THE ASTONISHING STORY OF A JEWISH FAMILY'S WILL TO OUTLIVE THE NAZIS

# Nine out of Ten



DR. MOSHE KATZ
*as told to* Nachman Seltzer

# Nine out of Ten



## The astonishing story of a Jewish family's will to outlive the Nazis

*By*
**Dr. Moshe Katz**

*with*
**Nachman Seltzer**

Digitized by Project Zikaron
Touro University-NY Libraries
www.zikaron.tourolib.org
2026

Nine out of Ten
*By* Dr. Moshe Katz *with* Nachman Seltzer

© 2006 Dr. Moshe Katz

ISBN 1-931681-97-X

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced
or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or
mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by
any information storage and retrieval system,
without permission in writing from
the copyright owner.

Cover design by Daniel Weinstein

Interior design by Amir Achitoov

Design and Printed by Tova Press, Inc.
Brooklyn, NY 718.438.8877
This book was printed in the United States of America.

Set in Sabon Old Style

Published by Leah's Heritage Ltd.

Distributed by
Israel Book Shop
501 Prospect Street
Lakewood, NJ 08701
Tel 732.901.3009 Fax 732.901.4012
www.israelbookshoppublications.com

# Dedication

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO THE SIX million Jews who perished in the Holocaust, including my beloved parents, Chaya and Chaim Katz, my dear brother and his wife, Pinchus and Chana Katz, and their beautiful daughters, Malkie and Shaindy, my aunts and uncles and hundreds of cousins, my unforgettable Rebbies, R' Gershon Kestenbaum of Kosice, Slovakia and R' Michoel Yehuda Friedfertig, who was my cousin as well.

This book is also dedicated to my own righteous gentiles, the Toth, Poly, Yaklovsky, Stauber and Halmos families and others whose names I unfortunately don't remember, who risked their lives so that I may live.

# Acknowledgements

MY OVERWHELMING GRATITUDE IS FOR THE RIBBONO SHEL Olam. He has given me the strength to continue the course of life which my dear parents envisioned for me, although they were unable to see it themselves. He has afforded me the Nachas that I am so fortunate to have, after having experienced first-hand the greatest tragedy in history, the Holocaust.

My deepest thanks go to Nachman Seltzer, my co-author. His devotion to telling my story has brought this book to fruition. May he have continued Nachas from his beautiful family.

I am also deeply grateful to the wonderful newspaper *Hamodia* for introducing *My Mission* to their large readership, and particularly, to Mrs. S.H. Ehrlich for her kind forwarding of the many inquiries generated by the serialization.

I would like to thank Mrs. Dvora Kiel for her meticulous editing and conscientious attention to detail.

Many thanks to Tova Press for their devotion to this project. I also thank Rabbi Yair Hoffman, principal of Gamla High School for Girls, and Rabbi Yechezkel Kaminsky of Kitov Book Store for their guidance and advice. My thanks goes to Moshe Kaufman of Israel Book Shop for all of his wonderful suggestions and important advice on the road to marketing this work.

The beautiful cover was designed by my son-in-law, Daniel Weinstein. His creativity and devotion are greatly appreciated.

My son-in-law, Shimy Zoimen, was my technical assistant in every way. No matter what time of day or night e-mails would be sent, he graciously

delivered the hundreds of e-mails to me as hard copy.

My sons-in-law, Chaim Czermak and Maish Schiff as well, are always there to assist me.

The seeds of writing this book were planted years ago. I never realized what an arduous journey it would be and almost gave up on the idea of ever publishing it.

My grandson, Yosef Zoimen, while learning in the Mirrer Yeshiva in Jerusalem, sent me a heartfelt letter stating, "Zeidy, you must finish your book. You always lectured us to finish what we start."

When my youngest grandson, Shlomo Dovid Zoimen, noticed my hesitation, he made me promise I would have it published.

I am most inspired by my wonderful children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren who always want to hear another story.

They are my greatest audience. This book is my legacy to them.

My sincere appreciation goes to my three jewels, Chaya, Miriam and Debbie.

Most importantly, I want to thank my dear wife, Hindy, for her kindness and unlimited patience while I was writing this book. Without her encouragement, this book would never have been written.

Dr. Moshe Katz, Lawrence, New York

October 2006

# Table of Contents


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Introduction | 9 |
| Chapter One | Where It All Began | 13 |
| Chapter Two | Fear Sets In | 21 |
| Chapter Three | The Noose Tightens | 29 |
| Chapter Four | Escapes | 39 |
| Chapter Five | Deportations Begin | 47 |
| Chapter Six | Occupation | 57 |
| Chapter Seven | Scattered | 65 |
| Chapter Eight | Living Underground | 73 |
| Chapter Nine | Shave and a Haircut | 81 |
| Chapter Ten | Salasi Takes Over | 89 |
| Chapter Eleven | Living on the Razor's Edge | 99 |
| Chapter Twelve | Relatives | 105 |
| Chapter Thirteen | The Russians Arrive | 111 |
| Chapter Fourteen | Going Home | 119 |
| Chapter Fifteen | Rescue Attempt and Revenge | 127 |
| Chapter Sixteen | Survivors | 135 |
| Chapter Seventeen | Picking Up the Pieces | 143 |
| Chapter Eighteen | Refugees | 151 |
| Chapter Nineteen | On the Move Again | 161 |
| Chapter Twenty | Earning a Living | 167 |
| Chapter Twenty-One | Building Anew | 173 |
| Chapter Twenty-Two | Growth of a Community | 181 |
| Chapter Twenty-Three | My Legacy | 189 |
| Chapter Twenty-Four | From Strength to Strength | 193 |
| | Epilogue | 201 |
| | Photographs | 207 |
| | Glossary | 229 |

# Introduction

WE WERE A HAPPY LITTLE BAND GROWING UP TOGETHER IN Czechoslovakia. We played together as young children, went on to learn in the same *cheder* and in adolescence we studied together in yeshiva. Later, as young men, we suffered the trauma of the Holocaust together as well. A supposedly civilized nation planned and actually carried out a plan whose horrible magnitude had never before been attempted in the whole of world history, its leaders making full use of twentieth-century technology to do so. The sick mastermind behind it all gathered genealogical lists and, according to those lists, ordered the massacre of millions, using diabolical new techniques of slaughter. The Holocaust was a monument to the depravity and the depths to which a society can sink.

Throughout Europe, a continent not unused to violent anti-Semitic rampages, mass killings began. These "civilized" destroyers first gassed the Jews in trucks, then shot them en masse, hung them, buried them alive and eventually annihilated them in their infamous gas chambers and incinerated their remains in their ovens. The war itself did not reach Budapest until March 19, 1944 when Adolf Eichmann was sent from Berlin to oversee the mass deportation of Hungarian Jewry to Auschwitz. When Hungarian Jews began to wake up to what was in store, it was just a little too late.

The little band of friends was subjected to the same tribulations as all their fellow Jews, sudden detainment for lack of proper documents; widespread roundups for forced labor in Jewish work brigades, eventual deportation and death. Their number dwindled until only a few of the original group were left. They decided to gather once more for what might be their final

meeting. Running silently through the deserted streets of Budapest after curfew, risking their lives, only four twenty-year-olds met: Hugo Schwartz, Mendel Valer, Saye Weingarten and I, Moshe Katz. Our drawn faces belying our youth, we huddled secretly in a basement and made a pact among ourselves, that whoever survived the war, that insane attempt to eradicate all trace of our nation, that person would undertake a sacred mission to tell the story of what happened to the Jewish people, no matter what the cost.

After the war, which *bechasdei Hashem* I alone among them survived, I was prepared to tell it like it was. But no one wanted to listen. Now, any storyteller needs one thing above all: a listener. For a good twenty years I had no listeners. At a *simchah*, if two survivors met and began to reminisce about the war, the hosts of the *simchah* would ask them to desist. If they could not manage to stop the flood of shared memories, they were usually asked to leave.

Then, on May 11, 1960, the Mossad mounted an operation to capture the man who organized the destruction of Hungarian Jewry. Having received accurate information revealing the whereabouts of Adolf Eichmann, the Israeli Secret Service planned a daring operation to be mounted on Argentinian soil. A team of agents abducted Eichmann as he walked down the street on his way home from work in Buenos Aires. The small band had timed everything down to the second, when an untied shoelace almost compromised the mission. Despite this fluke, they managed to capture Eichmann and spirit him away to a safe house for interrogation. Afterward, they dressed him as an Israeli airman and drugged him just enough to ensure his cooperation. The plane that flew him to Israel also carried Abba Eban, Israel's Minister of Education at the time, who was totally unaware that he was the cover for the abduction.

When this amazing news reached me, I was overjoyed. Eichmann, the despicable architect of the Final Solution, the beast who personally sent over half a million Hungarian Jews to their deaths in the ovens of Auschwitz, had been caught. I envied the judges who would have the pleasure of deciding his sentence and I knew there was no way I was going to miss his trial.

The news elated me for another reason as well. Until now discussion of the Holocaust had been taboo; no one wanted to talk about it. Even those

who knew the truth pushed the subject into the closet and closed the door. People were afraid to discuss it. The entire world was pretending that the horrors had never happened so we could all hold hands and be friends. Suddenly, the Holocaust was the topic of the day and there was no way to ignore it. Eichmann appeared on the cover of *Time*, the story was featured in *Newsweek*, and the *Reader's Digest* published a dissection of Eichmann's career from start to finish. I realized that I would now be able to speak openly about it, to inform an ignorant generation of the atrocities that had taken place just a few short years before.

I arrived in Israel on Thursday evening. The trial was due to begin on Sunday, and there wasn't an entrance ticket to the courtroom to be had. I tried everything I could think of and was about to give up and purchase a return ticket to the States, when I remembered an old friend, Reb Binyomin Mintz, who headed Israel's Ministry of Postal Services. I went directly to his office. When his secretary asked me if I had an appointment, I said, "Just tell Binyomin that Moishe Katz is here from New York and wants to see him."

He came out of his room and gave me a big hug. "I'm so happy that you came to visit me. What can I do for you?"

I told him the truth - that I had come to Israel out of a desperate need to be a witness at the Eichmann trial and was unable to get an entry pass. "Please," I said, "can you get me one?"

"Well," he said, "I know that all the passes have been given out, either to the press or to members of the government. But here's what I'll do. My own pass is for the opening day, but I'll have my secretary transfer it to your name. But it's only for one day."

"One day is better then nothing," I replied. "Even that makes my trip worthwhile."

I attended the trial with mixed feelings. When I entered the courtroom, I had to show the guards my passport and they asked whether I was a Holocaust survivor. When I answered in the affirmative, they directed me to a seat far in the back of the courtroom to reduce the possibility of my attacking Eichmann during the trial.

One look at Eichmann and the years slipped away: I found myself back in Budapest. The sidewalks were dappled with the sunlight passing through the

tree branches and birdsong filled the air. The sounds of the normal world ceased and it was as if I were standing in a vacuum. The hairs on the back of my neck stood straight up. It was Satan himself sitting in that glass cage, bringing back memories long since buried. In my mind's eye, I saw him once again striding down the boulevard in Budapest like an emperor of old, wearing a spotless uniform, shoes polished to twin mirrors, wielding a baton. The king of the world! Now he was in a cage in the land of his enemies, an object of world scrutiny and about to be judged. *Where are your bodyguards now, Adolf?* I thought to myself in wonderment, and I praised Hashem for allowing me to witness his retribution.

Back in New York, many people heard that I had been at the trial and called me. The first invitation to speak about it came from the Yeshiva of South Shore on Long Island, and that, *baruch Hashem*, led to further invitations in both Jewish venues and in areas where no Jews lived. People suddenly wanted to listen, and I was finally able to tell my story. It snowballed. I began lecturing wherever I was asked. I spoke at yeshivos, girls schools, public schools, Catholic schools and universities. I was recently asked to speak before an all-school, three-day symposium in the city of Ottawa, Canada. But it's still not enough. Strangely, even today, sixty years after the war's end, there are still some who do not wish to listen.

And each time I stand before a crowd and relate the horrors of the *churban*, the utter destruction of the Holocaust, I picture my young friends and our last meeting in Budapest, and I know that I'm fulfilling my promise to those who were killed so brutally. Now, as then, I'm ready to talk. I just need you to listen.

CHAPTER ONE

# Where It All Began

I GREW UP IN UZHOROD, CZECHOSLOVAKIA, A CITY OF architectural beauty and gracious living, situated on the banks of the Uzh River. We lived in one of the better neighborhoods of Uzhorod, and our classically European apartment building fronted on Masaryk Plaza, named after the country's first president, Thomas Masaryk. Opposite our building lay a large park in which the trees grew thick and tall, and children romped freely. Our home was a ten-minute walk from the river, where we spent many an afternoon fishing and swimming with the neighborhood children. We walked to school over the magnificent bridge that spanned the Uzh River. From five to seven o'clock every evening, women strolled along the promenade bordering the river, enjoying the fresh air and the flowers, which grew in profusion along the river bank.

My parents were well known in the community, and many *tzaddikim*, righteous men of the previous generation, were frequent guests in our home. The sounds of Torah learning permeated our lives. The Komarner Rebbe lived right next door and Reb "Pinyeleh," the father-in-law of the Skverer Rebbe, stayed in our home on his yearly visit to Uzhorod. Our family is related to the Belzer dynasty, and my brother Pinchas was a Belzer *yoshav*, one who sat and learned with great diligence in Belz for eight years until he married "young" at the age of twenty-five. At least once a year my father would travel to Belz to visit the Rebbe.

Uzhorod came under Czech suzerainty when Czechoslovakia was created

in 1918 at the end of World War I. Czechoslovakia existed as a country only until 1938, when, with England's tacit agreement, Germany and Hungary gobbled up its territory to cater to Germany's need for more "breathing space." Uzhorod had been called Ungvar before 1918, Uzhorod from 1918 to 1938 and Ungvar once again until 1944, when the Soviets changed it to Uzhorod, which it is still called today under Ukrainian control.

Ungvar's Jewish community was established in the mid-1600s in the aftermath of the Chmielnitzky massacres. Rabbi Aryeh Liebish Reisman served as the first rabbi in Ungvar, followed by Reb Gedalia Richzeit, Reb Yehuda Fried, Reb Tzvi Hirsch Charif Heller, Reb Mordechai Avigdor Weinreb, Reb Shlomo Ganzfried, Reb Meyer Eisenstadter (known as Reb Meyer Asch), his son Reb Menachem Asch and Reb Chaim Zvi Manheimer. The community built a magnificent synagogue under the leadership of Reb Eluzer Lev in 1904. It was the most beautiful Orthodox shul in Middle Europe and is still standing. Unfortunately, it functions as a popular music hall today.

Reb Avraham Yosef Grunwald served as rabbi after Rav Lev, and it was his son, Reb Shia, who established a *shtiebel* on 53rd Street in Boro Park after the war. Rav Yosef Elimelech Kahane of Tzelem, who also served as the president of Kehal Shomrei Hachomos, was rabbi after Rav Grunwald. He served as the Rosh Yeshiva in Uzhorod and attracted close to two hundred young students between the ages of sixteen and thirty-five. My older brothers, Yankel and Pinchas, were both close to the Rosh Yeshiva and served as *gabbaim* in the yeshiva for several years. Our last Rabbi was Reb Elimelech Kahane, who was taken from the ghetto of Ungvar with the third transport and gassed *al kiddush Hashem* along with the majority of his congregants in June 1944.

My father, Reb Chaim Katz, came from Poland with his family in 1900 at the age of twelve. He was born in Yavarov and lost his mother at a very young age. Father was a handsome young man with dark eyes, tall and very thin. He had brown hair and a reddish-brown beard that made him appear older, which helped him in business. As the second of three brothers, he was selected to learn a trade. After much deliberation, his father decided to apprentice him to a brush maker; in those days brush making was a very lucrative trade. After only two years, he had mastered the business to the point

where he was able to buy out his boss and, at the age of twenty, establish his own business. Soon after that he was able to set up his younger brother, my uncle Yisrael, in the same business in Romania. His other brother, my uncle David , later immigrated to the United States during the First World War, reaching foreign shores before the rest of the family. But all that would only come years later.

The company manufactured brushes of all kinds: hairbrushes, hat brushes and toothbrushes; brushes to shine shoes with and brushes to clean clothing with; and brooms galore. Despite his youth, my father became widely known as a businessman with vision. His lofty soul, however, made him much more than a money maker. It helped him develop into an entrepreneur in the realm of *chessed* as well. He purchased about twenty straw mattresses, which he stored in two, ceiling-high piles in a corner of the house during the daytime. At night he would spread them on the floor throughout the house for his many guests. He, himself, would stand over the stove when he came home from work and prepare a hearty meal for everyone: a huge pot of stew or goulash and another enormous pot of soup, which he served with an unlimited supply of fresh bread.

After supper, the travelers and Father repaired to the *beis medrash*, which was conveniently located in our courtyard. Early in the morning, Father could be found in the *shtiebel* hunched over his *Gemara*, learning enthusiastically with a *bren* and a *geshmak*. All this while he was still a *bachur*! He was friendly with and helpful to all the other young men who had arrived from Poland at the same time as he, and in his "spare time" chaired the nominating committee of the shul. He was so busy that he never even thought of taking time to find a wife. Hashem, however, decided that he was ready and that was that.

Mother lived with her family in the city of Paks, Hungary, but her brother studied in Ungvar at the yeshiva of Rav Yonasan Shteif, later the Rav of the Viener *kehillah* in Williamsburg. Her brother met Father in Ungvar and was so impressed that he suggested the *shidduch*. Mother's father asked Reb Yaakov Lebovitz, the father of the Viener Rav, Reb Ezriel Yehuda Lebovitz, to "spy" out the territory and to get to know the young man, Chaim Katz. Reb Yaakov came to town "on business" and needed a place to stay. Where

did people stay when they came to Ungvar? At Chaim Katz's home, of course. Reb Yaakov stayed with Father for two weeks and returned to Paks with the highest praise for the *bachur* as a *yerei Shamayim* and a *baal chessed*.

The young couple settled in Ungvar. My parents' house had eight rooms, including two that were used for the brush factory, and a big storage attic with many beds. It was a rare night when the house wasn't full of guests, and sometimes there were so many that we children spent the night on the floor while the guests slept in our beds. In one of life's many ironies, Mother didn't speak Polish and Father spoke not a word of Hungarian. He was fluent in Yiddish and German, but Mother didn't know Yiddish and barely knew German. Nevertheless, *baruch Hashem*, it was a match made in Heaven.

Mother was about five-foot-two and wore an attractive blonde wig. The whole city came to love her and called her the Mama of Ungvar. Her list of charitable activities was staggering. She supplied poor brides with dowry chests of towels, linens and blankets; she helped needy families in many ways. Every Thursday, Mother went to the slaughterhouse to oversee the preparation of the tens of chickens she regularly ordered. She would have them delivered to our house to be cut up and given to me to distribute secretly to the poor, along with flour and yeast to enable them to bake their *challos* for Shabbos.

Mother had a comprehensive knowledge of medicine and established connections with many of the top doctors in town, some of whom treated anyone Mother sent free of charge. She was also a frequent visitor at the local mental hospital, where she could be found almost every Shabbos afternoon giving encouragement and good cheer to the patients. When Mother went around the city collecting money for her many projects, everyone received her graciously and gave her substantial sums, because they all knew about her many charity projects and how much money it took to run them.

One of my earliest recollections is of Father calling to me to run quickly and get the midwife, Mrs. Williger, who lived close by. A short time later I heard the newborn cry of my younger brother Sruly (Yisroel) mixed with happy shouts of "*Mazel tov*!" I was only four at the time, but I still remember the long table at his *bris milah* around which sat many of the city's poor. After he married, Father was often the *sandek* at the *bris milah* celebrations

of our poorer neighbors. In return for this great merit, Father would pay for the *seudah*. There would be about thirty-five *challos* and Mother would cook enough gefilte fish for all the celebrants. When these boys for whom Father had been *sandek* reached *bar mitzvah*, Father would buy them a brand new wardrobe. When he was invited to act as the *kohen* at a *pidyon haben*, Father would put aside the five silver coins in a small velvet bag, and when that child turned twelve, Father would take the coins, add whatever amount was necessary and order *tefillin* for him from our next-door neighbor, the scribe Rabbi Landesman. Father would stay in these young boys' lives, often helping to pay for their weddings if their families could not.

Making a wedding in those days was far different from what we do today. The entire cost of a wedding then would pay for about ten portions at the luxurious *simchas* we make today. There was no such thing as a catered meal. All food was home cooked, the ceremony took place in the courtyard and people didn't invite everyone they knew. There would be about thirty-five people at the *chuppah*, and large *sheva brachos* meals would be served only on Shabbos.

On *erev Rosh Hashanah*, when I was a bit older, I would accompany Father to the marketplace where he would pick out about sixty-five pounds of grapes, the most expensive fruit available, and we would march swiftly from poor home to poor home, carrying all those grapes, delivering them to the grateful inhabitants. Hungary has always been famous for the quality of its vineyards and wine cellars, which is, of course, due to the lusciousness of its grapes. When Father and I entered a home with those huge bunches of delicious grapes, the heady aroma would bring everyone running, adults and children alike. As always, the blessings would rain down on Father and all our family, and Father would shrug it all off in his typically humble fashion. This idyllic life was soon to be roughly shattered, never to be pieced together again.

For some reason, though I was the eighth child, Father let me accompany him almost everywhere he went, and I will always cherish those moments we spent together. Having the merit to be around my parents so much of the time, I witnessed their selfless dedication to their fellow Jew, and it imbued me with many priceless lessons that stayed with me all through my life -

especially during the harsh and bitter years of World War II.

My parents used to go away for a month at a time, twice a year, before the war. Several times they traveled to Budapest where Father checked into a clinic to undergo treatments for a severe ulcer that plagued him. They stayed with either my mother's brother or sister, both of whom lived in Budapest. In 1936, the doctors recommended that Father undergo an operation. My parents were unwilling to take such a serious step without first consulting with a *Gadol.* Mother sent Pinchas as their emissary to the Belzer Rebbe. The Rebbe told Pinchas that "the ulcer was like a candle, at any time it could go out." We understood that to mean that an ulcer could place a person in serious danger before his time to go. When the Rebbe gave Father a blessing that the operation be successful, Father went ahead with it.



My first encounter with government policy was at the tender age of six. The Jewish school in our neighborhood was located across the river, accessible only via a bridge. It was a long walk from my home and I was afraid to go there myself. The public school on the other hand, was a mere three houses away, and I decided that I wanted to go there. Father, who felt that people should always have the opportunity to learn a lesson or two in life, allowed me to enroll in the public school, where I would be one of the few Jewish students in my class.

The Czechoslovakian government at this time had instigated a brand new policy that called for the deportation of all foreigners back to their respective lands. This meant that my parents could be deported back to their native lands of Poland and Hungary, both enemies of Czechoslovakia. Father would have to take out citizenship papers as quickly as possible. To do that, however, he needed to find somebody who carried our family name and also had deep roots in our city.

In those days, when a Jewish couple married, the wedding would be officiated over by the local Orthodox rabbi but not recognized by the municipality as an official marriage. The government, while not giving official recognition to the marriage, nevertheless registered these couples using the

husband's mother's family name. My parents were therefore registered under the name Kastner. Father, while searching for roots in Ungvar, was unable to find anyone with the name Kastner, but he did find a family with his father's name, Katz. And so we were once again using the name Katz, which enabled us to apply for the documents we needed to become Czechoslovakian citizens.

Once Father had taken care of our registration problem, the chief of Ungvar's police department "found a way" to give us brand new papers with our genuine name of Katz, certifying that we were citizens in good standing with a long and rich past behind us. This development gave me the new name of Mor Katz instead of Kastner. The morning after our names had been changed, I entered my classroom and took my seat as the teacher called the roll. When he called out "Mor Katz" (our new name), I raised my hand and answered, "Here."

A moment later he called out "Mor Kastner." Again I raised my hand and answered in the affirmative. He burst out laughing.

"You Jewish trickster," the schoolmaster exclaimed. "Two names? One name isn't enough for you?" I tried to explain that our name had been changed from Kastner to Katz the day before, but the teacher refused to believe that there was a reasonable explanation for what he perceived as something underhanded. He kept muttering, "Jewish liars, looking to make some extra money on welfare, want to swindle the government!"

I began to cry and to call hysterically for my sister, Manca, who was in the third grade. She arrived in a hurry and reiterated what I had said, asking the teacher to just "cross out the name Kastner."

"I cannot cross it out," he replied, "unless I get authorization from the principal." So my sister went downstairs and asked the principal to come and explain matters to the bull-headed teacher. The principal finally came upstairs, but at that point I was so upset that I walked out of school and ran home. I decided there and then that the Jewish school was the place for me, where I could wear my cap and be among Jews. This ended my first encounter with bureaucracy and anti-Semitism.

Despite our now valid citizenship, on March 4, 1936, we were brutally reminded once again that we were strangers in a strange land. Government

agents entered our home and demanded to see all the documents that proved our family's legal right to remain in the city. Mother, born outside what was now Czechoslovakia, lacked a birth certificate and was ordered to leave Uzhorod (now in Czechoslovakia), go back to her parents' home in Paks and wait there until such time as the Czech government saw fit to issue her valid Czech identity, which she would need in order to return to her family.

I celebrated my *bar mitzvah* on May 10, 1937, and the fact that Mother wouldn't be there made me very sad. A few days before the *bar mitzvah*, a letter arrived addressed to me, a first in my young life. It was from my mother. My hands were shaking as I read what my dear mother had written. Although she would not be with me in person to share the momentous occasion, she said, she would be there in spirit. She also promised to return soon since she had acquired almost all the necessary papers. I held onto that letter and read it over and over until it was dog-eared and almost illegible. Mother returned home just before *Rosh Hashanah, baruch Hashem*, and by *chol hamoed Sukkos* my parents were already planning my future education.

I'll be honest. I was a pampered child, and Mother knew I wouldn't be happy in a dormitory that lacked certain comforts, so she selected a yeshiva that provided many of the material conditions I was used to. The yeshiva had, for instance, maids who changed the students' linens for them regularly. My parents believed in sending their boys away to learn, but they also believed in not denying us. After the *Sukkos* holiday, Mother outfitted me with a wardrobe of new clothes and accompanied me to my new school in a small Romanian town just over the border with Czechoslovakia called Valea Visouly.

I was not too happy to be separated from my mother again so soon, but if I had to leave home, this was not such a bad place to be. We were twenty-two spoiled boys from well-to-do homes and we were cared for, well-fed and individually catered to. Nevertheless, the learning was on a high level and the *rebbes* were excellent. Our *rebbe* was Mordechai Lieb Cohen, and I still remember a large part of *Mesechtes Shabbos*, the whole of which I learned by heart in six months.

CHAPTER TWO

# Fear Sets In

OUR YESHIVA WAS LOCATED ON A MOUNTAIN IN A BEAUTIFUL forested area in which we were allowed to hike. We awoke in the mornings to the freshest air imaginable. Little did we dream that these were our final breaths of freedom.

One evening about ten boys gathered in one of the dorm rooms to get acquainted. The conversation turned to our fathers' occupations. When I reluctantly admitted that my father manufactured brushes and brooms, and that my brothers and I were taught the business from a young age, they scoffed.

"Well, then," they chorused, "show us that you can make a brush."

I realized that I now had to prove myself, so I told them that if they really wanted me to make them a brush, they would have to procure for me the right kind of animal hair. I needed horsehair, which was expensive, and I knew they couldn't afford to buy it so I hoped the whole thing would blow over. No such luck. The very next day a wagon pulled by two hefty horses pulled up in front of the yeshiva, bringing shingles to replace those that had been blown off the roof during a particularly nasty winter storm the week before. The faces of the troublemakers lit up in wicked anticipation as they realized that what they needed had just made itself available.

The owner of the wagon unloaded his wares and was given a bowl of steaming oatmeal to eat, after which he retired to one of the spare bedrooms to rest up from his grueling journey in the biting cold. The boys seized the moment. With grins of anticipation on their faces, they sneaked outside and

approached the horses standing quietly at the side of the building. One boy who knew how to handle horses soothed the frightened beasts, while a second boy took a pair of scissors he'd scrounged from somewhere and hacked a generous chunk of tail off the hapless animal. This is much crueler than city people can understand, because horses need their tails to swish away the insects that bother them. This poor horse would be tailless for a long time.

The boys presented me with an ugly mound of dirt-encrusted hair that was nowhere near the quality of the horsehair we used at home. But my chagrin at what the boys had done didn't come close to the wagon-driver's reaction when he saw his shorn animal. He stormed off to the nearest police station and returned with two grim-faced officers, who arrested all the boys involved, including me, and marched us off to jail. The Rosh Yeshiva had to use all his influence to get us released, and, of course, promised that we would be dealt with suitably.

Back in the yeshiva, the unrepentant boys demanded that I keep my word and make them their brush. I told them that in addition to the horsehair, I still needed a special kind of wood and a drill to make the holes for the wiring, which they had no way of supplying. So I wrote home asking my parents to send me some wire and a ready-made wooden handle complete with already drilled holes. It took me a few weeks, but I was finally able to put together the brush of their dreams.

