from our Polish travelling companion, who hid behind her newspaper until we switched trains an hour and a half later.

One summer, we were really fortunate in our choice of a bungalow, this time in Druskieniki. It was a big house with four apartments, each with a separate porch. Druskieniki was only an hour away from Grodno by train, and before the season started, my father had gone there and chosen the best front apartment with the biggest porch. Benches with tables

were a standard feature on all summer home porches. Ours could easily seat ten or twelve people.

When we arrived, the other three apartments were already taken. My father was delighted that our next door neighbors were Reb Yerucham Levovitz, the *mashgiach* of the Mirrer Yeshivah, and his family. On the other side, one apartment was taken by two sisters-in-law, the daughter and daughter-in-law of the distinguished Prives family from Warsaw. The fourth apartment was occupied by the prominent Cyrinskis from Vilna; Madame Cyrinski was the daughter of the famous Rabbi Maze from Moscow. My mother enjoyed the company of these ladies to the fullest. At once, she became very close with all the women, and they were truly a select group.

I remember Rebbetzin Levovitz, a short, jolly woman with an easy laugh. It was humorously told that summer how her husband, by failing to be a clever businessman, had become a great *talmid chacham* and famous *mashgiach*. Her parents owned a restaurant, and her father had wanted his young son-in-law to learn a little about the business by helping attend to the customers. The young man did it as he understood it should be done. When he noticed a man rushing in and starting to eat without washing, he would come over and gently remind him, "Reb Yid, you are probably so busy that you forgot to wash before you ate the bread." Once, when he noticed that someone was served a portion of chicken that had been cooked the day before, a widely-accepted practice, he quietly told the man that he should know the chicken was cooked yesterday. His father-in-law promptly sent him back to the *Gemara*!

The summer turned out to be a very sociable one for me as well. My good friend Tania Zhyzhemska, also an only child,

came with her mother to Druskieniki year after year, and I was very happy to have her there. Fradka Rabinovitz, the Lida Rav's daughter, Chana Steinberg and a few others also belonged to my circle of close friends. Tania, in particular, was a character. Though she was tall and thin, she joined me in all the slimming programs.

Those days, just a few short years before the war, were happy and content, without a worry or a care.

For my father, the summer vacations were the best time of the year. He particularly liked Druskieniki. It was the only resort place in eastern Poland, and many Lithuanian *rabbanim* and *roshei yeshivah* used to come for mineral baths. Here he was in his element.

This particular summer, though, exceeded every previous expectation. Every afternoon, our porch was converted into a rabbinical council, and so it was jokingly called "the rabbinate." Among the *rabbanim* who gathered there were the old Suvalki Rav, then still called the Semiatitcher Rav, because for many years he was the rabbi in Semiatitch, a town near Warsaw; the Lomza Rav, Rabbi Shatzkes; the Krynka Rav, Rabbi Myshkovski, who was a relative of my father's and a leading rabbinical personality; our own Lida Rav, Rabbi Aaron Rabinovitz; Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz; and many others whose names have escaped my memory.

Another special gathering place for the *rabbanim* was on the long promenade along the Niemen River. The river was on one side, a thick pine forest on the other, and the wide benches along the way provided a cool and relaxing place for Torah *pilpulim*.

The young, modern public preferred the park with its beautiful flowerbeds where a string orchestra played every afternoon. This left the promenade free for the *rabbanim* and

the students who had come with them. American *yeshivah* boys with cameras would hide behind the trees and click away at the benches where the *rabbanim* were sitting. As far as I remember, my father was the only "layman" among them. The *yeshivah* boys would later send us the pictures, and my father had a whole collection of them.

I remember my father once telling us how Reb Baruch Ber Leibowitz, the famous *rosh yeshivah* from Kamenitz, caught a *yeshivah* boy in the act of snapping his picture and sternly told him to destroy the film. This moment itself was caught by another boy, though; there was no escaping those cameras! Unfortunately, our photograph albums were confiscated when the Soviets arrested my father. Photographs were important to the Soviets. They were proof of one's associations, they hoped to find incriminating evidence, and they were glad to pick out accomplices to arrest as well.

Another summer, also in Druskieniki, we stayed in the Central Hotel. It turned out that a few doors down the hall, on the same floor, was the suite of Reb Chaim Ozer Grodzenski from Vilna, whom my father knew well. It was a joyous meeting for both. For a whole month, every day from four until six in the afternoon, they were seen walking along the river, engrossed in a *shmuess*. My father was very punctual, and four o'clock on the dot he would knock on Reb Chaim Ozer's door.

It once happened that my father had a visitor and didn't notice the time. A few minutes after four, there was a knock on our door. I was in the room, and I opened the door. Reb Chaim Ozer was known for his extremely sharp, penetrating gaze. I saw eyes like two burning coals and quickly stepped aside as my father went to meet him.

"What happened today? Has our friendship terminated?"

Reb Chaim Ozer asked, but then noticing the guest, he smiled and just said, "Oh."

When we went to Krynitza, a resort at the foot of the Carpathian mountains in Galicia, my father's steady companion was Rabbi Shuster from Sokolka. Their long walks and talks often started right after breakfast. Rabbi Shuster used to give a lecture every day at about five in the afternoon, standing on one of the round tables in the park, drawing a crowd of several hundred people. He spoke several languages and had a broad knowledge of physics, chemistry and philosophy. His topics combined Torah with his general knowledge. The summer before the war, we were again in Krynitza and my father befriended the Jaroslaver Rav, Rabbi Steinberg, a prominent rabbi from Galicia. They also spent long hours in Talmudic discussions.

In my father's youth, it was still common for *talmidei chachamim* to keep their sons at home, teaching them Torah themselves. My grandfather had raised his three sons that way, and all of my father's training in Torah had come from his father, the genius of Grodno. Circumstances had made my father a businessman, but his heart was fully immersed in Torah. He cherished every moment of spiritual elevation from his guests at home and from his revered companions in the summer months.

CHAPTER 35

The Doctor's Note

THE MORE I REMINISCED, THE MORE THE PAST BECAME the present for me. It was as if, during my one month in the barn, I experienced my whole previous life anew, including my emotions and reactions. Now it was shattered again into irretrievable fragments by Brodatch's voice. He was standing in the barn door.

"I have just spoken to Ravtzov," he was saying, "and according to him, it is safe for you to come out of hiding. After the first week, there were no more inquiries from the police."

"But where shall I go? I can't go back to Tokushy, as much as I want to see my mother. You forget that I left work without a release. After all this, shall I get arrested and sent to prison?"

"You don't have to worry about your mother," he assured

me. "Etia and Kreina are helping her. Here, I brought a letter from her. I see her often, and she is fine. As far as a place to stay, Ravtzov suggested you come live with his old mother until something more permanent can be arranged. As always, he is ready to help. Here is Ravtzov's address. I paid the woman here until the end of the week.

"Don't worry about the money," he continued, seeing my worried look. "I am keeping an account. You'll pay me back when you get settled. And as always, your money will bring me luck. I have to go now. I'm sure you'll find the way to Ravtzov, but wait until it gets darker."

As always, he was in a rush. I barely had time to scribble a few words to my mother before he was gone.

I sat in my corner, giving thanks to Hashem for the goodness of people who cared. I had not done enough to deserve it. I knew it was in the *zchus* of my father's *chessed* and *tzeddakah* that strangers, particularly a Soviet party member, should show so much concern.

It was completely dark when, exhausted and somewhat unsure of myself, I knocked at Ravtzov's door. His wife, an ample woman in her fifties, opened the door. It was the first time I had seen her. Obviously, she knew I would be coming, because she hurriedly motioned with her hand to the left end of the foyer where her ninety-year-old mother-in-law had a separate room with a tiny kitchenette. From a room to the right of the foyer, I heard several voices talking and laughing.

It was one of the infrequent days when Ravtzov was in Petropavlovsk. He was probably entertaining his party comrades. The old Mrs. Ravtzov was a sight not often seen in Soviet Russia. She was a woman from years gone by, old but healthy and alert. A kerchief tied under her chin covered her head, and her dark dress reached to her ankles. She knew

about me, too, because I noticed that beside her bed a couch was prepared for sleeping.

"Come in, come in," she said smiling, obviously happy to have a companion.

A normal bed with clean linen, a room with electricity? Could it be real? I wondered to myself. No rats, no bugs, no cow, no manure! I didn't care if it lasted an eternity or a day. In a land of total brutality and darkness, only miracles can keep one's head above water.

"Put down your bundle over here," the old woman said. "Take off your jacket. Come here and sit down. You are probably hungry. Come, I'll give you something to eat." I did as she told me, still a little dazed by the sudden change in my circumstances. She quickly put some bread, sour cream and boiled eggs on the table, without interrupting her monologue.

"You see, my son is very devoted to me," she was saying. "His wife is also a good woman, but I have to cook for myself. They don't keep kosher! They eat pork, no separate dishes, no *Shabbos*, nothing. That's why my son gave me a separate room with a small kitchen. I eat only dairy. The girl who cleans and works for my daughter-in-law brings me what I request, and she also washes my clothing and the floor. My son has a very high position, and he is not stingy." I knew Ravtzov from Tokushy and the favors he showered on the Jewish exiles. "Eat, eat," she urged me.

I was amazed to discover that Ravtzov had a religious mother, but my thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door. His company gone, Ravtzov came in to say good night to his mother.

"Oh! You came!" he said, noticing me. "Good. I am leaving tomorrow, early in the morning. While I'm away, you

may go out and spend time with my wife also, but when I'm here, stay in this room. The cleaning girl will know you as a visiting relative." In the Soviet heaven, the higher one's position the more one is subject to suspicion.

Ravtzov's wife Gossie, despite her affluence, was a very unhappy person. She hadn't made friends in Petropavlovsk. Her habit of talking too much made her husband wary of letting her have associations. But worst of all, she worried about her two sons in the war. She was like a prisoner kept comfortable and provided for, but lonely and afraid. My short-term stay in their house gave her a chance to unburden herself of her worries and pain. I suspected that when Ravtzov had invited me to stay with his mother, more likely he had had his wife in mind. After a week, he came back to Petropavlovsk.

On his advice and detailed instructions, as well as a loan, I undertook a daring and dangerous plan, which would invoke some tricky playacting. Despair and necessity are the best teachers; they even taught me to put on an act. It was September, 1944.

Before the war, the First Stalinski Hospital had been a government hospital for civilians. It was the biggest in Petropavlovsk, the capital of Northern Kazakhstan, a town between Chelyabinsk and Omsk on the Trans-Asiatic Railroad in Siberia.

During the war, thousands upon thousands of wounded were taken from the battlefields to the safety of the outlying regions of the Soviet Union, including Siberia. All the hospitals were converted to military use. Only in rare emergency cases were civilians also admitted. The brass, of course, had free access to all facilities. There were no private doctors; nothing in Russia was private. The hospitals were badly

understaffed, as most of the able-bodied men were drafted into the army.

Dr. Kolaga, the head of the hospital, was about sixty years old and lame, which was why he was assigned to supervise a hospital in a Siberian town. I had had an opportunity to find out a few details about him. First, I discovered that, in a discreet way, he was cooperative. I also discovered that he had recently married a young nurse. It was important that I get to him in order to execute my plan.

The hospital was a big white structure on parklike grounds, about a hundred yards from the street. It was surrounded by a high wire fence, with a booth in front in which a military watchman sat. The gate was opened only to admit transports of wounded. All pedestrians had to enter through the booth. I also learned that family members were permitted to visit, and here is where my acting was to begin.

When I started out, my heart was pounding with uncertainty and fear. I ran the last long block before the hospital, so that when I reached the gate I was breathless; I had rubbed my eyes with onion to make them red and teary. I had also made two long smudges on my cheeks with a dusty finger to appear as if I had been crying, although I had reason enough to cry without acting. Without stopping for a moment, I burst into the sentry's booth.

"Hey, where are you going?" he demanded. "Who are you?"

As if on cue, although this time I wasn't acting, real tears began flowing down my cheeks, and in a breathless, gasping voice, I told him that I had just heard that my only brother had been brought to the hospital badly wounded, with both legs missing. If I couldn't see him immediately, I would probably never see him alive at all. He probably heard stories like this

about a hundred times a day.

"Ha, don't worry," he said. "If he made it all the way to Petropavlovsk, he'll live. What is your last name?" The last question was just a formality; he didn't even have a list with him.

I gave him some Russian name, still panting and twisting my fingers. Meanwhile, more people came into the booth. He motioned to the opposite door, and I was on the hospital grounds. I ran the first few yards, then slowed down, wiped my face and began to prepare the second act.

The doctor is not a simple watchman, I thought. Will I succeed? In any case, I had to take the chance; too much depended on it. I clutched my stomach with both hands, bent my right knee, began moaning and, with a face distorted with pain, approached the formidable building. No gleaming walls and floors here. Drab, everything drab, but this was the least of my concerns.

"I must see Dr. Kolaga!" I cried out to the back of a white-clad figure who was arranging something on a hospital cart farther down the hall. As she turned, I leaned against the wall, still moaning as if overcome with pain.

I heard real moaning from several directions. A stretcher with a mummy-like wounded man was wheeled past me. Another patient, with one leg and a crutch, and a hand missing as well, was helped through a door by a woman. Two women crying hysterically, holding on to each other, were leaning against the wall a few steps from me. Misery, everywhere misery. Being in Siberia for four years, I had seen enough misery and death, enough limbless bodies, remnants of what had once been a human being. Too many times I had seen the despair of a wife, mother or children. Crying and moaning had become a way of life for us. And still, the sight

in the hospital hallway was utterly depressing.

No distractions now, I told myself. However painful, continue what you have undertaken.

"What's the trouble?" asked a sweet, young voice, striking a dissonant chord amid the woeful noises.

Keeping my eyes half-closed, and with dragged out, choked words, I pronounced, "I have acute appendicitis; it's an emergency. I must see the doctor! I came from Poludieno. The doctor there sent me here."

"Sit down," she said and motioned to one of the benches which ran along both sides of the hall. "The doctor is now at lunch. He'll be back in half an hour."

"I can't wait that long," I said. "I'm dying from pain."

She hesitated for a moment, then she pointed in the direction of a little house with white shutters, visible through the large, bare window in the hall.

"That is where the doctor lives," she said. "You can try to see him there." Then she was instantly off to continue her interrupted work.

I hesitated, but only for a moment. I picked myself up and started in the direction of the white-shuttered house. Five minutes later, a pretty young woman, whom I assumed to be his young wife, opened the door. I repeated my rehearsed statement to her in the same agonized voice.

"Go back to the hospital," she said. "The doctor will see you soon."

I went back to the hospital. Before long, I saw a short, stocky man, dragging a stiff leg, come into the hall. The young nurse was still busy at her cart. The doctor opened a door leading to a room opposite the big window in the hall. I was still sitting doubled over on the bench.

"This girl said she has appendicitis and that she is in great

pain," said the nurse, stopping at the open door of the doctor's office.

"Come in, both of you," I heard him say.

A thought flashed through my mind. Both? It meant a witness, and in delicate situations like bribing, witnesses were not desirable. But there was no way out now.

I entered the office. Large and sunny, it contrasted sharply with the drabness of the hall. Between two windows, facing the door, stood a large desk and a high-backed chair. Above the chair hung the inevitable portrait of the bushy-whiskered tyrant Stalin.

Meanwhile, the nurse pulled a curtain at the other end of the room, revealing a high examination table, surprisingly clean and neat, with a stepstool nearby just as in every doctor's office all over the world.

"Give me your *spravka*," he said.

A *spravka* was a kind of recommendation or note from one authority to another which one had to obtain in order to accomplish anything and everything. They were written by whichever authority one was handled by, and they were not easy to obtain. Often, they had to be bought.

Without a *spravka*, or *komandirovka*, one was unable to go from one location to another, no train ticket would be sold, no admission anywhere, to anyplace.

"Of course I have a *spravka*," I claimed, as I started fumbling in my pocket, but all I could produce was a wet handkerchief. My face and bent body still feigned agonizing pain.

"I-I don't know," I said. "I had it in my pocket, but it was such a long way, and I was in pain all the way, and crying, and I probably lost it taking out my handkerchief."

"Lie down," said the doctor. "I'll examine you."

I climbed onto the cot. He checked my pulse and pressed my abdomen. I cried out a few times, probably in all the wrong places, and being an experienced doctor and shrewd as well, he saw through the charade. His face, though, remained grave and serious. For a moment, even I believed that something was really wrong.

"Yes, you do have an inflammation. First, I'll have to give you an injection." This was meant for the nurse to hear. He went to a cabinet near his desk and said, "Nadia, please forgive me for keeping you so long. I know how busy you are these days."

The nurse, a sweet, naive girl, gave me a sympathetic look and left the room.

Good, I thought. Now I am on safer ground. I climbed down from the cot, and the doctor, instead of opening the cabinet, sat down at his desk, indicating the chair opposite his.

"What is this all about?" he asked.

He spoke, as I had already noticed before, in short, concise sentences. He knew the general rule that words in Russia are more deadly than a loaded gun. I had also learned something by then, so I did not tell him that I had escaped in the middle of the night from Tokushy, my registered place of residence, that I had been hiding for a full month in a cow barn or that the police and the N.K.V.D. were still after me. I only told him that I presently lived in Tokushy, and that I had an old, sick mother whose health was deteriorating rapidly. Moving to Petropavlovsk was now my only goal, because only in such a big town could I earn enough to support my mother and myself. I also told him that I had left my place of work without permission, which by itself constituted a crime entailing a punishment of up to five years in

prison. Of course, being a Soviet citizen, he was familiar with this.

I told him I was from eastern Poland, which had been taken over by the Soviets in September, 1939, and that for the last four years I had been in exile with my mother in Siberia. I told him that I still had some very nice clothing which would be much easier to sell in a big town.

I studied his face and read his thoughts. How much his young wife would appreciate a good foreign-made dress or suit! I thought. Then and there, I resolved to come back soon with a dress for his wife, but afterwards, I was advised by Ravtzov not to return to the hospital. It was more prudent and safer, he believed, never to return to the scene of a crime, such as bribery.

"What shall I write?" he asked, stealing a sideways glance at the heavy paperweight on his desk, which was now wedged up by an envelope I had slid under it, containing a few hundred *chervoncy*. I was still trembling inwardly, not believing I had really heard his question correctly. The events of the past hour and of the preceding few months were reeling in my head like a kaleidoscopic blur. Then I caught sight of his hand holding the pen over a slip of paper, and I came back to reality.

"Please write that I am seriously ill and must be under constant medical care," I said. "A permanent stay in Petropavlovsk is, therefore, vital."

I watched in disbelief as he wrote, signed, affixed the hospital seal on the piece of paper and, with an understanding nod of his head, handed it to me. I thanked him and left his office and the hospital building. I walked down the long path to the gate, through the watchman's booth and into the street.

Now back in the street, I felt suddenly drained and exhausted. There was a bench in front of the hospital fence, and I eased myself onto it, clutching the precious piece of paper in my pocket. Now with the doctor's *spravka*, I'll be able to receive a permit to register in town and bring my mother over, I thought. It wouldn't be so easy, of course. I was still a deserter, a fugitive who had to watch her step and look over her shoulder. But so far, thank Heaven for this.

I was tired. Not hungry, or thirsty, just tired. I leaned back on the bench and closed my eyes. I wanted to sleep. It was a crisp, cool, sunny September day, barely past noon. The air, dense with the fragrance of fallen leaves and drying grass, was fresh and clean. Garbage collection was non-existent. Nothing was thrown out. Everything was saved and used. There wasn't even a piece of paper blown by the wind. It was snatched up from the air by some passerby and pocketed away; if nothing else, it would later be wrapped around a few flakes of coarse tobacco and delightedly inhaled during a moment of relaxation.

I still had my eyes closed when I heard someone sit down on the other end of the bench. My heart jumped. The fear that had accompanied me to the hospital was still in my bones. Fear was an inseparable companion to every human being in Russia. It is the mechanism that makes the regime tick. People were afraid of their own shadows. I had feared, naturally, that I was being watched and followed, that perhaps the doctor would tip somebody off and give me away. Now I was almost sure that he had.

Why hadn't I run from here? Why had I chosen to sit just on this bench? Nonsense, don't be silly, I said to myself. Probably, someone was tired and just wanted to rest. I didn't dare open my eyes. But if someone is really after you, it will

not help to play the ostrich sticking his head in the sand, I told myself. Then the person picked himself up and left. I sighed with a surge of contentment. Happiness, after all, is a very relative concept.