Soon we became aware of the fever of nationalism burning in the people around us and saw the growing expression of militancy by young and old alike. Germany had announced its annexation of the area in Czechoslovakia known as the Sudetenland and threatened to invade Czechoslovakia itself. Czechoslovakia was surrounded by enemies: Germany, Poland, Hungary, all of whom wanted to retrieve the portions of their land that had been taken from them to form Czechoslovakia after World War I.

Sure enough, in the fall of 1938, with the support of England, France and Italy, Germany swallowed up most of Czechoslovakia, and Hungary seized the land that had formerly belonged to it, including Ungvar (Uzhorod) and

the surrounding countryside. New regulations came into effect that generated a feeling of unease among the Jewish community, though business was booming as usual. We were busy from morning to night: during the day with our broom and brush company, which we ran from our house, and after hours with our clandestine document-forging "business."

Underneath the floor on which stood an array of modern brush-making machinery lay other equipment that we had been using to prepare documents for the hundreds of Jewish refugees that passed through Ungvar after World War I. We prepared passports complete with visas and work permits. The documents themselves were authentic, because Mother and Father had developed an effective bribery network among sympathetic government clerks, which kept us well-stocked with genuine Hungarian passports. In those troublesome times there was always a fellow Jew who needed documents, and it was my job to pick up and deliver them.

Beginning years before when I was only eight, the government had decided to investigate our family. They had probably received a tip that we had some suspicious machinery in our house. Whatever the reason, police officers now began to call on us all the time and at odd hours. One day I was returning home on my bicycle from a delicate mission that involved picking up a package of documents from the Friedman family, fearfully eyeing every tree I passed as a potential hiding place for government agents waiting to pounce on me and haul me off to jail. I knew that if I were caught a lot of people would be endangered. I rode up to my house bathed in sweat despite the intense cold. I saw my father standing at the window and I immediately sensed that something was wrong. Father was grimacing, signaling something with his eyes. I looked around and saw a police car at the curb. I jumped back onto my bicycle, made a U-turn and raced back to the Friedmans' house with imaginary police sirens screaming in my ears. I practically stopped breathing until the package was safe again in Mr. Friedman's hands. That was my first encounter with the law, and the feeling of fright stayed with me for a long time. Now, at the age of fourteen, I was to have another frightening encounter with the law.

In those days, *yeshiva ketanah* basically covered one year's study, and one moved on to another yeshiva for the next grade. After a year's study in Valea Vesouly I had transferred to the yeshiva at Kashav, and the following year to Rachov in Carpathia. About four weeks after my arrival in Rachov, however, a new republic was declared, which split the country in two. The new president decreed that no foreign nationals could remain in the country without special permission. I had to leave the yeshiva at once and go home.

Having been expelled from my yeshiva in Rachov as an alien and sent back to Uzhorod, I was more or less at loose ends. War was imminent and soldiers in uniform were everywhere. A few weeks after the Hungarian army had occupied the city, I was walking along the street, trying not to make eye contact with the Hungarian soldiers, when suddenly a bunch of them attacked me like a pack of vicious dogs. I was accustomed to the friendly Czechoslovakian soldiers, and I wasn't in the least prepared for what came next. They jumped on me, pushed me to the ground and while one soldier held me down, another began to yank and pull at my *peyos*. The more I shrieked in agony, the more they enjoyed the game. They actually succeeded in pulling out all the hairs of my *peyos* on one side. Finally tiring of the game, they gave me a few last kicks and left me lying in the street with blood streaming from my head.

I stumbled home in shock, crying and bloodied. My mother hugged me close to her and said, "Don't worry, Moishele, your *peyos* will grow back."

I pulled away from her roughly. "I don't want them to grow back," I cried. "If I didn't have *peyos*, nobody would know I'm Jewish and want to beat me up!"

I ran out of the house and went down the street to the barber we always used, telling him that I wanted my *peyos* cut short enough to be unnoticeable. Mr. Haberman, the barber, immediately asked, "Does your father know you are doing this?"

I couldn't lie outright so I said, "I don't know," and looked away. He refused to touch my *peyos*. I shrugged my shoulders and left his shop, making my way to a non-Jewish barber shop some distance away. The gentile barber did what I wanted without asking any questions. One, two - he chopped off my *peyos*. My soul shrieked in agony, but my heart sighed in relief at the

prospect of being safe now from attack. I arrived home, *fait accompli.* I now looked like a gentile, since everyone wore caps or hats in those days unless they couldn't afford it, and now I, too, had no *peyos.* The entire family did their best to persuade me to grow them back. Pinchas, my older brother spoke to me for hours, as did my father and mother.

"Moishele," Pinchas began, "don't you remember all our discussions about the *mesirus nefesh* of our ancestors, the glory of ten of our nation's giants who sacrificed their lives on the fiery altar rather than deny Hashem?" I nodded sadly, hating to disappoint my mentor, remembering not only the stories but even the times and places I heard them. The scope of Pinchas' knowledge was stunning; he quoted *gemaras* and *sefarim* and spoke eloquently about what sets a Jew apart from a gentile. Nevertheless, I stubbornly shook my head and resisted all their efforts, determined to avoid any future beatings by keeping my *peyos* cut short.

Yankel was the eldest, Pinchas next. Pinchas had been born in Paks in 1914 during one of Mother's visits to her parents. His Hungarian citizenship was to give him only temporary sanctuary some years down the line. I always regarded Pinchas as my mentor. He was almost six feet tall with light brown hair and blue eyes. He was a good looking young man, who wore a *shtreimel* after he married, unlike the rest of us. He had studied in the yeshiva in Ungvar for a few years and developed a reputation for both seriousness in learning and an extraordinary ability to get things done. On Thursday nights the yeshiva boys stayed up way past midnight learning, and then Pinchas used to bring them home with him. He would help himself to all the cakes and kugels that Mother had already prepared for Shabbos, serving it all to the hungry *bachurim.* Mother always shook her head on Friday morning when she saw her raided kitchen and all the food missing, but she'd just smile and begin preparing the Shabbos meals all over again.

Today, yeshivos serve, if not delicious, at least ample meals three times a day. In Ungvar, there was almost never enough food for the boys and they often went hungry. Eventually Pinchas took charge. He hired a horse and wagon and began traveling among the farms in the area, requesting leftover or surplus produce and storing everything in the large cellar of the yeshiva. During elections there were about thirty political parties running for seats in

the city council. Pinchas took advantage of the situation, promising the "farmer's party" all the yeshiva's votes if they'd provide it with an ample supply of flour. The politicians were delighted with the deal and came through with the flour.

Pinchas had a natural tendency toward *Chassidus* and was drawn to Belz and its great Rebbe. Though he resembled his brothers superficially, Pinchas had a spiritual look about him that radiated holiness and raised him to a level beyond ours. At one point he decided to leave Ungvar and move to Belz, and he learned there for many years. His gentle spirit could not tolerate the fact that so many Jewish boys were denied a Torah education in those days primarily for lack of funding, and he returned to Ungvar at the age of twenty to do something about it. When the yeshiva administrators didn't support his vision, he opened his own Belzer *shtiebel*, using the premises of the Machzikei Hadass shul.

Again he rounded up a horse and wagon, but this time he collected *sefarim*. Before we knew it, he had a *beis medrash* and *otzar sefarim*, and the sounds of youngsters learning Torah rang out. He accepted anyone with a true desire to learn, molding them and taking them to an ever higher level. When he felt they had grown sufficiently, he would take them to Belz and leave them in the care of the great yeshiva there. I still remember when Avraham Trenk and Shalom Hershkowitz made their first trip to Belz with Pinchas, and I know there are many families living a life of Torah and *avodah* today due only to Pinchas' foresight.

One day I walked into the kitchen and there were Mother and Pinchas deep in conversation. "Pinchas," she lamented, "what will be with you? By the time you're ready to get married there won't be any girls left!" Pinchas smiled and reached for another slice of Mother's cake.

"My dear Mother," he would say, "don't worry! Hashem will send the perfect girl for me at exactly the right time."

Eventually, Pinchas gave in. My parents hired a car, and they spent the day going from town to town meeting the prospective girls that Mother had lined up for him. He became engaged to Chana Stern, whose father, Reb Shmuel, agreed to support the couple for the next five years. Nevertheless, my parents wanted him to learn a trade and after great deliberation they

decided he should learn the apple growing business. As usual, Pinchas took me along wherever he went, and the two of us traveled to a farm about 100 kilometers away that had a large apple orchard. We spent the next few months learning how to grow, pick, pack and ship apples. I was close to my brother, and young as I was, I knew intuitively that my beloved Pinchas would never go into business. He would only be content in the world of Torah and Belz, but for my parents he'd do anything. Even as we strolled arm in arm through the orchard, the ripe fruit heavy and redolent on the trees, words of Torah emanated from his holy mouth. He spoke to me of the depths of *Chassidus* and the amazing ideas found in the great books of our heritage. He told me stories of the great Rebbes of yesteryear, some of whom he had known. Those conversations and his low, solemn voice come back to me whenever I find myself in a wooded area, reminding me of a beautiful time before the world went crazy and everything was destroyed.

After his marriage, he went to live in his father-in-law's home. There, Pinchas became close to the Vizhnitzer Rebbe, Reb Chaim Meir, with whom he learned every day. When I'd arrive for a visit with my brother, I always loved seeing the Rebbe, who would stroke my cheek and tell me that I should be very proud of my older brother. Indeed, I was as proud as could be to have such a special brother.

His children were special as well, and we were all very close. My sister, Chana took Pinchas' little Malkie down to the river bank one afternoon, and a bee came along and showed more than a little interest in Malkie. Another cousin attempted to chase the bee away, and hit Malkie by mistake. Malkie began to cry. My cousin, trying to make amends, explained that it wasn't Malkie she had intended to hit, but the bee. "Even a bee you don't have to *potch* so hard," Malkie complained. I still miss Pinchas and his wonderful family.

Now that I was fourteen and home from yeshiva with nothing to do, my father decided that the time had come for me to enter the family business. Every child in my family learned a trade, and we were all involved in the manufacture of brooms and brushes in one capacity or another. And even in

this the government had the last word. Father first had to sign a contract of apprenticeship for me and I had to take some approved business courses as well. My three sisters worked in the family business. Chana, who looked just like Mother, did light bookkeeping; Manca collected money that was owed to us and Terry was our go-between with the government bureaucracy and handled things like tax problems. But I had to attend the government sponsored three-year business college twice a week and learn how to calculate expenses, how to design a brochure, how and where to advertise, and how to make a telephone call. I studied the art of letter writing, how to deal with banks and the tricks of the import and export trade, not to mention courses on government regulations, mathematics, Hungarian and world history. I spent the rest of the time learning in my cousin's yeshiva. Rav Michal Yehuda Freidfertig, besides being a *tzaddik*, had a deep understanding of his *talmidim*. He never chastised me for what I had done to my *peyos*, although it obviously hurt him.

CHAPTER THREE

# The Noose Tightens

IN 1938, WHEN HUNGARY REOCCUPIED ITS FORMER TERRITORY, all our Czech currency became instantly worthless. The official exchange rate for the new currency, the Hungarian pengo, was exorbitant and people were left penniless. My brother, Yitzchak, also known as Joe, had friends working in the local branch of the Mittelmans Bank, and he proceeded to cut a deal with them.

"Listen," Joe told them over a cup of coffee in a café, "there is no reason we have to starve to death, and I have an idea how we can avoid it. I'll deliver to you in the bank a suitcase full of the old currency. You'll take it to the Hungarian Federal Reserve and exchange the money as if you had collected it from many different people. Then we'll split the money fifty-fifty and have enough money to live on for a while." They shook hands on the deal and swung into action.

Joe brought the money into the bank and handed it over to his friends. At the end of their shift they made their way to the Federal Reserve and gained entrance as Mittelman Bank employees. The agent on duty at the entrance was immediately suspicious, but sent them upstairs and notified the upstairs guard to keep an eye on them. When they opened the suitcase bulging with outdated currency, two federal agents approached them and demanded to know where they had gotten so much money to exchange. The interrogation did not last long, because the two young men were extremely frightened and when pressed to confess, they caved in easily. The young men looked at the

rubber whips the agents held in their hands, then looked at each other and decided that their friend Joe Katz was not worth sitting in prison for.

The name *Katz* was not unknown to the agents. "Aha! That Katz family is always involved in something illegal. We know they've been helping criminals and forging false passports. We've never before been able to pin anything on them. Now we've got proof," they assured each other.

That night five police officers came storming into our apartment. "Criminals," they yelled. "Now we've got you!" They raged through the apartment, ripping upholstery, turning closets inside out and banging on the floorboards to see if they were hollow underneath. But Father had seen the police car pull up in front of the house and whispered to me, "Moishele, run quickly and get Dr. Toth the lawyer!" I climbed out the window and ran all the way to our lawyer's home. Interrupting Dr. Toth in the middle of his dinner, I managed to gasp, "The police! They're raiding our house as I speak."

Dr. Toth wasted no time. He grabbed his top hat and walking stick, said goodbye to his wife and children and ran out the door, motioning to me into his car. We arrived at my house four minutes later and ran into the building. Bursting into the apartment, he brandished his walking stick and roared at the policemen, "Where is your warrant, boys? These people are still entitled to some rights, you know."

Dr. Janos Toth was a member of the City Council and heavily involved in politics. They knew he was not to be trifled with. His friendship with my Father had made things a lot easier for us during those years. The young policeman handed the warrant over to our lawyer, who examined it carefully and soon the corners of his mouth curved up in a smile. At that moment, we knew we had won this round.

"This is a warrant for the arrest of Joe Katz," pronounced Dr. Toth, "not the whole family, and it most certainly does not authorize the destruction of their home."

The policemen looked at one another and, muttering under their breath, filed out. As he walked out the door, the senior officer said to Father, "You may have gotten away with it this time, but we're going to keep our eyes on you so watch out!" Time was running out on our passport operations, and we could feel the noose tightening around our necks.

Rumors now began to circulate, mostly based on reports from Polish refugees who arrived in Hungary with a burning desire to warn everyone they came in contact with about the atrocities the Nazis were committing in Germany and Poland. The stories were so unbelievable that we dismissed them with condescending smiles, certain that whatever danger there might be would not reach us. Yet we were aware that things were no longer so rosy in our country either. The Hungarians sympathized with the Germans and began to enact racial laws that affected the Jewish community. Soon all male Jews between the ages of eighteen and forty-five were conscripted into forced-labor gangs, leaving children without fathers and wives without a livelihood. Jews received some financial aid at that point from the American Joint (the American Joint Jewish Distribution Committee), but it wasn't enough to keep people afloat and families began moving in together to save on rent.

Our family was not touched at first for two reasons. First, my father was an important contributor to the economy with his large business, and second, we had a number of influential government clerks on our payroll and had been paying them off for some time. As the situation worsened and people had less and less money, Father began giving employment to more and more young Jewish women. The American Joint was helpful, too, in that it funded the purchase of raw material for all kinds of Jewish businesses.

While this was happening, we young men couldn't show our faces in public for fear of inciting the jealousy of those whose male children had all been taken away, and that might have led to our arrest. One fine day, however, the police caught up with my brother, Mordechai, in the town market and took him away to a labor camp, where they dealt very harshly with him because he had evaded the police for so long. We began to realize that perhaps the Polish and Slovakian refugees hadn't been exaggerating, but still we didn't really believe their horror stories. The truth was, as we later found out, that compared to what was going on elsewhere, we were residing in a country club.

In America a man doesn't need an official permit to lease property from a

landlord and open a business. In Hungary, however, one needed a license to conduct business. Now the Hungarian government cracked down further on non-ethnic Hungarian citizens and called all business licenses up for review. Of Ungvar's fifteen tailors, five of them were gentiles and the remainder Jews. Of twenty-eight shoemakers, only three were gentiles. When the licenses were redistributed, somehow none of the Jewish tailors or shoemakers or other artisans received a renewed license. Overnight tens of Jewish families lost their livelihood in our city alone. And there was worse to come.

There was a gentile lawyer in town by the name of Dr. Julius Egresi. Tall and distinguished looking, with gray hair swept back off his forehead, Dr. Egresi was a formidable man. One sunny morning, he decided that the city of Ungvar needed but one broom factory and that it might as well be run by him. Without further ado, the attorney called on his old school friend, Mayor Laslo Megay. This would not be their first joint business venture.

"Good morning Laslo," Egresi greeted his old friend.

"Good morning Julius," returned the mayor with a wide smile for his old buddy, knowing instinctively that whatever Egresi had in mind, it would be worthwhile for both of them.

"Brooms," Egresi began. "Everybody needs them. You can't get enough of them. There's always a customer for a broom." The mayor nodded his head sagely.

"In my opinion one factory ought to be enough to supply our good citizens with brooms," Egresi ventured, testing the waters.

"True," the mayor agreed.

"And," said Egresi, "an important local industry like broom making ought not remain in the hands of a Jewish family."

"And brush making?" inquired the mayor, with the ironic lift of one bushy eyebrow, knowing that Egresi hadn't the slightest idea of how to make brushes, which is much more complicated than broom making.

"No, just brooms to start with," said the lawyer. "Then we'll see." The deal was struck and Egresi walked out of City Hall a triumphant man.

A registered letter arrived at our home the next day bearing the calamitous news that our business license was revoked and we had thirty days to turn over the equipment to Dr. Egresi, the new owner, who would, of course,

compensate us "fairly." My parents had absolutely no intention of parting with the company they had toiled so hard to build over so many years. They looked for and found a suitable gentile employee who lived in the city of Kisvarda in central Hungary about one hundred kilometers away from Ungvar, and he agreed to be their front man. A veteran of World War I, Mr. Benko received his broom manufacturing license as soon as he applied. My sister, Manca, who had been in charge of the bookkeeping, was appointed manager of this new factory and moved to Kisvarda to oversee production at the new location.

We shipped out our equipment as unobtrusively as possible, and it wasn't too long before our entire broom operation, registered in Mr. Benko's name, was up and running smoothly again. Our family handled sales, Manca ran the factory and Benko was in charge of shipping. The money rolled in and we banked most of it. Until one fine morning when Mr. Benko, our friendly gentile employee, strolled into "his" factory, walked over to my sister and said he'd like to see her in his office. That was in itself strange, for Mr. Benko had never ordered my sister to do anything previously. Once inside the office, Benko reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a twelve-inch knife.

"My dear Miss Katz, from now on I am running "my" company. Take your things and get out, and let me never see you here again! This is your one and only warning: Never show your face in here again, or you are dead!"

Manca, stopping only to grab a few things from her desk, ran for her life! She took the next train home and told my parents the entire story. There was nothing anybody could do. After all, the factory and all its equipment officially belonged to Benko and we weren't even supposed to be there. It took some time getting used to the idea that the business was no longer ours. We still had money in the bank, but that was only faint consolation, and in any case it was steadily diminishing.

Dr. Egresi, while disappointed over his failure to acquire our machinery, didn't let it faze him, and soon his broom factory was doing well. He named it "Kato Brooms," after his wife, and strutted around town, left thumb behind one suspender, as if it was the most normal act in the world to push a rival out of business in such an underhanded manner. In a short time every

store in town carried Kato's brooms. We made sure to sell our remaining, hidden stock far away from Ungvar and the greedy eyes of Dr. Egresi.

Some time before our run-in with Dr. Egresi, and just after the police raid that had trashed our home in an attempt to find my brother, Joe, Father called me into his private study for an important talk. This action reflected how seriously he regarded the situation since it was most uncommon for Father to call us in to his study. It was a somber room furnished mostly in dark wood, with shelves of *sefarim* lining all the walls, yet it was comfortably furnished and welcoming. I settled my small frame in an armchair and tried to anticipate what Father wanted from me. Father had always been reticent and quiet, and now with all our recent troubles he had become more somber then ever.

"Moishele," he began, "your brother, Joe, is now in hiding as you know, and will most likely have to remain so for the foreseeable future. It will be your job to supply him with his daily meals as well as any important messages we may have to send him. It won't be easy. The police are extremely annoyed that we slipped through their net and are going to be searching carefully to find something to pin on us. You will have to be extremely vigilant at all times."

I had no illusions about what the police would do to me if they caught me delivering food to my brother. But he was my brother, and I was ready to do anything for him, so I reassured my father that I'd be as careful as possible and began planning exactly how I was going to carry out my task. I decided that I would have to be an authentic delivery boy, delivering genuine merchandise to our customers around the city. I loaded the large basket on my bicycle with a layer of food, on top of which I placed pillows and blankets and on top of that packages of brushes. Some days I'd deliver paintbrushes to the paint shop and other days cleaning brushes to grocery stores.

One morning I packed a shipment intended for an old customer of ours by the name of Papernik who happened to be a policeman. Mrs. Papernik ran the store. First I delivered Joe's food to our cousins' house where he was

hiding; then I proceeded to Papernik's shop with their order of twenty toothbrushes, twenty clothing brushes and a few other assorted brushes. I made sure Mrs. Papernik signed the receipt, got back on my bike and headed home. Standing at the corner right next to the railway crossing were two detectives whose faces lit up with evil happiness when they caught sight of me. They had recognized me as a member of the Katz family, and no doubt hoped to coerce me into revealing where my brother was hiding.

"What is your name and where are you coming from?" the first one asked.

I pulled out the receipt from Mrs. Papernik and said that I had been delivering merchandise. They paid no attention to the receipt or to my protests and hauled me in to police headquarters for questioning. This did not bode well for me, and my fourteen-year-old heart was pumping wildly. They took me into a bare room, furnished only with a wooden table and a few benches. They manhandled me onto the table, tied me down and removed my shoes and socks. The two detectives stood over me with truncheons in their hands. Now the interrogation began in earnest.

"Where is your brother?"

"I don't know," I answered, remembering Father's warning: *Never tell the police anything*. My eyes were closed and my lips were sealed. I was going to be heroic. I would reveal nothing. That was when I felt the first blow. They began to beat the soles of my feet with their truncheons. My entire body lurched upward in pain. The soles of my feet felt as if they were on fire.

"Now tell us where you really came from," they shouted and struck me again. They only hit the soles of my feet to conceal the beating. Since many people in those times walked around shoeless, they were prepared to claim that any scars on my feet were from walking barefoot.

Again and again, the blows came crashing against my soles. The tears ran down my cheeks in rivulets, but I clamped my mouth shut, only opening it at intervals to say, "I don't know."

They kept this up for an hour and all the while I let the pain wash over me until my throbbing and agonized feet weren't a part of me anymore. They were furious, for they never expected a fourteen-year-old boy to be so stubborn. Finally they decided to take their lunch break. They untied the ropes and pushed me off the table. Naturally my feet wouldn't support me and I

collapsed in a heap. The detectives were remorseless and merely picked me up and locked me in a closet to wait for them to finish eating lunch.

At three o'clock, when the detectives returned from enjoying their wiener schnitzels and opened the door, I fell out of the closet and landed on my face. The detectives looked at me with hate-filled eyes but now they resorted to verbal vituperation and threats.

"Katz," the first one spoke up, "tell us where your brother is. Can't you see that my partner is totally out of control? I'm telling you, he'll kill you if you don't tell him where your brother is hiding.

"Listen," he tried again, "you know that we are going to locate your brother. It's just a matter of time before we find him, so what's the point of your suffering? You're not the guilty one."

They kept up a steady stream of questions and tried all sorts of tactics to make me talk, but I didn't say a word. Finally, one of them said, "OK, you don't want to use your mouth to talk, so you won't use it to eat or drink either." They locked me in the room and went away. I was extremely hungry and thirsty, having eaten almost nothing the entire day, but the detectives were true to their word and nobody entered the room for the rest of the day.

I tried to be brave. I *davened* all the prayers that I could remember by heart. Exhausted, I lay down on one of the wooden benches and willed myself to sleep. I was sure that my parents knew of my incarceration, but the police had the right to hold me incommunicado for up to forty-eight hours. Not even our prestigious lawyer Dr. Toth would be allowed to see me. And so I slept on the bare bench and prayed for the nightmare to end.

It was not over yet. I was awakened early the following morning by a sharp slap on my face and pulled to an upright position by my ears. I shrieked in agony. It felt like my ears were being pulled off and my yell must have startled them, because they let go of me and began to scream at me once more. By this time, however, I realized that they did not have sufficient evidence to keep me and would have to release me after forty-eight hours. So *bechasdei Hashem*, I held out, and forty-eight hours after my arrest, they threw me into a police car, drove me home and tossed me out of the car. It was Friday night and I came home just in time for candle lighting. I pulled my broken body up the stairs and walked into my home just as my mother

was lighting the candles. There was a feeling of serenity in the air and the aroma of Mother's Shabbos food filled the house, giving me life once again. The table was set with a place for me, since they knew that I was coming home and I fell into Mother's arms. She held me close and called me a hero, and I knew that all my suffering had been worth it to ensure that my brother remained free.

CHAPTER FOUR

# Escapes

A COUPLE OF WEEKS AFTER MY DEVASTATING EXPERIENCE IN jail, Father called me in to his study again. He gave me instructions to go to an acquaintance of his named Mr. Gluck, who worked as a taxi driver, and order his cab for six o'clock the next morning. The time had come, he said, though he wished otherwise, to spirit Joe out of the country. I found Mr. Gluck at home, hard at work demolishing a bowl of goulash.

"Mr. Gluck," I said, "my father would like you to pick me up tomorrow morning at six," and I gave him an address a few blocks away from our house. "We'll go from there to Chop." Chop was a city about twenty kilometers from Ungvar, where there was a large railway terminal from which one could travel to just about any place in Europe.

"And who exactly is going to pay me for this little journey?" he asked sarcastically as he stopped spooning up his goulash for a moment. I reached into my pocket and produced a hefty bundle of Father's cash. I paid him only half the amount he asked for to ensure that he would show up the next day.

Suddenly he looked at me with a sly grin and asked, "Tell me, why don't I just pick you up at your house?" Mr. Gluck, like everyone else in Ungvar, knew that Joe was in hiding and he obviously was suspicious of my sudden trip.

"No," I said impatiently, "I have to go to shul early tomorrow morning to catch the first *minyan* and there's no way for me to get back in time unless you meet me where we just made up to meet." He finally caught on that

I was prepared to take my business elsewhere if he kept asking questions, and we wished each other a good night. Then I went to see Joe to update him on the escape plan. The next morning I was up early, davened, ate a good breakfast and made my way over to the street where Mr. Gluck was supposed to pick me up. It was winter and the bare branches of the trees tossed in the brisk wind. The taxi was waiting for me as arranged, and I gave Gluck instructions to take me to another address where Joe would be waiting for me.

"Who else is coming with us," he asked me sharply.

"My cousin," I replied. "His name is Emanuel Genud."

Joe was waiting in the shadows, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, trying to stay warm. He was bundled up as if to ward off the cold with a heavy scarf half covering his face. "Emanuel Genud" slid into the seat next to me and I squeezed his hand in silent support. As the cabbie drove swiftly along the empty, early-morning road to Chop, I bided my time for about two miles and then made my next move.

I suddenly cried aloud, "Oh no! I forgot to... I left something back home... stop the car and let me off here!"

"Oh, no you don't!" said Gluck, disapproval stamped all over his florid face. "If you're getting out, who's going to pay me?" I took out the other half of the money I had promised him and settled the bill in advance. The taxi sped off in the direction of Chop, leaving me standing alone at the edge of the road. Slowly I began the long trek home.

Joe arrived safely in Chop where, under the assumed name of Emanuel Genud, he boarded the first train to Budapest. He was carrying documents supplied by the Katz family's underground forging operation. Joe went directly to the Swiss Embassy and applied for a visa to Switzerland. His passport had, of course, actually belonged to the real Emanuel, a cousin of ours, but Emanuel's picture was replaced by a picture of Joe, glued on authentically with our own gluing machine, and we had stamped it with all the requisite stamps.

Joe left for Switzerland in October 1938 as soon as his visa came through. He entered a yeshiva there, spending most of the day in Torah study, and supported himself by selling *siddurim* and *chumashim*, which we sent him

regularly. The Hungarian government that controlled Ungvar did not allow residents to make international phone calls from private phones. All such calls had to go through the government-operated telephone exchange at the post office. We, of course, didn't want them to have a record of our calls, so Joe would send us telegrams in which he would tell us when to be at the post office to await his phone call.

All went well for four years. One day in 1942, Joe sent a telegram addressed as usual to the Katz Broom Factory, which was our official address. The postman mistakenly delivered it to the Kato Broom Factory, run by greedy Dr. Julius Egresi. The telegram read: "Mama, please be at the post office at 5:00 p.m. on Sunday, [signed] Emanuel Genud." Egresi, seeing that it had been sent from Switzerland, was suspicious. Everyone knew that Switzerland was full of spies, that the Katz family were probably engaged, as usual, in illegal activities, and therefore he, clever Dr. Egresi, would do his civic duty and report them to no less than the chief of police – another old friend of his.

Together Egresi and the police chief decided to set up a sting to catch the Katz family in the act. It never crossed their minds that this might just be an innocent communication between relatives. They resealed the telegram and had it delivered to the Katz family. Then they informed the Hungarian equivalent of the F.B.I., which then arranged to have agents hidden in the post office to listen in on the expected phone conversation. At last the police would have the evidence they needed to arrest the Katz family!

The following Sunday afternoon was a bright and sunny day. Mother and I set out for the main post office, never suspecting the trap awaiting us there. Thanks to the informer Dr. Egresi, the intelligence branch had placed a tap on the telephone on which we would be receiving Joe's innocent call.

"Hello," Joe's voice came over the wire.