CHAPTER 36

The End of a Chapter

AFTER OBTAINING THE DOCTOR'S NOTE STATING THAT I needed constant medical care and, therefore, had to live in Petropavlovsk, I had to find a permanent residence. Without a place to live, there could be no registration in town. I was afraid, however, that registering would bring me to the attention of the K.G.B., but Ravtzov assured me that I could trust him.

A few weeks later, a Soviet refugee lawyer I knew from my previous trips to Petropavlovsk, and whose family I had befriended, explained to me that in order to look for me in Petropavlovsk, the Poludieno K.G.B. would have had to send my records there. That would have shown their double failure—not being able to persuade me to become an informer and not preventing my escape from Tokushy. Thus,

I was fairly safe in Petropavlovsk.

With no apartments available, Liba Shmulovitz and her beautiful daughter Freidele, came to my rescue once more; indeed in times of need, Liba with her outstretched, helping hand always came to our aid. They had moved to Petropavlovsk a year before. After two weeks of Ravtzov's hospitality, Liba offered that I share their room. My name had to be entered in the house record book, with the landlord's triangle seal affixed next to it. Then the doctor's note and the book had to be taken to the *Domuprav*, an office resembling a rent commission, building department and city registry all in one. Surprisingly, it took only a few days to obtain the permit to stay in the city.

At that time, Liba's son Lazar was drafted to work in the coal mines of Karaganda and Liba was allowed to visit him there. Shortly after I came to stay with her, Liba visited Lazar and brought back a blank sheet of paper with the letterhead of the Karaganda coal mines, which Lazar had obtained. Not being very fluent in Russian herself, Liba asked me to write a *"kommandirovka"* for Lazar in the name of the coal mine office, authorizing him to go to Moscow for supplies.

Of course, an official letter of this sort required an official seal, but Liba solved this problem by borrowing the landlord's triangle seal. I dipped the seal in ink and affixed it to the *"kommandirovka."* The words on the seal were illegible, and I scrawled an elaborate, equally illegible signature over it, thereby adding forgery to my growing assortment of trades.

My involvement ended with this, and I never learned the details of what transpired afterwards. I do remember, however, that after the war Liba received a letter from Lazar, postmarked in Poland, in which he stated that he was planning to make his way to Palestine.

As soon as I obtained permission to live in Petropavlovsk, I started to plan moving my mother and our possessions to our new location. It was not easy. I was afraid to go back to Tokushy, and my mother was not able to make the move herself. Until then, all our moves had been arranged by the K.G.B. How was I to organize a move on my own?

By then, the Polish Jewish community in Petropavlovsk was a sizeable one. In addition, there were also many Soviet Jews who were able to escape from the European part of the U.S.S.R., knowing that the Germans, in spite of their initial victories, would never cross the Urals into Siberia. I was constantly asking around among all these people for information on how to hire a truck. It took me a month until I succeeded, and it was, coincidentally, through a niece of our landlord. Her fiance had been wounded in the war and released from the army. He was employed as a truck driver for some cooperative. His job was to deliver supplies to the neighboring villages. I had to wait for his next trip to Tokushy, and when it came I summoned all my courage and climbed into the seat next to the driver. He let me off before we reached the town.

It was the end of October, and the day was cold and windy. I raised my jacket collar, pulled my kerchief low over my forehead and ran to our house. It was one o'clock in the afternoon. I hadn't had a chance to notify my mother, but she had already heard from Brodatch that I was coming and had been waiting for me for a whole month. The driver had told me to be ready in two hours. Luckily, Etia and the boys were home for lunch. With Etia's and Kreina's help, a few big burlap bags filled with produce from our garden were neatly tied and piled up in the first room waiting for the move.

Our clothing and some extra bedding had always been

kept in the trunk and two valises, so now all that was left to do was tie up the bedding from the beds in one of the sheets, put all the pots and dishes inside the bedding so they wouldn't rattle and fold my mother's iron bed. We were ready to move.

The driver arrived half an hour earlier than planned, bringing the truck just in front of our door and across the yard from the windows of the Selsoviet. The driver, Etia, the boys and I were loading our things as if we were running from a fire. It took no longer than ten minutes, and by some miracle, not one of the villagers or the Selsoviet men came to the scene. Amid tears and sighs, we said good-bye to each other.

My mother took her seat in the driver's cabin, and I settled myself on top of the truck among the bags and bundles. When the truck passed the last village house, I realized that a miracle had happened again. In bright daylight, under the nose of the Selsoviet, another chapter of our Siberian experience had come to an end.

Our half room at 8 Octiabrska Street in Petropavlovsk wasn't too comfortable, but neither was Liba's half. The room was small, and we had more possessions than Liba, so it was a real sacrifice on her part to take us in. Of course, we shared the rent and, the most important thing in Siberia, the firewood. When we arrived in the late afternoon, it was snowing, and though the first sparrow doesn't bring the spring, the October snow in Siberia does mean the start of winter.

Regardless of the clutter and sardine-like squeeze, the small room had important advantages—a private entrance from the vestibule and electricity! What a great luxury!

Unfortunately, it didn't have the regular Russian oven, which would have kept the room warm many hours after it stopped burning. Instead, there was only a small, two-burner kitchen stove, which could use coal or wood and had to be constantly fed. A special, unexpected luxury was a wall outlet and a radio speaker hung high on the wall under the ceiling.

Although the outlet was for the radio speaker, we soon discovered that we could use the outlet for another purpose, too. Through selling clothing, I made contacts with a few wives of higher officials, and one of them gave me an old, little electric stove. What a find! In the winter, we kept the fuel-burning stove going most of the day, in any case, but in the summer, we could cook without using up fuel! We could save fuel for the winter and keep the apartment cool, as well. The wire was short and broken, but Liba knew an electrician who was able to fix it.

Before we had time to look around, the winter set in with all its force. The old struggle to keep the place warm, or rather, above freezing, and to satisfy our constant hunger started all over again. In fact, the struggle was a continuous one, but when I had been forced to work by the K.G.B. or in the *artel*, we had at least had our daily rations of bread. In Petropavlovsk, it was easy enough to find a job, but a job invariably meant having to work on *Shabbos*. So I had to look for other sources of income.

The few bags of potatoes and other vegetables we had brought from Tokushy were quickly gone. Our room was too small to accommodate all our possessions, so our landlady had graciously offered the space behind the oven in her big kitchen for our vegetable sacks. She lived in the kitchen with her husband and a refugee woman with a small child. Past the kitchen was another room where two families minus the

husbands lived. They always asked if they could borrow a few potatoes or a carrot, and I couldn't refuse. As a result, the stock quickly ran out.

After selling a few pieces of clothing to raise money to repay my debts, and going to the *baracholka*, the peddlers' market place, to buy some edibles, I noticed that besides the peasant women selling their garden produce, others, mostly women, were selling and buying all kinds of items.

In all of Petropavlovsk there were three or four stores, usually closed. There was a newspaper stand in the center of town, but no matter how early one came, the curled up invalid behind the stand had one answer, "All sold." There was also an *apteka*, a drug store, where prescriptions were filled, always the "next day" or "the day after next." The only place that thrived was the beauty parlor, where two hairdressers and a manicurist were busy around the clock. The wives of the brass wanted to be pretty. Coming from the lower classes, they considered red nails and curly mops the ultimate in status and elegance.

There was also a fairly big commissary where people could bring whatever used items they wanted to sell, from clothing to housewares. Of course, it was also government-owned, but the prices were higher than for government items, which were never available anyway. The maximum length of time an item was kept was three months. Thus, the *baracholka* (from *barachlo*—junk) was the only place where the turnover was from hand to hand. Officially, only used items or clothing were permitted, but under a coat or shawl, a piece of stolen material, sewing thread, leather for soles and other such basic necessities quickly changed hands before a policeman could spot the transaction.

In Petropavlovsk, there were two *baracholkas*, and Liba

frequented both, buying in one and selling in the other. If such behavior was caught, it was severely punished—*spekulantka*, capitalist speculator! Besides politics, it was the most offensive crime in Soviet Russia, carrying the penalty of ten years in a labor camp. Stalin allowed himself the privilege of chopping off the heads of his own comrades and thousands of innocents, but to "speculate" in order to feed hungry children while the father was away in the army defending the homeland, possibly wounded or killed, was considered a terrible crime.

Being unable to get a job without working on *Shabbos*, I joined the delinquent crowd. I became a *spekulantka*, though of a somewhat different variety. Rather than showing my face too often in the *baracholka*, where policemen and informers were constantly circulating, I chose knocking on doors. For a start, I took a few things my mother and I could do without and went out to try my luck. Many people were suspicious and didn't even want to open the door. The more brave, seeing that I offered "western" goods, grabbed them eagerly. Some bought for money, others offered something in exchange. In the *kolkhoz*, all the barters had been for food, but here in town, money was very welcome. The best trade-in I remember was a pair of new, high rubber boots, which Aunt Etie had sent during the first year, in exchange for a portable, hand-operated sewing machine. It was very old and rusty, like its owner, but it began a new chapter in my career.

Happy and excited, I brought it home. After lumber and grain loading and railroad-building, it seemed easy to carry a sewing machine all that way. Before the deal was made, the old woman showed me how to operate it. It screeched and clacked, but it did sew. At home, after a thorough inspection and advice from our landlady, it was decided that it needed

a good oiling to reduce the noise. There was no machine oil, and the cooking oil, dark, thick, and unrefined, would clog the parts and do more harm than good.

"Kerosene will do," was the landlady's verdict. "Wait until my niece comes. She'll ask her fiance. He'll get it."

What was easy in other parts of the world had to be sweated out with pain and patience in Russia.

To practice I took an old sheet, cut out the middle part where it was worn thin as cheesecloth, dyed the sides which were still sturdy and produced two skirts. Style and size notwithstanding, I took one to the *baracholka*. To have brought both would have meant mass production—ergo, *spekulantka*! With only one, I didn't have to hide it, as it surely didn't look new, but it went quickly enough. From then on, I was mostly in the skirt business. I made dozens of them. They were easy to sew (one size fits all) and easy to sell. I used any material I could lay my hands on, except for silk and velvet, even khaki colored army tent canvas, stolen by some soldier and sold on the market by his wife or mother. My old machine groaned but obeyed.

Once, I got a real find. One of the women I had dealt with a few times before secretly informed me that she had gotten hold of a rare and excellent piece of material, cream colored and very strong.

"There's only one thing," she said. "It doesn't take dye."

"Show it to me," I said.

She led me to her bedroom and pulled a huge, oddly-shaped piece of material from under her bedcovers. It was smooth and silky to the touch, and I noticed that it was cut from some bigger piece, probably with a knife or a razor blade. It hit me that it must have been part of a parachute, although I had never seen one. I told her what I suspected.

She paled and almost went into shock. There is a dual quality in the character of Russian people, a shrewdness and foxy cleverness, and an almost childish naivete. The sound of the word parachute brought out an almost hysterical fear in her.

"I didn't know," she cried out. "I never would have bought it, even though it was cheap. I would never have bought it."

She had bought it for next to nothing, probably from a soldier who had been able to hide it in his backpack, and who was afraid of being caught and wanted to get rid of it quickly. I bought it, also for very little, but it was so big that we both had to struggle to roll it up tightly to make a bundle as small as possible.

"You shouldn't use it right away," my mother cautioned me wisely, and so it rested for a while under our bedding.

The tent canvas and the piece of parachute silk weren't the only things which I had the opportunity to buy through a Russian soldier returning from Europe. One morning at the market, I saw a soldier who looked like he had something to sell. Approaching him, he told me he had a very special item, something almost unseen in Siberia, a bar of facial soap. I wasn't surprised, because in many cases soldiers returning from Europe would bring looted or stolen goods of greater value than a bar of soap.

I asked him to show it to me. He took it out of his coat pocket, and as I took it in my hand, a shudder went through my body. It was stamped with a big, heavy "J." We had heard about such bars of soap. We knew how the Germans made them. The shocking fact was that they cooked Jewish bodies for the fat to make the soap.

Looking at it with eyes clouded with tears and horror, I could see in it pieces of my murdered aunts and uncles and

cousins. It was the first time I had seen any of this soap.

During the last year in Siberia, we used to buy these bars of soap at every opportunity, asking every soldier in the market if he had one. On the train back to Poland, our transport collected twenty-seven such bars, which were taken by someone travelling to Lodz to bury in the Jewish cemetery there.

CHAPTER 37

Victory and New Questions

TOWARDS THE END OF 1944, WITHOUT ANY CONTACTS and without applying for them in any way, some Jewish families who in one way or another had been connected with rabbinic circles before the war, began receiving packages from the United States. The sender was Vaad Hatzalah in New York. The packages were addressed to the places where we had originally been sent at the beginning of May, 1940. My mother and I were among the recipients. The Soviets, triumphant with their victories and their having been joined by the Allies in fighting the Germans, allowed the parcels to reach their addressees.

No notices were sent. When news about mysterious packages began to circulate, we thought it was some plot or trick of the K.G.B. Then a few people without "criminal"

records like mine went to the post office, and there they were—a shelf full of packages! Someone noticed my name on a package, I decided to take the risk and claim it. Using my permit to live in Petropavlovsk as my identification, I retrieved the package without mishap.

All the parcels were identical, though each shipment, sent about once a month, had different contents. Mine was addressed in clear, Russian print to the *kolkhoz* Sergeyevka, where we had spent our first year. The same address was on all subsequent parcels. On orders from above, if the addressee was no longer in the place to which it was sent, the parcel went to the district center, in our case Poludieno. After a certain time, if nobody claimed it, it was sent to the county seat, in our case Petropavlovsk. In the winter months, when the snow and blizzards delayed the transfers from place to place, two or three parcels would arrive at one time.

All summer long, the American parcels arrived more or less regularly, and they were a tremendous help. The Vaad Hatzalah in New York really knew what was needed. A typical parcel of clothing contained a grayish-navy or khaki colored pullover (man's only, army surplus), a plaid hooded jacket and an army blanket. Sometimes warm underwear was also included. A food parcel might contain a kilo of cocoa, a bottle of saccharin (one thousand grains), a kilo of candies (inferior quality), sugar and rice. Then there were parcels containing bars of laundry soap and parcels containing half kilo packages of loose tea. The tea was made to order for the Kazakhs, the native Asian Muslims we had met during our stay in the railroad camp. In Petropavlovsk, they were my only tea customers. They were willing to travel for tens of kilometers to town, usually with all of their wives and children, just to procure some tea.

I usually took only one item a day to the *baracholka*, and thus one morning I found myself there with a single package of tea half hidden under my shawl. The Kazakhs have a special instinct for finding their "gold," and in no time, many of them were pulling at my hand. Greedy fingers tore open the package, took a few grains and started to chew. Everyone was an expert, and everyone had to give his opinion. The commotion didn't escape the attention of a policeman, however. When he appeared, carrying a rifle, of course, all the Kazakhs vanished into thin air, and I found myself being led away with a half-empty package of tea in my hand. My mother heard about it even before I reached the police station. Someone had seen me and had run to tell her what had happened.

The police station looked like a Siberian railroad waiting room, with the distinction that the windows had bars. Dozens of people, mostly women, were sitting on the floor, holding onto baskets and bundles, wringing their hands, eyes filled with panic. They were waiting to be interrogated. There were two policemen in the room. One was at the door to the interrogator's room, the other watching the entrance door. My policeman, after delivering me, left to hunt for another *spekulantka.*

I sat down on the floor next to a woman who seemed to be more agitated and frightened than the rest. Like all of us, she was wearing a shawl, and under it, in a basket, she had a little notions store—a few spools of thread, a few small plastic combs, some pins and two or three more items of a similar nature. She recognized that I was Jewish and, in a hushed voice choked with tears, kept repeating in Yiddish, "*Oy vey*! At home I have more stuff! If they search there, I'll go to prison! What will happen to my children? My husband is in the army.

I am a refugee here, and I have nobody! *Oy vey, Oy vey!*"

I was miserable myself, but her pain eclipsed mine. I wanted to comfort her, but how? She was a Soviet citizen, and she knew what to expect for such a crime.

The entrance door opened frequently with more and more arrestees filling the room. It became so crowded that there was barely enough place to stand. I noticed that the people who were let in to the interrogator's room didn't come out.

"There is another door from there leading outside," a woman sitting in front of me informed me. "For others, the door leads straight to the prison."

"Silence!" boomed the policeman, hearing the hushed voices coming from our corner.

I never found out what happened to the poor woman who was so desperate; her turn came before mine.

It was completely dark outside, and the gleam from the electric bulb gave a reddish reflection to the straw-haired man across the table, whose water-colored eyes looked at me with hatred and suspicion.

"Why do you have American tea? Do you have any family or friends there?"

"No, I have nobody in America."

"Who sent you the tea? Did you ask for it?"

"No, I have never written to America. The parcel I received was sent by some organization."

"What else was in the parcel?"

"Tea, soap and sugar."

"Was it sent for your own use or for speculation?"

"What I didn't use myself, I wanted to trade for flour."

"Why don't you work?"

"I have a sick mother, and I have to take care of her."

"How many more packages of tea do you have in your house?"

"Only one more," I said, although I had about twelve.

At this point, I decided to take a chance. I knew that if I showed fright or nervousness, it would only make him more suspicious. Instead of continuing to answer his questions, I began insisting that he send policemen to search my room. It worked. Usually, the *spekulants* feared a search more than anything else, and there I was insisting he should order one!

"This time I'll let you go," he said. "But if you get caught again selling anything in the *baracholka*, you'll be arrested right away!" From nine o'clock in the morning until ten o'clock at night, the only thing that mattered in Russia was my half-empty package of tea!

The next day, I did go to the *baracholka*, but empty-handed. I told the first Kazakh I met that I had *tchai* (tea) and motioned toward the exit. He understood and followed me. When we came to the house where I lived, I told him to wait in the yard. I brought out a package but didn't let him touch it. After the customary bargaining, he agreed to bring a *pud* (sixteen kilos) of flour for each package. In this way, we had bread the whole winter, and the Kazakhs had their "tea party." I always wondered how the Kazakhs were able to steal so much grain and not get caught.

The next most valued products in the packages were the cocoa and saccharin. None of my customers for these commodities, though, was ready to buy a whole bottle of saccharin or a whole pound of cocoa, so I had to divide them into smaller quantities. Saccharin was bought by the grain. Little packets made from newspaper containing five or ten grains were the norm. These were usually bought by average Soviet refugees. Cocoa, also in little packets, two or four teaspoons

in each, went to the wives of the officials. They found out about my cocoa from each other and would come to our house. Oh, their terrible disappointment if they were told that all of it was gone, and that they would have to wait until the next parcel arrived! But we were never sure what the next parcel would contain. Five years had passed, and the roles had changed. In Sergeyevka I used to wade in slush and mud, knocking on doors for a few onions or potatoes. Here in Petropavlovsk, the manicured ladies knocked on my door for a few teaspoons of cocoa. It was all the same pettiness, in spite of the differences. The officials had excellent rations, and they were bursting from overeating. Only cocoa was missing.

The winter of 1944-1945 came to an end. The triumphant march of the Soviet army had started much earlier, and the bulletins which came from our speaker announced the liberation of one town after another. In time, towns in Poland began to be mentioned, towns which I knew, where I had friends and family. And then one day, loud and clear, came the name of the town of Lida.

It was a bright and sunny day. I looked at the wall, then back at the speaker, thinking that maybe something more would be revealed. They had named my town, my hometown, where I was born and had grown up. How could they continue on without any further details? My heart jumped and sank alternately. From the few refugees way back in 1941, and later from the wounded soldiers sent home, we knew that the path of the Nazi army was strewn with destruction and death, but a spark of hope still flickered. In my mind's eye, I saw my young cousins surrounding me on my return, welcoming me as a heroine, the survivor of a Siberian exile. How naive, silly and egotistic! How could I have compared the hell of a Nazi death camp with Siberia? Siberia was also hell, yet

there was no comparison. But we didn't know that yet.

After hearing that Lida was in Soviet hands again, I immediately sent a letter to Uncle Shmuel and Aunt Gittel.