"Sweetheart," Mother gushed, "how *are* you? Are you getting enough to eat? Are you taking your vitamins and eating enough fruit?" Joe had always been a picky eater, always thin, always in too much of a rush to find the time to sit down and eat a good meal. (Even today at 88, *sheyichye*, Joe is as skinny as he ever was.) As a result, Mother was constantly worried about him.

"Of course I am," he laughed. "Just yesterday I bought a whole bunch of bananas in the market."

"And how's business?" she asked.

"Just fine, *baruch Hashem*," he answered. "I sold almost everything you sent me."

"Joe, listen to me," she said, forgetting to call him Emanuel. "Don't do anything dangerous, you hear? Don't go anywhere you shouldn't go and don't get involved in anything illegal." He promised to behave himself and the conversation turned to family news. Mother told Joe how much we loved and missed him and ended with another warning to stay out of trouble. How ironic it was that while Joe was now safe, our troubles were about to begin!

Two days later Mother and I were summoned to police headquarters where a pair of tough detectives showered us with questions.

"What does *banana* mean?" one of them began, looking straight into Mother's eyes.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she answered. "Banana means banana," she said, shrugging her shoulders in confusion.

He stared at her out of slate-gray eyes. "You know what I mean. You spoke of bananas in your telephone conversation with one Emanuel Genud at present in Switzerland, that infamous breeding place of spies. It is obviously a code word, and I intend to find out what it means."

Mother stared at the detective in alarm, only now comprehending the magnitude of what we were facing. They suspected us of spying!

"And another thing," his partner continued. "You told Mr. Genud not to do anything that he isn't supposed to do. Is he transferring funds illegally?"

"I am sorry to disappoint you fine gentlemen," Mother stated calmly and firmly, "but the conversation you monitored was between me and my nephew Emanuel Genud and it was entirely innocent." They stared at her in disbelief.

"Oh yes, officers," she continued, "banana means banana. I was simply asking my nephew if he is eating enough fruit... and when I warned him not to do anything he isn't supposed to do, I just meant that he should take care to wear a coat when it rains, and take care of himself."

"And the books and other articles you send him?"

"Yes," said Mother, "we do send him books, religious ones, which he

then sells to support himself."

"Who is this man really?" he asked again, trying to trip Mother up. "My sister's son," she replied.

"Come on, madam, if you tell us the truth, we'll go easy on you."

"Listen," she said, "my son was always a poor eater. I was just trying to make sure that..."

"Son?" said one. "Did you say son?"

"Yes," she replied quickly. "Emanuel is just like a son to me. The boy stayed in my home while he was studying in the Ungvar yeshiva. You can easily verify it!" With grave reservations they finally allowed us to leave the station for lack of hard evidence, but that was only the first in a year's worth of interrogations. We were in and out of court that whole year. Our excellent family lawyer, Dr. Janos Toth, was working hard constantly to keep us out of jail.

At that point Joe, although safe in Switzerland, was so concerned about our dangerous situation that he somehow procured Argentinian visas for the entire family. I still have those documents. When the visas arrived in the mail, my parents weighed the pros and cons of uprooting the family and moving so far away. They never let us children in on their discussions so I can't say for sure what the deciding factors were, but I firmly believe that their main concern was the preservation of our *Yiddishkeit* in a strange land. Their total dedication to the *Ribbono shel Olam* was deeply entrenched.

At that time the Nazis were pressuring the Hungarian government to harass the Jews in all sorts of ways. A new law imposed an unrealistically low price ceiling on all goods and services. The law was senseless, for almost nothing was available through normal channels at this point, and shopkeepers were forced to buy on the black market. This of course inflated prices. One morning fifty undercover agents came to Ungvar and arrested fifty Jewish shopkeepers for price gouging. The president of the *kehillah* appeared at our door in the afternoon, requesting a meeting with Mother.

"Listen," he said to Mother, "we must get these people released before their case goes to trial, or who knows what will happen to them."

Mother promised to do her best, and that afternoon paid a call on the chief of police at his home, which wasn't too far from ours. It just so happened that we had a longstanding arrangement with Ungvar's police chief

dating back to when we had discovered his fondness for goose. Whenever the *shochet* came to our house to slaughter geese for us, there was invariably a problem with the lungs of one or more of the fattened geese, rendering those fowl not kosher, and we made sure that they found their way to the home of the chief of police, beautifully dressed and with ribbons around their throats. I myself had the honor of delivering many a goose, and I remember that I had to take my shoes off when I entered his house, because they had a carpet. So we were still on fairly good terms with the chief of police. Within a day of Mother's visit, all fifty Jews were released, with the payment of only a small fine.



My sister, Terry, was a frequent visitor to the prison in Ungvar, where she dispensed food and drink and gave moral support to the hapless Jewish inmates who had been arrested for a multitude of reasons. Because she was an almost daily visitor, the warden and guards came to know her quite well and allowed her access to every section of the prison but one. That section stood behind tall and forbidding gates and she had no inkling of what went on there. One day we were gathered around the table eating lunch, when Terry entered the room, her face deathly pale.

"Do you know what I saw at the jail today?" she asked us, her voice barely under control. "You know that I visit the jail as often as I can to give out kosher food to the Jewish prisoners. Well, there is one section of the prison where I am not allowed entry. Today for the first time I was able to find out what that section of the jail is used for." She paused and we waited as she dropped her bombshell.

"It's the high-security wing. They hang people in its courtyard," she whispered. Our mouths dropped opened. We had not imagined that the Hungarians had sunk so low.

"Not only that," she went on. "I saw a prisoner in that courtyard for the first time today. He is obviously a Jew; he has a long, flowing beard and his eyes were shining with a holy light." Father instructed her to find some way to talk to the man. Who knew, maybe he was even a relative?

The next day, after distributing food to the Jewish prisoners, she approached the guard in charge, who knew her quite well by then. She showed him that she still had some food left in the basket and begged him to let her go through the gate and give some food to the prisoner in the special wing. The guard was understandably reluctant and put up a big fight, but he was no match for Terry. Eventually he gave in and allowed her to go through, warning her to do it quickly because he himself could be arrested if anyone found out.

She watched in trepidation as the guard unlocked the giant steel gates and allowed her through. The yard was empty except for the gallows that stood there awaiting the next sacrifice. The guard accompanied her into the prison building, knowing how rare it was for anyone who entered this wing to be allowed out — ever. They passed along a row of mostly empty cells, and as they approached the special prisoner's cell she heard the quiet singsong of Torah learning. The man was sitting on the stone bunk, his back against a damp, moldy wall, humming softly to himself. The guard unlocked the door and Terry entered the cell. As she emptied her basket onto the bunk, he pleaded with her to inform his family that he was alive and well. He told her that he was Rav Alter Yitzchak Aizik Weinberger, the Turkeh Rav.

The city of Turkeh is located on the Polish-Hungarian border and at that time had a fairly large Jewish population. Prominent among them was the humble *tzaddik* and Torah scholar known as the Turkeh Rav. This is the story he told Terry: Early one morning the Rav had innocently decided to cross the Hungarian border into Slovakia with his son. In fumbling in his pockets for his passport, he inadvertently revealed a mass of innocuous papers he was carrying. The border guards immediately became suspicious, clamped handcuffs on them both, arrested them as spies and sent them to the maximum security prison in Ungvar.

As the guard hurried Terry out of the cell, the Rav reminded her once more that his Rebbetzin in Turkeh and his sisters, who lived in Ungvar, were all, no doubt, searching frantically for him and his son, and he begged her not to forget to contact his family. Terry ran home to tell Father the startling news that the Turkeh Rav, whom they had heard was imprisoned but no one knew where, was alive and well but scheduled for hanging. They immediately informed his family of this, providing them with some small measure of relief.

The Turkeh Rav later described his arrest in a *sefer* he wrote. *"After a number of hours [at the border crossing, the soldiers] took me and some others [they had arrested], among them thieves and murderers, to... jail. Thus began a new chapter in my life. The new jail had all the facilities I could want: clean rooms, beds to sleep on. I made the acquaintance of two fine men there. One was a Jew by the name of Yosef Moshe Halpert. The other was a non-Jew. Both were fine upstanding people.*

*"My first night at the Ungvar prison [they put me in a cell with] a fellow Jew who was in prison for attempting to save another member of* Klal Yisrael. *I begged the man to do his best to get a message out of the prison that the* Rosh Yeshiva *of Turkeh is languishing together with his son in prison. Through his attempts my family received the first hint of my whereabouts.*

*"After about a month I met a young woman who apparently frequented the jail, performing acts of* chessed. *She asked me my name and I told her that I was the Turkeh Rav. She was so happy that she burst into tears of joy! She told me that from the day my sisters had found out that I was in the Ungvar prison, they had attempted to verify in which section of the heavily guarded jail I was in, but had had no success. When they heard that the chances of getting out of this prison alive were very slim, they had almost given up hope of ever seeing me again.*

*"She couldn't believe she had actually found me alive and well and hastened to inform my family. This amazing girl, this* baalas chessed, *provided me with some kosher food before leaving me. She revitalized my body with her food and my soul with her kindness. Much later I learned that this young woman was the daughter of Reb Chaim Katz. May the* Ribbono shel Olam *bless her and her family."*

Father listened to Terry's tale and took immediate action. He applied a suitable amount of grease to a suitable number of palms, reminding those who needed a reminder that a very important and innocent man was in prison and that it would mean a great deal to a great many people to have him released. That was another escape that ended well.

And so, as Europe was erupting all around us in a cloud of flames and misery, the Jews of Ungvar, ourselves included, lived lives that were at times uncomfortable, but we had no idea at all of what was going on in the world outside – until the deportations started.

CHAPTER FIVE

# Deportations Begin

IT WAS 1942. I WAS EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD, HAD A TRADE SCHOOL degree cosigned by Father and the mayor of Ungvar, and though life was hard it was still bearable and even held some promise. Admiral Miklos Horthy was the anticommunist, pro-Nazi, dictatorial regent of Hungary. Horthy had sought German help in reclaiming territory ceded to Yugoslavia and Romania after World War I, in return for which he joined the German-Italian Axis when World War II began. Now his Nazi allies were most unhappy with Horthy's lack of cooperation in implementing the Final Solution. They demanded that all of Hungary's Jews be deported forthwith.

Horthy realized that compliance with this inhuman demand would totally destroy his country's economy. When the pressure on him became unsustainable, however, Horthy agreed to deport all "foreigners," meaning all Polish-born Jews residing in Hungary. There were, indeed, many who had come to the area to better their lives as Father himself had done all those years ago. Once again our longstanding connections with the police department and monetary sweeteners generously distributed protected us for a while.

The deportations, however, became a torturous yet accepted fact in our lives. Wherever you turned, you could see whole families being taken away. In our district of Carpathia alone there were about 23,000 Jews, so you can imagine the horrible scenes we witnessed. We would awaken to the heartrending cries of children being pulled from their warm homes and dragged away. We cried along with our friends and prayed for their safety,

never dreaming that anything more than hard labor awaited them at the end of their journey. Daily deportations carried away our friends and relatives and we could only thank Hashem that we were not yet among them.

My brother, Pinchas, was by now married and living in Volchovic, part of Marmorosh, with his wife's family. When the state troopers came to collect the Polish Jews from his village, he had papers to prove that he had been born in Paks, a town that had always been under Hungarian sovereignty. This fact granted him some additional time in this world. But his father-in-law and brother-in-law were both deported along with everyone else to Kaminsky Podolsk, a concentration camp in Ukraine. His two young sisters-in-law managed to escape the dragnet and secretly trekked over 100 kilometers from Volchovic to Ungvar, where we hid them among all the Katz children. Pinchas, meanwhile, did his best to avoid being conscripted into a work gang.

The Hungarian State Police had acquired so much power by now, and they were so desperate to show the Germans that they were doing something about the Jewish problem, that they sometimes rounded up Hungarian-born citizens as well. I remember one boy named Tabak who, when asked to show his papers, remarked that he felt bad for the Polish refugees. They took him away on the spot, no further questions asked.

Then we began hearing reports on the situation in Kaminsky Podolsk. The hard-hearted Hungarian guards were slowly, but surely, starving the deportees to death before they even reached the extermination camps! One day in late autumn, Pinchas arrived at our house. His eyes were sunken into his head, his cheeks permanently streaked from crying. With tears streaming down his face, he begged Father's help in saving his father-in-law. Father had no idea how to go about saving someone from detention in Kaminsky Podolsk and doubted that it could be done. But Pinchas wouldn't give up.

"You do things for everyone else," he cried. "Now do this for me! Please find a way to bring back my father-in-law." At last Father gave in and promised to try to think of something, and when Father put his mind to something he always came up with a solution. Some thirty years before, Father had saved a Hungarian gentile named Gero from starvation when Gero's business went bankrupt. Father was the only person to offer him an interest-free

loan and trust him with new merchandise, and Gero felt himself forever in Father's debt. Old man Gero made his son promise that if Mr. Katz ever needed a favor, that son was also honor bound to help him.

Father had a quiet talk with young Gero, who was now an officer in the Hungarian army. Against all odds and probabilities, Gero agreed to try to extricate Shmuel Stern, Pinchas' father-in-law, from Kaminsky Podolsk. I don't know how much money passed between them, but I know that Father wrote a note that Gero was to deliver to Mr. Stern, begging him to trust Gero as Father's emissary and to follow Gero's instructions to the letter.

Officer Gero had no trouble reaching Kaminsky Podolsk, locating Shmuel Stern and handing him the letter. Then he removed a pair of scissors from his pocket and handed it to Stern, telling him to cut off his beard. Gero told Stern flatly that it was the only way he could sneak him out of the camp. Mr. Stern looked Gero straight in the eye and said, "If I'm going to die, I want to die as a Jew. I refuse to touch a hair of my holy beard!" He grabbed the note Father had written him and wrote back that the soldier had done his duty, but he was not interested in going back with him if he'd have to cut off his beard. He thanked Father for going to all this trouble for him.

Officer Gero returned to a most disappointed and stymied Katz family. Pinchas, however, was not one to take no for an answer. He grabbed the note and wrote despairingly: "Please come. This is your last chance. Cut off your beard - it will grow back. Please do as the officer tells you!" But now officer Gero had a brilliant idea. "If he won't come with me looking like a normal person, maybe I can get him out as a special medical case." And he did! With a borrowed jeep, plastered with symbols of the Red Cross, Gero drove an extremely bloodied, thoroughly bandaged and sick-looking Mr. Stern from the concentration camp straight to our home. We welcomed him with shouts of joy and undid the many layers of bandages and sponged off the dried blood.

Mr. Stern had arrived a few days before *Rosh Chodesh*. On *Rosh Chodesh*, Shmuel Stern said to Father, "I want to go to shul and *daven*." He needed to *daven*, to share the joy of deliverance with Hashem, but he insisted on doing that in shul and only in shul. The man had been rescued mere days before and was already endangering himself - and all of us - once more! He stood

there, this stubborn old man, with his beautiful white beard, in borrowed *tallis* and *tefillin* and asserted, "If I'm not allowed to go and *daven Hallel* in *shul* as I have done my entire life, then I'm going home!"

Father tried reasoning with him, explaining that he would attract attention in shul and it would reach the ears of the police that there was a new Jew in town, and this would not only endanger him but all of us for having helped him escape from the detention center. Reb Shmuel stood there with our *tefillin* wrapped around him and didn't listen to a word that Father said. He merely repeated that he was either going to shul or he was going home. There was nothing to do but have him escorted back to his home town, where, indeed, he went to shul to his heart's content – for a total of two or three days, until he attracted the attention of the police and was rearrested.

The officers sat him down in the local jail, offered him a cigarette and in the friendliest manner possible said, "Now, Stern, everything will be fine if you just tell us who brought you out of Kaminsky Podolsk." Not getting anywhere that way, they resorted to their usual methods and finally, under torture, Mr. Stern told them that none other than his *mechutan*, Chaim Katz, had facilitated his escape.

Somehow we learned of the storm heading our way and did our best to put some impediments in its way. First, Father arranged for another old friend of his, a well-respected doctor at the hospital in Ungvar, to come and place our house under quarantine. Huge red crosses suddenly appeared on our front door with signs forbidding entry into our home due to a highly contagious illness. The police were not overly impressed by our tactics, and before we could catch our breaths they arrived to interrogate us, wearing surgical masks to avoid "contagion." Father sat across the table from the policemen and staunchly denied everything.

"Do you have any connection with old man Stern?"

"Of course, he is my son's father-in-law."

"When was the last time you met?"

"At my son's wedding," Father told them. "But tell me, why are you so concerned about anything the old man says? He is most likely senile and it's not worth your while to listen to him."

The interrogation continued for hours and the meeting turned stormy, but

Father stuck to his story, and eventually they left. The police were sure (and rightly so) that Father was hiding the true facts from them, and Father was equally insistent on sticking exactly to his story. The incident soon became a federal affair for the simple reason that no one had ever escaped from Kaminsky Podolsk. The case dragged on for months, embroiling us deeply. It turned our lives upside down. Just when we thought it was over, another interrogator would decide to have a go at our file and would rehash the whole situation all over again. Things could not continue in this way.

Our lawyer friend, Dr. Toth, was always there for us, but finally decided that things had gone far enough. One of the good doctor's many powerful and influential friends was an individual known as the Hunchback. The man known as the Hunchback was none other than the head of the Hungarian secret police and a man who inspired fear in all who crossed his path. Dr. Toth knew him well from their university days, and was one of the few who could converse with him in a normal manner, which suited the Hunchback very well. Dr. Toth requested a meeting.

At the appointed time, Dr. Toth entered Secret Service headquarters fearlessly, strode past the staring officials at the front desk, rode the elevator to the top floor and sharply rapped on the chief's door. His old friend was sitting at a desk in a spacious office with a panoramic view of downtown Budapest and the flowing river that splits the city in two. He was eating breakfast and Dr. Toth happily accepted his invitation to join him for a cup of Brazilian coffee.

"All right," the Hunchback finally asked, "why have you come?"

"Well," began Toth, "recently I have come across an investigator of yours who I feel might need a little investigation himself."

"What do you mean?" asked the little man between bites.

"Well," said Toth, "I have been hearing talk of bribery and high living. I came to see that the law is upheld."

"Hmm," the chief said, "tell me more."

Now the truth was that the investigator assigned to our case really had begun dropping hints that he might be able to have our case dropped under the "right" conditions. Father took him at his word and probed delicately to find out how much money the investigator had in mind. When he heard the

amount, however, Father backed off. Bribery was one thing, blackmail quite another. Besides, it was wartime and there was no way we could pay so much.

The Hunchback now devised a plan to trap the investigator in the act of doing something illegal. He instructed Dr. Toth to have Father negotiate a bribe and arrange a time when the "money" would be transferred. In the meantime, Father sent a messenger to the Belzer Rebbe in Bochnia detailing all our recent and not-so-recent troubles, and explaining how things had become much worse since he had rescued a fellow Jew, who also happened to be his *mechutan*, from Kaminsky Podolsk. He begged the Rebbe to *daven* for us so Hashem would lift the terrible decree. It was a Thursday night when the answer came back from the Rebbe, written on very thin tissue paper and delivered by messenger. The letter promised us deliverance from our current troubles using such terms as "*yishuas Hashem keheiref ayin* – G-d's salvation comes like the blink of an eye."

That evening the house was infused with a festive air. It did not matter in the least that we were still under investigation, or that we did not possess nearly enough money to pay the inspector off as he wanted, or even that we had no guarantee that Dr. Toth's plan would succeed. The Belzer Rebbe had given us a *bracha* and that was sufficient cause for celebration.

Dr. Toth came to see us with a broad smile on his face and closeted himself and Father in the study. He instructed Father to arrange an appointment with the inspector for nine o'clock the following morning at our house. The investigator was more than happy to comply. The next morning our home was the scene of frantic activity. At eight o'clock, secret police agents came through the front door and proceeded to set up listening gear all over the house. The Hunchback arrived with two of his special-operations experts, who drilled a hole in the door of our bathroom, which was to be their command center and observation post.

The operation was in place. Agents were hiding all over the apartment, ready to pounce on the traitorous investigator as soon as he accepted the bribe. Everyone was at his station and ready for the big moment when the phone rang shrilly, its sound reverberating throughout the apartment. We answered the phone right away. The caller asked to speak to the Hunchback,

saying it was an emergency. The secret service chief came running out of the bathroom command post and picked up the phone. With a thunderous look on his face, he replaced the receiver and turned to us.

"My agents inform me that our investigator will not be joining us this morning. He has just committed suicide." He turned on his heel and stormed out of the house, followed soon after by all his agents with all their equipment. This obviously ended the investigation into Mr. Stern's escape and closed the case against us. Dr. Toth stayed behind to celebrate with us. We were thrilled with and thankful for the *siyatta diShmaya* the Rebbe's *bracha* had wrought.

Our lives quieted down then for a brief interlude and we tried to come up with a plan to keep our business in relatively safe hands in case the war took a turn for the worse. We decided to sign the brush-making operation over to a non-Jew named Gury Galop, whom we knew, was completely trustworthy. He had worked for us for many years, and we knew that we could rely on him — unlike the previous former employee who kicked us out and took over the business for himself. This way we hoped there would be something to salvage after the war when life would return to normal and Jews would be allowed to run their businesses once again. But before we were able to carry out our plan, the man got sick and passed away leaving us without a backup plan.

By this time, those Slovakian Jews who were able to evade deportation in their country had slipped over the border into Hungary and were living in hiding, many of them in Ungvar. Their fellow Jews who were helping them were, of course, forbidden to associate with them. We developed a code name when speaking of them over the telephone: they were to be called "The Musicians," and anything that had to do with them was referred to in musical terms. Hungarian policemen were accustomed to returning to their homes at night and not patrolling the streets, so the Musicians would move about after ten o'clock. But woe to the refugee they caught, and woe to the family that had sheltered him: all were transported forthwith to the Kaminsky Podolsk concentration camp.

Food, which until then had still been plentiful, was now becoming scarce. The Nazis felt no compunctions about shipping wheat out of the country to feed the starving German population. We began to add corn flour to our bread, as the Nazis graciously allowed us to keep our corn crop. I had become friendly with a baker and was able to obtain two additional loaves of "bread" a day, which I sent regularly to my Uncle Israel in Romania, whose family was slowly starving to death.

My brother, Mordechai, known as Louie, had always been one of the more outgoing members of the family. In peacetime he had sold more brushes than anyone else, and when the war subsumed our lives, he spent months on the run to avoid being forced into the labor brigades. At the time of our family's dispersal, Louie stayed constantly in motion to avoid incarceration in the ghetto. As the situation deteriorated around us, Louie tried to find work as a gentile, but no one would hire him. He somehow was able to contact an experienced smuggler, who agreed to smuggle him into Slovakia.

Safe in Pressburg, Louie, passing as a gentile by the name of Horvath, set himself up in the brush-making business, and before long he was filling orders for brushes all over the city. He eventually moved into a luxurious apartment on Tolstoy Avenue. As the clean-shaven "Horvath the brush maker," bachelor and man-about-town, he entered Slovakian high society with confidence, all the while lending a hand to his less fortunate brethren in hiding in the city.

Louie kept his rescue operation nice and simple and always stayed in the background. He recruited the concierge of his apartment building, a middle-aged gentile woman of strong conscience, to help him. She became his messenger and delivered food packages all around Pressburg to any Jewish family in hiding that Louie heard of. Louie remained above suspicion for some time, until someone betrayed the good-hearted woman and she was arrested and tortured until she revealed the name of her supplier: Horvath the brush maker.

Since Louie was by then one of the city's leading businessmen and a "gentile," the Nazis did not arrest him outright. Instead, on January 23, 1945, they took him in for questioning, where he was confronted with his former concierge. He ferociously denied everything the woman said, maintaining

that he was just an ordinary businessman. At first they offered him a deal in exchange for revealing where some of the hidden bunkers were. When that didn't succeed, they began to torture him in earnest. Suffering the most excruciating pain, Louie still would not change his story. They were forced to let him go because he was a gentile, but it wasn't long before they arrested him again. This time they sent him directly to the Theresienstadt Concentration Camp. We found out only many months later about all he suffered as an inmate in the camp, and how only his belief in Hashem had pulled him through the inhuman tortures he'd been subjected to in the "model concentration camp" where he wasn't even known as a Jew!

CHAPTER SIX

# Occupation

ON MARCH 19, 1944, THE GERMANS, MAY THEIR NAMES BE blotted out, occupied Hungary and things changed drastically for the worse. Life would never be the same again. The Nazi troops marched victoriously into Ungvar accompanied by their Hungarian lackeys, provoking fear by their very appearance. One of the first things they did was appoint a Judenrat, a Jewish council, through whom they would deal in regard to all Jewish affairs. The five Jews selected to sit on the council were not bad people. They were merely uneducated in the devious and satanic ways of the Nazis and were no match for their beastliness.

The Nazis ordered the Jews to provide them with large amounts of gold, implying that they would take the gold in return for leaving us alone. Our lives were certainly worth gold to us, though, of course, the Nazis had no intention of keeping such promises. This edict was followed by orders to bring in all radios, telephones, typewriters and bicycles — in short, anything that might serve as a link between the Jews and the outside world.

Jews were allowed in the marketplace only after the noon hour, when the best produce was gone already and only undesirable produce remained for which the farmers charged triple with impunity. Over the following four weeks, the situation became one of such desperation and hopelessness that some Jews, *Rachmana litzlan*, committed suicide. I knew at least ten people who took this drastic step. Although in normal times there is a separate section of the cemetery for people such as these, the rabbis ruled that these

were special times, different measures were called for and allowed their burial to proceed as usual. The rabbis did, however, counsel people to keep silent for fear of encouraging others to take the same awful step.

Not only were all the Jews of Ungvar and its environs under house curfew from nine in the evening until seven the following morning, but we were ordered to wear the yellow star and to have little or no contact with our gentile neighbors. A notice went up on the day of the invasion, signed by Ungvar's Mayor Dr. Lazlo Megay that the punishment for disobeying any of these edicts was immediate arrest and execution.

Lazlo Megay, mayor of Ungvar, was an ethnic Hungarian and a Jew-hater of epic proportions. In his youth he had been a star player for the leading Ungvar soccer team, and he harbored an eternal hatred for the Jewish soccer team and its star player, a man by the name of Ouslander, who had defeated him ignominiously in a really memorable championship game. Lazlo had acquitted himself with distinction, earning the accolades of the adoring crowd time and time again. With a tied score and only minutes to go until the whistle, the game had become a personal match between Megay and Ouslander. In the last few seconds of the game, Ouslander threaded his way through the opposing defense like a pro and scored the winning goal off Lazlo Megay, thereby earning the latter's eternal hatred.

Moreover, when Uzhorod/Ungvar was appropriated by the newly formed independent Czechoslovakian state back in 1918 and ethnic Hungarians became suspect and were strongly encouraged to move back to their land of origin, Megay had to return to Hungary. He held on to his grudge and bided his time, looking forward to the day he'd be able to even the score. And so, in 1938, when he made his triumphant return to Ungvar to become its mayor, one of his first visits had been to the home of his archenemy, the Jew Ouslander.

Ouslander greeted the returning sportsman with pretended enthusiasm and was about to invite Megay to enter his home, when the mayor forestalled the invitation and said in a chilling voice, "You are one up on me. When the score was three to three, you made it four to three in your favor. I'm about to even the score." Ouslander knew that the "score" would not be evened on the sports field.

"You have one day to pack your bags," Megay said, "and then you will

be on your way to Russia. Have a pleasant evening." And Laszlo Megay, newly appointed mayor of Ungvar, turned his back on the stunned Jew.

This same Megay, on April 20, 1944, barely a month after the invasion, signed his name to the edict that would change all our lives:

"On this day, April 20, 1944, the deportation of Jews will begin.

– All Jews and everyone considered a Jew, together with their entire family, are confined to their apartments as of 9:00 a.m. When ordered to leave, they may take 50 kilos of luggage with them and a fourteen-day supply of food.

– Gentiles are forbidden to receive any articles for safekeeping.

– Landlords and building superintendents are obliged to assist the police in carrying out the deportation of Jews."

Our family, like all the other Jewish families, gathered together in desperation to decide what to do. We looked long and hard at each other, trying to store the images indelibly in our memory for we knew in our hearts that we might never see one another again. Numbly, we listened in silence to the plans our parents had set in motion months before.

My brother, Yankel, was to go to a beer and wine factory whose owner had agreed several months before to hide him. Yankel was unhappy with his orders and wanted to stay with my parents to take care of them, feeling it was his duty as the eldest. Mother, feeling desperate means were necessary at this point, silenced him with these words: "As the oldest, your duty is to listen to your mother and father! Otherwise I'm going to go into the kitchen, pick up a knife and stab myself to death! I will not take no for answer!"

Yankel went to pack his things, hugged each of us and left the house, leaving the rest of us sitting around the table waiting to be told, individually, where to go. My younger brother, Yissachar, known as Sonny, was sent to hide in a wine cellar and he, too, left after tearful goodbyes. My parents tried to avoid any of us knowing where our siblings were hiding in case we were caught and tortured to reveal where they were.

Our good friend, Dr. Toth, arrived in his car and took Manca away with him, out of the war zone and deep into Hungary. He later returned for another sister, Terry, but had to turn back when one of the war zone guards recognized him from his previous journey with a different girl and refused to let him pass.