About two months passed before a letter came back. It was postmarked in Lida. On the return address was the name Leibush Ferdman. I knew Leibush Ferdman. He was a professional electrician. For as long as I could remember, he had done all the electrical work in our factory and in our house. His family had perished, but he had survived in a partisan group. With trembling hands, I opened the letter and read:

"As Lida was razed to the ground," he wrote, "and no Jews remained, with the exception of those few who hid in the forests with the partisans, the hundreds of letters which had started to arrive from Russia were all delivered to the temporary city hall. The survivors in Lida were allowed to browse in case there would be a letter for them. I found your letter, but with sorrow I must tell you that no one from your family survived. Your Uncle Shmuel and his family were sent to the death camp of Yanov, not far from the town of Slonim. Your Aunt Gittel was in the Lida ghetto until May 8, 1942, when five thousand five hundred Jews were shot after digging huge, trench-like graves for themselves on the outskirts of the town called Piaski." I couldn't continue reading. The pain was too overwhelming.

My letters to Grodno, Vilna and Bialystok remained unanswered. There was nobody left to read them. It is impossible to relate the numbing pain, the helplessness, the despair we felt in those months.

Changes took place in the world at large, too. We heard, coming from our speaker, the news about President Roosevelt's death. We heard Vice President Truman's oath

when he became president. "In G-d we trust," he had said.

It was hard to believe that Soviet radio had allowed the name of G-d to be broadcast. Under Stalin's rule, it was unthinkable. The broadcasts also reported the Allies' bombardment of Berlin; the Soviets' march through Poland to Hungary, Czechoslovakia and the rest of Eastern Europe; and the final surrender of Germany on May 8, 1945, three years to the day after their slaughter of the Jews of Lida.

World War II had come to an end. The Soviets were jubilant. It was said that twenty million Soviet people were killed in the war. For the Soviets, one thousand or one million are just numbers with a few zeros more or less. People were not important. The only thing that was important to them was the spread of Communism over a third of Europe and their growing influence in many other parts of the world.

Poland was arguably one of the most important countries in our long *galus*, where Jewish life bloomed for centuries. Great Torah luminaries lived in Poland and influenced generations of *talmidei chachamim*. All aspects of Jewish genius found their expression in Poland, penetrating the wall of anti-Semitism and hatred. But although Poland was my birthplace, I have very little sentiment for that country and its people. Their treatment of Jews, both during the war and after, was so inhuman that any feelings I might have had for them were completely destroyed. I had absolutely no desire to return to Poland.

In the meantime, the events in the outside world bypassed us. Our status was still that of exiles. It even seemed that our situation took a turn for the worse. Our part of eastern Poland was now incorporated into Soviet Russia as a permanent province and we had become unwilling Soviet citizens. Would they keep the "easterners" in Siberia forever?

Or would they send us back to our burned-down towns to live among the Poles, whose anti-Semitism, enhanced and strengthened by the Germans, would make life a danger and a hell?

The war was over, but its residue lingered on like the unmelted snow of early spring. The future looked bleak.

BOOK SIX

Beyond the Cold Horizon

CHAPTER 38

A Taste of Soviet Paradise

THE SUMMER OF 1945, SHORT LIKE ALL OTHER SIBERIAN summers, brought a change in my mother's and my living conditions. The room which we had been sharing with Liba and Freidele was too small for four people. Because of our need and the impending winter, Liba had graciously extended her hospitality and squeezed us into their room. But now it was time to move on.

In my wanderings around Petropavlovsk, I had come upon an elderly couple named Kagan who lived at 154 Stalinska Street in a big, well-kept house. It had a big yard with a detached barn, a true Siberian status symbol, and a porch, a foyer and three other rooms. They didn't need any of the items I offered for sale, but when I asked if they had a room for rent, they both answered, simultaneously, "Yes, but on

one condition. Two hundred *chervoncy* a month, paid in advance and four cubic meters of firewood brought before you move in."

Here was the crux of the matter, I thought. No wonder they had said it in unison, they had probably repeated it many times. "Four cubic meters of firewood!" I repeated, astounded. If they had asked me to bring down the sky, my reaction would have been the same.

"I'll try to get the wood," I said. "If I succeed, I'll come back." I liked the room, the house was clean and very bright, but the terms were out of reach.

I'm sure Hashem keeps a certain number of miracles for everyone in times of dire need. Once again, the *shaliach* was Ravtzov. I myself didn't have the courage to approach him with such a request, but Brodatch, who often visited us when he was in Petropavlovsk, asked him outright for help with the firewood.

"No problem," Ravtzov said. "Let them rent the room. The wood will be delivered."

I ran to the Kagans with two hundred *chervoncy* in my pocket. I made a deal with them that we would move in, and if during the first two weeks the wood would not be delivered, we would move out. I knew that Ravtzov's word was like a promissory note. Friends who lived nearby, a very fine family called Svietytzki, also exiles, were very helpful in finding a man with a wagon and helping to move our belongings. In a few days, to the bewildered astonishment of Mr. Kagan, a huge wagon with two cubic meters of excellent birch firewood drove into the yard, depositing it on the ground.

"I have an order to deliver two more meters tomorrow," the driver said and drove off. Wood was Ravtzov's official business, although extracurricular deliveries like these, which

were probably made regularly to all the government establishments and their bosses in Petropavlovsk, were not quite part of the regular job description.

From that day on, the Kagans showed a special respect for my mother and me. We were given the first room, the bigger one. It was big enough to allow a makeshift partition to be made from sheets, so we had privacy, and the Kagans had undisturbed passage to their room.

The Kagans were also exiles but for another reason, from another time and by a different tyrant. Mr. Kagan had been a young revolutionary when the first attempt to overthrow the Czar's regime in 1905 had been aborted, and the participants were sent to Siberia in chains. The system had since changed, but the methods were the same. After serving his time, he decided to remain in Siberia. His young fiancee joined him, and they settled in Petropavlovsk. After the Communist revolution, Kagan, with his "clean" Communist record, got a job as a supervisor of a cooperative. His ideals fulfilled, he was happy.

If their name hadn't been Kagan, I wouldn't have had any clue to their being Jews, as there was no trace of Jewishness in their lifestyle. I was shocked when I first entered their room to see, prominently displayed, a portrait of Stalin flanked on both sides by framed photographs of Kagan's parents. His father was a Jew with a big *yarmulka* and a long beard, and his mother wore an old-style wig called a *peruk,* which covered her forehead almost to the eyes. A *frum*, old-world couple.

"My father was a *shochet* and a Talmudist," Mr. Kagan said with sarcasm, seeing my puzzled look.

Though I knew I had to be careful with Soviet people, I couldn't contain myself from saying, "You must be proud of your parents."

"Proud?" he cried out. "I am proud to be a party member. I am proud of serving a prison term for the cause of Communism. I am proud of my *rodina*, my homeland, which was the first of all countries to accomplish and realize the ideals of Marx and Lenin. I am proud of the fact that I, the son of a poor *shochet* in a small Ukrainian town, became a director of a big cooperative. I am proud that my daughter is finishing medical school and will become a doctor this coming spring. Be proud of ignorant, backward people with their medieval ways? Ha!"

"So why do you keep their pictures on the wall?" I could not help asking.

"To remind me of how I'd look if I had followed in their path," was his terse reply.

"I'm glad to hear that you are happy," I said. "It is so refreshing to see happy people." I remembered his happiness when the firewood had been delivered; he and his wife had been very anxious for firewood, which was no longer attainable for him since he retired.

Mr. Kagan's words about the Soviets' great achievement in realizing the ideals of Marx and Lenin and their worship of Stalin were the product of typical Soviet propaganda. I had heard those words so many times that they were coming out of my ears. What shocked me so forcibly was Mr. Kagan's denigration of his parents.

The door to their room was open and my mother had heard the conversation. When they were out of earshot, I couldn't contain my dismay any longer.

"Mama, how can a Jew's hatred of his own religion and heritage and his own parents lower him to such a degree?"

My mother looked into my pain-filled eyes with calm, patient understanding.

"Yes, it is very painful," my mother said. "It is all the result of our long *galus*. After two thousand years of being dispersed throughout the world, many of our people—too many, I'm afraid—have come to believe that by adopting the ways and lifestyles of the lands in which they live they will endear themselves to the gentiles and be spared our troubles. It hasn't helped them, though. Millions of Jews have brought destruction upon themselves in the name of progress, culture, civilization, enlightenment and materialism. Jews have contributed immensely to all of these ideals, but they have been rewarded with pogroms, blood libels and expulsions. And what is happening now, in our time . . ."

My mother's voice started to quiver and her eyes glazed over with tears. She remained silent for a few moments. A memory flashed through my mind of my mother in our house in Lida engrossed in a discussion about the rise of anti-Semitism in Poland. But my mother wasn't going to let me daydream. She collected herself and continued.

"Jews were given a priceless gift," she said quietly. "But many have exchanged the diamond for a worthless bauble."

"Yes, Mama. How true it is. Have you heard how Mr. Kagan prides himself on being a Communist Party member while he couldn't even get a few pieces of wood to warm his house?" Could a person who had lived in Communist Russia through its worst years be so blind to its complete breakdown of all moral and ethical values? What kind of paradise had the realization of the Communist ideals brought? Destruction, bloodshed, hunger and misery! These questions whirled in my mind, when I heard my mother's words again.

"Hashem gave us another treasure," she was saying, "but we have evidently misused it—*bechirah*, free will. We have to pray and beg Hashem to enable us to make the right choices

and select the right priorities."

My mother had touched on the essential point again, as she always did, and I was left with more to think about than I had expected. Rather than wonder about people like the Kagans, she reminded me again that there was still a great deal of work for us to do on ourselves.

A few weeks later, an incident with a chicken proved another example of the paradise in which the Kagans lived.

As in all households in Petropavlovsk, the yard of the Kagans wasn't for idle decoration. In fact, in my six years in Siberia, I didn't see a single flower anywhere. The Kagan's yard was planted with vegetables, with a space for the chicken to peck. They also kept a cow in the barn. These were their main sustenance. The Kagan's life was more similar to that of peasants in a *kolkhoz* than to anything else. One evening, I overheard them discussing a gray chicken.

"You know," said the wife. "The gray chicken didn't lay any eggs the whole summer long. She eats well and seems to be healthy. I don't know the reason."

"She is too old," her husband said. "That's why."

It was almost five and a half years since my mother and I had tasted any kind of meat. In Petropavlovsk, there was an old *shochet*, a relic from pre-World War I days. I don't know if he ever had a chance to use his *chalef*. Kosher *shechitah* was illegal altogether. Besides, I never saw a live chicken being sold on the market. Now, this unexpected combination of a live chicken being available coupled with the presence of the old *shochet* presented a singular opportunity.

"*Rosh Hashanah* is approaching. Maybe you should ask Mrs. Kagan if she wants to sell the chicken to us," suggested my mother when I told her about the conversation. "We'll keep her until *Yom Kippur*, and for the first time in six years,

we'll be able to *shlog kaparos*."

Our landlady was always willing to sell milk and eggs; after all, the cow was their main source of sustenance, why shouldn't it provide a little income, too? But a chicken?

I asked her.

"I'll think it over," she answered.

The proverbial question, a little altered, was heard now in their daily, hushed conversations.

"To sell, or not to sell?"

"Maybe she'll start laying eggs again. Maybe it's just a temporary problem."

A difficult decision to make! *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* passed without a deal. Our meals on *Sukkos* were also *milchig*. Then late in October, Mrs. Kagan noticed that the chicken was becoming thinner and losing her appetite. Her husband was right. The chicken was too old.

"If you want the chicken, I'll sell it to you," she said in a resigned tone.

"Mama, through all the holidays since we left Lida we have never had any meat. Should we buy the chicken now?" I asked. It seemed an extraordinary luxury in our reduced surroundings.

"Even after the *churban* of the Beis Hamikdash, *Chazal* advised us to go on with normal life!" my mother exclaimed. "Isn't *kavod Shabbos* enough reason to buy a chicken?"

I bought it and took it to the *shochet*. He slaughtered it secretly in a little shed behind his house. I *kashered* it in the barn.

We had some *fleishige* dishes that Aunt Etie had brought to the station in Lida at the time we were exiled. They were packed away in a bundle, as we hadn't had any use for them all those years. We still had our little electric stove, and we did

all our cooking in our room. We used their big, clay, kitchen oven only to bake bread. These ovens, like those in the Sergeyevka *kolkhoz*, were automatically *kashered* thoroughly every time they were started up for baking.

There was no need for a refrigerator in Siberia, especially from the beginning of October until the middle of May. All houses in the towns and *kolkhozy* had outside storage sheds where food was kept. I cut the chicken into an endless number of pieces, wrapped them accordion-like in a towel and overnight they were rock hard. For a long time, we had meat for *Shabbos*. Two legs and the neck, an onion and a few potatoes made an excellent *cholent*.

CHAPTER 39

A Special Doctor

THE SEVEN MONTHS MY MOTHER AND I LIVED IN THE Kagan house could have been the best, but they turned out to be the most traumatic.

To be sure, we lived in an airy, bright room, heated adequately by a large, floor-to-ceiling, tile-covered oven. Our combined sources of livelihood—Vaad Hatzalah parcels, my sewing and knitting, trading, door-to-door buying and selling—kept us fed and warm. We had a good relationship with our landlords, never mentioning politics and rarely religion. They were helpful when needed, and I reciprocated by knitting for Mrs. Kagan.

We occasionally had visitors whenever time allowed, usually on *Shabbos*. We met the family of Rabbi Levi Belitzki, with whom we became very close. We also visited with Mrs.

Baikalski, who had moved with her family to Petropavlovsk, Dora Kaplinska, the Hurvitzes and a few others. Liba and Freidele used to come over. We shared our worries and our hopes, and the togetherness made life more bearable.

My mother never showed emotion when confronted with bad news, hardship or pain. She was always calm and level-headed, always in full control of the situation at every moment. It seemed that all the tragedies and miseries we had gone through since the beginning of the war were suppressed by her unusually strong will power, and they didn't show in any outward signs. Her strong belief in *hashgachah pratis* was the main factor.

Physically, she had never been strong. She had survived the chokingly crowded living conditions, the numbing cold of the railroad labor camp and the days when our only food was a thin, grayish liquid made from a few tablespoons of flour cooked in rationed water. But now that our situation had become more bearable, the dam gave way.

The news of the annihilation of our entire family was the last straw. One day in November, my mother woke up with high fever and pain in her abdomen. Mrs. Kagan had a rubber hot-water bottle, which I applied, but the pain persisted. I had a few packets of aspirin. This lowered the temperature, but only temporarily. How could I get a doctor? There were no private doctors. All the hospitals in town were still filled with war casualties. For the civilian population there was only a polyclinic, a place where patients were checked, given a prescription and sent home.

One possibility we eliminated was Dr. Kupitzki, a Jewish man in his fifties, a native resident of Petropavlovsk. His father had been a rich merchant, but not rich enough to live outside the Pale of Settlement. He had been caught by the

Czar's gendarmes in St. Petersburg and exiled to Siberia without the right to return. During the reign of Czar Alexander III and Czar Nicholas II, this law applied only to Jews. Dr. Kupitzki, for some transgression, had lost his license to practice medicine. The Kagans told me that he was an excellent doctor but he would never take the risk of seeing a patient. There was also a doctor who was a Polish exile, but he didn't have a Soviet license to practice medicine.

"You can't take your mother to the polyclinic!" Mrs. Kagan advised. "The waiting line is three or four blocks long. People come in the middle of the night to wait for it to open. With such a high fever and pain and in such cold weather, it's too dangerous. Go tomorrow, early in the morning, and when you're admitted, ask for a doctor to be sent home. They used to do this."

I left the house when it was still dark. The Kagans lived far from the center of town, and when I arrived at the polyclinic, it was just as my landlady had said. I had to go three blocks back to take my place at the end of the line.

The biting wind was the worst. The line behind me grew, and the wall of people in front of me gave at least a little protection from the wind. We were stamping our feet, and a thin cloud of steam wavered above our heads from the sighs of the sick and restless.

When my turn finally came, I tearfully begged the girl behind the desk to send a doctor to see my mother. She was impatient with me and showed no desire even to listen to what I had to say.

"We have many sick people. If your mother can't come here, let her stay in bed until she gets better," was the young woman's highly professional advice.

"*V'chom dela?*" I heard a voice ask. "What is it all about?"

I turned and saw a dark-haired, bespectacled, portly woman approaching. I repeated my plea.

"I am Dr. Siegal," she said. "Give me your address. Between four and five this afternoon, I'll come myself."

When I returned home, I found Mrs. Kagan near my mother's bed. With a worried look, she put her finger to her mouth, indicating that I shouldn't talk. I took a look at my mother, and my heart sank. Her face was dark yellow. In a while, she opened her eyes, and they were the same color. She was delirious and didn't recognize me.

One hour, two hours—how long an hour can stretch when you want it to rush by! Every few minutes, I ran to the window, hoping that by some miracle the doctor would come early.

The wind stopped, and a dense, lethargic snow fell incessantly. Even the snow had a yellow tint. Everything I looked at seemed to be yellow.

"In two more hours the snow will be half a meter high," I said to Mrs. Kagan. "How will Dr. Siegal be able to walk such a long way?"

"What? Dr. Siegal herself will come? You must be mistaken. She's the head of the polyclinic. She never makes visits herself. She sends one of the other doctors."

"I spoke to her, and she said she would come herself," I insisted.

"Impossible." Mr. Kagan, who had heard the conversation, upheld his wife's view.

When Mr. Kagan opened the door at five in the afternoon and saw Dr. Siegal, his face showed the same astonishment it had shown when the wagon with wood had arrived. The sled driver who brought the doctor asked permission to wait in the kitchen until the doctor was ready to leave.

Dr. Siegal examined my mother thoroughly, and her

diagnosis was a severe inflammation of the liver. She gave my mother an injection, and the next morning she sent a nurse with medicines. The nurse also drew some blood for an analysis.

Mr. Kagan's eyes almost popped out of their sockets when he saw the nurse handing me the medicine. It would have taken three days to fill the prescription at the *apteka.*

"Chto ty? Podkupila tvoyevo B-ga?" he asked incredulously. "What's with you? Did you bribe your G-d?"

He was beside himself—I couldn't tell if it was wonder or anger. My mother and I were exiles, which meant enemies of the Soviet people. How could undesirable elements have such privileges?

"Yes," I said, not wanting to miss an opportunity to make a point. "We did bribe Hashem. With prayer, observing *Shabbos,* not eating *treife* and trying to observe all the other commandments in the most unfavorable conditions."

"Nonsense!" he said and went outside to shovel the snow.

Hashem had sent us an angel in the person of Dr. Siegal. I gave my mother the medicine every four hours, day and night, in a tablespoon of warm milk, as the doctor ordered. The pain subsided a little and the temperature fell, but the yellow color didn't pale. In a few days, Dr. Siegal's sled again stopped in front of the house. She had the results of the blood test and had brought additional medicine. She also ordered a very light diet. Luckily, I had farina which I got in exchange for cocoa, and I cooked it in water mixed with a little milk until it was almost transparent.

For a whole month, Dr. Siegal came twice a week to check on my mother's condition. She had a sled and driver at her disposal, and in the evening after the polyclinic closed, she took the trouble to come to us. With Hashem's help, and Dr.

Siegal's devotion and exclusive care, my mother's condition began to improve. After six weeks in bed, she felt strong enough to walk around, though she still couldn't go outside. In the meantime, Dr. Siegal became our close friend, and she would drop in whenever she had time, both professionally and socially.

She told us her life story. She was about fifty years old, had never married and had come to Siberia a few years before as a war refugee from Kiev. Before the war, she had been a professor of medicine in the University of Kiev. In Petropavlovsk, as in Kiev before the war, she lived together with her two brothers, one older brother, also a professor at Kiev University, in the Faculty of Engineering, and one younger brother who ran the household. None of them had ever married. They came from an aristocratic and very religious Jewish family. Although they held high professional positions, they had remained strictly observant. They certainly couldn't find religious partners on their intellectual level; there weren't any religious young people in Soviet Russia anymore. And because of the Iron Curtain, emigration was out of the question. Not wanting to compromise their religious convictions, their only choice was to remain single. As the two older siblings were busy with their professional work, the youngest decided not to pursue a career and devoted himself to running a kosher home for them.