He turned back and hid her temporarily on his farm - in a pig sty!

I was the last sibling to receive instructions. "I left you for last, Moishele," Mother said with tears in her eyes, "because you are going to survive." She spoke quietly but with conviction, in a low voice that sent shivers up and down my spine. "But in order for you to get through the war safely there are two things you *must* do. First, you must keep Shabbos at all costs as best you can. Never do any work on Shabbos that you could have avoided. Second, do not let a nonkosher morsel of food pass your lips - not soup, nothing! Keep your *neshamah* clean and Hashem will reward you with life." Father was nodding his head in agreement all the while, though I noticed that his shoulders were drooping and creases had appeared in his forehead overnight. Mother reiterated this injunction with her customary directness.

"Remember, Moishele, you must die before you allow nonkosher food into your mouth!" Finally, Mother told me that, because I was so sensitive about cleanliness and hygiene, she had saved the cleanest place of all for me. I was going to stay at the palatial home of Dr. Toth and would become a member of his family.

Yisrael, the youngest, was to stay with my parents. Only those three remained behind when I set out for Dr. Toth's home. After I had gone, Mother realized that I had not taken any extra clothing with me. She quickly made up a bundle of clothes for me and told Yisrael where to take it. It was well before the nine o'clock curfew when Yisrael left the house, accompanied by a gentile worker who Mother sent to watch over him. They had walked barely two blocks when a policeman halted them and demanded to know where they were going.

"None of your business," Yisrael answered sharply and somewhat foolishly. "I have the right to walk about in the street until nine."

"What's in that bundle you're carrying," the officer asked, undaunted. Yisrael refused to answer, and the policeman said harshly, "You can't fool me. You're going into hiding and that I will not allow. Go back home or you'll get a proper beating, do you understand?" With no choice and with a heavy heart, Yisrael turned around and went back home.

At about eight o'clock at Dr. Toth's house, where I was safely ensconced and just beginning to calm down, the good doctor came storming in from

the street, white with alarm. He had just found out that a policeman had stopped Yisrael in the street and sent him home, and would no doubt investigate further where he had been heading. Yisrael now knew where I was and although I trusted him implicitly, he was barely fifteen and a half. Stronger men than he had been broken under interrogation. Dr. Toth felt that it was no longer safe for me to stay in his beautiful home. He told me to run to his farm, which was located about ten minutes away from his house, and to tell his tenant farmer that he had sent me to stay there until he could come to pick me up. The farm would be a far cry from that opulent, five-bedroom home with multiple bathrooms and even a separate laundry room, almost unique in those years. Ironically, no sooner had I been separated from my parents and siblings than I had to undergo another separation and leave the carefully selected, warm and caring environment to be thrown headfirst into a sea of danger.

I raced through the deserted streets with the note clutched tightly in my hand, trying my best to reach the farm before the curfew went into effect. There were only about five minutes left when I left Dr. Toth's house, and I kept looking at the hands on my watch as I ran panting down the avenue. I ran straight into a patrolman walking the beat, and I knew that that was the end. He grabbed me and began to yell, berating me for being where I didn't belong. In the midst of his shouting, however, he took a better look at me and stopped in mid-sentence.

"Aren't you Katz the brush maker's son?" he asked.

"Yes, I am."

"Well, if that's the case, I'm just going to close my eyes and you, young man, will get yourself as far away from here as you can and as fast as you can, and you won't ever show yourself in this neighborhood again." To my utter astonishment, he patted me on the back as he spoke.

"Yes, I remember your father well," he muttered, speaking as if to himself. "He's a great man. My father always had only the best things to say about him." Now his expression hardened once more and he said, "There's no time left. Get out of here, run as fast as you can. May the One above watch over you." I needed no second invitation and ran for my life.

I reached the farm without further mishap and handed Dr. Toth's note to the farmer. He read it and bade me sit down to wait for lawyer Toth. When Dr. Toth arrived some two hours later, he took me out to the shed where my sister, Terry, had been hiding on a kind of upper shelf built out over the pig sty. Dr. Toth told her to get into his car quickly, because he was taking her somewhere else immediately. On his way out he called out to me, "Don't worry, Moshe, I'll be back soon and I'll take you somewhere too."

He came back much, much later and with bad tidings. "Moshe," he said, "I won't be able to smuggle you out of here for a while. You can't imagine how hard it was to get your sister past all the guard posts. You will have to stay on the farm until things calm down a bit." With no choice at all, I agreed to do whatever he said.

In the meantime, the manager and his wife began to fidget because Dr. Toth hadn't returned yet and it was almost five o'clock. Their regular boarder, a military nurse, was due to come home from work any minute. For some reason they waited until she was walking up to the house before taking action. They pulled down a trapdoor leading to the attic, rushed me up a shaky ladder and closed the trapdoor, leaving me in a dark, cramped, freezing space with no room to move. Beneath me, I heard the manager's wife speaking to their boarder. It soon became obvious to me that my hostess was being extremely rude to the nurse and trying to incite her anger so that she would leave and look for other lodgings. She even accused the poor woman of stealing from the family.

The nurse was incredulous and confused and naturally denied the charges. The manager's wife refused to listen and demanded that the nurse vacate the premises the following morning. This would indeed solve my problem the next day, but in the meantime I was in agony. Not only was I cold and cramped in the small hiding place, but I had no way to relieve myself either. It was five in the afternoon and the nurse wouldn't be gone until eight the next morning. I recited as much of *Tehillim* as I could remember to take my mind off my plight and finally, I just prayed that Hashem would end every-

thing for me then and there. Hashem in His infinite mercy did not accede to my request, and I spent an insufferable night, marveling at how much pain the human body could stand.

When they opened the trapdoor at ten to eight in the morning, I couldn't move. I was frozen in place and only semiconscious. They got me down somehow, and the manager's wife applied warm compresses to my limbs until I slowly began to come back to myself. I was so bewildered that I didn't remember where I was at first. The woman heated up some soup and was about to spoon it into my mouth, when with a start I came to and recoiled before the nonkosher soup could enter my mouth.

"I'm s-s-sorry, but I cannot eat this," I stuttered, not wanting to hurt her feelings, but hearing my mother's final words still ringing in my ears.

"All right," she acquiesced, "but what can you eat?"

"Bread," I told her, "just give me some bread."

After a while I recovered somewhat. As I lay there on the couch, I picked up the local newspaper to see what was happening in the country. Almost the entire paper was devoted to the "Jewish Problem" and what was being done to eliminate the Jews.

The farmer came in then, took the paper from me and sat down to read it while he smoked his pipe and drank a cup of coffee. After a few minutes he turned to me and said, "My boy, they are really out to get the Jews." He looked at me sympathetically and continued, "I don't know how long you'll be staying on the farm, but as long as you're here you had better learn to be a proper farm worker, and the sooner the better. You must learn to plant potatoes, to hoe a field, to differentiate between harmful weeds and healthy grass so that when the workers arrive for the coming season you'll be able to blend in as a farmhand. The workers will be here in two weeks, which doesn't leave us much time to prepare you. You're really going to have to work hard."

But hard work didn't scare me in the least, and I was a quick learner.

CHAPTER SEVEN

# Scattered

ON APRIL 22, 1944, MY PARENTS AND MY BROTHERS, PINCHAS and Yisrael, were locked into the ghetto of Ungvar where they awaited deportation along with all the city's Jews. My older sister, Chana, had by then reached Budapest, where she had established herself as a gentile. Chana was an unusually energetic and clever young woman, and she immediately tried to figure out a plan to rescue my parents and two brothers. She had made many friends already, some of whom were fairly high in the city's social hierarchy.

One evening she was visiting the Herzog family, Jewish but highly connected, when the doorbell rang. Chana went downstairs to answer it. Through the glass panes she saw a military figure in full uniform waiting to be admitted. She had no choice but to open the door and admit the S.S. officer, who looked at her with a broad smile on his face. She returned the smile, of course, but her hands were shaking and her legs were trembling. Shoving the telltale hands into her pockets, she inquired brightly what they could do for such a distinguished visitor.

Doing his best to put her at ease he said, "I'm not here in any official capacity. I just came for a friendly visit."

Chana led him up the stairs to the dining room where the family was gathered around the dinner table. Mr. Herzog lifted an eyebrow when they entered the room, and did not seem too pleased to have such a guest. The soldier correctly interpreted the look on Herzog's face, and said, "Herzog

old friend, don't you recognize me? I was one of your best customers before the war."

"Ah, Julius Fabian," Herzog said holding up his wine glass, "of course I remember you. You always ordered the plaid cashmere. Come, pull up a chair and sit down. Take off your jacket and make yourself comfortable. You'll stay for supper, won't you?"

As the meal was served and the conversation went on around her, Chana was thinking. Maybe, just maybe, the answer to saving her family lay right here with this blond Aryan in his Nazi uniform. She listened carefully to his opinions and comments and decided that he might be willing to help her. Risking everything, Chana asked Julius if he would be willing to get involved in a rescue operation.

Julius Fabian, the S.S. man, smiled graciously at her and answered that under the right "circumstances" anything was possible. Chana understood his hint. They skirted the money issue at first, getting down to the brass tacks of the escape operation. Logistics, documentation - they tried to cover every detail. Then they began the financial negotiations, and eventually everything was settled. Chana would open a joint bank account in her name and Fabian's. She would deposit half of the total sum of 12,000 dollars in the account before the operation was under way; the second half would be deposited upon a successful outcome. He suggested that Chana meet him at his apartment, No. 2 Leopoldt Street, exactly one week later to make final arrangements.

To raise the money, Chana sold all her jewelry and borrowed money from friends and from our father's former business associates. She was relieved and grateful that even her gentile acquaintances were forthcoming, showing the esteem in which everyone held my dear father.

Chana found herself humming as she walked toward Julius Fabian's apartment, the bankbook hidden in her pocket. She kept looking behind her to make sure she hadn't been followed, and finally she turned into Leopoldt Street and entered his building. Julius' face creased into a smile when Chana pulled the bankbook out of her pocket.

"Now then," Fabian said, "let's go over the plan just one last time. Shall I fix you a cup of coffee?" Chana wasn't interested in coffee; she just wanted

him to get started on rescuing her parents. She stifled her impatience while they went over the plan from the beginning. Then she handed over the bankbook and stood up to leave. Two black-coated S.S. officers marched into the room. She never found out whether Fabian had betrayed her or had simply been caught. Whatever the cause, Chana was now under arrest for attempting to bribe an S.S. officer. As they led her out of the apartment, she could only hope they didn't know she was Jewish and be thankful that she was not carrying any incriminating documents.

Nazi headquarters in Budapest was located in a beautiful hotel, with wrought-iron banisters, marble stairs, an abundance of flowers – and swastikas hanging everywhere you looked. They took Chana down to the basement of the hotel, where the furnishings were more spartan and the air redolent with the sounds and smells of human misery. Thus began the most incredibly painful experience in her entire life. Two interrogators started slapping her in turn as they asked her questions.

"Where do you live?" A slap from the right.

"What's your connection to Fabian?" A slap from the left.

She couldn't tell them where she lived, because her sister, Terry, and some other Jews were living there as well. Though the pain was unbearable, she refused to answer. Eventually, they tired of inflicting pain and getting no response. They dragged her out of the room and down a long hallway past numerous closed doors. She could hear screams emanating from behind those doors, and her heart beat in terror at what was to come.

They took her to an empty room and tossed her onto a mangy mattress that was lying on the floor. The S.S. men were systematic in everything they did, and now, too, they went from stage to stage in torturing her. Punching and kicking her, the two "interrogators" vied with each other in seeing who could make her scream the loudest. Eventually they began to beat the soles of her feet with rubber truncheons, which would leave no exterior mark. Since she was a "gentile," they wanted to inflict only interior damage while leaving her outer shell more or less intact. They kept her there for five torturous days, during which she couldn't even hold down a glass of water. She became weaker and weaker, but she would not tell them anything. Seeing that they could get nothing out of her, they finally decided to take her and

dump her in the local brick factory that was serving as a detention camp for the thousands of Jews whom they were deporting daily to Auschwitz.

Now it was Terry's turn to take action. Terry was amazingly resourceful and fearless. She knew that it was just a matter of time before the next trainload would be shipped out, and then it would be too late to save Chana. Terry was also passing as a gentile and by now had numerous "connections" and strings to pull. She knew a telephone technician who worked for the Hungarian telephone company and who had free access to telephone installations anywhere in Budapest. He agreed to fall in with Terry's plan and on the day of the planned rescue, he would enter the brickyard detention center and inspect the telephone installations in the factory - accompanied by his wife.

He would carry out his "inspection" until he located Chana and then smuggle her out of the camp dressed as his wife, for whom he would return later. It was a daring and dangerous plan, but it just might work. The technician and his wife were admitted into the detention center and he set to work. As he moved from one telephone pole to another, he kept a sharp lookout for Chana and finally located her. In an urgent whisper, he explained that he had brought some clothing with him, and all she had to do was don the clothing and be ready to leave with him dressed as his wife when he finished his work. Chana looked in amazement at the tall, heavyset man whose kind gray eyes shone with compassion, and regretfully handed the package back to him.

With tears in her eyes, she explained to the bewildered man that were she to escape from the detention center, she would be endangering all the other prisoners. She did not want that on her conscience. Just one week before, someone had gone missing and the Nazis had taken revenge on all the unfortunate detainees. She knew that they had suffered terribly because of that one person. So Terry's plan did not succeed because of Chana's great compassion and caring nature, and the gentile electrician and his wife left the camp without her.

Chana knew quite well that deportation was imminent and she would

have to plan another way to escape, one that hopefully would not rebound on her fellow prisoners. It was now June 1944. One morning, she was selected along with many other women prisoners to be deported. Some soldiers escorted them out of the camp and marched them to the train station. It was a beautiful Shabbos morning, with not a cloud in the sky, and the wheat stalks in the fields danced gracefully in the summer breeze as they passed by – yet there they were, unbelievably, marching to their deaths! How could it be? Did not Hashem want them to live, to experience and enjoy His delightful world?

Their guard was an older man with sad eyes and a sagging jaw. He seemed to be less forbidding than most of the other guards. *It was worth a shot*, she thought. Chana sidled over to him with a winning smile and hope in her eyes.

"You know as well as I do," she began, "that the war is as good as over. It's only a matter of time before the Russians will be here, and then what will happen to people like you?"

He looked at her shrewdly and asked "What's in it for me?"

"Why don't you give me your address, and after the war is over I'll make sure you are rewarded."

His eyes darted from side to side as he considered his options. Just then a trolley car came thundering down the boulevard and rolled to a stop right in front of them. The women took it as a Heavenly sign and jumped on board the trolley right before his eyes. The trolley rolled on with the women on board, and the guard made no move to stop them. Chana, *bechasdei Hashem*, had again escaped the clutches of the police.

Manca, meanwhile, having been smuggled out of Ungvar by Dr. Toth, had been living as a gentile in the interior of the country. She had found a job in a cigarette factory under the name of Anna Makarova. The constant Gestapo inspections and surprise raids to round up "suspicious" people, however, proved too much of a strain for her to live with, and eventually my brother, Louie was able to smuggle her into Slovakia. There she found a job

as a canteen cook and nanny at a German military installation. Her boss was a man by the name of Kreci who treated her fairly, and while the hours were long and the work difficult, from a security point of view she couldn't have asked for a better job. The Germans were building a new railway line of their own to circumvent the Slovakian line, which the partisans were constantly disrupting, and they opened the canteen to serve the German workers and soldiers.

The Germans weren't stupid, however. They knew very well that many Slovakian Jews were slipping out of the net, and they were determined to correct that lapse. Less than a month after Manca arrived in Slovakia, the Nazis decided to introduce a different colored identity card every month. All residents had to appear personally at Gestapo headquarters to receive their new cards. This innovation, they hoped, would aid in the capture of many more hidden Jews. Manca, as an employee of the military, received her papers directly from the S.S. without having to go and pick them up. But Yankel, our oldest brother, had by now left his hiding place in the beer factory and had slipped into Slovakia too. With true *mesirus nefesh*, Manca offered to take his place in line and pick up his identity card for him; women could pass as gentiles more easily than men. On a gray, blustery day, Manca stood waiting in line for Yankel's ID card. A stern-faced S.S. officer approached her and her stomach plummeted.

"Miss Makarova," the S.S. officer said, "Whatever are you doing here? I can hardly believe my eyes. I myself gave you this month's identification card. Would you care to explain why you are seeking another card?"

Manca's tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. She blurted out a story that she had lost her card, but he was having none of it. Anything else she could say would end up with Yankel's arrest, so she said nothing further. The officer was enraged at her silence and just hauled her off and punched her in the jaw, hard enough to knock her front teeth out. In the end, though Manca confessed to nothing, the Nazis tracked Yankel down, discovered he was circumcised and threw them both in jail. Although it was now clear that Yankel was a Jew, they tortured him further just for good measure before they sent him off to Auschwitz. They tortured Manca further to find out what her real name was, but "Anna Makarova" stuck to her story.

Meanwhile, Anna's boss, Kreci, was desperately in need of her services at the canteen. His children were without their nanny and were getting in everyone's way, and the food preparation for the canteen was at a standstill. Kreci went down to the Gestapo office and pleaded for Anna's release, telling them that he was willing to vouch for her not being Jewish and insisted that they release her under his cognizance. So, for the moment, Manca was safe, and worked even harder to please her boss.

*Hashgacha pratis*, however, works in unforeseen ways. The partisans were becoming increasingly active in Slovakia at this time, their operations growing constantly in professionalism and scope. They tied wires across highways, causing German vehicles to crash and burn; they planted explosives in the exhaust pipes of supply trucks that detonated when the driver turned on the ignition. The Germans responded by activating a huge net of informers to trap the partisans and eventually they caught many of the partisan leaders. The name of one of these happened to be General Makarov.

The Gestapo immediately suspected Anna of being a close relative of the general, and once again charged her with treason and took her in for questioning. Mr. Kreci again went to bat for his loyal worker. Kreci was a respected man in Slovakia, and though the Nazis were anxious to convict her and receive promotions for their devotion to duty, Kreci insisted that the similarity of names was pure coincidence. Finally, the commanding officer suggested a compromise. If Manca would admit to being a Jewess, he would drop the charge of espionage. Kreci reported the deal to Manca and recommended that she admit to being Jewish, which might mean survival, while a charge of espionage during war time meant certain death.

Manca chose life. She admitted to being Jewish and was freed once again to work for her benefactor, Mr. Kreci. Looking back now, I think that people were beginning to see the way the wind was blowing and probably felt that whatever good deeds they could easily perform at this point would count in their favor after the war. Naturally, all this came to light much later.

CHAPTER EIGHT

# Living Underground

I WAS STILL HIDING OUT AS A FARM WORKER ON DR. TOTH'S farm. One day, however, I received information that changed the whole picture for me. I found out that my brother, Sonny, was hiding in a bunker in a wine cellar with nineteen other Jews and it was located within a few blocks of the farm. The wine cellar had been built many years before by a Jewish winemaking family. It extended deep into the mountain side, and its entrance was hidden from sight by a vestibule in which drunks would congregate to escape the cold and rain. The door to the cellar was sealed with a great, rusty padlock that looked as if it hadn't been opened in decades.

There was a space over the door, however, between it and the ceiling, through which I was able to throw loaves of bread and other essentials. A note thrown over the door could bring about an urgent meeting with someone from the bunker, if necessary, and an answer would be waiting in a prearranged spot a few hours later with details of when the meeting would take place. At the designated time, a few screws would be loosened and the locked padlock would swing away from the wall, allowing the petitioner to enter the bunker. Somehow, the responsibility for these hidden Jews devolved on me, and I undertook to supply all twenty survivors with food every two days.

The farm manager dared not supply me with home-baked goods from his own kitchen in case the bunker was discovered, knowing that it could be traced back to him. Instead, we had to buy the food at different stores and at varied times to avoid suspicion. I used some of the money my parents had

given me, and the manager supplied me with more at regular intervals for this worthy purpose. Bread was cheap, fortunately, and formed the bulk of my purchases without attracting too much attention. I soon developed a system, and the operation worked smoothly for quite a while.

After one of my deliveries, however, I was on my way back to the farm when I noticed a police officer following me at a distance. I tried to outdistance him, but he only increased his pace. Then I saw a water fountain in a small park not too far ahead and made a beeline for it, acting as if that were my destination all the time. I bent over the fountain and drank water as if my life depended on it, which it actually did.

The policeman came up to me as I raised my dripping head from the water fountain and licked a few last drops of precious water from my lips, trying to act as if a drink of water was the only reason I was out on the street at night.

"Well," he said jovially, "I can see I was mistaken. I thought you were trying to run away from me, but you were only looking for a drink." He leaned over the fountain himself and took a long, satisfying drink. Then, as if he had just thought of it, he asked me my name.

"Toth," I told him.

"Oh," he asked, "are you related to the Toth that owns the large farm?"

"No, no, not that Toth," I said quickly.

"Indeed. Well, you can go now," he said and sauntered away while I silently heaved a huge sigh of relief.

One morning early in June 1944, the headlines screamed the word *invasion* in capital letters. The Allied Forces had landed on Normandy Beach in German-occupied France. The news was so encouraging that I was determined to share it. I left a note in the secret hiding place telling my brother, Sonny, in the wine cellar bunker to expect me at eight o'clock that evening. I gathered together as many newspapers as I could in order to lift their spirits, and I bought as many potatoes and apples and whatever other vegetables I could find in the market to assuage their hunger. The denizens of this bunker had a small wooden table into which they had ingeniously banged

a circle of nails, which acted as a trivet to stand a pot on. Under the pot they placed burning candles that eventually brought the water in the pot to a boil and cooked the vegetables. The aroma of the food was absorbed into the bunker's thick walls and did not give them away.

That night they escorted me into the bunker, which extended for about two hundred meters under the ground. There was an upper level too, where everyone slept. Despite my youth, I was asked to mediate minor disputes among them over sleeping territories and the like. I did my best to satisfy everyone, and many simmering battle were settled that evening. It was a good night for all. We spent most of the night talking; I was determined to instill in those forlorn and forsaken souls the hope inspired by the morning's news and raise their morale. Some of them gave me mail to deliver, and I promised to do my best to ensure that it reached its destination. We sat in that stuffy, claustrophobic chamber, carved into the bowels of the earth, and I began to comprehend the magnitude of what these people had endured living underground for so long. We ate the soup, a delicacy of mouthwatering proportions for them, and I knew that I would appreciate my lot so much more from that day on. The shadows danced in the candlelight as we shared our fears and hopes for the future. And then it was morning and time for me to go.

"Hold out just a bit longer," I urged them. "From all reports it may be as little as a week or two."

With adolescent confidence, I brashly told them that the Germans would never be able to stand up against such a colossal array of armed might as the Allies had apparently sent into Europe, and they would soon be freed.

There was another family in hiding to whom I had also been delivering food. The Feldmans, with their five children, were hiding together in the rafters of a barn not far from the wine cellar. The owner of the barn shared with me the responsibility of feeding both the Feldmans and the bunker people. The news of the Allied advances had whipped up a frenzy of Jew hatred in Hungary, and almost the whole populace was intent on ferreting out the last Jew from his hiding place before the war's end. Every day, the papers reported brand new discoveries of yet another Jewish hiding place, uncovered by yet another vigilant and patriotic gentile, with details of their

capture and interrogation, and deportation. The Feldman's host had thought he was being careful, but evidently he hadn't been careful enough. A few days later he was taken in for questioning.

"You buy a lot of bread," they said to him menacingly. "Sixteen pounds of bread is much more then you need to feed your family, isn't that so?" And it was true. They thereupon burst into his house, inspected every inch of his farm, and finally found the hapless Feldmans hidden in the barn. But the police still weren't satisfied. Sixteen pounds of bread feeds a lot more people than they had discovered. What had this farmer done with the rest of the bread?

As soon as I heard what had happened, I ran to the bunker and threw a note over the door, telling them that it was an emergency and that I'd be back to talk to them within the hour. When I arrived, the padlock was loosened and I pushed it aside and entered the long, dimly lit passage, ripe still with the heady smell of wine. Sorrowfully, I related the bad news and told them that it might not be too long before their hiding place would be discovered. I said that I would be taking Sonny away with me then and there. There was an outcry of anguish.

"What about us?" they cried.

"I'm sorry," I told them, "There is no way I can save everyone!"

They begged me to take just one more person with me, and I agreed, choosing the daughter of the man who had been my *kvater*. Her name was Rivka Kohn, and her parents had been close friends of ours, but she was alone now and I felt somewhat responsible for her. I took her out first, bringing her to the farm where I worked. I hid her without the manager's knowledge (a really risky thing to do) in the attic where I had once hidden overnight.

Then I smuggled my brother out and took him to the farm too, this time with the manager's knowledge and permission. I hid him in the farm's warehouse among the farm machinery and tools. There wasn't enough space for him to stand up, so he lay down on the floor under some furniture. I covered him up, and that's where he stayed all day, every day, from morning to night.

The farm manager, his wife and mother, his brother and one other worker, who was a Seventh Day Adventist, knew that I was really a Jew in hiding.

The Adventists observed Saturday as their Sabbath and refused to bear arms, and were also on the run from the Germans. Although I was afraid of him, the Seventh Day Adventist was as scared of me as I was of him, thinking that I would report him. He told me this when we met after the war.

A few days after I spirited Rivka and my brother, Sonny, out of the wine cellar, the police raided it and took the sixteen remaining Jews away to be shot. Two of the original nineteen had managed to get out before the raid, *baruch Hashem*, and I heard later that they reached Slovakia safely after a three-hour walk. Their name is Feldinger and they live in Tel Aviv today.

Rivka, meanwhile, was making the best of a horrible situation. She was in virtual solitary confinement, in a horribly cramped and stuffy attic, spending the days in total silence. I would climb up and bring her food whenever no one else was in the house, but I dared not stop and talk to her because someone might come in unexpectedly. This went on for weeks, until one Shabbos in July. It was an unusually hot day, and in the attic, of course, it was twice as hot. The manager's wife decided to bake some bread as was her custom on Saturday. The stove's chimney ran through the attic, however, and on this occasion Rivka had unknowingly draped some clothing on top of the chimney chute, blocking the smoke. The woman, choking from the backed-up smoke, grabbed the ladder and climbed up to the attic to investigate. She was astonished, to say the least, to find a girl living in her attic.

She called out for her husband, who appeared a moment later. Rivka climbed down the ladder and stood there looking at them in terror.

"What on earth are you doing in my attic?" he thundered. When he saw that she was holding part of a loaf of bread in her hand, he knew immediately that I was the culprit. I was placing his home and safety at risk. He stormed out to the barn and confronted me.

"What have you done?" he roared at me. "You scoundrel! Don't you know that I'm risking my life daily for you and your brother and this is how you repay me?" I tried to explain but couldn't get a word in.

"Why didn't you tell me? How many more Jews are you hiding here?" He

was beside himself with rage and probably fear.

"None," I replied. "She's the only one that you didn't know about."

"Okay," he said, beginning to calm down, "but if I find one more unauthorized person on my grounds, you're out, too. Just like that!" and he snapped his fingers. "Now we have to get rid of this girl right away!"

"Just give me until tonight to move her somewhere else," I pleaded. He agreed reluctantly.

I took her out after dark when the streets were empty, and led her to a house that I knew was abandoned. Giving her four liters of water and sufficient food for a few days, I left her with strict instructions not to leave the safe house and told her that I would return on the following Monday night to take her to another, safer hiding place. Actually I had no such place in mind, but I was hoping I would be able to persuade the farm manager to let her stay with us. His wife, after all, wanted to help.

On Monday morning, however, I was devastated to pick up the paper and read the headlines. The leading story, with a front-page picture, told of Rivka's capture and arrest. The story under the picture related that she had run out of water and gone outside to the pump to fill her water bottles. A neighbor spotted her and reported her to the police. Young and inexperienced as she was, she refused to divulge to her interrogators the name of the person who had given her the water bottles, and, fortunately, she was unable to tell them where she had come from because it had been pitch dark when I moved her in and out of the farm, and she really had no idea where it was.

The city couldn't very well provide her with a personal train to Auschwitz, and the question of what to do with the "Jewish girl" was taken up by the entire town. While Rivka languished in jail, letters to the editor filled the local paper with suggestions on how to punish her. Some suggested she become a slave for all the city's needs, others favored disgracing her publicly, still others demanded beatings and torture, while one brilliant idea would have her become the city's official public toilet cleaner. Finally the police decided to arrange a show trial for this poor, defenseless girl, to prove to the public at large that the Jews were traitors and spies.

I couldn't attend the trial myself for fear of being recognized, but I devoured every word the newspapers reported. The courthouse was a large

and somber-looking building, with a rotunda lined with portraits of past judges staring sternly down from the walls. I could only imagine what Rivka was feeling as she was ushered into the courtroom, stared at by hostile guards and surrounded by the Jew-hating crowd.

Through the entire charade, Rivka sat in the prisoner's box unmoving, a faraway look on her face, and acted as if this whole affair had nothing to do with her. The farce was over quickly and Rivka was found guilty of treason and sentenced to hanging. The entire courtroom, including the judge, awaited a spectacle now: surely the prisoner would cry and scream and plead for her life. They were disappointed when she accepted the judge's words stoically and unemotionally. The judge, however, whose name I still remember, Judge Miko Bushfekete, turned out to be somewhat better natured than he had appeared all during the trial.

"Young lady," he announced after pronouncing her sentence, "Hungary is a democratic country of freedom-loving people, so I will therefore grant you one last request. What do you wish to have before the sentence is carried out?"

Rivka stood up with dignity and said unblinkingly that her last and final request was that she be buried alongside her grandfather in Ungvar's Jewish cemetery.

The judge was plainly shocked. "I don't understand," he said. "Why don't you ask for something for yourself – one final luxury? What does it matter where you will be buried?"

"That is what I want and you said I could have what I want. Will you do it or not?" The judge looked at her in amazement and sat quietly in his place, thinking. Then he stood up and announced a mistrial to the astonished observers, saying that because the defendant was obviously insane, the case was closed. He gestured for Rivka to follow him into his chambers. When they were seated opposite each other, he shook his head wonderingly and said, "You know, you remind me of myself when I was your age. What courage you have to demand a Jewish burial! I am inclined to give you another chance at life. But this time," he continued, "make sure you don't get caught." Rivka couldn't believe what she was hearing and sat there in quiet shock.

"I'm going to send two detectives to escort you to the train station where you will board a train to Budapest. When you get there, find yourself somewhere safe to stay and don't get caught, do you hear! The truth is you did nothing wrong and don't deserve to be punished. Now get out of here and make sure I never lay eyes on you again, at least not until the war is over!"

The judge summoned two soldiers and instructed them to take her to the train station and see that she was on the next train to Budapest. Their faces mirrored the incredulity in hers, but they did as they were told. She left the courthouse a free woman. They drove her to the station, bought her a one-way ticket and watched carefully as she boarded the two o'clock express to Budapest. When Rivka reached Budapest, she melted into the crowds outside the railway station, somehow eluding the tens of police officers on the watch for people just like her.

Months later I saw her again in the most unexpected place. There was a unique building in the city known as the "Glass House." Today, many buildings have a glass facade, but in those days it was quite the novelty. The Zionist organization had taken over the building as a residence for their members and when I later escaped to Budapest and found a job in a supermarket, I delivered food there every Thursday afternoon. One day as I entered the building, I heard shouts and screams coming from the basement. Being perennially inquisitive, I decided to investigate.

The water supply for the whole building was stored and doled out in the basement. Imagine my surprise when I walked into the room and found Rivka being raked over the coals by a couple of irate tenants. There was a sign posted that each person was entitled to one cup of water per day. Their complaint was that Rivka wasted water by washing her hands, and that used more than her share of water. They wanted to throw her out of the building. Once again, I came to her rescue, remonstrating with the two angry young men, offering them some of my wares as a peace offering and calmed them down enough to agree to let her stay on the condition that she wouldn't do it again. Rivka went on to survive the war, *baruch Hashem*, married a *talmid chacham* and today has children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.

CHAPTER NINE

# Shave and a Haircut

IN WARTIME, PEOPLE WERE HIGHLY SUSPICIOUS OF ANYONE who wasn't dressed neatly and of men whose hair was long and who were unshaven. I had been working on the farm for months and my hair had grown very long. I was afraid that people would suspect that I was either an escaped prisoner or - Heaven forbid! - a Jew, but I had to figure out how to get a haircut secretly in a town where many people knew me and might recognize me. I could have asked my host, the tenant farmer to cut it, but that would have defeated the purpose because an unprofessional haircut would make me stand out even more than before. I, therefore, waited for a rainy day when I could don a raincoat and pull its large hood over my head.

I walked quickly through the quiet streets, my hood pulled well down over my face, and crossed the bridge in the direction of the barber shop of our old friend, Mr. Yaklowsky, on whom I was sure I could depend. Not only was his wife Jewish and he himself had always been friendly toward Jews, but he had been one of only two gentiles to play on the Jewish soccer team, a sure indication that he was no anti-Semite. In those years, all businesses closed down at the lunch hour and everyone went home for lunch, so I timed my visit to coincide exactly with the lunch break. The barbershop was closed and all its window shades pulled down. I walked around to the back of the building and knocked on his door.

I heard Mr. Yaklowsky's jovial voice call out, "Wait just a moment," and he himself opened the door. His face turned a ghostly white when he saw me

and I think he almost fainted.

"What in Heaven's name are you doing here?" he hissed at me between clenched lips.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "I'm here for a haircut."

"Come inside quickly," he said, "before someone sees us and reports us both." He pulled me by the arm into the barbershop and waved me into a chair while he went to get his equipment ready, at the same time scolding me about the danger I was placing him in.

"Have you escaped from prison?" he continued without giving me time to answer. "Don't you know that the Germans are watching my store all the time because they know I am a friend of the Jews?"

"Nobody noticed me," I said, "and I purposely waited for a rainy day and the lunch hour for that very reason."

"Ach, it doesn't matter," he finally said. "What's meant to happen will happen."

He tied a cloth around my neck and for just a moment I was back in the prewar days taking a haircut like any normal person. But his hands were shaking, I noticed, and I began to fear for my neck.

"Moishe," he said, "I won't be able to give you a haircut like I used to - we don't have time for that - but I'll do my best." Ten minutes later he was finished and I was admiring the freshly shorn me in the mirror.

"Do you need anything else?" he asked, clearly in a rush to get rid of me. "Money? Food? Tell me where you are and I'll bring it to you myself."

I thanked him for his concern and explained that I was in transit right then and didn't have a fixed location. As I left the store he wished me good luck and surprised me with a warm embrace.

"Listen," he said, "if you survive the war, make sure you come back and visit old Yaklowsky, you hear? Don't forget." I assured him that he'd be my number one visit if I survived, and I went out the back way, making very, very sure that no one saw me.

July 19, 1944 was a fateful day for my brother and me. It was a Friday and the farm manager came running out to the barn to inform me that a

Nazi soldier had come to his front door asking for me.

"He asked for you by name, P-p-peter," the manager stuttered, "and I don't know what to do," he said, distraught.

"What did you tell him?" I asked in a whisper, feeling as if my legs were going to give way beneath me.

"All I could think of to tell him was that this was such a big farm that I can't remember the names of all the workers, and I told him I'd go out and look for the one called Peter. I told him to come back at noon, so that gives you some time to disappear."

"Wait a second," I said. "Did the soldier have any documents or letters with him, or did he say anything that sounded like a code word?" The manager was unable to answer.

"Listen to me," I said. "When he comes back, see if he says anything with the word brush in it. Got it?" He nodded and left.

Prior to splitting up the family, Mother had insisted that the word *brush* be a family password to use in times of danger. If any of us ever needed to send a secret message to one another, he or she would use the word brush somewhere in the message and each of us would know that it was a communication from another family member.

The soldier returned at twelve o'clock and, mumbling that he was suffering from a hangover, said that he had felt so bad earlier that he had even left his brush behind, and... That was my cue. I emerged from behind the door to see a soldier of medium height, with curly brown hair and light blue eyes, holding in his hand a brush. After verifying that I was indeed Peter, my assumed name at the farm, he handed me the brush. I went into the barn for a screwdriver and I unscrewed the handle of the brush. Inside I found a considerable amount of money and a letter from my sister Chana.

"To My Dear Brother,

The roundups are increasing, and I know it will not be long before they penetrate your cover, so I have bribed this soldier to bring you to me in Budapest. Follow his instructions and *be'ezras Hashem* we'll be together soon. But hurry. Leave soon. The longer you stay, the greater the chance of your capture.

Your loving sister, Chana."

I told the farm manager that my brother and I would soon be leaving, and went right out to the barn to get Sonny. He had been staying out of sight, hiding under some old farm machinery in the barn, coming out only at night when I brought him something to eat. I hadn't really seen him in the daylight until now and I was shocked at his appearance. He was filthy and his clothes were black with grime. If we didn't clean him up, we'd have the entire Hungarian police force after us in no time.

It was a major project and took a long time to clean him up. The manager's wife had washed and ironed his clothes in the meantime, and he looked like a *mentsch* for the first time in weeks. I packed up our few possessions and we prepared to leave the haven where we'd been safe for so many months.

As agreed, we left the house at ten to seven that evening. Sonny clung to my arm, fearful of being set free after being locked up for so long. We reached the train station without mishap and waited in the shadows for the soldier to appear. A few minutes later, a shadow detached itself from the trunk of a huge tree, and we sighed in relief to see "our soldier" coming toward us. We boarded the train together, trying to look like a soldier in uniform accompanied by two plainclothes detectives. We were planning to get off at the main train station down the line and board a train for Budapest. As we pulled into the main station, however, we saw that the police were out in full force looking for stranded passengers and checking everyone's documents. We had no documents, so we stayed on the train until the next station, Chop, where trains left regularly for all parts of Europe. Unfortunately, it was so late at night by then that no more trains were due to come through, and we had to leave the station to find somewhere to spend the night.

A full blackout was in effect because of the war, but we did spy a small light off in the distance and trudged wearily in that direction. The light came from a smallish building that we hoped was a hotel. We knocked and pushed open the door of... the Chop police station! Under the flickering light of a solitary light bulb sat several policemen playing cards. It was hard to tell who was more discombobulated by our sudden appearance: we, who had obviously been doing everything in our power to avoid meeting up with a policeman, or they, who evidently thought we were soldiers sent to check up on them. We didn't intend to allow them to find out the truth, of course, and

we pressed our momentary advantage by going on the offensive.

The policemen, in their haste, knocked over the card table, sending cards, coins, bills and drinks flying while they stood to attention before us. "Our" soldier spoke Hungarian and German equally well and proceeded to lambaste the men in both languages for dereliction of duty, incompetence and a list of other misbehaviors.

"Our soldiers are dying this minute on the battlefield, and you sit here and play cards!" he hollered. "How privileged we are to have such brave men as you on our police force!" The men shrank back under his furious verbal assault. Finally, he calmed down somewhat and ordered them to go out and find accommodations for him and his important friends. Not more than fifteen minutes later, we were lying on soft mattresses between freshly laundered sheets in the home of a local peasant whom they had awakened and ordered to give us only the best and lodge us until morning as guests of the Chop Police Department.

Early the next morning, after a hearty breakfast of bread and water (Sonny and I declined the meat that was offered), we left our lodging and started walking through the military zone toward "civilian" Hungary and, hopefully, safety. We would have to pass through the military checkpoint and we had no documents or identity papers whatever. We stopped to take stock at the edge of a meadow filled with wildflowers in full bloom.

Our soldier guide turned to us and said, "I have no authority to get you through the checkpoint and it's too risky to even try, so here's what we'll do. We'll separate for now, and each of you pick an armful of flowers from the field. Go up to the guards and give them a sob story that you are soldiers on leave, about to be sent to the front, and you have only a few hours' leave to go home and see your family. Show them the flowers you're bringing to your wives and tell them it may be the last time you'll see each other... or whatever you can think of. If you get through, I'll meet you on the other side and we'll go on from there. Just make sure *you* do the talking," the soldier said to me, "because your brother still seems to be in shock." That was the truth; Sonny was still not used to walking around openly in the sunlight.

It was a beautiful day; people were out walking and no one paid us the least attention. We stood up straight, put our shoulders back and tried to

look like Hungarian soldiers on leave, as we approached the guardhouse and stood quietly waiting for the guards to acknowledge us. A few of them were sitting outside playing cards and one or two were inside where it was cooler, drinking beer or something stronger. Who knew? Who cared! Finally, one of them ambled over and asked for our papers.

I held out my bouquet. Sonny did the same. Hashem was with us and the words just seemed to flow of their own accord. "Sir," I said, "I'm really sorry, but in our haste, my friend and I left our papers at the base. If we're forced to go back and get them, we won't have time enough to visit our new brides on the other side in the civilian zone. We're going to the front tonight and this will be our last chance to see them!"

The guard stood there looking at us, clearly weighing the options.

"To which division are you attached?" he asked us.

"Twenty-fifth Infantry," I replied nonchalantly. I will never know what moved him to do what he did, but *bechasdei Hashem*, without further questions, he raised the barrier and motioned us across.

"You'd better be back here by midnight and not a minute later," he added, "because the shift changes then and the new guards won't know you."

We thanked him heartily and with a cheery wave, crossed over into civilian Hungary.

Walking swiftly, we reached the prearranged meeting place and to our immense relief, our soldier was waiting there for us. We were still out in the country, however, and our next order of business had to be renting a car or hiring a taxi to get to a large town with a train station. The closest one was in Debrecen, former home to 10,000 Jews and halfway to Budapest. We passed by a farmhouse with a car parked in the driveway. The farmer was inside eating lunch with his family. He agreed, for a price, to drive us to Debrecen, and *baruch Hashem*, we had the money Chana had sent me to pay him with.

The Hungarian soldier rode up front with the driver, and Sonny and I sat in the back, expecting trouble to rear its head at any moment. I soon sensed that the farmer was eyeing us in the rear view mirror and felt distinctly uncomfortable. I was sure that our ragged appearance had given us away. Sure enough, he finally blurted out the question, "Are you people on the run?"

Fortunately our soldier-protector intervened and pulled out his revolver, pointed it at the driver and threatened to use it on him if he didn't "shut up and keep driving." The soldier directed him to let us off a couple of blocks from the train station. We paid the driver and removed ourselves from the scene as quickly as we could, hoping that he wouldn't report us but almost certain that he would.

We walked as fast as we could without attracting attention to the train station, where we found that the next train to Budapest wouldn't come through for a while. Hanging around the station would be dangerous, and our soldier-guide suggested that Sonny and I use the time to get our hair cut because we really looked like fugitives. Ordinary citizens in the large towns of Hungary had their hair cut every two or three weeks and were clean shaven. We looked for the nearest barber shop and decided that I would go in alone first and test the waters. The soldier and Sonny would wait in the park down the street; if no one suspected me, my brother would follow me in for a hair cut and a shave.

I walked into the barbershop and sat down to wait while the two barbers finished lathering and shaving two elderly men. When the first barber finished with his customer, he looked meaningfully at his partner and said that he was going outside for a smoke. He turned to me and said that the second barber would be with me soon. A few moments later, the remaining customer, freshly barbered, left and I replaced him in the comfortable leather chair. Leaning back in ease and comfort, I savored the almost forgotten feeling of being treated like a normal human being, but I couldn't quite forget that I was on the run and could not afford to let my guard down for a second.

While the barber began to trim my hair, I kept my eye on the mirror in front of me, which reflected what was going on in the street outside the shop. I could see the other barber. A crowd was gathering around him and he was speaking agitatedly to the crowd and pointing toward the shop. I knew instinctively that he was talking about me. Soon a policeman appeared and I saw that the barber was leading him back to the shop.

There was no time to lose! I jumped out of the chair with only half a haircut, sending his brushes, combs, shaver and lotions flying. The barber in

the shop realized that I intended to flee and charged after me, but, fortunately for me, he slipped on the spilled lotions and lost his balance. Still, he managed to grab me and I had no choice but to turn and punch him on the jaw with my right fist, followed by a left to his solar plexus. He fell to the floor moaning and holding his midriff, while I grabbed a hat off the rack at the back of the store to cover my half-shorn head and ran out through the back door just seconds before the policeman entered through the front door.

The soldier and Sonny were waiting in the park down the street where I had left them, and I breathlessly told them what had happened. Already, we could see the barber with three policemen in tow running out of the shop and looking up and down the street. We made a run for the train station, and unbelievable as it may sound, *bechasdei Hashem*, the next train to Budapest was standing in the station, tooting its whistle, ready to pull out. We hurried over to the ticket booth, the soldier between the two of us, trying our best not to attract undue attention, and the soldier asked for three tickets to Budapest. We boarded the train just as it was pulling out.

CHAPTER TEN

# Salasi Takes Over

THE SIGHTS WE SAW WHILE TRAVELING ON THE TRAIN TO Budapest testified to the increasing gravity of the situation: Jews in handcuffs were being beaten and cursed and roughly hauled away in every town we passed. Sonny and I, burning with indignation and horror, closed our eyes and recited *Tehillim* during most of the trip. When we had caught our breath and calmed down somewhat, our soldier-guide revealed to us what we would now have to do.

Because we had no papers and the station in Budapest would be crawling with police, we would have to jump from the train when it slowed down about ten minutes before it entered the station. When the time came, he led us to the platform next to the door at the end of the carriage. He showed us how to grab hold of the handlebar on the side of the train, then jump out and keep running alongside the train for a few feet. One couldn't just take a running leap out of a moving train, no matter how slowly it was going. You had to run along with it, then release your hold on the moving car and throw yourself on the ground and roll over four or five times to break your fall.

He went first, doing exactly as he'd shown us, and my brother followed him, leaving me to bring up the rear. We ran with the train, threw ourselves to the ground and rolled over like children playing in the mud. *Baruch Hashem*, we survived the jump and were thrilled at having made it into Budapest alive, a bit bruised but whole. We now steeled ourselves to meet the next challenge that would come our way.

It was now nine-thirty in the evening and the soldier was going to take us to his own apartment just to get us off the streets. His concierge always locked the door at ten, so we had to hurry if we wanted to slip into the building unnoticed. We needed to hide out until we could come up with new passports, identity cards and work permits, among other things. *Baruch Hashem*, we were safely ensconced in his apartment by nine-fifty-seven and all three of us fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning, July 20, 1944, the headlines screamed out the failure of yet another attempt on Hitler's life. This one had taken place in Rastenberg, Germany. It was even rumored that the Desert Fox, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, was one of the plotters and would be hung for his treachery, despite his popularity and status as a war hero in Germany. We knew that security measures in all Nazi-controlled territory would be tightened now, and the police would be even more alert to apprehend fugitives.

The morning also brought our sister, Chana, who arrived with documents for us and more money to pay off the soldier. She had paid him in full before the trip, but he had used all the money to get himself drunk and consequently threatened to call off the trip unless she paid him again. She agreed, but held on to the money until we arrived safely. She also saw to it that we had freshly laundered shirts, neatly pressed suits and new silk ties to make us look like ordinary businessmen. The papers she had purchased through her connections were not forged; they were the real thing and had cost a small fortune. My new name was Istvan Masaros, born August 5, 1924; Sonny was now Nandor Nagy. His birth certificate carried the name of his mother only, in effect stating that his father was unknown, a development which caused us some hardship. The government refused to provide food coupons for illegitimate children who didn't officially exist. Nevertheless, we entered the next stage in our underground lives.

While walking through Budapest a few days later, I was approached by a Hungarian officer who beckoned to me. I was petrified but couldn't refuse to obey. I approached him warily, ready to bolt if need be.

"Tell me, young man," he said. "Where can I find such-and-such a street?"

Not wanting to get involved, I simply told him that I didn't know. He was obviously looking for someone and I hoped that my answer would end the

conversation. He looked at me without saying a word, reached down to his holster, undid the flap and took out his gun. I stared at the man not knowing what to expect. Still silent, he aimed the gun at his head and blasted away. I stood there openmouthed. That was the last thing I'd expected to happen. Turning away from the blood-splattered wall and the dead officer lying on the street beside me, I tried to run away but was immediately accosted by two detectives who had come running over. They began questioning me.

"Young man," they said, "what was this officer talking to you about?" I told them he was looking for someone and that she had run down the next cross street. They set off in hot pursuit and I set off in hot retreat in the opposite direction. One never knew from which direction danger would approach.

Chana's influential friend, Dr. Strauss, who had used his wide-ranging connections to establish her as a gentile citizen, was able to call in more favors and secure jobs for Sonny and me in a large garage that repaired German army vehicles. Despite the need for maximum security clearance and the competition for employment, Dr. Strauss was able to place us there. The security passes we were given were worth their weight in gold. We were now working for the German war effort, and as employees of the German army we could go anywhere in Budapest without fear of Gestapo or Arrow Cross (the ruling Hungarian fascist party) agents.

We worked hard, doing whatever we were asked to do, and we learned to get around in Budapest with our Nazi passes hung prominently around our necks. Things were quiet for a few weeks, until one morning the security police raided the garage looking for saboteurs. Apparently the underground was at work here, too; repaired trucks were being sent back to the battlefield only to blow up when the ignition was turned on. They found neither evidence nor clues in the garage that day, but returned two days later with a team of tough interrogators to set up "interviews" with each and every worker. This was an emergency of the highest order! It didn't matter in the least that our security passes were valid or that we hadn't been involved in the sabotage. Our stories would not be able to stand up to any sort of intensive scrutiny.

The owner of the garage, a friend of Dr. Strauss, came over to us and

whispered that all he could do was schedule our interviews for later in the day, but he strongly advised us to remove every trace of our presence within the next half hour and disappear. When the Germans realized that two of the workers had escaped, they would obviously assume that those workers had been involved in the sabotage. It might save the real saboteurs, but our new papers were now worthless. We threw our precious documents into the garbage on our way to Chana's apartment, and for the first time since we parted from our parents, I felt totally helpless. Even though I was twenty years old, I had never been forced to make such momentous decisions before. Our parents had given us all instructions and we had simply followed them. *Baruch Hashem*, our sister, Chana, was capable and courageous and highly inventive, and within a very short time she had acquired another two sets of papers that would keep us safe for the time being.

Our next move had to be finding an apartment in a neighborhood where no Jews lived, because the police were bound to focus less on such areas. Our search led us to the other side of the river that divided the city in two. Buda was totally different in character from Pest, where we had been living. We would have to sublet our furnished apartment and look for another in Buda. We soon found a suitable vacancy on the tenth floor with a terrific view in all directions, but alas, it was unfurnished. Not a sheet or a blanket or a stick of furniture in sight. This presented a serious problem, for by this time there was hardly any merchandise left in the stores. No one had anything left to sell.

Once again, Chana rose to the occasion and introduced us to her Jewish friends, the Herzogs, with whom we, too, became friendly. The Herzogs were true *baalei chessed*, dispensing charity and help to their brethren as much as they could. I mentioned our problem to Mr. Herzog when he invited us over for dinner a few days before Yom Kippur.

"Moishe," he said, "you need sheets and blankets – that's not a problem. I have enough for you and your brother. But I need something from you in return."

"What might that be?" I asked him.

"Nothing you haven't bought before," he replied in all seriousness. "Just go down to the market and buy me a rooster so that I'll be able to *shlug kaparos* before Yom Kippur."

I looked at him incredulously. There was a war going on in all of Europe. The Allies were bombing Budapest almost every night; Jews, those that were left, were being hunted down like dogs and sent off to who knew where in sealed cattle cars; and all Herzog worried about was obtaining a rooster for atonement. What a man!

I naively agreed to do it. It wasn't a very intelligent thing to do, given the circumstances, but I did it anyway. I went down to the big outdoor market in search of a live rooster. I found a farmer who was more than happy to sell me a lively, plump, well-mannered rooster, with a bright red crest quivering gently in the sunlight. But now that I had acquired the creature, how was I going to transport it quietly back to the Herzog residence without being questioned? With brilliance born of desperation, I walked among the crowded stalls searching for a flower seller. I bought an enormous bunch of flowers, large enough to camouflage the rooster among its blooms, and set out for the Herzogs' dwelling. I held the poor rooster in an iron grip underneath the flowers, and the second I heard the slightest peep, I whacked him on the head to shut him up. He was pretty quiet during most of the trolley ride, probably because he received an occasional love tap to keep him focused. Mr. Herzog was overjoyed with his rooster and I, slightly unnerved from the harrowing trolley ride home, grabbed the pile of bedding Mrs. Herzog had prepared and hurried back to our new apartment to take a much-needed shower.



The Swedish Embassy in Budapest, under the leadership of Swedish Ambassador Raoul Wallenberg, had been issuing bona fide Swedish passports to hundreds of Jews, and by declaring that they were Swedish citizens with the right to emigrate, saved their lives. Horthy had looked the other way, but under Salasi those days were over.

I shall never forget my one and only meeting with Mr. Wallenberg. He had

arrived in Budapest in mid-July. He swung into action right away, issuing a steady stream of Swedish passports for which he did not charge anything. My small circle of friends decided to try and obtain some of these passports to hand out to as many endangered Jews as possible, and they elected me to do it. With an armload of photographs, I hesitantly entered the Swedish Embassy and, to my utter astonishment, I found a whole crew of Jewish boys working there, helping to turn out the passports. In no time at all, they had all the pictures attached to bona fide, brand new Swedish passports.

I was about to walk out when Mr. Wallenberg himself stopped me. He was a tall, good-looking man in his thirties with a ready smile, not at all arrogant like some other diplomats I'd met.

"Listen," he said softly yet urgently, "I don't want to know your name, but I want to ask a favor." *What on earth could I do for this aristocratic, important man?*

"Tell me," he said, "why people are falsifying our passports." I knew he was referring to those Jews who were counterfeiting Swedish passports, not knowing that they could obtain them from the Embassy without charge.

"I will give out as many passports as are needed, so why do they forge them? Don't they know that they are jeopardizing the entire operation that way? The Nazis will simply invalidate all Swedish passports, authentic or not. So do me a favor. Contact those who are doing this and tell them to stop!"

"Mr. Ambassador," I said respectfully, "I have no idea who's doing this. I came here privately to help as many people as I can. I'm really sorry but I don't see how I can help you." Then he offered me some extra passports to take with me, saying that one never knows when a few blank passports will come in handy. I never saw Mr. Wallenberg again. He was a very brave man and saved some 100,000 Jews. May his memory be blessed.

One morning soon after our arrival in Budapest, I was riding the trolley car on the way to work when I saw two little children walking aimlessly along the street, with no adult in sight. The girl was not more

then ten and she pulled along the boy who must have been around seven. It was a bitterly cold day and his face was streaked with frozen tears. The trolley car was moving slowly enough for me to jump off and run back toward the children. Slowing down so as not to scare them, I approached them and asked for their names. The little boy turned to his sister and asked, "Should I tell him my Jewish name or my *goyishe* name?" I asked them if they were all right. The girl answered, "We're fine, thank you very much," with a stiff tone meant to discourage further questioning. It didn't discourage me.

"Tell me," I said gently, "Where are you from?" She named a street in downtown Budapest and tried to walk away.

"One second," I said. "Why are you out on the street freezing to death if you have a home to go to?"

She looked up at me and two fresh tears rolled down her cheeks and froze there.

"Because they threw us out," she said. She must have realized by now that I was not someone to fear. "Father was arrested and Mother is out looking for work, and we were staying with our cousins, but then the Nazis passed a new law saying that if anyone is caught sheltering children from the Jewish neighborhood where we come from, they'll be killed, and I guess our cousins didn't want to be killed, so they threw us out onto the street," she said in a rush without pausing for breath and with her head held high. *What a girl!* I thought. A few more questions revealed her parents' names and also that these children were my cousins. I also figured out who the cowards were who had thrown them out. Not everyone was cut out to display the same *mesirus nefesh* for their fellow Jews as my parents!

I introduced myself as a cousin, explaining to the girl how we were related, and I told them that I would take care of them. I brought them to a monastery I knew of and requested shelter for them, a request the nuns acceded to willingly, not knowing that they would be seeing a lot more of me than they bargained for. I had no intention of allowing the children to be brainwashed into another religion. For now, though, it was enough to know that the children had a safe, warm place to stay

where they would be cared for. I kept in touch with them throughout my stay in Budapest and was privileged to see them happily reunited with their parents at the war's end, a rarity in those times.



It was now October 1944. Admiral Miklos Horthy and his *relatively* benign government were ousted by the monstrous Ferenc Salasi, who deeply hated Jews and let loose a storm of unbelievable terror in Budapest. Under Horthy, a few of the beautiful foreign embassy buildings that lined the broad, pristine boulevards in the capital city had been used by the Swedish and Spanish ambassadors and others like them to shelter as many Jews as they could. Those days were now over. Armed gangs of Arrow Cross thugs roamed the streets from morning till night looking for, and shooting, anyone they thought looked even remotely Jewish.

Budapest was now under almost daily aerial attack by Allied bombers: the Russians by day and the British and Americans by night. It was like living through an earthquake. When the air raid sirens went off, everyone ran to the nearest shelter and hid until the raid ended. Jews like us sat among the gentiles, who would have killed us on the spot had they known who we really were. We, however, were happy to witness the destruction. We wanted these people to suffer as our people were suffering. We wanted the vengeance of G-d to rain down on them in a hail of falling stone and burning ashes. We rejoiced when one of the bridges over the Danube was hit and collapsed into the river. To ward off suspicion as I sat peacefully in a bomb shelter while other twenty-year-olds were off fighting, I made sure the neighbors knew I was employed in a supermarket. Anyone working in the food business had an automatic exemption from army service. For this reason, Sonny often just stayed home during the raids and trusted in Hashem to protect him.

Salasi was issuing new edicts every day, and his henchmen of the Arrow Cross brazenly shot Jews dead in the streets. One morning in November, Budapest awoke to find its walls plastered with the fateful notice: "All Jewish adults between the ages of eighteen and forty-four must report tomorrow morning to the public school in their district."

What had begun in the outlying, occupied military districts had finally reached the heart of the homeland and struck terror in every Jewish heart. Three hundred thousand Jews had already been shipped out of Hungary, and the Arrow Cross now was determined to collect the remaining one hundred thousand. Jews were being expelled en masse from Budapest, and the Danube might well have been the river in Babylon into which they poured their tears. This cruel edict left behind only the elderly and thousands of abandoned children. The deportees were told that they would see their children when they "returned from work" in the evening, but they knew in their hearts that there was no work where they were going and that they would not see their children again. Yet with guns pointed at their heads, what else could they do?