It wasn't easy. To find kosher food required time, energy and caution. In those years, it was considered counterrevolutionary to show any interest in religious observance, so the utmost care had to be taken not to provoke suspicion. The younger brother did all the cooking because they didn't want to rely on a non-Jewish cook, and he also did all the other household chores himself to keep their lifestyle private.

At work, Dr. Siegal manipulated things to avoid violating *Shabbos*, except in cases of *pikuach nefesh*. After hearing all this, the *chessed* she did in caring for my mother became less mysterious to me.

Her older brother was employed as an engineer in an ammunition factory in Petropavlovsk, which had been evacuated from European Russia. The most unbelievable thing was that he openly, with the permission of the K.G.B., abstained from work on *Shabbos*. This fact puzzled many, but evidently he was indispensable, and the need for ammunition was urgent.

Soon after she recovered from this illness, my mother fell ill again. Once more, she had high fever, and now a deep cough.

"It's pleurisy," Dr. Siegal said. Antibiotics were unknown in Siberia, although we had heard that recently some wonder drug called penicillin had been discovered "somewhere," a euphemism for the Western world.

My mother had to spend long weeks in bed again. The little electric stove was burning around the clock, keeping water and milk warm. The only medicine was aspirin and cough syrup. My mother's cough was deep and prolonged, and it left her very weak. During the day when I had to go out, Mrs. Kagan was of tremendous help. I repaid her with long hours of knitting for her and her medical student daughter, whom I never saw; the need for doctors was so urgent that her daughter's medical school in Omsk, four hundred kilometers east of Petropavlovsk, didn't even allow for New Year's vacations.

The "short order doctors" took a crash course for four years right after high school. "In wartime, everything is different," they used to explain. "The young doctors will gain

their experience by practicing." I was happy that Dr. Siegal wasn't a wartime doctor.

Among all this work and worry, the year 1945 rolled into 1946. The new Communist Poland was put on the map again, altered geographically, economically, politically and socially. It became a satellite in the Soviet constellation.

Rumors began circulating about an eventual repatriation. When? How? We didn't know. A Polish committee was organized and meetings were permitted, though they were adequately infiltrated with K.G.B. agents and informers. A few surviving partisans travelled all the way to Siberia to be reunited with their families. Privately, they told their hair-raising stories. At the meetings, they were the speakers, praising the bravery of the Soviet partisans (actually dispersed military units trapped in the Polish forests) and the help they had gotten from them. Sometimes, a gala event was organized. A few songs were sung, some poetry read, and a few speeches, all tailored to the Soviets' taste, were delivered. Culture thrived. We all began to feel that a new sunrise lurked beyond the cold horizon.

Little by little, my mother recovered from the pleurisy, but she felt very weak. Dr. Siegal advised her to stay indoors. This coincided, however, with an unexpected announcement from the K.G.B. that all Polish residents, in alphabetical order, had to come register at their headquarters. There had been similar counts during the previous years, but we were almost sure that this time it had another purpose.

When our turn came, I had to have two witnesses and the doctor's note to be able to sign for my mother. For two months after the registration nothing happened. The uncertainty was very depressing.

Meanwhile, *Purim* approached and for the first time in

Siberia we baked *hamantashen*. The filling was grated carrot mixed with dried apricot. One of our friends had discovered friends in Tashkent, also exiles, and a parcel exchange began between them. Tashkent, in Central Asia, two thousand kilometers southeast of Petropavlovsk, had a subtropical climate where grapes, apricots and peaches grew in abundance. Our friends used to sell the dried fruit by the cup.

At the same time, a group of Jews in Petropavlovsk got together a few days before *Purim*, and a decision was made to bake *matzos* on a larger scale. For this purpose, they were able to rent an apartment with a kitchen for a few days from an elderly woman who went to stay with a friend.

Every participant had to help clean and *kasher* the house. There were two exceptions, both Soviet Jews. Ravtzov, though he did not keep kosher himself, wanted *matzos* for his mother. He provided the wood. The second was Dr. Kupitzki, who was extremely happy to have *matzos* for the first time in thirty years. I offered to bake *matzos* for Dr. Siegal, but she said they had baked for themselves all these years and would do the same now.

The operation began before sunrise the day after *Purim*. Everyone brought his own flour. We brought all the *kashered* utensils, and a real *mashgiach* took care of the *kashrus*. He was Rabbi Levi Belitzki, later a very respected rabbi in New York. About twenty-five people worked, alternating functions, until late into the night. We baked over two hundred kilograms of *matzos* that day. The K.G.B. discovered the crime the day after. Informers were everywhere. They let us keep the *matzos*, but the poor woman in whose apartment this terrible outrage took place had to go to prison for two months.

When I returned home with my bundle of *matzos*, far past midnight and exhausted enough to faint, I found the light

burning in our room and Mrs. Kagan near my mother's bed. My mother had high fever again, and the yellow color had returned. When Dr. Siegal saw her the next day, the expression on her face told me how serious her condition was. Dr. Siegal again began coming twice a week.

"It is more serious this time, because being ill all winter has greatly lowered your mother's resistance," she told me. "She is also anemic, and I'll add some iron to the medicine."

I asked her if my mother had pain, because she never complained.

"Of course, she has pain," the doctor replied. "I have never seen a person control herself like your mother does, not even uttering a sound or a moan. Your mother is very brave."

Pesach was approaching. Word spread that in the first days of April, right after *Pesach*, transports with Polish exiles would be sent back to Poland. An unusual excitement, a mixture of happiness and pain filled the hearts of everyone. We were happy to end the Siberian hell, but what and whom would we find upon our return? We were not given personal documents. There were only lists with names. Human cargo again.

My mother's condition did not improve. She became emaciated and weak to the point of being unable to sit up in bed. Her temperature fluctuated, and her color didn't change. Dr. Siegal did the best she could.

The doctor also knew about the repatriation and was frank in advising me not to undertake the trip. She not only advised, she insisted and pleaded that I shouldn't endanger my mother's life. Despair was a mild expression for the way we all felt. Friends and compatriots from Poland came to visit, looked at my mother, looked at me and shook their

heads in pity. My mother had a vague idea of what was happening, but she was too weak to react.

What could we do? Should we remain in Siberia alone, when all the Polish citizens were leaving? Without documents, without means, without friends? Dr. Siegal and Ravtzov, our only real friends who were Soviet citizens, were planning to return to their hometown of Kiev now that the war was over. The Vaad Hatzalah parcels, the mainstay of our sustenance, would also stop. To remain in Siberia, we would be forced to accept Soviet citizenship. Wouldn't it be a slow death for both of us? As long as we had been a group of Jews together, no matter how difficult the circumstances, the togetherness, the mutual help we extended to each other, the sorrows and hopes we had shared made it possible, somehow, to survive.

But if we stayed, my mother and I would be alone, with nobody in the world. Furthermore, Mrs. Kagan informed me that when her daughter graduated in May, she would need the room. I was trapped between the fear of remaining in Siberia and the danger to my mother if we travelled. I was already familiar with the conditions in a Soviet cattle car filled with thirty to forty people travelling a stretch of ten thousand kilometers.

I had the fullest confidence in Dr. Siegal, both as a doctor and as a friend, but I still wanted to hear another opinion. I told her this, and she did not object.

CHAPTER 40

A Thousand Splinters

I WENT TO DR. KUPITZKI FOR ADVICE. HE LIVED IN A WELL-kept house where remnants of elegance from the past were still in evidence. Pictures hung on the walls, the floors were covered with rugs, worn but clean, and there were good pieces of furniture. It seemed that his father, as a Czarist exile, had been spared the confiscation of property and belongings by the Soviets. His family consisted of his wife, two daughters and a widowed sister with a child. His wife, the sister and his older daughter had jobs, so the family was more or less comfortable. They didn't mix with other people and lived an isolated life. His younger daughter Vera married a man from Poland and later left with the other Polish exiles.

I came late in the afternoon when the whole family was at home. They thought it was a social visit, brought tea and

something to eat, and knowing that with me they could feel free to talk, they started to bombard me with questions about life on the "other side," at least, as I had known it before the war.

I felt their eagerness and longing to hear, if not to experience, how people lived in the free world. I was sitting on pins and needles, but plain courtesy dictated that I answer their endless questions.

"Yes," I said, confirming the truth of some of their wildest imaginings. Compared to their experience, plain stories about bountiful grocery stores and a choice of newspapers seemed like fairy tales. "But everything I am describing happened before the war. What it will be like now is hard to predict."

Dr. Kupitzki finished his tea, put down the cup and with a wide sweep of his hand said, "In a free world, wounds will heal sooner, people will return to their normal lives. Although it is very hard for us to be hopelessly separated, we are happy that at least our younger daughter will not feel the constricting chains which keep us prisoners in our own four walls."

Finally, I brought up the problem that was pressing on my heart. He bit his lower lip, a habit I had noticed before, and then put both his hands on the table, saying with a doubtful expression on his face, "There are a few doctors in Petropavlovsk, but the only one I would recommend is a certain army colonel who just came home for a short furlough. I am absolutely convinced that he will not come to you, and it is most likely that his orderly will not even let you in to see him. But you can try. Even in Moscow you won't find a better doctor. Here is the address."

There is no stronger motivation than necessity and hope.

The next morning was a Friday, and I went to see him. The door was opened by a soldier, the colonel's orderly. To come to a Soviet colonel without a recommendation from higher places is most unusual. I saw it on the orderly's puzzled face. When I told him, suddenly bursting into tears, that I wanted to see the colonel as a doctor because my mother was in critical condition, a nervous flicker crossed his face. It showed indecision and fear.

"The colonel is here on a short vacation. He is not seeing patients."

"Please, please ask him. Maybe he'll agree to see me for only two minutes." I was still standing in the open door, the orderly looking at me, but probably envisioning instead the enraged face of the colonel when he would tell him my request. Then he turned, not closing the door, and disappeared inside the house. In a few moments, he was back.

"Come," he said. "Go into the second room on the left."

The door to the colonel's room was open, and I went straight in. He was sitting behind a desk in full uniform but without a cap, leaning back in his chair.

"*Sadityes,*" he said. "Please sit down."

No rage, no anger? From my experiences, I equated a Soviet uniform with rage and anger. Could the inside of a Soviet uniform contain a human being? It turned out that it did. He patiently listened to my story, which I interrupted only to swallow my tears.

"You may tell Dr. Siegal that I'll be at your house tomorrow afternoon at three," he said after I had finished my story. "Tell her to meet me there."

Was I hearing right? I stood up quickly, afraid he might change his mind. He put a piece of paper and a pen in front of me, and I wrote down the address. I thanked him and left.

On the way back, braving the snow and the March wind, it occurred to me suddenly that all the excitement about getting to this doctor was only for a second opinion. Was he going to perform a miracle? Would he, by just seeing my mother, put strength into her emaciated body, or bring her instant health? In my desperate, panicky state, I realized I should not turn to this or to any doctor, but to the only One who heals, the Almighty. Only Hashem could help her and only from Him could I expect a miracle.

On Fridays, I used to fire up the big tile oven in our room a few hours later so that the heat would last over *Shabbos*. The furnace was big enough to hold more pots than our small tea kettle and one-dish-meal pot. The oven had a hinged, cast iron, tightly-fitted door which kept the heat from escaping.

The days were still short, and it was after candle-lighting time when I was finally able to make the trip to Dr. Siegal with the results of my visit to the army doctor. I had never had an opportunity to be in her apartment before. She lived very far from us and always came by sled.

For a few moments, I stood mesmerized by the sight before my eyes. Cattle cars, trains, tents, barns were swept away as if by a magician's wand. It was a Friday night from years long gone! Here in Petropavlovsk, in Stalin's Russia! A brightly lit room, a big round table covered with a snowy white tablecloth, two tall, silver candlesticks with real candles, a white embroidered cloth covering what could only be *Shabbos challos*. Fine porcelain dishes and gleaming tableware. A cheerful, serene *Shabbos* atmosphere in every corner of the room, which otherwise was very modestly furnished.

Dr. Siegal was sitting at the table when I came in. A tall man was standing in one corner *davening*. A Soviet university professor, in Stalin's time, *davening* Friday night?

The younger brother, short and slim, was busy in the kitchen readying the *Shabbos* meal. I took in every detail. Somehow, it elated me. The festivity was contagious.

"I am glad the colonel agreed to come," Dr. Siegal assured me. "I'll be on time."

On the long walk back home, I had enough time to reflect on the situation facing my mother and me. It was clear that my mother wasn't in a position to make any decisions. Would I be able to carry the load of responsibility? Inside me a voice kept repeating, "Look at the Siegal family! They have risked their freedom and possibly their lives, but they've stood steadfastly by their convictions. What moral strength they possess! What faith and trust in Hashem they have! Surely, Hashem will not abandon us in our time of need." My thoughts were shooting in a thousand directions. It's my mother's life, *my mother's*! I kept repeating to myself. The closer I came to our house the more agitated I became. The calmness I had felt in the Siegal house had blown out with the cold outside and the fear in my heart.

My mother was dozing when I returned. The flame in the little *kurnik* was flickering, the room was half dark. Above the partition, a dim light from the Kagans' kitchen supplemented the illumination. My mother woke up.

"Why are you up so late?" she asked.

"No, Mama, it is not late," I told her. "You slept so you think it is the middle of the night. I'll give you something to eat."

With effort and at additional cost, I had been able to obtain white flour from which I made toast. I gave my mother the medicine, then toast and tea with milk, and then I ate. I felt very tired. When had the day started? It seemed like a month ago.

On Dr. Siegal's orders, I had to give my mother the medicine every four hours, day and night. I didn't have an alarm clock, and I wouldn't have used one anyway, as it would have awakened the Kagans. A human being probably has a built-in, subconscious mechanism which activates itself when there is an absolute need. I went to bed and fell asleep immediately. Four hours later on the dot I was up, gave my mother the medicine, helped her with her needs and went back to sleep again.

Dr. Siegal came before three. On *Shabbos*, she didn't use the sled. She walked. I don't know what pretext she used to leave the polyclinic early. The colonel came in full uniform, his shiny boots and army coat immaculate, the insignia on his cap and shoulder straps indicating his high rank. At the sight of a full-fledged colonel on his doorstep, Mr. Kagan was completely beside himself.

The Polish doctor, a young and inexperienced Jewish exile from Poland, also asked permission to be present. When they were all seated, Dr. Siegal related my mother's medical history from the first day she had seen her. From time to time, the colonel inclined his head, interrupting only to ask a question. A few times, he looked doubtfully at my mother, then when Dr. Siegal finished, he said he wanted to examine her himself. He spent a considerable amount of time checking my mother. He wasn't in a rush, and he was very polite and serious. I was surprised at his attitude and respect. Finally, he sat back, crossed his legs and, measuring his words, looked up at me.

I was standing at the foot of my mother's bed. Before he began, I knew what he was going to say. He praised Dr. Siegal for her correct treatment and expressed regret that, under the present conditions and the overcrowding in the hospitals,

a patient so seriously ill as my mother wouldn't be able to benefit from full-time medical care. To undertake the long and arduous journey back to Poland in such a condition was, in his opinion, absurd and tantamount to a death sentence.

I remember his exact words. "You will not bring her to your destination alive." With this he concluded his speech, stood up, put on his coat and shook hands with everyone present. I saw him to the door, and before he stepped outside, he repeated his last words. I thanked him heartily for his kindness, and he disappeared behind the low gate.

It was the most agonizing *Pesach* I ever experienced in my life. Six years earlier, the *Pesach* my mother and I had spent in the train on the way to Siberia was torturous enough, but then my mother was well, and a glimmer of hope that we would still meet my father sustained us.

My mother heard the doctor's words. She had her eyes closed, but weakened as she was, she fully understood their meaning. She didn't cry, didn't complain and didn't speak. She was silent as always. Dr. Siegal continued her visits, and I continued to give the same medication every four hours. There was no change in my mother's condition.

A week after *Pesach*, we heard that the repatriation had begun. Someone saw a transport from another region passing Petropavlovsk. Then we heard that some of our friends from Tokushy had left and that more transports were on their way to Poland. Tokushy, as a central railway station, served many villages where exiles were still living from the day they had been brought to Siberia.

The tension was high. In Petropavlovsk, everyone was packed and waiting for the call. Then someone came with news that a transport was due to leave in a few days from

Petropavlovsk itself. In addition, thousands of people were brought from the villages around Petropavlovsk and left waiting at the station to be loaded into the cattle cars. I, too, packed our belongings. I had to pack in any case. The Kagans' daughter would be coming home in a few weeks, and we would have to move. I wanted to cry, I wanted to pray, but I couldn't concentrate. I was as hard as a rock and yet, at the same time, broken into a thousand splinters. Then the day arrived. A transport with a list of names including my mother's and mine was due to leave in a week. It was at the end of April. At least, they were giving us advance notice, not like the fifteen minutes we'd had when we had been taken from our home.

I still didn't know what to do. I was dazed, doing things in a trance. In the kitchen, I saw Mrs. Kagan mixing white dough, which was unusual.

"I'm baking white bread, and I'll make toast for you to take along," she said. "I see that you don't know how to prepare for such a long trip."

A dam was suddenly removed. My head fell on Mrs. Kagan's shoulder, and an uncontrollable stream of tears started to flow down my face and onto her apron.

"Yes, Hashem," I cried. "You will help us! My mother will survive! She will eat the toast, every crumb of it. You will help. O Almighty, You will help."

People sometimes act in an unusual manner which cannot be explained by reason or logic. There are times when *hashgachah pratis* takes over without letting us decide for ourselves one way or the other.

When we were taken in the middle of the night and thrown into wagons to be exiled to Siberia, the families left behind were filled with grief and despair for us. And we,

suffering so much during the years in exile, didn't know that for reasons known only to the Almighty, we had been chosen to survive, and our families, who seemed safe, to perish.

It wasn't my decision to take my mother out of Russia; Hashem gave me courage and hope. He turned the danger of that difficult trip into a miracle of survival.

CHAPTER 41

The Long Journey Back

WHEN DR. SIEGAL CAME THE NEXT DAY, I TOLD HER about my decision to leave. She did not attempt to dissuade me any longer, and good soul that she was, she just said she would come again and bring a supply of medicine. If possible, she would try to get a pint of blood to give my mother a transfusion. She kept her word.

It was an unusually early and warm spring, and the snow disappeared very quickly. Two days before our departure, Dr. Siegal came in a carriage instead of a sled, together with a nurse who was carrying the stand on which to hang the glass transfusion bottle. The doctor gave me a long list of instructions, a supply of medicine and many good wishes for my mother's recovery. I have never forgotten the *chessed* she did for my mother. She was like a flower in a jungle of thorns.

There were other good people in Russia, including truly righteous gentiles. For example, the Russian military doctor. Who had forced him to come to a desolate, poor exile family and spend a few hours of his time? Then there was the chairman of the Selsoviet in Tokushy, who had walked the streets until late at night until he found someone he trusted to warn me about my imminent deportation to the Arctic gulag. And Ravtzov, the assimilated Jew who lent us a helping hand at every turn. The appreciation I feel for them and a few others will never fade from my memory.

The last two days were like a whirlwind. I had to finish the packing, find a wagon to take us to the station and prepare adequate and suitable food for the long trip, because we knew that we would receive only the bluish-black, clay-like bread. Then I had to arrange some kind of comfortable means for my mother to make the initial trip from the house to the station, which was about four kilometers away.

The blood transfusion seemed to make my mother a bit stronger. The next day, she was able to take a few steps around the room, but then she had to lie down again. The only way for my mother to ride was on a stretcher. Here Mr. Kagan, who had become as helpful as his wife, came up with an idea.

"I have an old door in my shed," he said. "I'll cut a hole in each corner for handles, you'll spread out a few blankets, and we'll put the stretcher on top of the trunk. We can put the valises and bundles in the back of the wagon."

I did as Mr. Kagan suggested. Our old iron bed, which had accompanied us on all of our wanderings in Siberia, was folded now and waiting to make the trip with us to Poland. My mother, fully dressed, lay on the stretcher made up with blankets on top of the Kagan's bed. When the man with the

wagon arrived, Mr. Kagan helped him carry our things and arranged them in the wagon as planned. Before I left the house, I gave the Kagans some nice presents, which they fully deserved. Mrs. Kagan kept wiping her eyes with her apron. As the wagon began to move, Stalinska Street disappeared from my sight and my life.