A general curfew was now imposed in the city from ten o'clock every night. Anyone found in the streets a second after ten was picked up and taken to jail or shot immediately as a spy. Our false papers had held up so far, *bechasdei Hashem*. On the evening following the great deportation, I heard a tremendous commotion coming from below our apartment and across the street where the Danube River flowed swiftly past. I looked out the window to see what was causing it.

The streets were filled with soldiers and policemen, and a long line of trucks snaked its way onto the piers. Rather than backing up to the loading platforms of the factories along the banks of the river, they were backing up to the water's edge. Then, from the backs of the truck, the soldiers and police hauled out a "cargo" of children, hundreds of crying, screaming children, one by one, and threw them bodily into the Danube. They were carried away by the mighty current, and I can still see the horrible image of their little hands raised in terror and then being sucked into the depths. Those few who were able to swim and tried to save themselves were gunned down in a hail of machine-gun bullets. The river turned red with blood.

This outrageous scene lasted throughout the night and was repeated during the next few days. It was a scene of unimaginably cruel depravity. When the guns fell silent, there were twenty thousand fewer children in the world.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

# Living on the Razor's Edge

ONE DAY OUR LANDLADY RETURNED HOME FROM WORK IN A rotten mood. I still remember the date — it was November 20. I had returned home from work just a few minutes before her and was in no mood to listen to her invective, so I retired to my room and stared out the window at the Danube, in which I could still visualize the helpless children her countrymen had assisted so readily to their deaths less than a month earlier. I could hear the old lady's raving clearly. "Those Jews," she screamed. "I wish them all torture, maiming, and death. Killing isn't good enough!"

I wondered what could have happened to turn this usually even-tempered woman into such a witch.

"I know I've said it was wrong to drown those children," she continued, "but by the beard of my grandfather I finally understand how sensible it was. If we let them grow up they'll destroy our society. Raising them as Catholics wouldn't even help, since once a Jew, always a Jew!"

Her voice, which was shrill at the best of times, was steadily rising into incoherence as she worked herself into a fine temper. I finally had to leave my room for something to eat and couldn't help asking what had occurred to put her in such a foul mood.

"Well," she began, "you know I have a newspaper stand near the corner of Andrassy Ut next to the trolley stop." I nodded my head. "Well, today there was a bunch of soldiers milling around there, some on their way back to their bases, some on leave and just hanging around. Then these two sol-

diers came up, escorting two Jewish prisoners. All four sat down on the bench next to my stand to wait for the trolley." I looked at her in puzzlement, since I had heard nothing so far that merited her reaction.

"So what happened then?"

"Well one of those Jews picked up a newspaper that was lying on the bench, and then...," she paused as if relating this tragic tale was totally breaking her heart, "and then both of those Jews sat there reading the newspaper, which they hadn't paid for, by the light of my gas lamp! Can you imagine? They used *my* light to read the paper (which was not even one from my kiosk) until the trolley car arrived!" Then she added almost under her breath, "Yes, it's a good thing they got rid of all those children!"

How I would have loved to throttle her right where she stood.

By December 1944, everyone knew the Russians were coming. You could almost feel it in the air. The weather worsened and so, it appeared, did the Nazi war effort. We tried to read between the lines of the biased news reports in the papers. Chana came by one day and, as usual, she had something to tell us that set us off in a new direction.

"Moishele, the Russians are on their way. It's time for you to find yourself somewhere else to live. I think you and Sonny must move back to the Pest side of the city."

"Why?" I asked.

"For two reasons," she replied. "The Russians will be liberating Pest first, which means the closer one lives to that area, the quicker he will escape German rule. And secondly, most of the fighting will be in Buda and I want you boys far away when that happens." There was no arguing with Chana. One simply listened and obeyed.

We went looking for an apartment on the other side of the river. Many people had already evacuated the area in anticipation of the arrival of the dreaded Russians. That left us with many apartments to choose from. But first we had to register with the head security officer to whom all area security officers and building superintendents had to report. We would have to

bribe each one in the chain. Fortunately, I had access to food at the supermarket where I worked. Food was the best currency at that time because of the severe shortages. This bonus was about to expire however, because I couldn't keep my job in Buda and live in Pest.

Early one morning as Sonny and I were eating breakfast, we heard a sudden shrill whistling noise that made our blood congeal in fear. It was the sound of a Russian artillery shell coming in for a landing. It crashed through our bedroom window, sailed onto one of the beds, and buried itself in a mound of sheets, pillows and blankets. A missile like that can cause a great deal of damage and kill a lot of people if it explodes. *Bechasdei Hashem*, the shell didn't explode. We were thus privileged to experience yet another open miracle, *baruch Hashem*.

Later, we were walking along the street not too far from our building when the air-raid sirens went off for the third time that morning. Everyone knew the drill: At the third blast of the siren, run as fast as you can to the nearest shelter. It was not too pleasant to take refuge in a strange shelter in an unknown building, but I tugged on Sonny's arm, trying to pull him into the ten-story building we were standing in front of, which we knew had a large shelter in the basement. Sonny pulled away from me.

"What's the matter?" I yelled at him as the siren whooped up and down, knowing that at any second a bomb might come hurtling down on our heads.

"No!" he said. "I'm not going into that building. Go ahead if you want to, but I'm going up to our apartment until it's over."

"You're crazy. You can't go upstairs. We can go to another shelter if you want. Where do you want to go?" Incredibly, he pointed to the building right across the street, a much smaller one, not as new and not nearly as well built. I protested briefly but he remained adamant. "All right," I said, grabbing his hand, and we ran across the street while I looked back with longing at the stronger building behind us.

Seated in the shelter, I asked him what was wrong with the other shelter. "Oh, I don't know," he answered. "The people there always look at us as if we're spies, as if they suspect us of something." Well, I wasn't about to get into an argument over the way people looked at us, and I let myself drift off to sleep while the bombs up above thumped down and we heard

the constant crump of explosions.

Two hours later we left the shelter and gasped in horror. The ten-story building was in ruins. A direct hit had demolished the entire structure and buried the shelter underneath the rubble. I don't think there were any survivors. Sonny and I saved each other's lives like this countless times. We were a team all through the days we lived on the run in the war zone, and our closeness is a strong bond that unites us to this day.

Our sister, Terry, the sixth oldest in the family, had been sharing an apartment all this time with a woman who was employed as the Hungarian Interior Minister's secretary. His name was Imredi, and his importance to the government can be measured by the fact that they did not dismiss him even after they found out his grandmother was Jewish, for under the Nuremberg Laws, descendants to the fourth generation were still considered Jewish. Imredi was an anti-Semite of the highest degree, even though he was *halachically* Jewish. Terry used her considerable charm and wit to get by as a non-Jew. She wore a cross around her neck and attended church regularly with her secretary friend. She also began smoking at that time, something that shocked me when I saw it, as I had never seen a girl smoking before. With all that, however, she remembered her Jewishness just as well if not better than the rest of us.

Terry kept a tiny *mezuzah* with her always. It was so thin that she was able to wrap it in a cigarette paper, camouflage it with a bit of tobacco, and keep it hidden inside a cigarette box among all the genuine cigarettes. One day however, she made the fatal mistake of leaving the cigarette box at home on top of her desk, an open invitation to anyone in need of a smoke. Her roommate, the minister's secretary, felt no compunction about accepting the invitation and selected one as if it was intended solely for her own use. Something didn't feel right. She broke open the cigarette and uncovered what appeared to be a little scroll with Hebrew writing all over it. And do you know what angered her most? She was incensed not by the fact that she was sharing her apartment with a Jewess, but rather by the idea that her friend

hadn't trusted her enough to tell her the truth.

In a fit of pique, she informed on Terry to the Nazis. Just after Terry arrived home from work that day, there was a sudden sharp rapping on the door accompanied by shouts of, "Police! Open up!" The secretary rushed to open the door and four Nazis troopers stormed into the apartment, headed straight for Terry and arrested her. Ironically, as they marched her out of the apartment, her roommate called out to her plaintively, "If only you had trusted me!"

Terry was taken directly to Nazi headquarters, which was located in the most elegant hotel in town, the Majestic, where the Nazi brute, Adolf Eichmann ruled supreme. I had seen this fiend for myself a short while before while walking along a street near the hotel. A group of high-ranking Nazi officers walked past, going in the opposite direction, with Eichmann in the center. Immaculately dressed, uniform pressed so well you could cut your hand on the creases, he carried a walking stick and strutted by – a far different figure from the shrunken, balding prisoner I saw on the witness stand more than twenty years later at his trial in Jerusalem. In any case, Terry was now in this monster's clutches, and Chana would have to use all her wiles to come up with a plan to free her.

The following morning, Chana left her apartment bright and early, dressed as if for a business meeting. She boarded the trolley in her neighborhood and rode along the beautiful boulevards of Budapest toward the wealthier neighborhoods of the city. She was secure in the knowledge that she looked no different from the other gentile women on the tram. She left the trolley when she reached a street of elegant homes and foreign embassies. She watched the trolley rumble off and then walked slowly along the street until she came to an imposing building with wrought iron gates enclosing sculptured flower gardens and tinkling fountains. This was the Spanish Embassy.

Chana walked up the circular driveway with her heart thumping nervously, climbed the stone stairs and entered the building. She had an appointment with the Spanish ambassador to Hungary, who just happened to be the brother of a friend of hers. As she waited in the elegantly appointed waiting room and looked about her, she silently recited *Tehillim*. At last the receptionist ushered her into the ambassador's sunny office. Her friend's brother was a

young man in his early thirties with even, handsome features. A pleasant smile played on his lips as he inquired how he could help her, a friend of his dear sister.

This was no time for games, Chana decided. She would be perfectly honest with him and tell him the truth. She explained that her sister's roommate had discovered that Terry was Jewish and denounced her to the Nazis.

"Well, I am sorry to hear that," the young man said, "but what can *I* do?"

"I would like you to pay an official visit to the chief of police and complain that one of your citizens has been mistakenly arrested."

"Is your sister a Spanish citizen?"

"No, of course not," Chana answered, "but if you don't undertake this mission of mercy and get her out of Eichmann's clutches immediately, she will not last the week." They spoke at length and Chana eventually prevailed on the man to help her. He agreed to intercede with the "Angel of Death" – Adolf Eichmann - and testify that Terry was a Spanish citizen.

Three days had already passed and it took a few more to set up an appointment with Colonel Eichmann himself. When the fateful day arrived, Chana and the ambassador's sister, Olga, accompanied the handsome young man to the Majestic Hotel where they were holding Terry. The girls wished him luck on his righteous mission and watched from across the street. Just as he walked up to the entrance, the door of the hotel swung wide and out walked Terry, apparently none the worse for her incarceration. Chana couldn't believe her eyes. Terry had talked her way out of Nazi headquarters and into freedom! We were so relieved and elated to have her back with us that we never asked her how she convinced her interrogators to release her. To this day I don't know how she did it, and, unfortunately, she is no longer here to ask.

CHAPTER TWELVE

# Relatives

WE HAD MANY RELATIVES IN BUDAPEST BEFORE THE WAR. Among them were the orphaned children of cousins who had passed away a short time before the deportations began. I had been in touch with them from the time I arrived in Budapest, and it was now apparent that they were in great danger of deportation or worse. Having managed to place them in a Catholic orphanage in the city, I didn't let a week go by without a visit to remind them of who they were and to try to prevent the nuns' brainwashing them. The food packages I brought to the orphanage were my currency and made me a welcome guest there, though I am sure the nuns secretly prayed for my demise at the hands of the Nazis so that they could mold and shape my two little cousins according to their beliefs.

Sometimes, if we had some free time, Sonny and I would go to the local flee market because it was possible to pick up the most amazing bargains there. On one of our shopping excursions I happened to notice a rack of assorted clothing almost hidden among the exotic merchandise. To my utter astonishment, hanging there among numerous suits of old and patched clothing, was a police uniform complete with awards and medals. What *hashgachah pratis!* We immediately realized the value of such a purchase and bought it on the spot. Sonny looked better in it then I did, and he took to wearing it most of the time. With his clean-shaven face, his hair smoothed back with gel and an intimidating air, Sonny was able to pass himself off as a Hungarian police officer. He usually came with me to the orphanage in uniform and

waited for me outside in case something unforeseen came up.

One Thursday morning we went to visit the children, bringing with us two boxes of nutritious food from the supermarket. We gave it to the nuns to feed all the orphans, and I went in alone. I sat down with my little cousins in the garden to have our weekly chat.

"*Kinderlach*," I said, "what are the two most important words we must always remember?"

"*Shema Yisrael*," they chorused, and we said the prayer together slowly, pronouncing each word clearly. I hoped to impress it deeply in their young and impressionable minds. I told them of their responsibility to our Father in heaven and how they must never forget who their parents were and that they were Jews. "Even if I'm not here for you when the war is over," I said, "you must make sure to find the Jewish community and join them. This place is only a temporary home to keep you safe." After I finished speaking, they told me about all the things they did and we laughed and joked, happy and content in our little corner. Soon the nuns were giving me pointed looks and it was time to leave. They knew that I was placing myself in danger by coming to the orphanage and could have reported me, but the food I provided persuaded them to look away. The truth is that I was grateful to them for saving my little cousins, even if their motives were not so pure. And so, when the nuns said it was time to leave, I went meekly. I walked out through the heavy, wrought-iron gates and straight into the arms of two policemen.

They were big barrel-chested men, their hair parted down the center in true Hungarian fashion, and they grabbed me by the arms and pulled me away from the gates. I struggled to free myself, but their combined strength was too much for me.

"Young man," the older one said, "this is not the first time we have seen you coming out of this orphanage. We saw you here last week and the week before that. What business do you have in an orphanage?" Sonny, in uniform, just happened to stroll down the street then, as if he were walking a beat.

"Why are you two idiots harassing this gentleman?" he shouted. The two "idiots" looked at one another shamefacedly, not knowing what they had done. "Didn't they teach you anything at the academy?" Sonny asked sar-

castically. "Did it even occur to you that you might be interfering with an operation in progress? This fellow was going to lead me to his gang of draft dodgers and you two fools have now totally compromised my operation. Leave the boy to me and just get out of here!" Sonny spoke with such authority that they scurried away and I almost felt sorry for them. Sonny and I hurried back to our apartment, trembling and thoroughly shaken up. We decided that I wouldn't be able to return to the orphanage safely until the war was over.

Another cousin of ours, who was a sister of the Viener Rav, lived in a beautiful, residential, gentile neighborhood under an assumed Christian name. Quite a number of Jews had sought refuge at her house and she wouldn't think of refusing them. I would often drop by on my day off to bring them a few baskets of food, knowing how hard it was for her to feed them all. One Sunday morning Sonny and I were drinking a cup of coffee with her in her living room when there came a sudden banging on the door.

"Police! Open up!" The people in the house began scrambling for hiding places while the banging intensified. My cousin was yelling, "I'm coming, I'm coming," while she urged everyone into hiding. My brother and I ran into one of the bedrooms, sure that this was the end of our freedom. The police combed the house, going from room to room, pulling people out of hiding places, berating them and ignoring their pleas for mercy. There was a window in the room we were hiding in that overlooked the courtyard. We were only one floor up and I gestured to Sonny to come over to the window so we would jump out. Sonny, however, motioned for me to go back to my hiding place and whispered that there were policemen stationed outside who would surely catch us. He preferred to say *Tehillim* and hope for the best. As usual, when my brother made up his mind, there was no budging him. If I wanted to jump, he wouldn't stop me, but he was staying right where he was. So I stayed, too.

Slowly the house quieted down, the shouts of the police evaporated and the sounds of slamming doors gave way to stillness. *Bechasdei Hashem*, the

police skipped over the room we were hiding in, though they found everyone else. I am convinced that there was a special dimension to my brother's *bitachon* and reliance on Hashem. Once again we had been spared.

Our cousin, Chaim Klein, was such a large man that he found it impossible to blend in anywhere. Consequently, he was always on the run. He had found safe lodging in a mental institution for a while through my sister's connections, but when the Nazis cracked down further on the Jews, he was expelled from the home along with all the Jewish patients. Once again he was out on the street without papers or anywhere to hide. Finally, one day he was arrested and taken to a transit camp, where he awaited deportation along with many others.

That day passed in slow motion for him until about four o'clock in the afternoon, when some workmen entered the detention hall and began to sweep up with Teutonic efficiency. Chaim hadn't been in the camp long enough to have taken on the emaciated look of an inmate, and somehow he appropriated a broom from somewhere and began sweeping industriously along with the workers. When the loudspeaker boomed out an announcement that the prisoners would be locked up for the night at five o'clock, and all workers should line up at the entrance and be ready to leave, Chaim got on line with the rest of the crew, surrendered his broom and walked outside to freedom. It was, alas, the freedom of a hunted animal.

Chaim needed documents urgently, but, unlike my sister, he didn't have the connections to obtain them. Ordinary false papers would never do for a man of Chaim's size. He walked the streets in fear, knowing that at any moment he could be arrested. No one would sell him papers they desperately needed themselves, and he hadn't enough money to buy them in any case, because people charged exorbitant prices for valid papers. Chaim, however, was a resourceful kind of guy and he came up with an idea. He made his way to one of the larger markets by way of side streets. In one area of the market husky porters gathered, waiting to be hired. Chaim went up to one of these huge men and, in perfect Hungarian, offered him a deal.

"Listen," he said to the giant who stood even taller than he, "I've got a commission to clear out furniture from a Jewish home, and I'm looking for a couple of workers. The job starts on Saturday. Will you come to work for me two days from now?"

"How much?" the man finally asked, after looking Chaim over carefully. Chaim quoted a fair wage and waited while the man seemed to be thinking it over.

"If you don't want to do it, I'll find someone else."

"No, no. It's good," the man said.

"Okay," said Chaim, "this is the deal. You come and meet me Saturday morning at nine o'clock in the morning at this address (he named the street), and I'll be waiting there with my truck. Now I need another fellow as strong as you. Do you have a friend?"

"Sure," the man replied and called over one of the other brutes idling nearby. They settled on a price and Chaim gave them some money as an advance. He pretended to walk away, but turned back suddenly and said, "Wait a second! How do I know you guys will show up? I've paid you good money, but how do I know that you'll keep your side of the bargain?" They attempted to convince him that they were trustworthy but Chaim was having none of it. Finally the man said, "All right, what do you want us to do?"

"I'll tell you," he said. "I'll double the advance money and you give me your papers to hold." The two porters agreed and handed over their papers to the "boss," never dreaming that they were getting conned. They are probably still standing there at the corner of Milo and Flishik Streets, wondering why the boss never showed up with the truck. Chaim, of course, was the new owner of two perfectly valid and completely genuine sets of identity papers whose general description matched his own. That was my cousin Chaim — a man who believed in himself and let nothing get him down.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# The Russians Arrive

ON THE MORNING OF JANUARY 18, 1945, WHEN WE LEFT THE shelter where we had spent the night, we found the streets full of Russian soldiers. They were wearing bright, white, camouflage uniforms to blend in with the snow and evade the strafing of German planes. The Russians had liberated the city, and overnight, the Germans disappeared. Budapest was officially handed over to the Russian army in a military ceremony. In the blink of an eye, haughty Hungarian officers were obsolete and were lucky if they could avoid court martial.

Russian propaganda, meant to bolster morale back home, spoke of 20,000 "subversives" captured and interned in Hungary. To back this claim, the Russians began pulling people off the streets and locking them inside special fenced-in areas hastily set up as internment camps. On one of my daily walks, some Russians grabbed me along with about twenty others and took us to one of these areas. I looked around in amazement. The place was packed with people from every walk of life, from gypsies strumming on guitars to native Magyars searching desperately for somebody to get them out. I concentrated on finding one thing only: a Jewish face among the Russian soldiers - and I soon found one.

An obviously Jewish Russian soldier was sitting by himself at a table, going over some paperwork, his glasses resting lightly on the bridge of his nose. He seemed to be looking with sympathy at the internees milling about and he also looked as though he'd much rather be somewhere else.

I approached him slowly, thinking desperately about what I should say. I was sure that this would be my only chance to get out of the camp, and if I missed it, they would ship me out with the rest. I stood beside the table quietly, waiting for him to notice me. Finally he looked up and said, "Yes?" It suddenly occurred to me that all I had to do was to tell him the truth.

"Sir," I began, "I'm a Jewish refugee and was rounded up along with all these other people. Can you possibly find a way to get me out of here?"

"I'm Jewish, too," he responded softly, motioning me to bend down so he could whisper. "Stand next to me for the next two hours until I get off duty and then I'll take you out with me." And that was exactly what he did.

I was free again! I wandered the streets looking for work. Finally, my feet led me to Russian military headquarters and I hung around there for a few days hoping to use my gift for languages to work my way slowly into their confidence. I became friendly with a few soldiers and eventually with some officers as well. The fact that I was Jewish raised me above suspicion. Aside from the fact that some of the soldiers were Jewish too, there was a general feeling among the Russians that Jews could be trusted because of all they had been subjected to. Eventually, I was offered a job as a translator and occasional interrogator. They gave me a document signed by the commander of the Russian forces in Budapest that entitled me to a car and other perks. The commander, himself, wrote a short note on the back of the paper stating: "This authorizes Mr. Mor Katz, a Jew, to go anywhere his work takes him and to travel any place within the Russian military zone." (This document, by the way, is currently on loan at the Holocaust Museum in New York.)

One of the first things I did after that was look for my family. I was able to reach Chana quickly, and together we located Terry, who had been living in a gentile home in the middle of the city. We all moved into the same apartment and did our best to stay out of trouble. The Russian army was still engaged in a bitter fight against the Nazis. The battle progressed inch by inch as the Russians advanced across Europe, and every town was the scene of a mini-war. The Nazis fought back viciously, trying in vain to keep the Russians from entering Berlin.

I was now working three to four hours a day for the Russians and receiving as much bread and food as I wanted from them. They just couldn't accept my not eating meals with them and treated me to long speeches on the futility of religion.

"Look what your G-d did to the Jewish people! Don't you realize the time has come to accept that all peoples are the same and that the Jewish people must join us in this movement?"

There were many Jews in the Russian army. I made a point of showing them the one strand of *tzitzis* I had held onto throughout the war. I also had a single remaining *tefillin* box. When I told them how I had risked my life to keep these two items safe, and how I used them daily no matter where I was, they were in total shock. This is what I told them:

When I went into hiding at the farm, I took a pair of *tefillin* with me. It was, of course, too dangerous to let any of the farmhands see them, so I buried them. When we escaped from the farm with the Nazi soldier that Chana had bribed to rescue us, I had to leave my *tefillin* behind. In Budapest, I set out to acquire another pair as soon as I could. There were still some shuls left in Budapest if one knew where to look, and I managed to find one of them that was hidden away in a maze of alleyways. The *shamash*, the caretaker, was a bent over old man in his seventies, with deep-set, brooding eyes the color of molasses, and he welcomed me warmly. I told him of my desire to purchase a pair of *tefillin* and he was only too happy to oblige. He removed several pairs from under the *bima* (reading platform) to show me. I looked at the collection he spread out on the *bima's* threadbare cloth cover and shivered. I felt a strong connection with Hashem even before I strapped on a pair. The *shamash* allowed me to pray there as long as I wanted, and I sat in the shadowed room for a long time, momentarily far removed from the destruction and horrors of war. I allowed the *tefillin* to draw me close again to Hashem.

In the end, I purchased the smallest pair he had. Every morning thereafter, Sonny and I took turns laying the *tefillin,* one of us locked inside the apartment and one standing guard outside. Our joy in keeping this *mitzvah* was indescribable, and we used this daily connection with Heaven as a way to keep our lives on an even keel. From then on, I never left those *tefillin* any-

where. I carried them with me wherever I went for quite some time, thankful that they were small enough to fit snugly in my pockets.

One morning in mid-November, just before the Russians arrived, the Arrow Cross set up a document checkpoint in our neighborhood. They placed a small wooden table in the center of the school yard, and soldiers herded everyone passing by into the yard. I awaited my turn at the end of the line nervously, touching the *tefillin* in my pocket and wondering what I should do when they searched me. My eyes roamed the yard searching desperately for somewhere to stash my *tefillin.*

About ten feet away stood an oil drum that was being used as a garbage can. It was about four feet high and was exactly what I needed. Stealthily, I sidled over toward the drum and idly began to play with its cover. The *shel rosh* part of the *tefillin* was in the inside pocket of my suit jacket, granting me easy access to it, but the *shel yad* was in my rear pants pocket and it wasn't so easy to take it out stealthily. First came the *shel rosh*, which I slipped quickly into the relative safety of the oil drum. I had just maneuvered the other part of the set out of my pocket and into the drum, when a soldier motioned me over to the table for my documents check. My heart was beating rapidly and I was in a cold sweat, but I pulled the papers out of my wallet and calmly placed them on the table in front of the soldier. He glanced through them, nodded his head, and motioned that I was free to leave.

I was in a quandary. I wanted to get away from the soldiers, but I hated having to leave without my *tefillin.* Sorrowfully, I made my way back to the apartment. The next day I was back in the schoolyard almost at the crack of dawn. With a prayer on my lips, I bent down and removed the cover from the metal drum. I spotted the leather straps of my *shel yad* almost immediately. They were half-buried in the muck, stained with oil spots and sticky with garbage, but they were in one piece and that was all that mattered. The *shel rosh* was nowhere to be seen. I turned over the entire drum, dumping everything out, but the *shel rosh* had disappeared. I felt that my connection with Hashem had just been reduced by half and it was physically painful. Eventually I left the yard, burdened with a new loss on top of all the rest that I had lost in such a short period of time. To possess a complete pair of *tefillin* again and then lose them was unbearable.

Still, it was heartening to possess the remaining half and I still felt a connection with Hashem. The half-*tefillin* plus the solitary string of *tzitzis* that I carried with me wherever I went served as a constant reminder that Hashem was looking down at me from heaven and "smiling."

Recently, I related this incident during a speech at the HALB school in Long Beach, Long Island. I received 144 letters from the students afterward, with each girl relating personally to the painful yet uplifting aspects of the story. One special girl wrote me the following:

*"Dear Dr. Katz, I am convinced that your* shel rosh *was not thrown away or damaged. I think that it was found by another Jew who felt that he, too, needed some of the connection to Hashem that the* tefillin *provided you with. He, therefore, took one part of the set for himself, leaving you with the second half of the pair, so you could continue donning it every day. It wasn't that he was taking your* tefillin, *as much as he was sharing what he had found with you."*

Our family always had a sincere and meaningful connection with Hashem that was an integral part of our lives. When the war began, I transferred that overall feeling of connection into something like a personal relationship, which only increased the longer I was on the run. I started making "deals" with Hashem. I would say, "*Ribbono shel Olam*, listen! I'm going to do my best to keep as many *mitzvos* as I can, and You in turn, please grant me life." I kept my word, and *baruch Hashem*, somehow, He always kept His side of the "bargain." I repeated this promise many times, especially during moments of greatest danger. There were many of those due to the fact that I undertook to help as many people as I could. I was in danger countless times yet was miraculously saved again and again.

So much of who I was came directly from my parents. With a mother and father like mine, who always helped others and did countless good deeds for everyone around them, we all grew up emulating their deeds automatically. Indeed, I spent so much time with my parents, following their orders, going off on secret missions for them, that I learned to accept everything they said unquestioningly. If my parents said it, it was good enough for me. If it was in my power to carry out their requests, it was as good as done.

Yet sadly, I somehow grew up with the strange misconception that my

mother didn't really love me. She had a habit of gazing at me and repeating a little Hungarian saying to herself whenever we were working together. Roughly translated, it was something like: *You are as good as you look*, or, *Your goodness is reflected in your face.* I must have had a poor self-image, because I was certain that I was not at all good-looking and I feared that everyone around me, including Mother, felt the same way. And if that was true, then the statement, *Your goodness is reflected in your face,* wasn't much of a compliment. Children sometimes interpret perfectly innocent statements in a most bizarre fashion. Each time Mother said this proverb, it cut me more, until I began to feel that she really didn't like me very much.

With that in mind, I began doing all I could to change her opinion of me. For one thing, I started a "getting Mother to love me campaign." I scraped together every single penny that I received over the year, all my Chanukah *gelt* and all the tips for delivering *mishloach manos* on Purim, and I bought her a *sheitel* for her birthday. Everything I did was calculated to make her smile, to show my devotion and love. But I always felt unappreciated, and this feeling stayed with me for decades.

Until ten years ago, that is, when I was in Toronto for the wedding of my sister's granddaughter. During the meal, I walked over to my sister to offer my congratulations. She was sitting at the beautifully set table, gracious as always and looking quite elegant. She gave me a big hello, and introduced me to the woman on her right as "the best Katz in the family!" As she said this, she gave a knowing look to the woman beside her and added, "My mother positively adored him."

"Wait a second," I broke in, my voice trembling with agitation. "How can you say that she adored me? She always said that proverb about goodness being reflected in one's face and you know perfectly well that my face was never anything to write home about." The lady sitting next to her, who understood the Hungarian saying, smiled at me and said most emphatically that those words were a compliment of the highest order. "They are the nicest words a child can hear," she said, and for the first time I felt that maybe, possibly, Mother had really liked me and had truly meant what she said - although it was hard to break the conviction of a lifetime. I needed further persuasion.