I told the driver to move very slowly so the wagon wouldn't shake. It took us two hours to reach the station which was only a half-hour's ride away. I climbed down from the wagon and told the man to wait. I went to look at my mother and felt a stab in my heart. She was so pale, so thin, so quiet, like a helpless child. My stoic, brave mother! Was I doing the right thing?

"*Nu, tchevo stoish*?" the driver asked impatiently. "Why are you just standing there?"

"Wait here," I told him. "I have to find my train."

The busy Siberian station in those days after the war was an unforgettable sight. Endless columns of trains travelled in opposite directions; numerous side tracks held long trains, some full and some empty. People were pushing, children crying. It was a tumultuous, chaotic nightmare.

The only thing I knew was the number of our train. The military guides—not guards with rifles, but still K.G.B. men—carried lists with the names and the assignments to train cars. They divided the people into groups of thirty to thirty-five in a regular car and sixty in a double car, which they called a *Pulmanovski*. No one knew who his fellow travellers would be.

Because of the slow progress of the wagon carrying my mother, the majority of passengers were already in the cars when we arrived. I was lucky to find our train without too much difficulty. Among the churning mass of people, I noticed my friend Dora Kaplinska, whom I had known before

the war and met again on my apartment-seeking trip with the Polish women from the *kolkhoz* Sergeyevka. Like us, she had ended up in Petropavlovsk. I pushed my way to her, and it turned out that we were in the same car. She told me that a few other families with whom we had been close in Petropavlovsk were also in the same car with us.

I elbowed my way back to my mother. The driver had to make a big circle to bring his wagon closer to the train, which was on a side track. Ours was a regular car. There were thirty people including two children. The sight inside the car was familiar. There were two double bunks on each side of the door, with the bundles stuffed under the lower bunk. The car was high, and a wooden box was placed in front of the door instead of a ladder. I first carried my mother up onto the train, as I would a small child. Then, with the help of others, I carried up the trunk and the rest of our possessions.

If I had found a place on the lower bunk, it would have been much easier, but the lower bunks were all taken. My mother was too weak to climb up to the higher bunk, but I had no choice. One upper bunk was filled, and on the other, there was an empty space next to one wall. The first thing I did was spread a blanket and pillow so that my mother could lie down. I had to lift her up, seat her, then climb up myself to help her to her place. I put another pillow for myself next to my mother's and took out a warm quilt, because the car was drafty and it was still cold. Our little blue pail was filled with milk, and when we were more or less settled, I gave my mother the medicine and a piece of Mrs. Kagan's toast with milk. Only then did I eat a hard-boiled egg with bread.

Each car was given a list with the names of the people assigned to it. However, in the hustle of bringing our things into the car and arranging them, I had not checked the list,

and I didn't know who our neighbors were to be. Worry and exhaustion overwhelmed me, and I lay down next to my mother for a while to rest. I must have dozed off when a booming bellow made me sit up abruptly.

"I don't want you on *our* bunk," a rough voice was saying. "I don't want my wife and daughters next to your sick mother. Take your *shmattes* and get out this minute!"

My tormentor wasn't a K.G.B. man but a Jew from Poland, whom everyone in Petropavlovsk knew and heard. In Petropavlovsk, he had lived on a grand scale, financed by activities that are better left untold. He, his wife, his two daughters and sons-in-law had never worked. They paraded around in black leather coats and shiny boots, the ultimate in Soviet high style, and always looked very well-fed. People appeased him, smiled at him, greeted him—and avoided him like the black plague.

I started to cry and plead with him that my mother's illness was not contagious, that she was only very weak and that, besides, her place was next to the wall and I would be between her and his family. But how dare I contradict him? In his rage, he grabbed our valises, the bundles and the trunk. With the help of his two sons-in-law, in five minutes all our belongings were on the platform in front of the car. My friends, my good close friends, lowered their heads and averted their eyes in shame and fear. No one uttered a word. I think only Aaron David and his family would have had the courage to protest, but they had left with another transport two weeks earlier. I understood my friends' positions. We were still in Siberia, still in the hands of the K.G.B.

I carried my mother outside, took down the blankets and pillows and made room for her to lie more or less comfortably on top of the pile.

The burning urgency of the moment dulled the pain, insult, hurt and anger. Only one thought occupied my mind, that I had to find a place in one of the other cars. From our other Siberian experiences with such train columns, we knew that one could never know when the train was scheduled to leave. It could be in ten minutes, an hour or two days. I took a look at the train. Our car was closer to the left end. I started with the next car to the left.

"No, we are already full," was the answer I received. The same reply was heard in the second car and the third, and every other one until the end.

I ran back, stopped for a moment and asked my mother if she was comfortable.

"Yes," she said. Only the one word.

"Don't worry, Mama. I'll find a place."

"Yes," she said again.

The train was long. In some cars, I saw people from Petropavlovsk whom I knew, some from villages and townlets in the surrounding area.

"I have a sick mother," I pleaded. "She is not contagious."

"We have no room to move as it is," was the only answer I heard. I ran from car to car. The sun was already setting. The nagging fear that the train would start moving any minute pierced my heart like a sharp knife. I started to run frantically back and forth, accomplishing nothing.

Are people without feelings? I wondered. I knew them, they knew me, so why the indifference? I found no concern, no understanding, no pity.

I ran further, then stopped for a moment to catch my breath. I looked up. Mrs. Ohr was sitting on a wooden box near the door of a train car. She was from a town not far from Lida. She was alone in Siberia. Her husband was in prison,

and her only son, an officer in the Polish army, had survived the war and was waiting for her in Warsaw. I had met her many times in Petropavlovsk. She played the role of a *grande dame*, always manicured and coiffured and very selective in choosing her company. When I came closer to the car, I noticed that it was a double wagon, a *Pulmanovski*. The space between the bunks was more than twice that of the regular cars. Because of its size, it didn't seem to be too crowded in this car, but when I asked her if there was room for my sick mother and me, she gave the same answer as all the others had given. She knew my mother and knew about her illness.

By now, my will to argue was atrophied, and automatically, I started to move on.

Suddenly, I heard a voice from the depths of the car. "What? A sick woman? Mishka, let's go help."

A young man, wiry and agile, sprang down from the upper bunk, followed by a short, stocky fellow.

"Where is the sick woman?" he said. "Is it your mother? My friend Mishka and I will bring her here. There is enough room."

Mrs. Ohr, too thick-skinned to show embarrassment, no longer protested.

It was completely dark outside when the young men finished bringing in my mother on the stretcher and then our bundles. Someone lit the kerosene lantern, and I noticed that Mrs. Ohr was the only one there from Petropavlovsk.

Volodia, the quick and energetic young man who had offered to help us, took command immediately. He spoke as quickly as he acted.

"First, we'll make a place for the sick woman, and for you because you have to be near your mother. Here," he said, pointing to the far wall between the bunks, "we'll put the

trunk, and in front of it the bed for your mother. Hey, you," he called out to someone on the lower bunk. "You'll have to move your box under your bunk. We need the space here."

Soon, the trunk was in place and the bed unfolded. Inspired by his energy, I quickly put my mother's quilt and pillow on the bed and helped her lie down. She was drained beyond her last bit of strength. I didn't feel much better.

"Your mother needs some privacy," Volodia observed. "Do you have any sheets?"

I pulled some sheets from one of our bundles and handed them to Volodia.

"Yadzia," Volodia called in Polish in the direction of the upper bunk, from where he had jumped down before. "Look in the corner under the basket. There are some cords. Throw them to me."

In the yellowish light of the lantern, I saw a blond, young woman leaning over the edge of the bunk with a ball of string in her hand. She dropped it on the floor. In her other arm she held an infant who, disturbed from his sleep, started to cry.

"It's my wife and baby," Volodia explained, and he started to fasten the sheets together.

He moved like lightning. All I heard was, "Mishka, the hammer. Mishka, a nail. Mishka, pull the other end. Mishka, move this away." And Mishka obeyed his commander's orders like a soldier on a drill. In no time, a small area was cordoned off in the middle of the wagon.

Was this all real? I wondered. How had we gotten from the bleakest tragedy to a miracle? But then again, how would a miracle be obvious if it were not preceded by a cataclysm?

From the beginning of the war, my mother and I had overcome many challenges and tragedies, but this particular day probably left the strongest imprint on my mind. From

time to time, until this very day, I have dreams in many variations, but all of the same substance—running after a departing train with luggage spread all around.

What I didn't realize at the time was that the miracle wasn't just in finding a place, but in every minute of the ensuing thirty-day trip. Had we not been forcibly removed from the car to which we had been assigned, the doctor's warning would almost surely have come to pass. In retrospect, it was clear that the Almighty had chosen for that scoundrel to act in such an inhuman manner so that we would be forced to move and my mother would survive.

Who can understand the paths along which the Almighty leads us? What may seem disastrous to us may turn out to be our salvation. Who can measure the extent of the *chessed* done to my mother and me by Volodia? I had never met him before, and motivated by sheer human compassion, he saved our lives by providing for us in the train. From the first moment we settled in the wagon, he assumed the role of a devoted son.

While we stayed on the side track for the first few days and also later, when we were already on the way, women from the nearby villages came to the station to sell eggs, baked potatoes, carrots and milk. The milk was in half-liter vodka bottles, the only product supplied in abundance. Instantly, a crowd gathered around the women, hands grabbing the most desired item—the milk bottles. Volodia, being quick as a squirrel, usually managed to get two bottles, provoking the anger of the throng.

"Why are you screaming?" he would shout back. "One is for my baby and one is for the sick woman. We have a very sick woman in our car. You can eat anything else, but she can't." If there was only one bottle, he always insisted on sharing it.

During the trip, when the train would stop at bigger stations, he and Mishka would jump off first and run to explore if there was anything edible available in the station buffet. Most of the time, all anyone could get was *kipiatok*, boiling water. But he never returned empty-handed. There were always women selling something of value—for an exorbitant price, of course.

For some reason, the medicine Dr. Siegal had prescribed for my mother had to be taken with warm milk. Every morning at five o'clock, Volodia started the little, round, iron oven whose chimney protruded through the train roof, by blowing on the kindling until the coal inside caught fire. On *Shabbos*, he insisted on warming the milk himself, disregarding my arguments that allowing a Jew to do prohibited work was like doing it myself.

"You are observant, while I am a lost soul anyway," he explained. "I wasn't Volodia before the war. I was Velvel Winterfeld from Stanislov in Galicia. My father was a pious Jew with a long beard and a long coat. I attended a *yeshivah* and wore sidelocks.

"The war changed all that. When I ran from the Germans to the Russian side, I was caught by the Soviets and sent to prison. Released after two years, sick and weak and all alone, I wandered from place to place until, reaching a village in the Petropavlovsk region, I couldn't walk anymore. I fell unconscious in the street.

"When I woke up, I was lying on the bunk near the oven in a peasant's kitchen. They turned out to be a Polish family who had lived in Siberia since the time of the Czar's rule, but they still spoke Polish among themselves. The peasant had picked me up in the street and brought me into his house. They told me later that I had been delirious and in my

unconscious state spoke Yiddish. It didn't matter to them, they said. A human being is a human being. They are righteous gentiles. They nursed me back to health. I received special attention and care from their youngest daughter Yadzia, who is now my wife.

"This is what became of Velvel Winterfeld. They are good people. I am the bad one. There is no way back now. I lost my *Olam Haba*. Let me, at least, do something good here."

Tears were in his eyes and in those of all who heard him. Mine ran freely. Even Mrs. Ohr became much softer and friendlier after that.

How tragic! However, I know that after a span of over four decades he stands out in my memory as a very selfless, benevolent and helpful person. He never wanted to accept the smallest favor in return. Only once did he take a few candies for his baby, which I bought from a soldier during a stop.

Of course, it was the Almighty's will to grant my mother more years to live and spare me insurmountable, unbearable hardship, but Volodia was chosen to be the *shaliach*.

CHAPTER 42

Return to a Ruined World

WE RETURNED VIA THE SAME ROUTE WE HAD TAKEN six years earlier, only more slowly. Trains carrying demobilized Soviet soldiers, German prisoners of war and endless numbers of canvas-covered platforms with ammunition and looted goods were going from West to East. What the bombs and war hadn't destroyed became prey for Stalin's hordes.

The Siberian landscape, the faded, gloomy stations and towns we passed, seemed to be even more neglected and desolate than before. But they were still there. They hadn't been touched by the German bombs. The Asian parts of Russia had been spared the ravages of war.

Often, our train had to be taken to a side track to ease the congestion. At one station, our train stopped opposite a

trainload of German prisoners-of-war. The tracks were so close that it was easy to see the uniforms and faces. Surprisingly, the prisoners in the train opposite ours looked clean, shaven and not at all underfed. Their windows didn't even have bars. The only apparent difference between our train and theirs was that our door could be opened at will and the prisoners' wagons were locked, with a guard for each car. Obviously, the prisoners were of a higher rank, not ordinary soldiers.

Although it was entirely pointless, I couldn't pass up the opportunity to express, though in the smallest way, my hatred for the Germans.

"You, from the superior race, are going to Siberia to *end* your life," I said through the window in German to one of the prisoners. "I, a *Judin*, am going back to the free world to *start* a new life."

He looked at me, squinted, pressed his lips tightly together, but didn't utter a word.

"How many Jews did you kill, you beast?" I asked.

This was too much for him to endure from a Jew. He turned away from the window.

My first encounter with German prisoners had been a few months earlier in Petropavlovsk. We had been very eager for news, still hoping for word of the repatriation, so any news was of interest. One windy, cold February morning, someone had seen three German war prisoners being held under strict security at the Petropavlovsk railroad station. This happened shortly after all their atrocities had become known. The word German was enough to conjure up a picture of a horrible monster from another planet. A few friends and I had walked the four kilometers to the station to see if they still looked like human beings, or like some wild animals from the jungle.

We found the German prisoners in the station waiting room. One corner was cordoned off with a chain, and the three captives were standing there under armed guard. They wore military uniforms, buttons missing, shoulder straps hanging loose, heads shaven. For a moment, we stood motionless, looking at them. Then, driven by some uncontrollable force, I ran forward, and before the guard could stop me, I spat right into the face of the nearest prisoner. It landed in the middle of his cheek. He wiped it off with his sleeve. My friends told me I shouldn't have done it, but if the guard hadn't motioned me away, I would have done the same to the other two.

I knew it was uncivilized and childish. Can a drop of spit avenge the loss of six million innocent lives, a million children, centuries of accumulated spiritual and cultural wealth? But at that moment, it was the only means I had to express the burning pain, rage and contempt I felt for a member of the cursed, degenerate nation which believed in *Deutchland Uber Alles*, whether he was guilty or not. No, I didn't regret my behavior.

As we continued our long journey, I was struck by a disturbing observation. Throughout the six years of living under various conditions in Siberia, our close-knit group often used the rationed water to keep our clothing and ourselves clean to avoid getting lice, the main carriers of typhus. Now, on the way back to civilization, I noticed that some of the people in the car had started twitching their shoulders and scratching their backs. There was one peasant woman on the other side of the car who was scratching more actively than the others; that was obviously where it had originated. Sixty people in one car for a month without changing clothes were an easy target for those little parasites.

The next time the train stopped, someone notified the guard. In no time, he appeared with a bagful of little white packets containing DDT. We were told to dust our bedding and clothing with the white powder, but to be careful not to let it touch the food. A day later, there was an announcement that when we would reach the next town the whole transport would be taken to the *bania*, the communal Siberian bath house.

The first time I had encountered a *bania* was in Sergeyevka. They were in use in Tokushy and Petropavlovsk as well, and by the time I came to live in those towns I was able to endure the *banias* when I had to, but my first reaction was to view them as torture chambers. Sergeyevka, which had one hundred families besides the exiles, had two *banias*. Each was a small structure, about six and a half feet by thirteen feet, not more than six and a half feet high, with an entrance foyer in front, which also served as a small nook for the clothing. It had a slanted, wooden floor with a hole at one end. In one corner was a pile of stones with a hollow space where wood was burned, thus heating the stones. Nearby stood two barrels with water. When the stones were white hot, they were thrown into the barrels. Instantly, the place was filled with a cloud of steam, making it impossible to see two inches away. The heat was suffocating, a real inferno. It was pointless to dry oneself after the bath because of the dense steam. Even the piles of clothing in the nook were drenched. Those who lived nearby were lucky, but to walk a fifth of a mile in forty to fifty degrees below zero weather after being broiled in the *bania* was a real Siberian experience.

When we reached the station with the promised *bania*, the activity started early in the morning as soon as our train was taken to a side track. In groups of about forty or fifty, we

were led to town in shifts until the whole train was clean and deloused. They wanted to deliver us back to the West in a proper and civilized manner.

One morning, when our train stopped at a station, three new passengers joined our wagon, a father with two teenage girls. They didn't have any luggage, their faces were ash gray, and their eyes were swollen and red. As we later learned, they had buried the mother of the family the day before. They had come from another region in Kazakhstan and had been waiting all night on the station platform for another train carrying former exiles. Everyone in our wagon was deeply moved by their tragedy. We all offered to help in any way we could. Now, too, Volodia took command.

We noticed that all three had tears in their clothing, the traditional *kriyah* made when burying a close relative. They sat *shivah* in the car. They told us that friends from their village in Siberia who were heading for Lodz in Poland would take care of their belongings. They would have to look for them later. But no one had the heart to probe them for any other details about their tragedy, and they didn't offer any. They were too heartbroken to talk.

We passed the Ural Mountains and moved closer to the area affected by the war. The ice curtain, which had imprisoned us in Siberia for six years, had finally parted, and now, a picture of horror and destruction unfolded before our eyes. Ruins everywhere, entire forests burned down, with young, fragile saplings, here and there, clinging to the charred remnants of the mother tree. Looking from the speeding train, we sometimes saw in the distance forests of blackened chimneys, fragments of buildings with no sign of life. Many station buildings were burned or ruined by bombs, and makeshift, temporary structures were erected to receive or

dispatch the endless numbers of trains. No peasant women were seen here offering milk, eggs or vegetables. If somewhere a house remained intact on the outside, the black holes that once held windows were witness to what remained inside. It was a sad sight, a sad feeling.

It reminded me of a time when, as a schoolgirl, a picture in my ancient history book of Pompeii ruined by the eruption of the volcano Mount Vesuvius made me sad for days, but it was still a detached feeling. My feeling now was intense. The closer we came to the old Polish border, the fuller the destruction and the deeper the depressing feeling.

But there were also happy moments during the trip. From somewhere, someone heard that President Truman had intervened with the British and secured one hundred thousand certificates to enter Palestine. Like lightning, the news spread from car to car. People started to sing and cry from joy, to embrace and kiss each other. About one hundred thousand Jews were returning from Russia to Poland, and everyone believed he would get a certificate. Upon arriving in Poland, however, it turned out that only a very limited number of entrance certificates had been issued to the displaced persons in the refugee camps. Many thousands of Jews, survivors of the gas chambers or Russian prisons, who tried to enter Palestine illegally were turned back to sea by the British.

One encouraging development wiped out the gloom and wretched sights we saw on the way. With the Almighty's help, my mother's condition started to improve, to the point that when we changed trains in Brest-Litovsk (Brisk), the new border town between Soviet Russia and the shrunken Poland, my mother was able to walk by herself and endure the search and registration by the Polish U.B. (the equivalent of

the Soviet K.G.B.). We were now on native soil.

In Brest-Litovsk, we were given the option of choosing, as our further destination, between Lodz and Schechin, a German town not far from Berlin. This town had been given to Poland at the peace treaty in Potsdam, together with Danzig, the town of Breslau and a part of Lower Silesia, as compensation for southern and eastern Poland being annexed by the Soviets.

My mother and I joined those who went to Schechin. There were rumors that from Schechin it would be easy to cross the German border and reach the D.P. (displaced persons) camps in Munich. We said good-bye to Volodia, who went to Lodz. I bless him until this very day, wherever he is. And so we returned to a ruined world and a new start.

BOOK SEVEN

The Thaw Begins

CHAPTER 43

Sorrow and Triumph

WHEN MY MOTHER AND I DISEMBARKED FROM THE train that brought us to Schechin, the first thing we had to do was to find a way to bring our luggage and ourselves to town. The station was at a considerable distance from town, but it looked even more remote against the backdrop of the completely destroyed buildings and streets that surrounded it. We were not the only ones hoping for transportation to town. There was a whole trainload of tired, hungry, anxious people, uncertain of what to expect.

Then, from nowhere, a few Poles with pushcarts approached the platform, and the nearest repatriots commandeered them. I wasn't so lucky. My mother and I had to wait until they came back for the next round. When our things

were on the cart, the man told us to walk alongside and asked for the address. Address? All we saw was a ghost town! Hundreds of demolished buildings! How would my mother be able to walk? And to where? I begged him to let my mother sit on top of the luggage.

"It will cost you more."

"I'll pay you more," I promised him. The "more" turned out to be an extra pack of American cigarettes! During one of the stops back in Russia, Volodia had bought a whole carton of American cigarettes from a soldier returning from Europe; the cigarettes were probably stolen. He shared the bargain with me, and now, the cigarettes helped me take our first steps in Schechin.

"So, where should I go?" the Pole asked again.

"Are there Jews living in Schechin?" I asked.

"Yes, plenty of them," he replied. "Every day, trainloads bring them here."

"Take us to where they are."

We started out. It wasn't an easy ride. The sidewalks were broken, heaps of rubble blocked every step. All we saw were remnants of buildings, here and there a column, a facade, an elaborate entrance without walls and without a roof—all testimony that it must have been a beautiful city. Later, we learned that in the last days before the German surrender a swarm of American airplanes, blackening the sky over Schechin, destroyed the bigger part of the town in seventy-five minutes, along with many inhabitants who couldn't escape in time.

Following the Pole through sideways and byways, we arrived in the center of the city. It was just one year after the end of the war. The American Joint Distribution Committee had established a relief committee in a relatively safe part of

a big building, even before the first transports had arrived.

An unusual picture in sight and sound unfolded before us as we approached the place. A crowd of about twenty thousand Jews of all ages were gathered, taking up several blocks. They were all singing the famous partisan hymn, "*Zog nisht keinmol az du geist dem letzten veg.* Never say that the road you are on is your last." The chorus of twenty thousand voices was overwhelming and crushing. It was a song filled with tears and hope, with bottomless sorrow and triumph. The enthusiasm of the crowd hypnotized me. The song was a triumph of life over death. The gathering turned out to be a daily occurrence.

Somehow, the thousands of Jews found holes, basements, nooks. The lucky ones found a room or two in a semi-destroyed building with inch-wide cracks in the walls. Some even found whole apartments with furniture in them. But the days were spent in the streets around the Joint Committee. Strangers stopped each other, constantly inquiring, "Where have you been? Did you hear about so and so? Did you meet someone from this or that town by the name of . . . ?" Constantly looking, eyes searching, asking, hoping to hear what was never destined to be heard.

On that first day in Schechin, our Polish pushcart man was considering how to pass without colliding with the crowd, when I suddenly heard a voice calling my name, but the crowd was so dense that I couldn't discern any familiar face. Then I saw Kreina Matetzka, our housemate and friend from Tokushy, elbowing her way towards us. She had noticed my mother on top of the cart. The people from Tokushy had arrived a few weeks earlier and were already settled. She, her children and mother-in-law lived together with another family in a small room with broken windows and a broken door.

Aaron David and his family had a better apartment, she reported, so we could take our bundles to his place. Just then, Aaron David's two boys emerged from the crowd and, seeing us, told the Pole to follow them.

Their place had once been an impressive four-story building, but what remained was a neatly cut triangle. The ground floor still had two livable apartments on one side where the second floor served as a roof. The two apartments were packed with several families, but the foyer still had enough space for us and our luggage. It was meant to be temporary, until we would find our own place. Aaron David and his whole family, helpful and friendly as always, made it possible for my mother and me to rest comfortably after the long and trying trip.

My next day's search brought no results. The entrance to the building and the staircase were, luckily, on the undamaged side. The apartment above Aaron David's was also undamaged, and it was occupied by a German family. A tall blond woman and a teenage boy were seen running up the stairs a few times, but otherwise they were quiet as mice.

"Let's go take a look," said Aaron David's younger son Yudka. "Now it's time that they feared us."

I went with him, just wanting to ask her if she had a spare room for rent. When she opened the door on our first knock, I noticed how pale she was and how her hands were trembling. Yes, she had a spare room, she said. I should just wait until her son came home to help her rearrange the furniture. During the night we heard them going up and down the stairs many times, and in the morning we found that they were gone, leaving the furniture behind. How ironic!

The apartment had a foyer, a very large room, a smaller room, a kitchen and a small bathroom. Without much

hesitation, we moved our possessions upstairs. Our good friends Rabbi and Rebbetzin Belitzki, *zichronam livrachah*, and their two young daughters, who had come with our transport, moved in together with us. They had the bigger room. We *kashered* and shared the kitchen and set up a semblance of normal life. Things remained very difficult, however, because I had no money and no prospects of getting any.

In Siberia, clothing had been valued currency, but in Schechin, it was worthless. Instead of offering farm products, peasant women spread items out on the sidewalks from the most expensive stores in pre-war Poland. One woman held out a beautiful Persian lamb coat, not even knowing its value. Another held a *tallis*, hawking, "A tablecloth, a tablecloth! Cheap, cheap!" A Jew bought it. There were exclusive crystals, silverware, hand-embroidered linen, items of beauty and value—merchandise looted from Jewish homes, but no customers. The Jews who populated Schechin at that time, returnees from Russia and German death camps, needed food to keep body and soul together; the Poles were choking on their booty. The Joint Distribution Committee helped to a certain degree by distributing food items, but the lines were endless and it took hours to get some.

Schechin, which before the war was a city with a population of half a million Germans, was now virtually *Deutchenrein*, free of Germans. Instead, the town was overflowing with Poles, the scum of many Polish cities, who were afraid to remain in their homes lest their war crimes be exposed. They came in the wake of the escaping Germans, taking over their homes and belongings, in addition to the looted Jewish treasures. People who couldn't sign their names wore expensive, tailored suits and diamond rings on every finger. They

didn't need our out-of-fashion, pre-war clothing.

But Jews, out of necessity and experience, find a way to earn a few cents. And so, a few clever and courageous young men found out that in certain places there was still a market for clothing. With the help of these middlemen, we managed to sell all the extra clothing in our trunk during the three months we spent in Schechin.

In the meantime, my mother took ill again. Our plans to go to the D.P. camps, and from there possibly to Palestine, had to be postponed. Again, a number of doctors gave the gravest prognoses. Many of our friends were leaving or had already left, but Rabbi Belitzki and his family were still with us. It was a great comfort.

During our first few weeks in Schechin, we had our greatest heart-warming surprise. One morning, Aaron David's daughter Feiga came upstairs.

"Dina, did you have relatives in Vilna?" she asked, quivering with emotion.

We had many. There was Aunt Gittel's daughter Sonia, whom I considered a sister, and her husband and daughter. There was my double cousin Mendel, my aunts and other cousins, but, intuitively, I cried out, "Yochele! She is alive!"

Yochele was my beloved Aunt Mina's only child, twelve years old when the war broke out. I ran down the stairs three at a time, and there she stood, tall and pretty, a mature nineteen-year-old young lady. We were crying and laughing, and so was everyone present. She had been in the Stutthoff death camp and was the only holocaust survivor of our entire family. She was married and had been living in Lodz since the end of the war. She had found out about us by accident.

Another most delightful surprise was to find my dear friend Shulamis Kivelevitch. She had survived by hiding in a

camouflaged pit in the woods around Lida. After the war, she had married Isaac Lasky. They had come to Schechin on their way to Germany and from there, via Italy, to New York. Until this very day, she is my closest friend.

One morning in Schechin, there was a knock on the door, and a tall, thin man entered. The man looked at my mother, then at me, looked around the room and, still standing at the door, broke down and started to cry.

"It's Alter," my mother and I cried out simultaneously. "Alter the painter."

My acquaintance with Alter the painter and paperhanger had begun very early, when I was only about five or six. He was a quiet, good-humored and patient man. He was a master craftsman and did wonders with wallpaper. For him, a job wasn't just plain work but a challenge to display his creativity. My mother, who was very selective, always relied on his advice. The last work he had done for us was to decorate my room less than a year before the war. Now, eight years later, here was Alter the painter!

He sat down and told a tragic story, so similar to many others. His wife and four young children had been shot in the big massacre in Lida in May, 1942. He was saved because he was employed by the Germans as a painter. Heartbroken and desperate, he escaped to the woods around Lida and was constantly running from hiding place to hiding place. He was one of the few who survived until the war ended.

"Now I'm all alone," he continued, wiping his tears and shaking with sobs. "When I found out that you, Mrs. Shapiro, and your daughter survived, I was overjoyed. It's like finding a close relative. I worked so many years for you and was always treated as an equal. I want to confide in you, Mrs. Shapiro, and ask for your advice. I met a woman from Lodz, whose

husband and two children were shot during an *Aktion* in the ghetto there. She has witnesses of her husband's death. Later, she was taken to Auschwitz, but she survived. She is also alone. I am considering marrying her, but I would very much appreciate your opinion. If it is not too much trouble for you, I would like to bring her here so you can meet her."

"By all means," my mother said. "Come whenever it suits you. This afternoon will be fine."

He seemed relieved, thanked my mother and left. Two hours later, he arrived with the woman. She looked much younger than he, and a little shy, but she seemed to be a pleasant and sensible person. She told my mother that she had been a seamstress in Lodz and her husband had worked in a textile mill. When she mentioned her two murdered sons, she became hysterical, and it took a while until she calmed down.

After a few moments of silence, my mother said, "I would suggest that you leave our apartment as a married couple. Together you'll find comfort in each other and it will be easier to heal the wounds. A rabbi lives in the adjoining room. I'll ask him to arrange for a *minyan*, and he will be *mesader kiddushin*."

They looked at each other and at my mother in surprise and shock. Alter's eyes filled with tears again. Overcoming his embarrassment, he said, "Mrs. Shapiro, unfortunately, we are both penniless. We both live on the rations and aid we are getting from the Joint Distribution Committee. In no way was I able to save up money to buy even the cheapest wedding ring."

Upon hearing this, without the slightest hesitation, my mother took off her wedding ring, the only piece of jewelry she had left, the ring she had worn since her own wedding.

She put the ring on the table and said, "Alter, I'm giving you this ring as a present. It is now yours. Be *mekadesh* your new wife, and *zol zein mit mazel.*"

Such utter selflessness was typical of my mother. I am sure she felt no qualms about giving away her own wedding ring under those circumstances, and that her heart was filled with the joy of pure *chessed.*

CHAPTER 44

Waiting for a Transport

AFTER THE WAR, THE VAAD HATZALAH IN AMERICA opened an office in Katowice, Poland, the biggest town in Upper Silesia at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains, not far from the Czechoslovakian border. The town was almost untouched by the war, and its iron ore foundries were working around the clock, blackening the sky with dense smoke. It had been a rich, industrial town before the war with a solid, prosperous Jewish population whose fate was the same as that of the rest of Polish Jewry. The Vaad Hatzalah chose Katowice because of its intact state and, mainly, because France and Czechoslovakia had opened consulates there right after the war in 1945.

At this time, the Vaad Hatzalah's primary purpose was not distributing food parcels, but obtaining French and

Czechoslovakian visas for the surviving remnants of Eastern European Jewry who wanted to leave Poland. It was a tremendous task, requiring money, international contacts and organizational skills. In New York, the effort was led by Rabbi Eliezer Silver and Rabbi Aharon Kotler.

In Europe, a remarkable woman from Switzerland, Mrs. Recha Sternbuch, stood behind all the work. Her talent, compassion and devotion were remarkable. She had started her rescue activities much earlier, helping Jews reach places as far away as Japan and Shanghai. Three thousand Jews, mostly from the Mirrer Yeshivah were provided with Soviet transit visas to Japan from Vilna, via Moscow and Vladivostok, in the first stages of the war, in 1941.

Her main activity was helping Torah people, *rabbanim*, *roshei yeshivah* and *yeshivah* students and their families. When I arrived in 1946, the Vaad Hatzalah office in Katowice was run very effectively by Reb Yitzchak Winkelstein from Kovno. Mrs. Sternbuch would come to Katowice every three or four months, after making arrangements with the foreign ministries in France, Czechoslovakia and England. The doors of the Polish interior and foreign ministries were also open to her.

Besides Katowice, a number of Jewish survivors were concentrated in Lodz, where the Jewish Relief Committee was located at 22 Zachodnia Street. Relatively speaking, the city itself did not show much war damage, except for the streets where the ghetto had been; they were razed to the ground. It was no longer the Lodz of before, the dynamic, vibrant Jewish Lodz, the Manchester of Poland. It was drab and quiet now. The soul of the city had been extinguished together with the lives of its Jews.

Warsaw, the pride and capital of Poland and the center of

Polish Jewry, was a heap of rubble. Somehow, one of the most beautiful streets, Aleye Uyazdovskie, a wide boulevard with two long rows of very impressive, ornate buildings, was spared. Praga, a poorer section separated from Warsaw by the Vistula River, also escaped destruction and was now inhabited by a small number of Jews.

Cracow, home of the Rema, for centuries the cradle of pure religious tradition and *chassidus*, was now devoid of all that. It too, was home to a small number of Jews.

The places where Jews lived after the war were temporary; they were waiting to emigrate. Poland, having always been distinctly anti-Semitic and an active accomplice to the Nazi atrocities in the war, presented no future for Jews whatsoever, except for a handful of die-hard Communists, who expected prominence in the new Soviet satellite.

Two routes led to the free world. One was in the north of Poland through the newly acquired Schechin, the other in the south by crossing the Czechoslovakian border. The majority of Jews crossed one border or the other illegally by hiring local guides for good pay.

At the end of August, 1946, a Vaad Hatzalah transport was due to leave from Katowice to Czechoslovakia. A few days before, Reb Avraham Trop, a renowned *rosh yeshivah* in the Chafetz Chaim Yeshivah in Radun and a friend of my father's, found out that my mother and I were in Schechin from Rabbi Shmuel Orenstein, whom we had met there earlier and who helped my mother and me in many other ways. Immediately, he sent a *yeshivah bachur* to Schechin with a message that we should come to Katowice without delay to join the transport. We regarded this opportunity to leave Poland as a miracle from Heaven.

The *yeshivah bachur* arrived early Sunday morning. The

transport had to leave Tuesday evening. All day Sunday, I was busy packing and preparing for the journey. But it turned out that we were unable to leave on Monday, because everyone who left Schechin legally had to obtain a permit to take along luggage. Two witnesses had to testify at the special ministerial office administering the "liberated" territories that the luggage had been brought from Russia and not obtained in Poland. Sunday was a legal holiday even in Communist Poland, and all offices were closed. All day Monday, the two witnesses and I waited just to submit the application. I received the permit on Tuesday. The passenger train from Schechin to Katowice left once a day, only in the evening, and the ride took ten hours. It was clearly impossible to get to Katowice in time to join the transport. We knew we had lost the chance, but the young man sent by the *rosh yeshivah* assured us that every two or three months such a transport left Poland and that we would surely be included in the next one.

Having no reason to stay in Schechin, however, we left for Katowice on Tuesday evening. The ride itself was traumatic. There was a blackout in the station just as we arrived, and the train itself had no lights. Without the help of friends and the young *yeshivah bachur*, my mother and I would never have been able to make it. We arrived in Katowice on Wednesday morning. The sky was gray, and a forest of tall chimneys spewed out black clouds of smoke, the trademark of every industrial town.

Tall chimneys, the noise of clanking and churning machines—a memory of my childhood wafted by, then disappeared.

There were many horse-drawn carts at the station waiting for passengers. In Katowice, the railroad was close to town,

almost a part of it. When the driver put our things in place and asked where we wanted to go, I told him to take us to the nearest and cheapest hotel.

"There aren't many hotels now," he replied. "But I know one on Ulica Mariacka which is not expensive."

He took us there. The trip had been so exhausting that the first day we slept until the evening.

First thing in the morning on the day after our arrival, which was Thursday, I went to the Vaad Hatzalah office. It was located on the fourth floor of a big, four-story apartment house. To hide their sins and show good will, the Communist government of Poland allocated this building for all Jewish communal needs. The building, located on a narrow, dead-end street called Tylna Mariacka, housed the Joint Relief Committee with a warehouse of foodstuffs sent from the United States, a free kitchen with daily hot meals, a kosher butcher store, the Vaad Hatzalah office, the *kehillah*, a room for a daily *minyan* and a spacious apartment for the rabbi of the town.

The Vaad Hatzalah office was relatively quiet due to the recently departed transport. As I expected, my mother and I were on the list, and I was assured that we would be included in the next transport. They couldn't tell me how long we'd have to wait, though. It depended on how soon the Czechoslovakian transit visas would arrive and how long the preparations in Poland would take for about four or five hundred people. This included obtaining birth certificates, which many people had lost during the war. There were forgers, though, who produced them *en masse*, along with Polish passports. My mother and I, however, had already been given temporary passports in Schechin.

Having nothing more to do at the Vaad Hatzalah office,

I went downstairs to the Joint office to register for food rations. In the courtyard where it was located, I saw many people, including women, standing in the butcher shop which opened once or twice a week, depending on when a cow or calf could be obtained and slaughtered in a strictly kosher manner. For over six years now, my mother and I hadn't tasted meat. I made a quick calculation in my mind, which left me convinced that for the time being we still could not afford it.

All the people who frequented the area around Tylna Mariacka were from the Torah world and introductions were seldom necessary. You just stopped and started talking. When a new face was spotted, the first question was, "Did you come here to join a transport?" There followed a bit of deeper mutual probing, and soon everything was known on both sides. The waiting period for a transport thus became more bearable. The mutual goal united us all.

When I left the premises, I had already arranged to become a third partner to a room in an apartment owned by a Polish family, a father with two young boys. The apartment was on the ground floor in the same building where the Jewish communal services were held. The woman who offered me the partnership was Mrs. Halperin, an exceptionally fine person who lived there with her young daughter Sheva. The third partner was Reb Akiva Gross from Tchebin with his wife and daughter. Partitions made from bed sheets provided privacy. The whole apartment consisted of a large kitchen, our shared room and a small room near the entrance. The landlord and his sons moved to the small room, leaving the kitchen, which was already *kashered* and in use when we moved in, at our disposal.

When I returned to the hotel room with the good news,

my mother was delighted, but we decided to stay where we were for *Shabbos*. A fresh loaf of white bread and a smoked herring supplemented the food we had brought from Schechin. Also staying at the hotel was Rabbi Zukerman, from the famous *yeshivah* in Novardok, a disciple of Reb Yosef Yoizel Horowitz and an acquaintance of my father. He told us how upset Reb Avraham Trop had been that my mother and I hadn't arrived in time for the transport.

It wasn't too comfortable in our cloth-enclosed cubicles. At one time, we had a fourth roommate, an elderly single woman. Then the Gross family moved to Lodz, and a Reisman family, two sisters and a brother, moved in. All were from Galicia. My mother and I were the only Litvaks.

During the week, each family ate at different times, but on *Shabbos* we were one family. The lighted candles, the white tablecloth and the aroma of the *Shabbos* dishes wiped away the sadness of the week. It was comforting to be together. At times, we even allowed ourselves to tell a joke and have a good laugh.

There were some who had managed to bring fortunes from Russia, mainly those who had speculated and traded dollars and Czarist Russian gold coins in the central Asian republics. Now, being temporary nomads in Poland and not aspiring to any permanent jobs, even if available, many of these Jews continued trading in the same manner. Here and there, someone with enough courage undertook the very risky task of going to the town where he had lived before the war to find out if anything remained that could be recovered. Those houses which were not destroyed were all occupied by Poles, and it was a rare case when they paid even a nominal amount for them. Most of these Poles were openly hostile, threatening to kill the former owners, chasing them away

with vicious remarks like, "It's a pity Hitler didn't finish the job." Many Poles did finish the job themselves; Jews often didn't return after risking such a trip. Most resisted the desire to go to their hometowns.

In very rare cases, Poles did save Jews during the Nazi occupation, but unfortunately these cases were few and far between. The hostile Poles we encountered were far more typical. The infamous, terrible pogrom in the town of Kielce in the summer of 1946, when forty-seven Jews who returned from Siberia and their hiding places were mercilessly killed in broad daylight by bloodthirsty Poles, was another example of the Poles' blind, inhuman hatred of Jews. There were many sporadic incidents of killings in smaller towns as well. Again we were enveloped by uncertainty and fear.