Some time later, at the *bar mitzvah* celebration of a relative by the name of Moskowitz, I was introduced to a distinguished guest, the Hungarian ambassador to the United States. I figured this was as good a time as any to clarify once and for all the meaning of the words my mother had constantly repeated to me. With that in mind, I wrote the saying in Hungarian on a paper napkin and asked the ambassador if he would kindly translate it into English for me. He read the words silently, looked up at me, and in all seriousness said, "This saying is the nicest, warmest thing a parent can say to a child." I thanked him sincerely, and for the first time in so many years, I unburdened myself to this kind and gentle man. I told him how I had always thought my mother didn't like me and how I had suffered because of it. He said to me, "You can rest assured that your mother loved you more than any of your brothers and sisters, and the proof is that she said this to you often." What a load off my mind that was!

Yet the truth is that because I wanted to earn her love, I always did exactly what she told me to, and that was what ensured that I never ate nonkosher food and kept Shabbos to the best of my ability all through the bleakest and harshest moments in our nation's history.

The Russian officers I became friendly with while I worked for them did their best to convince me to give up my religion. They tried every method of persuasion they could think of, praising their communistic way of life to the skies and criticizing Judaism. I would respond politely to their comments, never revealing my real thoughts, for I knew they would have earned me an instant visit to Siberia. One high-ranking officer, however, a woman, wouldn't leave me alone. Apparently, she had no children and had no greater desire than to adopt someone like me whom she could mold. She spoke to me endlessly about what a wonderful life awaited me in Russia if I'd return with her. I could have an amazing career in the Red Army, maybe even become a general, because her father was a big man in the party and there was absolutely nothing he could not achieve. On and on she went, day after day, until I couldn't stand the pressure any longer and decided to leave my job as translator. It just wasn't worth it. Besides, it was time to go home.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# Going Home

THE WAR WAS OVER AT LAST, AND EVERY DISPLACED PERSON'S greatest desire was to go home. We siblings who survived were hoping, futilely of course, that we'd arrive at our old house in Uzhorod and we'd discover Mother in the kitchen cooking a meal for a poor man, and Father in his office going over some business papers. We were still in the dark as to the extent of the killings. No one was capable of believing the magnitude of the slaughter that had occurred in this modern, civilized day and age.

May 8, 1945, was the official end of the war: VE (Victory in Europe) Day, but it was February before we were able to set out for home. Home! The word conjured up memories of a past life, a different existence - one long forgotten. Four of us had found each other: Sonny, Chana, Terry and I, when my younger sister Manca suddenly turned up. Obviously, we wanted her to join our group so we could all return home together. Manca, however, had heard somewhere that our brother, Mordechai, had been spotted alive in one of the concentration camps. She decided that she was going to tear apart the country until she found him.

The four of us arrived at what had been our home in Ungvar but now was an empty ruin. There was hardly a wall left standing. The doors had either been torn off their hinges completely or were still hanging drunkenly off-center, and there wasn't a stick of furniture to be seen. The floorboards had been pulled up brutally, leaving gaping holes wherever you looked. Even the ceilings were broken and cracked, with huge sections of insulation poking

through. Our hearts cried out in distress on seeing the destruction of what had once been our beautiful, warm, welcoming home. Clearly, the scavengers who had laid it waste were searching for the remains of our reputed wealth. Fortunately, they hadn't thought of digging up the backyard. That fateful night, when we had last gathered together as a family, Father had called me into his study to speak to me privately.

"Moishele, sit down," he'd said. "The situation looks black. Our people are going to suffer. All the signs herald the end of our world as we know it. I have, therefore, put together a barrel containing our most precious belongings, and tonight, when everyone around is sleeping, you and I will go outside and bury it in the backyard."

It was a bitterly cold night and we breathed out huge, steamy gusts of air and panted with effort as we dug up the frozen earth. We took our barrel, filled with many items of good warm clothing; family photographs, and a stock of valuable horsehair, which would hopefully be of great use to us in restarting the business if we survived. We lowered it into the hole like a coffin, and indeed, it felt as though we were burying a part of ourselves.

One of the first things I did when we returned home was to look for that barrel. *Baruch Hashem*, it was still there, right where we had buried it. I thanked Hashem from the bottom of my heart that the scavengers hadn't been successful in their search. The wooden barrel was encrusted with dirt and mud. Most of the clothing disintegrated at a touch, although one beautiful fur coat of the type that chassidic *rebbes* wear was in perfect condition. Most of the horsehair was still in good shape, and later on I took it to Budapest to sell. It was so valuable that I hadn't enough room in my pockets for all the cash I received for it! I probably could have sold it for even more on the open market, but I wanted to give the business to one of the family's suppliers from before the war. Suddenly, we had plenty of money. However, one thing I didn't have was proper papers, having disposed of my gentile papers earlier. Now I needed a birth certificate. But that meant dealing with Russian bureaucracy.

The Russians had taken over City Hall. A Russian woman was sitting where once a Hungarian clerk had sat. My heart sank as soon as I saw her, knowing that she wouldn't be inclined to help me one little bit. Her grey hair

was tied back in a severe bun, her eyeglasses were hiked up onto her forehead; she looked intimidating, to say the least.

"Yes," she acknowledged me with a raised eyebrow.

"Um," I said hesitantly, "are you in charge of birth registrations and related matters?"

"I am," she replied curtly. "Have you had a baby you want to register?"

"No," I said, "...er, not yet, anyway. Right now I need identification documents, like a copy of my birth certificate."

"I see," she said. "Let me explain something to you. The fact that you are standing here talking to me is clear proof that you were born, okay?" I nodded my head; her logic was unassailable. "Well then," she continued, "let's examine your situation. If you remain here in your home town under the benevolent rule of Comrade Stalin, you will never be in need of a birth certificate because everyone knows who you are. The only reason you would need a new birth certificate is if you plan to move away or, let's say, emigrate, hmm?"

I knew when I was defeated. Shrugging my shoulders, I left City Hall - only to bump into the mayor of the city on his way in. The new mayor, the former Louie Gruenstein, now called himself Louis Galan (to get ahead in life) and had, indeed, been elected to run the city. He was quite an educated fellow, who had worked for the city for many years even before the war. Somehow, he'd managed to secure more votes than any of the other candidates. He looked down at me from his great height of six-foot-two and said, "Moishe, Moishe, get out of town! Not only do the Russians have your name down on the list of former factory owners and want to arrest you as a capitalist, but anyone with any connection whatsoever to the previous government will be picked up and shipped off to Siberia."

"How much time do I have?" I asked him, anxiety making my voice crack.

"By Monday it will be too late," he replied. There was no choice, I would have to run. Again!

Before I could leave town, however, there were some very important things I had to take care of. Number one was Mr. Benko, the Hungarian thief who had stolen my family's factory and threatened my sister, Manca, at knifepoint. I hadn't forgotten him, nor, I thought, would he have forgotten about us. It

was time for retribution. My stored-up anger had, in a way, sustained me throughout the war, and I now felt a burning desire for revenge.

Early that Sunday morning I boarded the first train to Kishvarda. An hour later I alighted at the station and walked into town. I gravitated instinctively to the town's shul and enjoyed the warmest of greetings when I entered. There were about one hundred Jews there, Jews who had survived the war and returned home to claim their property. The feeling a Jew had upon meeting yet another survivor is indescribable. Upon leaving the shul, the first people I met were two of the Landau girls whose father had been a *dayan* and a good friend of my father. They were amazed to see me in Kishvarda and asked why I had come. I replied that I had come to settle a debt that was owed to my sister and the rest of the family. They understood immediately what type of debt I was referring to and begged me not to do anything rash.

"Moishe," they cried, "please don't do anything that will cause the *goyim* to start attacking us again. The anti-Semitism here is just beginning to simmer down, and we beg of you, don't cause it to flare up again."

I said goodbye to them without making any promises, but I was determined not to let Benko get away with what he had done, and besides, he owed us a lot of money. As morning turned into afternoon, I walked down the street to the town's police station where I informed the officers on duty that I had come to town to collect an old, outstanding debt. They referred me to two Jewish detectives who were now employed by a reorganized, anti-Nazi Hungarian police force. The two were more than happy to assist me. They even offered to come along on my mission, but I refused, saying that I'd like to make the first approach myself.

It was exactly five o'clock when I knocked on Benko's door. I waited outside, listening for the distinctive tread of a cripple, for he had been wounded during World War I. Yes, our Mr. Benko had been a war hero. When he finally opened the door, all the things I had been thinking of saying evaporated, and what came out was "Good afternoon."

He looked at me without recognition, and replied, "Good afternoon. What can I do for you?"

*Well for starters, you can give me back all the money you stole from us and then you can apologize for threatening my sister with a knife and for*

*causing my family so much pain at a time when we were so helpless*, were the words that ran through my mind. What I said was, "I'm Manca's brother," and watched the blood drain from his face.

"Yes," he said, "I remember you."

"Good," I replied, "because then you'll also remember that you stole our factory from us!"

"Come now," he said with a show of indignation, "the machines were all in poor condition, heaps of junk. They were worthless and broke down almost immediately. I wasn't even able to compete with anyone in the trade."

"That doesn't concern me in the least," I said, "and I don't want the machines back. However, I do want their value in cash, plus the money in our bank accounts that you stole. And I'll tell you something else. I haven't forgotten about the knife threat for one second, but if you return what isn't yours to keep, that part will remain a secret between you and G-d."

"All right, all right," he said, raising his hands in defeat and suddenly looking twenty years older. "But all my papers and cash are hidden. If you come back tomorrow morning, I'll have them ready for you."

I didn't trust him in the least, so I asked the two detectives to accompany me the next morning. We arrived at five to nine and were surprised when his mother opened the door.

"Miklosh is very depressed," she began, "and he didn't sleep all night. He left the house early this morning to go and pray at his father's grave in the cemetery."

"Which cemetery would that be?" I asked her. She gave us directions and we drove off in the detectives' car to the old cemetery on the other side of town. The stone door leading into the Benko family mausoleum was slightly ajar and I had a premonition as I pushed it open. In the dim light that filtered in, we could see a figure swaying back and forth over one of the gravestones. Benko had hung himself.

As we walked solemnly through the tangled underbrush on our way out of the cemetery, I told the Jewish detectives that I still wanted to get my money back, but they discouraged me from pursuing the matter any further.

"Listen," they said, "you've got your revenge. Leave it for now. It's not good that a strange Jew comes to town and turns it upside down. Just be

happy with Benko's death and go in peace." I packed my one bag that afternoon and left Kishvarda, hoping never to see the place again.

My next goal was to locate some of our beautiful furniture and other possessions that had disappeared. The police had instructions to allow us survivors to reclaim any former belongings that we could identify. I rented a horse and wagon and went out looking. Going from house to house, knocking on the doors of gentiles and demanding entry, I did eventually find some of our furniture. There was a couch in one home and a dining room table in another. In one house I discovered a whole cache of Mother's sumptuous, monogrammed linens and tablecloths. As I prepared to carry the linens out to my buggy, the woman of the house began to apologize to me.

"It wasn't we who made those holes in your walls, you know," she said.

"I don't recall mentioning anything about holes in our walls," I said sternly, looking her in the eye. She didn't say another word while I went on removing our belongings from her house and stacking them in the wagon.

I decided to give the furniture and furnishings to Stefan Polyi, Dr. Toth's tenant farm manager, who had sheltered Sonny and me on his farm during the war. None of our family was going to remain in Ungvar now that the war was over, and the furniture might as well go to someone who had done our family a good turn. Stefan and his wife were now residing in his home town twenty miles from Ungvar in what was now Slovakia. He had only stayed on the farm as long as he had to protect us, and two weeks after the soldier came to escort us to Budapest, he packed his personal belongings and went home.

I drove my wagon through the winding country roads to his village, past flowering shrubs and tidily painted wooden homes, seething with anger at those Hungarians who were living so calmly and contentedly, with so many material goods, while my suffering nation had been banished, their lives destroyed. Why had they needed to vanquish us, to quash us, to tread on us and destroy every vestige of my people? Didn't they know that G-d had promised His people that He would never abandon them?

Mrs. Polyi answered the door. She had obviously been crying and upon seeing me, burst into tears once again.

"The Russians took Polyi!" she sobbed. "Last week, Russian soldiers marched into the village and, without any warning whatsoever, picked up almost half the men and carted them away. They're now in a labor camp awaiting deportation to Siberia." She burst into fresh tears and couldn't stop crying. I was filled with pity. Her husband was such a good man; it was so unfair. Suddenly her tears dried up and she said in a whisper, "Maybe you'll go and plead his case?"

What was I to do? I clearly owed my life to Stefan, so I agreed to try to rescue him. His wife drew a map to show me exactly where the Russian internment camp was located, and I set out immediately. As I drove up in my wagon, I noticed the high degree of security in the area. The camp was surrounded with barbed wire fences, and guard posts were planted at strategic points all around it. The sergeant who stopped me at the main entrance looked pretty tough.

"Halt!" he challenged, his outstretched bayonet delivering a message clearer than words. "What do you want?"

"I need to see the commandant on private business," I replied, stressing the word *private*. The soldier called over another soldier to take over his post and said that he would accompany me to the commandant's office. The yard was filled with prisoners waiting to be shipped out to the frozen Steppes of Siberia. We walked over to a door with five gold stars painted on it. The soldier knocked and a sergeant admitted us. After a short wait, he ushered me into the general's inner office.

The general had thinning blond hair and even thinner blond eyebrows. His eyes were deeply set in a gaunt face and seemed to me sad and wise and experienced. He motioned me to sit down while he finished signing some papers. Finally, he raised his eyes and looked me over for a few moments.

"What can I do for you?" he said quietly.

Once again Hashem put the right words into my mouth. "I have nightmares all the time," I said. "I dream of Nazi murderers and Arrow Cross thugs and hear over and over again the radio announcements calling for extermination of the Jews. I can't forget the sight of children drowning in the

Danube to the resounding cheers of the worthy citizens of Budapest. All this haunts me night and day.

"And then you Russians came. I thought that now it would be different, that our liberators would impose justice in this land," I cried out in apparent anguish. "But you allow the bad ones to roam freely and arrest the good citizens who helped people like me. Here in this very camp you're holding an entire family who were arrested for no reason at all. They are good people who do not deserve this. Please, I beg of you, let them go!"

He looked back at me and I couldn't read his expression. Finally he spoke. "You have guts," he said. "But I want you to prove to me that you're really Jewish. Prove to me that you had *bris milah* and let me hear you say *Shema Yisrael.*" Of course these words showed me that this Russian general was Jewish.

"Okay," he said, after I had recited the entire *Shema*, "who do you want to take out?"

"The wife of the man who saved my life is waiting in my wagon," I told him. "She will show you who she wants you to release."

When we arrived back at their village with Stefan (or Istvan as he was called in Hungarian) and three others, Stefan's mother-in-law came out to greet us, singing praises to the One Above for the miracle He'd done for them. Suddenly she shrieked, "Where's Uncle Alex?!" Mrs. Polyi had indeed forgotten about her uncle, and she pleaded with me to return to the camp to get him. I went back right away, but the general was no longer forthcoming.

"You had your chance," he said. "Now be happy with what you have."

Though I was happy, indeed, to have helped save my benefactor, my joy was tinged with sadness that I had failed to rescue his uncle.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# Rescue Attempt and Revenge

DR. JANOS TOTH, THE OWNER OF THE FARM ON WHICH STEFAN Polyi had hidden Sonny and me, had been our family lawyer for as long as I could remember. He was also a person to whom we owed a great debt for the many favors he did for us. As a native Hungarian, he had held many prominent positions in the government before and during the war, and that automatically made him an enemy of the communists. The Russians had picked him up in one of their first midnight forays into the private homes of Ungvar, and taken him, protesting strongly, to the soccer field on the outskirts of the city to await deportation. I knew nothing of all this when we arrived in Ungvar. As soon as I was able, on my return to the city, I stopped by the Toth residence. I had expected to see the good doctor sitting regally in his study, smoking his pipe and perusing a legal brief as usual. The Toths were all very happy to see me, but their sadness was palpable.

"Where's the doctor?" I asked innocently, thinking that perhaps he was out on some typical mission of mercy.

"The Russians took him a few days ago," his wife said in a monotone. "They are holding him and many others locked up on the soccer field. As soon as they have enough prisoners to make up a transport, they'll send them all to Siberia."

Taking his son by the arm, I said that we must go down to the soccer field immediately and try to get the Russians to release Dr. Toth. I was full of confidence after my last rescue attempt and hoped I'd be successful this time

as well. At the soccer field we were able to catch a glimpse of the tall figure of the doctor among a pack of prisoners shepherded together on the other side of the field. My heart went out to this gallant man, who had used all his resources to help people in need. I approached the guard on duty and requested a meeting with his superior officer. Wordlessly, he assessed me and dialed a number on his telephone. He said that his officer would be there shortly. We waited near the gate while the sun shone brightly on an uncaring world that had witnessed a righteous man like Dr. Toth sentenced to Siberia in the flick of an eye. The officer arrived at the gate and questioned us.

"On the other side of this field," I began, "stands a man who has played a major role in my life." I knew that I was endangering myself by admitting that I knew Dr. Toth well, but this was the only way that occurred to me to try to save him.

"The man I'm talking about not only helped me and my family whenever he could, but he has done good deeds for half the city. He's a totally good man and was never involved in anticommunist activities. I'm sure that he was picked up by mistake and that once you understand who he is, you'll release him."

Although the officer may have been moved by my words, all he said was, "I'm very sorry, but there is absolutely no way we can release Dr. Toth. He's much too well known as a capitalist for me to even dream of releasing him. You are wasting your time here." He raised his hands helplessly and said, "That's the way it is: a member of city hall, on the town council, director of this, leader of that. I can't help you."

"But he saved my family," I protested.

"No. I'm sorry, but I'm not authorized to let him go."

I did no better with the city officials I visited, who answered me evasively, nor with the mayor, who sat enthroned in his luxurious office. "Come," I said to the mayor, "this is Dr. Toth we're talking about, not some vagrant off the street. What about all the favors he did for you over the years?" He refused to answer my question, and regretfully sent me away.

I can recall one story in particular that illustrates how Dr. Toth used his influence and position to help the unfortunate. Back in 1941, before Jewish business licenses were revoked, many Jews were tavern owners, and almost

all of them were veterans of the First World War. In the village of Kapush, some Hungarian soldiers became intoxicated at a tavern owned by a Jew named Simchah. Simchah had attained the rank of captain during the war. The drunken soldiers began to wreck the inn and in the end attacked the owner as well. Simchah, however, kept a thick club under the counter and whipped it out and gave a couple of the soldiers a sharp blow on their thick, Magyar skulls. He knocked them out. Then he went after the rest of the soldiers, who sobered up fast and ran out of the tavern. A few days later, Simchah was arrested for assaulting Hungarian soldiers and a date was set for a trial. No sane lawyer would take on the defense of a Jew who was obviously guilty as charged.

My father heard about it and tried to convince Dr. Toth to take on Simchah's hopeless case. Dr. Toth agreed, and he met with Simchah to discuss the defense. Father told them not to worry, but to just keep postponing the hearing, and that was what Dr. Toth began to do. For about a year, he managed to push off the trial using every legal technique he could think of, until, finally, the Hungarian government fell and a new government took over. Soon after that, the new Minister of the Interior announced a new judicial policy in a memorable speech one Shabbos afternoon in the central square of Ungvar. Henceforth, citizens would be allowed a plea of self-defense if attacked. He mentioned the "Jewish problem" in passing, but reiterated the principle that henceforth, no one, Jew or gentile, could take the law into his own hands, but a man was allowed to defend himself.

Simchah was freed shortly afterwards. We were all proud of Father's foresight, naturally, but Dr. Toth's actions were typical of the man's selflessness.

Two days later, I returned to the internment camp, intent on trying to rescue the good doctor, but the soccer field was empty. The transport had left and we never saw him again. May that righteous gentile, Dr. Toth, be remembered for all the good he did.



My next stop was the palatial residence of our old enemy, Dr. Egresi. His wife, who was roughly twenty years his junior, let me into the house. Egresi

himself had aged drastically over the past year and was looking more evil-tempered than ever. His snow-white hair stood up in tufts around his broad skull and his tall frame was slightly stooped. He looked me up and down with his beady, bird-of-prey eyes.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"My name is Mor Katz," I replied, "and I'm sure you remember my father whose business you stole!"

"Stole?" he roared. "It was fair competition!

"Listen, you're a lawyer by profession," I said. "Why did you pick on my family?"

"I picked your business because you were very rich," he answered. "And anyway," he added coldly, "that was then, and this is now. The war is over. Get over it. Besides," he continued, "the Jews will soon be in trouble again. Do you think the Russians like the Jews any better than the Germans or Hungarians do? Everyone hates the Jews. Get used to it. Now get out of my house!"

I left his home, all right, and went straight to the local headquarters of the Russian secret police, the N.K.V.D., where I insisted on seeing an officer of high rank. One Viktor Muslevko agreed to listen to my story, and I told him a great deal about the noted capitalist, Dr. Julius Egresi. Some stories were true, others not exactly so. I described in great detail the power Egresi had built up over recent years, how he had taken away our factory, revoked our broom-making license and thrown us out of the business without a second thought.

"But what did the man do against the communist cause?" Muslevko wanted to know.

"Well," I said, "whenever the lawyer Egresi agreed to take on a client, he made one stipulation."

"Yes?" inquired Victor.

"He wouldn't accept a client who was a communist," I replied.

"Where does this Egresi live?" he asked.

They came for him at 5:30 the following morning as the sun rose over the hilltops and the birds chirped loudly. Three men of the N.K.V.D. knocked on his door and demanded entry. Dr. Egresi's wife let them in. Egresi, an early

riser, was sitting in his study sipping a cup of coffee and going over some financial papers. He listened in amazement as the commanding officer placed him under arrest for committing treason against the communist regime in general and against the great leader Josef Stalin in particular.

"Take him away!" he ordered. Mrs. Egresi began screaming so they took her along as well. She was released the next morning, but the renowned anticommunist and capitalist entrepreneur, Dr. Julius Egresi was never seen again.



A family named Gruenstein (no relation to the mayor, Louie Gruenstein a.k.a Galan) used to live across the street from us for as long as I can remember. When the deportations started, they were taken away along with almost the entire Jewish community and were never seen again. One morning, I unexpectedly met their son, Kalman, in the center of town. He had served for four years in a Hungarian labor unit and from there he was somehow drafted into the Czechoslovakian army. He even attained the rank of major, an astonishing feat for a Jewish boy. He was splendidly attired in full uniform, complete with medals, and had just that minute arrived in Ungvar. He recognized me at once, for he was their youngest child and was still home when we were growing up.

"Mor Katz! Is it really you?" he shouted joyfully and pulled me into an embrace.

"Well, you sure look fine," he said, "all grown up." I returned the compliment. Then he asked me how his parents were doing. He obviously hadn't yet returned home. Sadly, I had to inform him that his parents had been deported along with everyone else.

His face took on an ashen hue. "The Germans?" he asked.

"No," I answered, "it wasn't the Germans, seeing as there were only about nineteen German soldiers stationed in the entire city. We could have overpowered the Germans easily. But the Hungarians," I continued, "they were a different story altogether. Our best friends turned on us without a second thought, revealing our hiding places to the Germans or the Arrow Cross.

Then they took all our belongings into their own homes."

"You mean they took away ... everyone?" he asked me incredulously; unable to believe it. It was indeed pretty unbelievable. "Everyone," I replied.

The next thing I knew, Major Kalman Gruenstein had commandeered an army truck with a driver and four armed soldiers. He wasn't acting rationally, and when he invited me to come along with them, I thought I had better keep an eye on him. We drove through the city, until we reached a traditionally gentile neighborhood. Then he ordered the soldiers out of the truck.

"Now, fan out and grab the first fifty people you see and bring them back here to the truck," he ordered.

"Who are we looking for?" one of the soldiers asked. "War criminals?"

"They're *all* war criminals," Kalman replied, "every last one of them. It doesn't matter to me one bit if they were good or bad. Every one of them deserves to die for what happened to my parents!"

The soldiers knew better than to disobey a direct order from a senior officer, so they fanned out through the streets in the gentile neighborhood, grabbing civilians and hauling them back to the truck. The people arrested were screaming in terror, totally unable to figure out why they were being treated this way. I turned to Kalman and asked if he was sure that this was the best way to handle the situation. But there was nobody home – he was beyond reason. Kalman knew only that his parents were dead and that these people had allowed it to happen. He wanted revenge at any cost. In twenty minutes the soldiers had collected fifty people: thirty-five men, ten women and five children, and stuffed them all into the back of the truck at gunpoint.

Kalman and I climbed back into the cab of the truck and Kalman told the driver to move on. We drove through the crowded streets, filled with people intent on leading their normal, peaceful lives. On we drove, into the forest on the outskirts of Ungvar with our fear-stricken cargo. The forest was dark and gloomy. We stopped in an isolated clearing deep within the forest that I remembered from my childhood. Grass grew wild underfoot. Kalman ordered everyone out of the truck. The prisoners cowered together and awaited their fate – certain it was death.

A soldier handed Kalman a machine-gun and Kalman blindly pressed

what he thought was the trigger but turned out to be the lever that opens up the chamber and releases the bullets. The bullets dropped out of the gun, the whole gun broke up into pieces and Kalman fainted dead away. A Jew just cannot kill people in cold blood. Had Kalman given the gun to one of his men, the deed might have been done with dispatch, but the Jewish heart isn't capable of such viciousness. We drove back into town, released the prisoners and brought Kalman to the hospital, where he slowly recovered. Some revenge!

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# Survivors

AT THE AGE OF TWENTY-ONE, I WAS THE OLDEST OF THE GROUP of adolescent survivors in Ungvar who were now on their own. I was about to leave my home and my home town forever. Many of the young people wanted to join me and my brother and sisters, and, before, long we were a group of twenty. Our first challenge was to evade the Russian soldiers patrolling the streets. We hired a huge wagon, large enough to accommodate all of us. It was pulled by two enormous oxen led by a big brute of a fellow called Anton. The oxen wouldn't move unless pulled, and Anton himself could pull with the strength of an ox. We paid him to take us to the large, international train terminal in Chop, not too far from Ungvar. It was April 1945 and the weather was beginning to turn mild. Spring was in the air and we felt that we were embarking on a new life.

In Chop we mingled with the crowds and boarded a train to Grosswardein in Romania. Many Jews had already straggled back there, among them the Vizhnitzer Rebbe with some of his chassidim. They had set up a big shul where many people came to *daven*. Our first priority, though, was to find living quarters for the whole group as no one had any desire to go his own way. This was no easy task. As the oldest, I went to the local police station and requested the allotment of an apartment big enough to house all twenty of us. The officer at the desk told me that they, the police, could not provide refugees with housing but, seeing our crestfallen faces, he assured us that if we would find a residence that had belonged to a Jewish family before the

war, they would evict the gentile family living in it and let us use it.

We wanted to remain together, so someone had to go apartment hunting; I was elected. After hours of searching, I finally found the place that would become our home for the next few months. It was a mansion off one of the main roads, next to a grove of pine trees. I rushed back to the police station to claim it, hoping that it had indeed belonged to Jews before the war. A family named Weintraub, may their blood be avenged, had in fact been its previous owners. The police had me sign a document stating that we would vacate the premises if the owners ever returned, which I signed gladly. *Halevai! If only they* would *return and reclaim their home*, I thought.

The police kept their word. They evicted the gentiles who had appropriated the house and we moved in. The next morning we received a giant care package from the Joint, with everything we could possibly need: mattresses and linens, towels, pots and pans and food staples. (The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee – the JDC, founded in 1914, sponsors relief and rescue programs for Jews worldwide.) It was as if the sky had opened up.

Every day brought new concentration camp survivors into town, all of whom were desperately searching for family members. We "grilled" each other for word of parents and siblings, and the response was always the same. "No one survived. They went to the ovens and gas chambers. Just be happy that some of your family survived along with you."

One Shabbos morning, the bell rang at seven-fifteen. My room was on the second floor, with a window overlooking the street. I looked out the window and saw two beggars standing at the door looking for a handout. I went downstairs to the kitchen and cut two big slices of cake for them. I opened the door only partially and handed them the cake. I was afraid to open it all the way because it was known that beggars carried lice. I closed the door quickly, but the "beggars" had taken a good look at me. The bell rang again, insistently. I opened the door. It was the same pair.

"Don't you recognize me?" one of them said. "I am your brother, Yisroel."

"Sruly?" I hadn't recognized him at all!

I opened the door all the way, never mind the lice, never mind the smell, it was my brother! The great joy I felt then is indescribable. He had no hair, his clothing was in tatters, he was a ghost of his former self - a ghost from Auschwitz - but he was alive and that was all that mattered. Sruly looked around at the neat kitchen, at the long wooden table decked with an embroidered white tablecloth and set for Shabbos, inhaled the delightful smell of the *cholent* bubbling away on the stove, and he couldn't believe any of it. He wanted to sit right down and talk, to relate his experiences, to tell me of all the miracles he had been granted. I wanted desperately to hear his story, but it was getting late and I told him I didn't want to miss the *davening* in shul.

"Shul? There's still a shul left?" he asked.

"Oh yes," I told him, "there's a shul, and Jews and even rabbis." I told him that the Vizhnitzer Rebbe had survived and was living nearby. But Sruly wasn't interested in going to shul with me. It was only when I told him that he'd meet other survivors that he agreed to accompany me. I waited while he cleaned up and dressed him in one of my newly acquired suits and a fresh shirt.