My first week in Katowice was spent writing letters. The first went to my mother's sister Chaya in Johannesburg, South Africa. The Red Cross and the Joint were helpful in locating the address. In an amazingly short time, we received a parcel from Johannesburg and a letter containing South African currency. They were badly needed and very welcome.

Uncle Shmuel had a brother-in-law in Sweden named Leon Mintz. I wrote to him, still hoping against hope that someone had survived, but his reply only confirmed what we already feared.

Two years earlier, while still in Siberia, we had received a letter from Rabbi Yosef Myshkovski of Krynki, then living in Jerusalem, in which he wrote that he was trying to find the whereabouts of my father and Uncle Yaakov. We already knew about Uncle Yaakov's passing, but as we knew nothing about my father, a tiny spark of hope still flickered. Having heard that Rabbi Myshkovski was in France in the summer of

1946, I wrote a letter to him in care of Agudas Yisrael in Paris. The answer we received caused us sorrow. Rabbi Dovid Zaritzki wrote that Rabbi Myshkovski had passed away a short while before.

As the Joint food rations in Katowice were always inadequate, people started travelling to Lodz where there was a much greater supply. I followed the crowd. Entering the office in Lodz to show my little card, I received a great shock. There behind the desk was Tzvi Tomkievich, a close friend and business associate of our family and the son-in-law of Reb Aaron Rabinovitz, the Lida *rav*. Needless to say, he was no less surprised to see me than I was to see him. His story was the same as that of many others. His wife and son had perished in Warsaw where they had lived before the war, but he had escaped and spent the war years in Russia. Like many Jews, he had at first believed that only men were in real danger from the Nazis, that women and children would be spared.

He personally took me to the warehouse, where a few helpers distributed various products, providing for each individual according to the number of members in his family. I didn't receive more than my share, nor would I have expected or accepted more, but his personal attention soothed the pain of taking charity.

When we returned to the office, Tzvi spent a while inquiring about my mother and talking about the exile years in Russia.

"Oh! You live in Katowice now," Tzvi suddenly said. "Please give my regards to the Rabbi of Katowice, Rabbi Gabel."

"I haven't seen the rabbi yet," I said. "I've had no reason to meet him."

"We were together in Bukhara," Tzvi said. "He is a very

nice and smart person. If you happen to meet him, please give him my regards."

When I was ready to leave he handed me an envelope.

"It's an old debt I owe your father," he said. "I'm glad to have an opportunity to repay it. And if you need any help, don't hesitate. For the time being, I'll be staying on the job here."

I was a little skeptical about the debt, but I took the envelope anyway. I thanked him, said good-bye, took my bags and went straight to the station.

CHAPTER 45

The Rabbi of Katowice

IN THE BEGINNING OF OCTOBER, A NEW TRANSPORT WAS being organized, and the Vaad Hatzalah office again became a beehive of activity. There were people from Warsaw, Lodz, Cracow and other Polish towns. Everyone was anxious to have his name on the list. When I got to the office, I was told that they had just received a telegram from Prague reminding them that Mrs. Shapiro and her daughter should unquestionably be included in the present transport. The telegram was sent by Rabbi Mordechai Londynski of New York, previously from Radun, who had come to Prague after Reb Avraham Trop went to France. I was also told that the passports we had obtained in Schechin were not valid anymore, and we would have to obtain new ones. The only thing my mother and I needed were photographs and a written

statement from a local authority verifying our identity.

"Which authority?" I asked.

"The rabbi's note is satisfactory," was the reply.

The first thing my mother and I did was take pictures, and then I went to the rabbi for the required note. The rabbi's apartment was on the fourth floor, next to the Vaad Hatzalah office. When I knocked on the door, nobody answered. I pushed it a little; it wasn't locked, and I went in. It resembled a railroad waiting room. About thirty or forty people were all over the place—in the long foyer, in the big dining room and in a third room off the foyer. There were people everywhere, talking, gesticulating and making a great deal of noise. No one paid any attention to me. It was obvious that the place was an open house for every wanderer.

I went to the dining room, which also contained a desk and a bookcase filled with *sefarim*, and asked the nearest man, "Which is the rabbi?"

"He is in the other room with some people," I was told. "If you need something, you'll have to wait."

The other room turned out to be the rabbi's bedroom. I looked around. All the chairs were taken. Many people were standing, and others were sitting on valises. With no other choice, I found a strip of unobstructed wall, leaned against it and waited.

How long will I have to wait, I thought, if all these people have to be received by the rabbi? Maybe I should leave now and come again?

I decided to wait.

After quite a long while, the door opened, and three men and a woman came out, followed by the rabbi. I could tell which one he was right away, because he had a beard and the other three were clean-shaven. Without wasting time, I

approached him, gave him my name and the reason I had come to see him.

"Oh, Shapiro!" He smiled. "I've heard about you."

He went to his desk, wrote the note, put a seal on it and signed it. Amidst the noise and crowd in the room, though, I had forgotten to convey Tzvi Tomkievich's regards.

I brought the rabbi's note to the passport official, and after reading it, he gave it back to me. It was just pro forma. They were happy to get rid of the Jews.

Meanwhile, I busied myself with preparations for departure. Somehow, after all those years, we still had a lot of luggage. I had to share a hired driver and wagon with two other families to take all our things to the station. To avoid a crush, luggage had to be given in a few days before the train arrived. They had a limited number of freight wagons, and only a limited amount of luggage was accepted. Unfortunately, we had too much.

Had I known ahead of time about the luggage limit, I would have packed more carefully, selecting the things which were most needed and sending the rest some other way. But wishing didn't help, and I just had to take the excess back. But what was I to do with the excess baggage? All the people I knew in Katowice were either going with our transport or had plans to go to other places. I had no time to wait; in a day or two, we'd have to leave.

At the last moment, an idea struck me. I would ask the rabbi if I could leave two burlap-wrapped bundles in his apartment until someone would be willing to take them for me. It was really unfair to burden the rabbi, as he was already busy attending to the needs of hundreds of people, but I couldn't see any other choice.

A few families who had been together with the rabbi in

Bukhara told me of his good deeds there, his kindness and his eagerness to help. I had also heard that he was from the town of Breziv in Galicia, where his grandfather Reb Shulem Gabel had been rabbi, following four generations of rabbis before him, a truly illustrious background. So why should I hesitate to ask for a favor? Encouraged, I went. It was late in the evening, and a few *orchim* were readying themselves for the night. The rabbi, taking advantage of the few quiet moments, was sitting at his desk, an open *Gemara* before him.

"Of course, without any doubt!" was his response to my request. "Bring the packages upstairs."

Then realizing that I would have to climb three flights of stairs and that the bundles might be heavy, he asked two young men to carry them up for me. There was a big empty shelf across the foyer above the entrance door, and the bundles were placed there. I thanked the rabbi for the favor. He said I shouldn't worry. He'd find the right person with whom to send the bundles, and wishing me a successful trip, he went back to the *Gemara*.

This was the evening before the departure. We left Katowice on the transport train at five o'clock the next morning.

There was a man whose job it was to escort the Vaad Hatzalah transports and see them through the border. When we reached the Czechoslovakian border, he came into the compartment where my mother and I were sitting, and he told us that, by mistake, our names were not on the list of passengers. Therefore, we could not continue and had to leave the train.

It was a terrible shock, but what could we do?

"Even a blade of grass doesn't move without Hashem willing it to do so," was my mother's often repeated remark.

The day was a nightmare. I remember standing with my mother on the platform, desperate and lost, each with a small handbag, seeing the train disappear on the other side of the border with our luggage and hopes. We had no Polish money to buy tickets to go back. It was cloudy, and a dense, cold drizzle was falling.

Then a Polish trainman appeared from nowhere.

"Are you the two who couldn't pass?" he asked. "Here are two tickets. Take the next train back to Katowice." I realized that this had probably been arranged by the escort. Thank Heaven, at least, for this.

In a few days, another telegram arrived from Prague: "LUGGAGE TAKEN CARE OF. JOIN NEXT TRANSPORT."

Sometimes, memory plays funny tricks. Some moments can be remembered in the minutest detail, while more important events fade, leaving a hazy, unclear picture. From the time of our return from our unfortunate trip, until the afternoon, weeks later, when the *shidduch* with Rabbi Gabel was first suggested to me, everything is a blank. The first thing I remember is a middle-aged gentleman, very neatly dressed, coming in and asking if he could talk to me. There were probably, as always, people in the room, because he spoke to me in the entrance hall, a most unlikely setting.

"I am Mr. Goldstein from Warsaw, now on a short stay in Katowice," he began. "Let me ask you something. Do you think that the rabbi would be a suitable match for you?"

Doors were opening and closing, people were running up and down the stairs, and in the middle of all this, such a question!

"Did the rabbi send you?" I asked him.

"What is your answer?" he insisted.

Events started rolling. Rabbi Orenstein and Rabbi Belitzki,

who also left Schechin and came to Katowice, got involved, and soon I was sitting in Rabbi Belitzki's apartment across the table from the rabbi. Without too many preliminary words, he started speaking.

"We both know the purpose of our meeting here, and we both know that marriage is a serious step which has to be taken with cautious consideration. Therefore, from the outset, allow me to stress a few things. I know that you come from a well-to-do family; in the pre-war years, you were used to luxury and comfort. I doubt if I'll be able to provide the same conditions, because I am not striving for wealth. You may be misled by my present position, by the popularity and respect I enjoy. When I leave Poland, things may change. In a new place, in new surroundings, a new start will not be easy. I am a person of strong principles, and I will not conform to any outside influences which may be against my convictions. In Eretz Yisrael, it seems that a rabbi must be well-connected. In the United States, as I have had the opportunity to learn, the function of a rabbi is to cater to the whims of his congregants. I am not prepared to serve as a rabbi under such conditions, be it in Eretz Yisrael or in America, and the future seems uncertain.

I had been put to the test by the Almighty many times during the previous years. Was He also testing me now? I wondered.

I considered the rabbi's words very carefully. According to what I had heard from those who had been with him in Russia, and what I had witnessed during the few months I had been in Katowice, I knew that what he said was sincere, honest and reflected the true nature of his personality. No empty promises, no self aggrandizement. And it coincided completely with my own outlook.

"Though it is true that my pre-war years were spent in luxury and comfort, there were more valuable things that I grew accustomed to in my parents' house," I replied. "Neither the N.K.V.D. and their threats nor the hard labor or the very difficult conditions in which we lived could take them away. The ethics, the strong belief in Hashem and Torah values with which my parents imbued me since my earliest years, left me unmarred by the hardships and even strengthened my determination to follow a true, Torah way of life, regardless of material well-being or discomfort.

"As a child, I remember playing with five-hundred-*ruble* notes of Czarist money of which my grandfather had a big boxful; they had become completely valueless after the First World War. He kept the box for a long time, believing that the revolution was a passing thing. In the last war, my father's large fortune was confiscated, but not before it had cost him his life just for being rich. Of course, money is a convenient commodity, but it is too fragile a foundation on which to build one's goals. I may even go a step further and add one more thing to what you have said before. I saw you a few times bent over a *Gemara*. Such a sight would please me far more than any riches."

When I finished speaking, I noticed that the stiffness and tension on the rabbi's face had been replaced by a mixture of relief, disbelief and respect.

As it turned out, despite the telegram from Prague promising us inclusion in the next transport, it left again without my mother and me, because by then I was already engaged to the Rabbi of Katowice.

"To spare me the effort of looking for you all over the globe, Hashem blocked your exit from Poland by having you miss the first transport and by having them give away your

seat on the second transport," was my husband's teasing remark whenever I mentioned my Czechoslovakian experience.

During the two months until the wedding, my mother became very ill again. She came down only to the *chuppah*. The *interfirers* were Rabbi and Mrs. Belitzki, *zichronam livrachah*, and our friends Mr. and Mrs. Avraham Krakowski, *yibadlu lechaim*. The *mesader kiddushin* was my husband's longtime friend Rabbi Englard, the Radziner Rebbe, now in Bnei Brak. At that time, he was the Rabbi of Sosnovice, one of the smaller towns around Katowice.

Many were shocked by our *shidduch*. I overheard a little chat once, after the engagement became official, between two Galicianer women.

"How could it have happened?" said one. "A Litvishe bride? Such a personality as the Rabbi of Katowice!

"I heard she comes from big *yichus*," the other said. "But still, a *heimishe* girl would have been more suitable."

During and after the war years, many "mixed marriages" (Galicianers and Litvaks) took place, and they turned out to be very successful. Before the war, such marriages had been very rare. Litvaks finding spouses from central Poland, from cities such as Warsaw or Lodz, had been common, probably because before the first World War central Poland had also belonged to Russia, but Galicia was distant, a place believed to have another mentality, another lifestyle. I remember that in Lida someone marrying a Galicianer was pitied, and I am sure that in Galicia it was the other way around.

Soon after our marriage, by some odd coincidence, a Vaad Hatzalah parcel sent to Dina Shapiro in Sergeyevka, Siberia, found its way to the Jewish Committee in Warsaw, Poland. The Soviets, in a humane gesture, sent all the

unclaimed parcels to Poland after the Polish prisoners and exiles were repatriated—a small price for annexing half of Poland and, in a way, a third of Europe. The Vaad Hatzalah numbered each parcel. The parcel with the number following mine was sent to Bukhara in Southeast Asia, addressed to Shimon Gabel. Both parcels were found in 1947 in the warehouse of the Jewish Committee in Warsaw by a *yeshivah* man, who brought them to Katowice. Depositing them on the floor in our apartment he jokingly said, "Now I know who your real *shadchan* was—the clerk in the Vaad Hatzalah office in New York."

CHAPTER 46

The Last Years in Poland

FROM DECEMBER, 1946, UNTIL MAY, 1948, WHEN WE LEFT for the United States, life in Katowice was very hectic. As before, the rabbi's apartment was the only address and transit station for everyone who happened to pass through Katowice. The majority of Jews were leaving Poland, but a limited number settled temporarily, establishing small businesses. Small enterprises employing four or five workers, as allowed by the government, mushroomed overnight, particularly in Lodz and Cracow. The inborn Jewish business acumen and the awareness of the miracle of survival gave impetus and drive to live and be active again.

The Rabbi of Katowice, as the leading rabbi of Polish Jewry in that period, was by force of necessity drawn into the melee of relationships and events. There was seldom a week

without a wedding or two performed in our large-sized dining room.

The prospective marriage partners were thoroughly investigated and accepted only if their legitimate right to marry was confirmed by two credible witnesses. Unfortunately, all too often there were couples not accepted by the rabbi for marriage because of lack of proper evidence of a former spouse's death according to *halachic* requirements.

This complexity was caused by the war and the holocaust, where tens of thousands of husbands died in prisons in Russia, and most of the men who survived had lost their wives in the gas chambers. The Rabbi of Katowice was known for his uncompromising stand, but many were ready to wait weeks and endure the hardship of his examination, rather than have their consciences burdened by a more permissive treatment.

Divorces were rare. Of the cases where it was requested, I can't remember one that was granted. My husband had a unique ability to mediate and reconcile, and the couples all came to thank him later for his efforts in preventing the break-up.

There were also business disputes. Partnerships formed in haste, by people of different levels of business ethics, couldn't last. Though the rabbi himself never had the slightest ambition or will to get involved in business, his excellent logic, intuition and reasoning power, in addition to his honesty and objectivity, made the warring parties travel to him from as far away as Lodz, Cracow and Warsaw. Due to his workload and lack of time, people would make reservations a month or two in advance.

Much time was also taken up by official visitors from America—the head of the Joint Distribution Committee, the

Vaad Hatzalah representatives and various groups and individuals with rescue missions for orphans or on private visits looking for survivors from their families. Katowice, because of the Vaad Hatzalah office, was their first stop, and they all came to us. Among them was Rabbi Eliezer Silver from Cincinnati, one of the founders of Vaad Hatzalah in America. Then Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman's older son came in the uniform of an American army lieutenant, granted by the American authorities to help him open many doors. As there were no kosher restaurants in Katowice, many of the visitors were our dinner guests.

The guest who stands out most in my memory was Mrs. Recha Sternbuch from Switzerland. With contacts in the highest places, and with an extensive range of relief work worldwide, she was still so modest and humble.

The busy schedule left little time for socializing. The transient nature of our contacts did not lend themselves to establishing lasting friendships, except for a few who were and remained close friends, most of them presently residing in America.

After our wedding, I decided to make a little order in the closets and drawers. During one of those cleanings, I happened to find a thick large envelope with American postmarks. I took it to my husband.

"Oh, it's nothing," he said. "It's a contract I received from the *landsleit* society from Breziv for the position of rabbi in their *shul*."

"You have a contract for a position in New York, and you never mentioned it to me?" I asked.

"You see, I'm not serious about it yet," he said. "America doesn't tempt me too much. I would prefer Eretz Yisrael. Anyway, it's too early to make plans. There is still a lot of work

to be done here, and besides, the contract is an official document approved by the Immigration Department, which says that I am allowed to include only my immediate family. That means your mother will not be able to join us; that's why I thought it was pointless to discuss it."

This was also one of his characteristics. No idle talk, no word deluges. His words were always to the point and with a purpose.

Meanwhile, my mother's condition became serious again. The polyclinic doctor advised that she see a specialist. Surgery seemed to be indicated. The best doctor in Katowice was Dr. Ivanski, the head surgeon of the Polish Military Hospital. I didn't have any problem in getting an appointment. My credentials as the *rabbinka* of Katowice were sufficient.

The doctor, tall, sixtyish and very distinguished, examined my mother with total attention. When he finished, he asked me to come into the next room.

"I find your mother's condition very grave," he said. "Your mother has a tumor the size of an egg, and it has spread to the underarm lymph nodes, which are swollen. She needs immediate surgery, but she is too weak. I'll prescribe a series of injections for two weeks to build her up; meanwhile, I'll order a place here in the hospital." He handed me the prescription and made an appointment for surgery in two weeks.

My mother didn't find out about the tumor. During the next two weeks, a doctor from the polyclinic came every morning to administer the injections.

I will never forget the shock Dr. Ivanski had when he saw my mother on the arranged date. Several times, he checked the record from the previous visit and checked my mother again and again. Finally, he sat in his chair, leaned back, took

out a handkerchief and wiped his forehead. I distinctly remember the expression of disbelief on his face. He was speechless for a few moments.

"Thank Heaven, a miracle has happened," he finally said. "The tumor has disappeared, and the glands are normal."

I was overwhelmed with the good news, but I wondered why a Polish doctor should be so happy with the miracle instead of having his professional pride hurt by the false diagnosis he had made.

At that time, a lawyer from my husband's hometown of Breziv lived in Katowice. His name was Dr. Seelenfreund, and he was in Katowice with his wife and children. He knew my husband well, and we visited each other occasionally. During one of our visits to them, I remarked that, regardless of Polish anti-Semitism, there were some decent Poles. When I mentioned the name Ivanski, telling the story about my mother, silence fell in the room and then quiet laughter.

"Dr. Ivanski is my brother," Mrs. Seelenfreund said. "It is a secret. He survived the holocaust on the Aryan side and hasn't disclosed his identity yet. His name was Shipper."

The name sounded familiar. "Is he the famous Dr. Shipper, the well-known public figure from pre-war Poland?" I asked.

"Yes, he is," she answered.

It was no wonder that he thanked Hashem for the mistaken diagnosis.

A few months passed, and we had to make a decision about where to go. The Polish press carried news about the Arabs' vicious attacks on the Jews in Palestine. The letters we received from those able to reach Eretz Yisrael also revealed mixed feelings. The Jews in Eretz Yisrael had to fight on two fronts, against the Arabs and against the British. In 1947,

England still held onto the Mandate over Palestine very forcefully, allowing only a minimal number of certificates and sending illegal immigrants back to sea.

It was barely a year since my mother and I had returned from Siberia. The horrors of the war were still in my bones. If there had been no alternative, we would certainly have gone to Eretz Yisrael then, but the big envelope in the closet drawer, ignored at first by my husband, offered a more practical option for the time being.

"We can stay in the United States for a while, let the wounds heal, have a temporary rest, and then we'll go to Eretz Yisrael," I suggested.

My husband agreed.

When we decided to go to America, it became clear that the only way my mother could go was to join a Vaad Hatzalah transport on her own; my husband's contract clearly stated that he could take along only his immediate family. Since we did not yet know the exact time of our departure, it was decided that my mother should leave as soon as she possibly could.

My mother, with the Almighty's help, regained her strength and was able to leave Katowice with a Vaad Hatzalah transport to join a group of *bnei Torah* and their families in Bailly, France, near Versailles. After a wait of several months, she received an American visa. My mother actually arrived in New York eight months before we did. Until our arrival, she stayed in Brooklyn with a cousin of Rabbi Mordechai Gordon, the Lomzha *rosh yeshivah*. When we came, my mother moved in with us and lived to see and enjoy two beautiful grandchildren. She passed away in 1957. So much for all the doctors' prognoses.

The reason for our leaving so much later than my mother

was that as long as there was an active Jewish life in Poland, my husband felt he was needed and didn't want to leave. He had so many things to take care of at home that he seldom left the house. On the infrequent occasions when he did, he would pull up his coat collar to cover his beard, because the sight of an Orthodox Jew irritated Polish sensibilities. True Torah life was becoming increasingly difficult in Communist Poland.

On rare occasions, though, the authorities were generous. The *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* services in 1947 were held in the biggest hall in town, packed to full capacity. The rabbi's *derashah*—delivered in Polish as the majority were modern, Polish-speaking Jews—was exceptional. His words touched the inner chords of everyone's heart. A collective wail broke out when he remarked that in normal times a whole family mourns a single deceased member, but now a sole survivor had to mourn the annihilation of a whole family. No less touching was his *davening*, when his beautiful voice carried the prayers and wishes of all assembled to the very gates of the *Bais Din Shel Maalah*, the Heavenly Court.

At the beginning of 1948, the Vaad Hatzalah stopped its activity in Katowice. All of the *bnei Torah* had left Poland, as well as most of the other Jews who chose to do so. After that, those who wanted to leave could no longer avail themselves of the organized assistance of the Vaad, which had ceased operations. Some people who were successful in their enterprises decided to stay "a bit longer," although the opportunities for proper Jewish life were minimal. The "bit longer" stretched until as late as 1968, when about twenty-five thousand Jews were forced to leave by the brutality of the anti-Semitic Polish president Wladislaw Gomulka. Still, Jews have not entirely vanished from Poland, the greatest center of

Jewish life for hundreds of years. Today, there are still about five or six thousand Jews living in Poland, though their life isn't even a faint shadow of the vibrant Jewish life of their forebears.

CHAPTER 47

Outward Bound

ON MAY 2, 1948, WE LEFT KATOWICE. MY HUSBAND AND I received our American visas in Poland, which enabled us to travel directly from the Polish port of Gdynia on Poland's prize vessel, *Bathory*. It was one of Poland's two luxury liners, the only one that had survived the war. Now refurbished, it was the pride of Poland, making regular trips to the United States via Holland and England. In Gdynia, we found many passengers from Austria and Czechoslovakia who were using the Polish port on their way to the United States.

After two days in Gdynia, and a few nerve-racking hours during which both we and our valises were scrutinized to the last thread, we finally boarded the ship with great relief. The larger pieces of luggage and my husband's *sefarim* had been

sent ahead two weeks earlier from Katowice. We had a well-situated cabin in the center of a middle deck, a favor from a very courteous young lady at the travel agency in Warsaw.

After depositing our valises in the cabin, my husband and I ascended to the deck to have a last look at the harbor. It was one of the happiest moments of my life when I saw the anchor lifted and the ship water-borne. I stood bent over the railing as the harbor and the land behind receded further and further towards the horizon, until they blended into the indiscernible gray mass of sea and sky. Although I was leaving the land of my birth and childhood, the land where many generations of my forebears had lived and died, it was a relief to leave this place that had become a vale of blood, tears and ashes, the symbol of diabolic cruelty and inhuman suffering.

After a day of sailing, we reached The Hague in Holland. As we were going to dock for a few hours, whoever wanted to see the town was given a pass. Alone, I would never have risked exploring an unknown place in a limited time, but my husband had a remarkable sense of direction, so we went. It was a beautiful spring day. The air was fresh and clean. There were no cars on the streets, only bicycles. Hundreds of them were parked along the sidewalks, and wonder of wonders, they were not locked up. The streets were quiet and very clean, the stores were few and far apart, and there were very few pedestrians.

I went into a fruit store to buy some berries. After a conversation consisting of a few German words and all ten fingers, it turned out that all products were rationed. No money was accepted. To make me understand better, the owner showed me a narrow green card, the ration coupon. The general atmosphere and feeling was of a very depressed economic situation not yet recovered from the war. There

was no time to see more, so we returned to the pier.

The next stop was Southampton, England, where a large number of new passengers boarded, filling the ship to capacity.

There were many Jews from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria and America, but besides my husband and myself, there were only three other Jews who did not partake of the food. At the start, we declared that we would eat only kosher. We were given a separate table, and our meals consisted of sardines, bread, fruit, raw vegetables and tea.

Altogether, it took only eleven days to travel from Gdynia to New York. During the entire trip, we had good weather and spent most of the time on deck, my husband with a *sefer* and I in conversation with the Americans. Those who were originally from Poland still spoke Polish well, and I learned a lot about American life from them. Most of them were not religious, however, so the information I acquired was quite one-sided.

The ship docked in New York harbor at the pier on the Hudson River at West 82nd Street. It was on Saturday, May 16, at three o'clock in the afternoon. Two hours before we docked, it was announced on the loudspeaker that every passenger had to present his visa and passport in order to receive a card entitling him or her to disembark and enter the United States of America. I took our visas and passports and joined the long line. It moved quickly, as several officials handled the crowd. All they did was check the documents and hand over the cards. No signing was required.

On religious grounds, we asked and received permission to remain on the ship until after *Shabbos*. Our valises, though, were taken to the customs room on shore, because all the cabins had to be vacated. My husband and I and our three

partners at the kosher table were the only ones to wait until nightfall to disembark.

Upon arriving in New York for the first time on a ship, the most fabled sight is the Statue of Liberty. I missed it, though. By the time I was finished with the formalities, the ship was already in the harbor.

During *Shabbos*, the only place we could sit was on the deck. The sights were overwhelming.We had a clear view of the relatives and friends of all the immigrants waiting on shore, many with flowers. Watching the joy of meeting and embracing was balm for the heart. Beyond them, the magnificent skyline and the endless flow of cars was fascinating. The only painful moment was when we saw several buses sent by HIAS, a Jewish organization, collect a few hundred newly-arrived refugees in broad daylight on *Shabbos*.

My husband took the position of rabbi in Congregation Knesses Israel in the Bronx, with a contract for one year. He actually maintained the position for twenty-four years. It was a good, residential neighborhood, ninety-five percent Jewish. The Jewish population was mixed, including secular Jews, modern Orthodox and a small segment of strictly Orthodox.

At the time my husband took over the *shul*, the membership was as varied as the general population. Except for a few, small, private *shteiblach*, the same situation prevailed in all the *shuls* in the neighborhood.

In all his *derashos*, my husband promulgated *shalom* and *ahavas Yisrael*, his primary credos. He loved all Jews. He always tried to find and see the positive side in everyone, although he never complimented anyone. He wasn't a back-slapper or a flatterer. If he had to reprimand someone, he did, though it was more like pleading than chastising.

On the second or third *Shabbos*, there was a *bar-mitzvah* in the *shul*. Outside, a long line of cars waited to take the guests home. After *Minchah*, my husband announced that he had something important to say to the congregation. Quietly and calmly, he declared that, as the rabbi of the *shul*, he felt obligated to lead the congregation as the founders, mostly the fathers of the present members, had intended it to be run—strictly Orthodox. Therefore, he would not tolerate any *chillul Shabbos* in the future. He also declared that they were free to cancel the contract if they were not prepared to give him a free hand to introduce the necessary changes.

His tough stand produced results. However, though he was categorically against arguments, a split among the members was unavoidable. Those against his position argued that the *bar-mitzvahs* were a substantial source of income.

"A *shul* is not a store or a factory," countered the rabbi. "It is a house of prayer."

The commercialization of Torah and religion hurt him deeply. For ten years, he forfeited an increase in salary but brought the house in order. Little by little, an exchange of members took place. The more Orthodox from other *shuls* joined ours, and those who found the new restrictions not to their liking left. In the Fifties, an influx of new Orthodox immigrants from Europe and also from Eretz Yisrael significantly increased the number of members, and it became the only completely *shomer Shabbos shul* in the neighborhood.

Besides his duties in *shul*, my husband devoted every free moment to learning Torah. He got a few offers to assume the position of rabbi in rich communities in South America, and Rabbi Henkin asked him to join the leadership of Ezras Torah. None of these appealed to him. The financial benefits didn't tempt him. He saw prominence only in learning

Torah, which was the end, not the means. His heart sang when he learned, and I shared his happiness.

During our years in the Bronx, my husband earned a reputation as a great scholar of outstanding honesty, integrity and compassion. He was a wonderful father to our two beautiful children, setting a superb example by his uncompromising adherence to Torah, *mitzvos* and ethics, by the long hours he devoted to the study of Torah and by selflessly helping others. After the Jewish neighborhoods in the Bronx deteriorated, we moved to Yerushalayim, and there, too, he earned recognition as a man of scholarship and integrity.

On Thursday, 23 *Nissan*, 5746 (1986), at five o'clock in the afternoon, my husband was on the way to *shul* for *Minchah* when he was struck by a speeding car. On Friday, 24 *Nissan*, at eleven o'clock at night, his *heilige neshamah* went up to Heaven. It rarely rains in Eretz Yisrael at that time of year, but at the moment of his passing, a sudden burst of thunder and lightning rent the skies over Yerushalayim and a torrential rain, a real deluge, descended on the city. It rained all day and all night that *Shabbos*, and the streets were flooded ankle deep. The *levayah* was on *Motzei Shabbos*, and when the last shovelful of earth was thrown on his grave, the torrential rains suddenly stopped. Even the sky was crying.

My husband left a priceless legacy—eighteen manuscripts of commentaries on the Talmud, based on notes he had begun to write, under the most trying conditions, in the Soviet prisons and Siberian gulags. Rabbi Baruch Shimon Schneierson, *rosh yeshivah* of the Tchebiner Yeshivah, who was in a neighboring camp, related that he had heard that my husband absolutely refused to work on *Shabbos*, in the very

presence of the K.G.B., and ate only dry bread and traded all other food for any available scraps of paper on which to write his *chiddushim*. Indeed, I still have a boxful of yellowed, almost disintegrated pieces of newspaper covered with faded, illegible words written with the stub of a blunt pencil.

My grandmother's words came to mind. "My children, I know you can be proud of your ancestors, but lead your lives in such a way that your ancestors would be proud of you." In my father and my uncles, in my mother and my aunts, and in my husband as well, I knew her wish had been fulfilled.

It is *Motzei Shabbos* now, as I conclude this memoir, and the *Yahrzeit* candle is still burning after twenty-four hours. Three years have passed since my husband's *petirah*. I look at the tiny flame gasping to draw yet another bit of life from the last drop of wax that clings to the sides of the glass. The universal comparison strikes me with personal force, a burning candle—how similar to a person's life! It starts out bright and strong, but with each passing moment, it consumes itself as it nears its end. And yet, as long as it burns it can ignite an endless number of objects, great and small. It can bring disaster and ruin, but it can also bring light and warmth.

As I think about all the dear and beloved members of my family and friends who perished at the hands of the Nazis and the Russians, of all those glowing flames that were so brutally extinguished, I am consoled by the knowledge that even in their shortened lives they brought light and warmth to the world with their goodness, humanity and unflinching devotion to the *Ribbono Shel Olam* and His Torah and *mitzvos*. May these pages stand as an everlasting memorial to them and everything they represented.



My husband Rabbi Shimon Gabel, ז״ל, Rav of Katowice
author of *Klei Golah* and *Sifrei Shimon* on the Talmud

ניט זילבער און גאלד איז זיין רייכטום געווען
ניט אין שוימיגען גלאנץ האט ער כבוד געזען
פון אייביגען אוצר דעם אינהאלט געשעפט
מיט טויזענטער ספרים באצירט זיינע וועגט
א לויכטנדער פלאם אין זיין הארץ האט געברענט
א מעכטיגער גייסט האט אין עם געשוועבט.

His riches were not of silver and gold
Nor in sparkling glitter did he honor behold
His insight from the Eternal Source was discerned
His walls with thousands of sefarim were adorned
In his heart a luminous fire roared
And his mighty spirit ever upward soared.



With my parents in a Polish resort in the summer of 1939



Katowice, 1946



Yerushalayim, 1989

GLOSSARY

agunah: woman unable to obtain a *get*
ahavas Yisrael: love of Israel
alef-beis: Hebrew alphabet
apteka: drug store [Russian]
aron hakodesh: holy ark containing Torah scrolls
artel: cooperative [Russian]
Avos: fathers
b'ezras Hashem: with the help of Hashem
baal tefillah: cantor
babushka: old lady [Russian]
bania: bath house [Russian]
bankes: suction cups [Yiddish]
bar-mitzvah: *halachic* adulthood
bechirah: free will
Beis Hamikdash: Holy Temple in Jerusalem
beis midrash: study hall
bentch licht: light and make blessing on candles [Yiddish]
brachah (brachos): blessing(s)
bimah: pulpit
bitachon: trust
blatt Gemara: a page of Talmud
bnei Torah: Torah Jews
chalat: robe [Yiddish]
chalef: slaughtering knife
chalilah: heaven forbid
challah (challos): *Shabbos* loaves
chametz: leaven; bread
chanifah: flattery
chassan: bridegroom
chassidim: adherents of *chassidus*
chassidus: Jewish pietist movement
chavrusa: study partner
chazan: cantor
chervoncy: Russian currency
chessed: kindness
chiddushim: analyses
chillul Hashem: desecration of the Name
chillul Shabbos: desecration of the Sabbath
Chol Hamoed: Intermidiate Days of the Festivals
cholent: special *Shabbos* stew

Chumash: Five Books of Moses, the Pentateuch
chuppah: bridal canopy
churban: destruction
daled: Hebrew letter
davar shebikedushah: holy matter
daven: pray
derashah (derashos): sermon(s)
Elul: Jewish month, roughly corresponding to September
emes: truth
Erev Pesach: day before *Pesach*
Erev Yom Kippur: day before *Yom Kippur*
fleishig: food containing meat [Yiddish]
frum: observant [Yiddish]
galus: exile
gam zu letovah: this too is for the good—Talmudic aphorism
gaon: Talmudic genius
gedolim: great ones
Gemara: part of the Talmud
get: bill of Jewish divorce
gezeirah: decree
gneivah: theft
goimel bentchen: prayer of thanksgiving
groshen: small coin [Yiddish]
Haggadah: liturgy for *Pesach seder*
heimishe: familiar [Yiddish]
Hakadosh Baruch Hu: the Holy Blessed One
halachic: of Jewish law
hamantashen: *Purim* pastry
hashgachah pratis: specific providence
hashkafah: perspective
Haskalah: Reform movement
hespedim: eulogies
Hoshanna Rabbah: part of *Sukkos*
illuy: prodigy
kal vachomer: all the more so
kallah: bride
kapote: frock [Yiddish]
kasher: make kosher
kashrus: being kosher
kavanah: concentration
kavod Shabbos: the honor of *Shabbos*
kedushah: holiness
kehillah (kehillos): community (communities)
Kiddush: sanctification of *Shabbos* or festivals
kinderlach: little children [Yiddish]
Kol Nidrei: opening *Yom Kippur* prayer
kolkhoz: collective farm [Russian]
Komsomol: young communist league [Russian]
kopek: Russian coin

kosher: worthy
kreplach: type of food
Krias Shema: the reading of *Shema*
kriyah: ripping
kulaks: rich peasants [Russian]
kulturny: sophisticated [Russian]
landsleit: compatriots
lashon hakodesh: Hebrew, the holy language
lashon hora: slander
lechayim: a toast
lebensraum: living space [German]
lechem mishneh: two *Shabbos* loaves
leshanah habaah bnei chorin: next year in freedom
leshanah habaah b'Yerushalayim: next year in Jerusalem
levayah: funeral
Maariv: evening prayers
machzor: prayer book for high holy days and festivals
marror: bitter herbs
mashgiach: supervisor
mattan beseisser: anonymous philanthropy
matzah (matzos): unleavened bread(s)
matzeivah: monument
mazel: fortune
mechitzah: partition
mechutan: connection by marriage
mein kind: my child [Yiddish]
mekadesh: marry
mesader kidushin: wedding officiator
meshulach: collector
midos: character traits
midos tovos: good character traits
mikveh: ritual bath
milchig: dairy [Yiddish]
min hashamayim: from Heaven
Minchah: afternoon services
minyan(im): quorum(s) of ten(s)
mitzvah: Torah commandments
Modeh Ani: prayer upon waking
moser: inform
Motzei Shabbos: night after the *Shabbos*
natchalnik: supervisor [Russian]
neshamah: soul
niftar: deceased
Nissan: Jewish month, roughly corresponding to April
nyet: no [Russian]
Olam Haba: the World to Come
Omer: forty-nine day period from *Pesach* to *Shavuos*

orchim: guests
oy vey: Yiddish lament
parshah: portion of the Torah
peruke: wig
Pesach: Festival of Passover, early spring festival
petirah: decease
pikuach nefesh: a matter of life and death
pilpul: involved Torah presentation
pim(y): boot(s) [Russian]
pita: flat bread
protektzia: influence
Purim: Festival of Lots
rabinka: rabbi's wife [Russian]
rav (rabbanim): rabbi(s)
rebbetzin: rabbi's wife
Ribono Shel Olam: Master of the Universe
rodina: mother country [Russian]
rosh yeshivah: dean
rosh hakahal: president of the congregation
Rosh Hashanah: New Year
Rosh Chodesh: New Month
ruble: Russian currency
samovar: water heater [Russian]
seder: Passover feast
sefer (sefarim): book(s)
Sefer Torah: Torah scroll
Sefer Hachayim: the Book of Life
seudah (seudos): feast(s)
seudas Yom Tov: holiday feast
Shabbos: the Sabbath
Shacharis: morning prayer
shadchan: matchmaker
shaliach: messenger
shalom: peace
Shavuos: Festival of Weeks, late spring festival
shechitah: ritual slaughter
Shema Yisrael: Hear O Israel, the Jewish Confession of Faith
Shemoneh Esrei: the Eighteen Benedictions
shidduch: match
shiur: lecture
shivah: seven-day period of mourning
shlog kaparos: pre-*Yom kippur* ritual
shmates: rags
shmiras halashon: restricting the tongue
shmues: discourse
shochet: ritual slaughterer
shofar: ram's horn
shomer Shabbos: Sabbath observer
shteiblach: *chassidic* synagogues
shtender: lectern [Yiddish]
shul: synagogue [Yiddish]
Shulchan Aruch: Code of Jewish Law

siddur(im): prayer book(s)
siyum: conclusion
Subbota: the Sabbath [Russian]
sukkah: *Sukkos* booth
Sukkos: Festival of Tabernacles, autumn festival
tallis (talleisim): prayer shawl(s)
talmid(ei) chacham(im): Torah scholar(s)
Tanach: the Scriptures
tefillah: prayer
tefillin: phylacteries
Tehillim: Book of Psalms
tichel: kerchief
Tisha b'Av: the Ninth of *Av,* a fast day commemorating the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem
velt: world [Yiddish]
treif: unkosher
tzaar: pain
tzaddik(im): righteous person (people)
tzeddakah: charity
tzidkus: righteousness
tzimmes: type of food
voyennoye vremia: wartime [Russian]
yahrzeit: commemorative day [Yiddish]
Yamim Noraim: Days of Awe
yarmulka: skullcap
yeshivah (yeshivos): Torah school(s)
yeshivah bachur: *yeshivah* student
yetzias Mitzraim: the Exodus of the Jewish people from bondage in Egypt
yibadlu lechaim: may they be selected and designated for life (said when mentioning the living at the same time as mentioning the dead)
yichus: pedigree
Yiddishkeit: Jewishness
Yom Tov: festival
Yom Kippur: Day of Atonement
zatzal: short for *zecher tzaddik livrachah*
zchus: privilege; merit
zecher tzaddik livrachah: the memory of a righteous person is a blessing
zemiros: songs
zhyd(y): Jew(s) [Russian]
zichronam livrachah: of blessed memory
zloty: Polish currency

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