After the davening, I introduced Sruly to the Vizhnitzer Rebbe. The Rebbe had known my brother, Pinchas, very well back in Hungary and was very happy to see Sruly. He spoke to him for a long time and Sruly was deeply gratified that the holy Rebbe considered him important enough to spend so much time with him. But Sruly was a confused young man. My poor brother was host to many conflicting emotions. He was burning to return to our home town and take revenge. I worked very hard at calming him down, but the fire of vengeance raged inside him, and many more months passed before it began to die down.

As time went by, Sruly opened up and I was able to gain a little insight into what he had gone through in the camps. Slowly he told me more and more, until eventually I was able to get a picture of the burden a sixteen-year-old boy had shouldered alone.

To begin with, when I had rushed out of our home after our final family gathering, in my haste to get safely hidden in Dr. Toth's home I had forgotten to take with me the bundle of clothing my mother had prepared. As I men-

tioned earlier, Mother sent Sruly after me with the package. Unfortunately, a policeman stopped him and sent him back home. When he returned home, Mother tried to convince him to go and join me at the Toths, but he refused, saying that he wanted to remain with and help his parents. Yankel, the oldest, had tried to do the same, but Mother had been very strict with him and sent him away to hide elsewhere. Sruly was the youngest and used to getting his own way, so he remained at home with Mother, Father and Pinchas. The Nazis, ably assisted by the Hungarians, had hustled them all off to the local brickyard to await transport to the extermination camps. Sruly was young, strong and quick. He joined a pack of boys who sneaked out of the brickyard and collected bread from as many bakeries as they could to feed the hundreds of Jews packed into the detention center.

The conditions in the brickyard were brutal, with only one water outlet for all those people. Try to imagine the crowding and shoving and arguments that must have resulted from forcing people to live that way. Hundreds of Jews were held in this makeshift ghetto from April 22, 1944 until the day before *Shavuos*, when they were forced into cattle cars to begin their hellish, three-day journey of no return. No food, no water, no way to sit or lie down, no way to relieve themselves. Men, women, children, old people and babies crammed into a space about the size of an ordinary room. Not everyone remained sane under those conditions. The journey itself stretched out much longer then it should have, because the train system was just not meant to cope with the amount of humanity the Nazis were shuttling from place to place. Packed cattle cars loaded with suffocating people were more often than not shunted aside while troop trains whizzed by them. Train schedules were totally out of control.

Their train finally pulled up inside the iron gates of Auschwitz on the second day of *Shavuos*. S.S. officers with rubber truncheons and snapping dogs welcomed them. The satanic Dr. Mengele, himself, sent our beloved mother off to the left without a second glance, and our father, Pinchas and Sruly to the right, to a life as temporary as the Nazis could make it.

The following morning, Sruly was determined to seek out Mother in the women's section of the camp. He asked directions of an emaciated survivor, who told Sruly to look at the smoke that was rising from a chimney on the

other side of the camp. "If your mother was sent there yesterday, my friend, then she is no more than smoke today." As they spoke, the thick, black smoke plumes rose curving and twisting into the sky. Sruly was devastated.

He was so young, just a teenager, with no one to unburden himself to, yet he had the presence of mind not to march off to tell Father what he'd just learned. Nor could he speak to Pinchas of his emotional turmoil - Pinchas had already lost his wife and children. Our beloved mother was dead and Sruly was in shock. But at least three of the family were still together. They were marched off to Buna, a separate division of Auschwitz, about five kilometers from the main camp, where they were assigned to heavy labor.

Sruly remembered one man, Lipa Kaufman, who took him under his wing and shared some survival tips with him. Lipa explained that if they would run to the kitchen right after roll call, they could help themselves to as much soup as they could carry. He swore Sruly to secrecy and the next morning he demonstrated exactly what to do. Lipa showed Sruly how to dip deep into the barrel of soup, below the watery upper layer, down to where the good stuff was. Sruly was thus able to provide Father and Pinchas with a bit of sustenance instead of watching them wither away from malnourishment. He was happy to risk his life for such an important reason, and he did so day after day, knowing full well that he would be summarily shot if he were discovered. But Father would beg Sruly to take better care of himself and not worry about his father. For the first time in his life, Sruly disobeyed Father.

While marching to work in the morning and stumbling back to camp at night, beaten and broken, Father would *daven* to Hashem, pleading with Him to end this horrible war and bring the redemption. He'd sing the words of *Tehillim* softly to himself with complete devotion, always praying for the welfare of his children wherever they were. But on August 12, 1944, Father was taken away to work on a different project far away, and Sruly was no longer able to provide him with the additional sustenance he so desperately needed in order to survive. The project lasted for only five weeks, but that was long enough to send back a walking skeleton in place of a father. Sruly fought a losing battle to save his life from that day on. Father passed away on 25 Tevet 5704, *zichrono livrachah*, relinquishing his pure soul to Heaven.

At that point Sruly almost gave up in despair, but he held on to his sanity

knowing that his brother, Pinchas the *tzaddik*, still needed him, and that thought alone kept him going. Years later, after hearing everything that Sruly went through, I'd lie in bed at night unable to sleep, thinking of my younger brother's heroism. No one ever really understood what he went through, or the true extent of the wounds to his soul.

Finally, a day came when the prisoners sensed that the Russians were nearing Auschwitz, and they even imagined that they could hear the sounds of battle in the distance. It was January 19, 1945. The S.S. officers began to fear discovery of their crimes and became anxious to hide or disguise all traces of them. They ordered the lower ranks to pull the skeletal prisoners off their flimsy cots, drag them out of the barracks and force them into an impossible march back to Germany. This came to be known as the Death March, because it was a physical impossibility for these undernourished, overworked, starving, emaciated people, in the dead of winter, to survive it.

The S.S. troops slaughtered as many prisoners as they could before they started out and the rest began the march through the snow. The suffering was intense, the cold unbearable, yet these broken creatures marched on into the bleak landscape of another European winter. Their sole nourishment was the snow on the ground.

One after another, these human wrecks collapsed at the side of the road and were "mercifully" shot. During all the confusion, Pinchas and Sruly somehow became separated and Sruly never saw Pinchas again. Pinchas died *al kiddush Hashem* and left Sruly in the black depths of despair. Indeed, Sruly thought he might never recover from this latest blow. What else did he have to live for? Father and Mother were gone, Pinchas was gone and he had no reason to believe that any of his siblings had survived the *gehinnom* he had witnessed thus far. Sruly became a walking dead man at the age of seventeen.

His friend, Bentzion Goldberger, supported him on the miserable journey, and helped to keep him alive. *Bechasdei Hashem*, the American army caught up with them and liberated them on April 23, 1945, and life began anew for this tortured soul. Like many other survivors, they were repatriated to their land of origin. The two friends, Yisrael Katz and Bentzion Goldberger, exhausted and broken, made their way to Budapest. While standing in line at a

refugee center in Budapest, waiting to claim assistance, a man named Klienberger approached Sruly and informed him that he was a lucky man. Sruly looked at him blankly, feeling at the time that luck had totally deserted him. Dying hope became a flame when the man informed him that he knew for sure that his brother Moishe Katz had survived. Sruly resolved then and there to track me down.

That was how, eventually, we came face to face on that Shabbos morning.

All during these traumatic times, I had worried that I hadn't done enough to try and save the other members of my family. My mind whirled with *if onlys* and I had begged Hashem to send at least Sruly back to me, whether I deserved it or not. If only our little brother, who looked just like Mother, would return and take his rightful place as the baby of the family once more. If we couldn't have Mother, I begged Hashem, at least give us back Sruly. And Hashem heard my prayers and sent him back to us. Broken and scarred, but in one piece and with us again. That was all that mattered. I will always cherish him. May Hashem grant him *nachas* from his beautiful family.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

# Picking Up the Pieces

MY SISTER, MANCA, IS ONE OF THE BRAVEST PEOPLE I HAVE EVER known. At the war's end, instead of returning to Ungvar with the surviving members of our family, she made it her business to track down the rumor that our brother, Louie, had survived. Through tireless investigation, she found out that Louie had been taken to the "model concentration camp" at Theresienstadt. The war was over, and without a moment's hesitation she decided to go to Theresienstadt and look for him.

This was far from an easy decision and required tremendous *mesirus nefesh*. A young woman traveling alone through Europe wasn't a good idea at the best of times, and those were not, by any stretch of the imagination, even normal times. Every railroad car in the area was packed with uncouth Russian soldiers, wild and unrestrained beyond belief. Yet Manca risked her life willingly to search for her brother. Her energy and dedication were boundless. She just wouldn't quit. Day after day she traveled, on train after train, the butt of insults and degradation, sharing space with the very people who had tried to kill us all just a short while before. Upon arrival at Theresienstadt, she found that all the prisoners whose health was precarious had been repatriated to the city where they had been arrested. That meant that Louie had been sent back to Pressburg.

Wearily retracing her steps, Manca traveled back to Pressburg in Slovakia where she continued her search, never stopping to rest, always on the move, looking for Louie. She sensed that he needed her desperately, and she was

afraid that if she didn't find him soon it would be too late. *How terrible it would be*, she thought, *if she might have saved him but didn't, just because she was too tired.* Arriving in Pressburg, she began a thorough, house-to-house search of the city. *Bechasdei Hashem*, she found him huddled in a basement deep in the ruins of the city's Jewish quarter, burning with fever and terribly sick. She didn't know whether to laugh with joy or cry with pity when she found him. How emaciated he was! His skin hung on him like an overcoat, and she knew she had no way to care for him where he was. He needed expert medical attention and he had to be removed from contact with people even sicker than he. She had to get him to Budapest somehow.

Easier said than done. Louie couldn't walk. He was as weak as an infant. He needed to be fed in small quantities and often. How on earth was she supposed to get someone in his condition all the way to Budapest on her own? For anyone but Manca, these challenges would have been insurmountable. Manca, however, let nothing stand in her way. She went to both the Joint and the Agudah offices in Pressburg. She related her story and told them how desperately she needed to take her brother to Budapest ... and help began to materialize. She was given a pile of warm, costly woolen blankets. She herself found a wagon in which he could lie down in relative comfort throughout the long journey. She bundled Louie into the wagon, made a warm nest of blankets for him and transported him to Budapest at an agonizingly slow pace, lavishing care on him as if he were a newborn child. That was our sister, Manca, taking her life into her hands, allowing nothing to stop her from carrying out the magic that was so much a part of everything she did.

Now, let me tell you what happened to my oldest brother, Yankel. He had always excelled in his studies and skipped a few grades, ending up with a *chavrusa* a few years older than he. As I mentioned earlier, when he was eighteen, Yankel was appointed *gabbai* of the yeshiva in Ungvar - no small undertaking as there were 150 boys ranging from fifteen to thirty learning there. In the evenings, he taught classes himself. Though he eventually

decided to go into business for himself and had an extremely busy schedule, he never missed giving his daily *shiur*. He was known throughout the city as a *talmid chacham*. Many were the times I'd arrive home late at night to see an exhausted Yankel, closeted in the dining room with someone who was seeking his advice.

As the war approached and traveling from place to place became much more difficult, Yankel joined the family brush-making business. When the fearsome edict of April 20, 1944 was announced, curtailing the movement of Jews and setting a curfew, our parents gathered us all together for the last time to assign hiding places. Mother wanted Yankel, as the eldest, to leave first. As I have mentioned, he protested, claiming that as the oldest he should remain behind to ensure that everything went smoothly for everyone else. Mother said that this was no time for heroics; she and Father had planned everything and there weren't going to be any loose screws if she could help it. Having no choice, Yankel gave in and left the house, going into hiding right away.

Soon afterward, he contacted a smuggler named Schreiber, who was in the business of taking refugees across the border into Slovakia. After one or two no-shows, Schreiber finally showed up and by evening on April 26, 1944, Yankel was in Slovakia. But he couldn't find a place to hide. Finally, he contacted old friends of ours, Mendel and Fraidy Feldman, who made room for him in the attic of the house where they were hiding. They were true *tzaddikim*, happily relinquishing their privacy and endangering their own safety to hide and feed him.

After some time, Yankel decided that it would be prudent to move on to a new location and somehow acquire non-Jewish identity papers. Proceeding to Kezmark in late 1944, he was discovered by the Nazis, while attempting to validate his false documents. The Nazis arrested him and took him away to a prison camp. Eventually, he was removed from that camp and placed in a cattle car going to Auschwitz.

Yankel was a true Katz, meaning that he never gave up. Crushed among all the prisoners on the train, on his way to Auschwitz, he still had hopes of surviving. He had managed to keep a small knife hidden on his person and immediately began to try to saw a hole in the wall of the car he was traveling

in. With great effort, he hacked out a hole large enough for him to squeeze through. The train was speeding down the track, which, unfortunately, was as straight as an arrow, and for a long time never slowed sufficiently for him to be able to jump.

When he finally felt the train beginning to slow down, he realized that this was his chance. It was now or never, and he gathered himself in readiness. Suddenly, he was roughly pushed aside by a man who had been a close friend of the family. The man knocked Yankel down, pushed himself through the hole and jumped from the train, leaving a heartbroken Yankel behind. This was, unfortunately, only an introduction to the total sadism and brutality he was to confront in the concentration camp – the most inhuman contrivance ever devised in the history of mankind.

In June 1945, the first postwar kosher restaurant opened its doors in Debrecin, Hungary, which was not far from Grosswardein, Romania, where we were living. My brother, Yisrael, and I were determined to go there and enjoy once again the pleasure of dining at a reputable kosher establishment. It had been such a long time since we'd had a really *geshmakeh*, proper meal and we were feeling adventurous. We arrived well before the opening, which was scheduled for 18:50, wanting to be its first customers. Besides, we were quite sure there would be a crush later on in the evening.

As we strolled down the street, a fellow dressed in rags approached us and tried to engage us in conversation. Just as I had been reluctant to get close to Sruly when he first appeared looking like a beggar, we were afraid to get too close to this man for fear of catching some disease or even just fleas. We knew, instinctively, that he was a survivor and we wondered how we could manage to get him to a hospital where he could be taken care of properly. The fellow kept right on talking, and his next words will stay with me for the rest of my life.

"Moishie! Sruly! I am your brother, Yankel." I felt no less awe than if I had been standing in front of Joseph in Egypt when he revealed himself to his brothers. Sruly and I were so overcome that we almost fainted. The man standing before us in no way resembled the brother we had known. Yankel had been aristocratic, always beautifully dressed, shirt pressed, shoes polished, well barbered. The figure facing us now was the merest wraith of

a human being. Only his smile, which I'd have recognized anywhere, was the same. His return was an amazing gift from Hashem. Thank G-d he was alive, skeleton or not! With his return, I began to hope that maybe other members of the family had survived as well.

In the meantime, the communists had marched into Romania and taken over, which meant that it was time for us to leave Grosswardein. Romania and Hungary were now both under the paw of the Russian bear, and restrictions were increasing every day. Prague seemed the logical destination for us.

The refugee committee in Grosswardein asked me to chaperone fourteen younger boys and girls who also wanted to get out and go to Prague. None of these youngsters were Czechs; they did not, in fact, possess any official identification. They were truly displaced persons, but they were all determined to get to Palestine. I agreed to be their leader and see them safely to Prague along with my family, but I anticipated trouble along the way because of the lack of papers.

We all boarded the train together, full of high spirits and good cheer. To these young people, the train ride seemed a step in the right direction. I tried not to show my anxiety, but the closer we came to the border, the faster my heart raced. The train began to slow down and the other passengers prepared their papers for the inevitable inspection. When I took out my papers, the youngsters finally realized that they were in danger. Two unsmiling border guards came through the cars, scrutinizing each and every set of papers. One checked the documents, while the other stood by to address the problems. The moment he finished checking my papers, all fourteen teenagers started talking at once, telling him they had no documents and begging his mercy. Without hesitation, the guard pointed to the door and ordered them all off the train. Over their protestations, I disembarked as well. The group told me emphatically to get back on the train as my papers were in order, but I refused. I had given my word that I would accompany them to Prague and that's what I would do.

"All right," the guard said indifferently, "you can go with them to jail."

The entire group, including me and my family, went to jail – in what was once again Czechoslovakia.

A European prison is not the most pleasant place to spend the night, and this one was no exception. It was at least heartening that we were able to stay together. Somehow, the town's small, Jewish community discovered that we were locked away in the local jail and they sent us breakfast the next morning, with enough bread, milk, fresh fruit and vegetables for all of us. I suspect that a fairly large sum of money passed hands, too, because it wasn't long before our captives told us that we were free to continue our journey. Rushing off to the station like madmen, we managed to catch the one o'clock express to Prague. We sat nervously in our seats and didn't relax for a moment until we disembarked in the Czechoslovakian capital.

In Prague, I led the group to a home for Jewish refugees and made sure they were well taken care of and settled in before I left them. The Katz entourage then proceeded to an apartment that a relative by marriage, David Klein, had received permission to occupy because he was a Czech veteran. (Terry's future husband, Reb Shalom Klein of Kosice, Slovakia, was David's brother.) The apartment belonged to Jews who had not returned from the camps, and the police dispossessed the German family living there and let us occupy it. It was a large apartment with six bedrooms, and there was plenty of room for all the Kleins and all the Katzes.

Food was a problem due to rationing, but my brother, Louie, who had by now regained his health, *baruch Hashem*, knew how to get things done. Every morning he would pay a visit to the local bakery and return with a big basket of rolls, which sustained us all day. I still don't know he did it. Another miracle! Refugees had the right to unlimited beer, too. We lived nicely on rolls and beer for several months.

Not all of us had identity documents, however, and without papers we weren't going anywhere. This was my first priority. With great effort and after many trips to the Ministry of Education, we were able to track down Mr. Thomas, a former public school teacher of ours, who could vouch for us. He lived about an hour-and-a-half train ride from Prague and when I arrived, he welcomed me warmly. He wanted to hear all about what had transpired since he last saw us and was most upset to learn of all the Jews of

Ungvar had suffered. Living in a small village had cut him off totally. He quickly filled out all the required documents attesting to the fact that we had all been his students. This enabled us to receive Czech citizenship papers and passports, which would allow us to travel freely – within the communist satellite countries that is. Still, with a valid passport, we had hopes of finding an opportunity to leave.

Anti-Semitism, which had gone undercover, so to speak, right after the war, was raising its head again, especially in Poland. Consequently, Polish survivors by the thousands were fleeing to Czechoslovakia. Most of them hoped to emigrate from there to Palestine, and the Czech government gave them temporary sanctuary, even without papers. One morning after *minyan*, the Rav called me over for a talk. He wanted to know if I could help in the huge rescue effort that was needed to help our displaced brethren that were flooding into the country.

Naturally, I answered in the affirmative, and I soon threw myself into the ocean of work just waiting for an unattached young fellow like me. We needed to feed all these displaced survivors, find sleeping quarters for them and provide them with temporary documents. It was desperate work, keeping up with the enormous daily influx. The war was over, but *Yidden* were on the run again.

Not only were the refugees at our door at all hours of the day and night, the police were on our backs as well. They wanted to know how much longer all these refugees would be streaming through. At one point, a group of Jewish soldiers in the British army responded to our request for help and supplied us with truckloads of food. We sent off forty people with them when they returned to Palestine. We worked around the clock for months on end. The Czech government was more than helpful, and the refugees owe a tremendous debt to those officials for facilitating our efforts. Many of the top echelon posts in the post-war civil service were now held by Jews who had survived. They knew what the refugees had been through and they did whatever they could to help. This cooperation ceased eventually when most of the Jews who had held influential positions in the Czech government were fired by the communists, accused of treason and hung, may Hashem avenge their blood.

Eventually, we were able to cope with the flood of refugees in Prague and send them onward. Our next task was rescuing those who had been arrested for black-market activities, a natural outgrowth of the weak economy. The former mayor of Unvgar, Louie Galan, always a friend, had good connections and helped us secure the release of many prisoners on condition that they agree to leave the country immediately. This would solve the problem, but it raised another one in its stead: Where would we send them? Germany, France and Italy accepted some refugees, but there were many who had nowhere to go. We tried to get them into Palestine. In the end, most of my time in Prague was spent getting fellow *Yidden* out of prison.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

# Refugees

IN DECEMBER 1945, WE RECEIVED A LETTER FROM OUR brother, Joe, inviting us all to come live with him in Paris. We applied for passports and visas, but the Czech Foreign Office wasn't about to supply us with any sort of document that would permit us to enter a Western country. We took a chance, though, and traveled without proper papers. At the French border, the guard told us our papers were useless. I showed him Joe's invitation and, for reasons that can only be attributed to *siyatta diShmaya*, he let us proceed.

Joe had escaped via Switzerland well before the Nazis invaded Hungary and eventually made his way to Paris. He was by now a well-established businessman. He opened his apartment to us all, making us feel welcome in every way. He was overjoyed at being able to share his home and all that he owned with us, his siblings. There was nothing he wouldn't do for us. His apartment was fairly small, but the excitement of being together again was contagious and he managed to fit us all in cheerfully. Joe decided I must learn to speak French as soon as possible and two days later enrolled me in a language school. With two hours of formal study a day, it didn't take me long to pick up the language and I acclimated quickly.

Fairly soon after I arrived in Paris, my concern for the refugees found another outlet. For a while after the war, the Russians released Polish citizens who wanted to leave Russia, and many took advantage of this policy before the Iron Curtain shut down entirely. Now a sudden flow of Polish refugees

arrived in Paris. One morning the Paris rescue committee informed me that a trainload of Jews would be arriving from Siberia the following morning at ten o'clock and asked if I would be available to meet them at the station and help them get settled. I couldn't sleep all night from sheer excitement. I would be organizing an entire operation all by myself and the thought of helping all those people gave me tremendous satisfaction.

Early in the morning I waited for them at the train station, and my heart beat with joy as I watched their train pulling in. I greeted them warmly, making sure that everyone kept together, and accompanied them to their assigned living quarters. They were anxious and bewildered, looking around at the bustle of Paris with trepidation. It was deeply satisfying to know that it was no longer I who needed to be helped but that I was now able to help others. As in Prague, I became deeply involved in relief and rescue work.

Among the newly arrived refugees, I discovered a group of twenty-five from Yavarov, my father's home town. I considered it a privilege to assist them, and from the beginning involved myself in settling them in. It took me two full days of running around to place everyone in the hotels and rooms I had rented for them in my neighborhood. Then, when everyone was settled satisfactorily and they all had a place to call home, I went to the Joint and Agudah to ask for assistance. These two organizations, working together, provided help in abundance. They sent beds, blankets and endless sacks of provisions with an open hand. Whatever was still lacking, I paid for myself. I had been working for my brother for a while and had some money in my pocket, which I spent gladly on things the refugees needed. No task was too big or too small; from making dentist's appointments to finding a *minyan*, I was just so happy to be able to help them. There was a huge shul nearby that had stood empty all during the occupation. Now it showed signs of life once more. There was always someone there: a couple of men learning, someone *davening* in a corner, assorted *minyanim*, and even an elderly Jew or two napping in the coffee room. Paris was starting to come out of the deep freeze of wartime.

The group from Yavarov thought of themselves as one family. They wanted to eat all three Shabbos meals together. I respected that desire and bought pots large enough to cook for such a crowd. I made a giant potato *kugel* and

gave my best shot to making a *cholent*. My good intentions, however, ran afoul of my inexperience. The first Shabbos, I put far too much seasoning in the *cholent*, but the crowd ate it anyway. The following week, I adjusted the seasoning and this time it was really delicious. As long as they were in Paris, I cooked the Friday night and Shabbos morning meals for the whole crowd. Those *Shabbosos* are among my fondest memories. The women all lit candles, the men sang *zemiros* with such joy, thanking Hashem for saving them from both the Nazis, *yemach shemam*, and from Russian tyranny as well.

In a few months, one by one, the refugees eventually moved on, leaving me behind in Paris. Some moved to Palestine, some to South America, others to Canada and some even settled permanently in France. It brought me great joy to know that I had helped them start their new lives.

One morning, I received a telegram saying that one of my cousins, a Rebbe, was due in Paris the next day with twenty students. He was coming from Prague and wanted me to meet them at the station and find lodging for them all. The Rebbe had opened his yeshiva in Hungary after the war and his students were mostly orphans. It was the first European yeshiva to be rebuilt after the war. Again, I was happy to have a brand new project to focus on. I was at the station long before the train pulled in and greeted the Rebbe as soon as he appeared. We then watched his students leave the train one by one and gather around us. But someone was missing! I turned to my cousin and asked, "Where is the Rebbetzin?"

"Now is not the time for this discussion," he said, giving me a sharp look out of his clear brown eyes. "Let's get the *bachurim* to their quarters first, then I'll tell you everything."

The next day I went to visit the Rebbe. I had arranged for him to stay in a house that had formerly belonged to a Jew. He invited me in and we sat down in a book-lined study with *sefarim* on every wall. I expected to hear a simple explanation on the whereabouts of the Rebbetzin, maybe a temporary problem with her papers. The Rebbe, however, spoke of a far graver concern.

"You see, Moishe Ber," he began, "we have a major problem on our hands. There are influential people in Prague, people with connections in the government who are, for some reason, determined that the Rebbetzin not leave the country. There are a lot of politics involved," he continued, and he himself didn't know why this one particular family, let's call them the Weinsteins, was so against the Rebbetzin leaving. All the Rebbe knew was that these people had put stumbling blocks in her path at every turn. "Maybe they're angry at me for something I did," he said, "and this is the way they're punishing me. Whatever the reason," he said pinning me to my chair with his gaze, "something has to be done."

I sat there hoping he wasn't going to suggest what I thought he was.

"Moishe Ber," he said, "you have to go back to Prague and get her out!"

"But Rebbe," I said, "you yourself said that you don't know why they're doing this. If you don't know, how on earth am I supposed to find out?"

"Moishe," he answered, "why is not important. You know who they are. I have confidence in your ability to solve my problem. It may not be easy, but I'm sure you'll be able to convince the Weinsteins to let her go." He said this in his quiet voice, a little smile playing on his lips to conceal his concern. No, it wouldn't be easy. With the communists in charge, who knew how much longer it would even be possible to get in and out of Prague freely?

"Moishe Ber, this trip is so important to me, that I'm promising you *olam haba*, an assured place in the Next World, if you do this. Besides, my wife is in danger and we must do something. Do you accept this mission?"

I accepted. He thanked me with tears in his eyes. He knew very well what he was asking. I would now have to return to Eastern Europe, an extremely dangerous undertaking. I told him that I would leave on the first train the next day. "Tomorrow may be too late," he said. "You must leave tonight." I refused. Knowing Prague as I did, I knew what it took to get anything done there. It took money. Bribes were a way of life there, and there was no way around that except money. If I hoped to accomplish anything at all, I'd need to raise a considerable sum of cash before I left. The Rebbe understood and conceded that I should leave on the morning train. He thanked me again and promised me the World to Come in tones of the deepest emotion. I went home, prepared the documents I would need to cross several borders and

made various other arrangements, not the least of which was getting together as much money as I could.

The first express train to Prague left exactly at 6:00 the next morning. As the beautiful countryside flashed past my window, I concentrated on forming a battle plan. I knew that many of my relatives and acquaintances who had been in Prague had since moved on, reducing the number of "connections" I could count on and making it very hard to plan ahead. It was going to take a lot of ingenuity to placate the powerful people who were working against the Rebbetzin. I wondered what the Rebbetzin could possibly have done to upset them so much.

The train made a few stops in different cities. Passengers disembarked and others boarded and the train moved on. It was strange, indeed, to be moving through Europe without having to worry about patrols of soldiers coming through to seek you out and deliver you to jail. In the late afternoon, I arrived in Prague. The city seemed to have changed little since I had left. The palace still stood proudly on top of the mountain and the bridge still gracefully spanned the Charles River. I made my way from the main terminal to a hotel near, but not in, the Jewish community, preferring to keep my interaction with old acquaintances to a minimum. It seemed best not to invite questions.

That night I visited the Rebbetzin at the apartment where she was staying. She told me that she had had a disagreement with someone, and in the heat of the argument that person had promised that the Rebbetzin would never leave Prague. She had lost all hope by now, so I decided not to tell her why I had come, afraid that I might fail. Nevertheless, I was determined to carry out the present mission at all costs.

The first thing I did was to ascertain where and in which *minyan* the Weinsteins *davened*. The next morning, I entered their shul with my *tefillin* and walked down to a central seat. I fully expected to attract attention in my obviously French clothes, and I figured that the Weinsteins were probably the type of people who would be interested in making the acquaintance of someone like me. This was essential to my plan. When the service was over, the men gathered around a table to down a piece of herring and a bite of cake before dashing off to work. The questioning began almost immediately.

"*Shalom aleichem. Nu*, what brings you to Prague?"

"Oh, I have a few business matters to arrange," I answered as vaguely as possible.

"Where do you live?" they tried again.

"Partly in Paris, partly in Rome. I travel a lot," I said.

In the meantime I kept my eye on Mr. Weinstein. He'd rolled up his *tefillin* and folded his *tallis* and was inching slowly over to the table. Finally, he sat down and asked me bluntly, "What's your name?" I told him. Knowing he was from Poland originally, I added that my family came from Poland. The questions followed thick and fast.

"Oh, you're from Poland. Do you know so and so?"

"Well, I never really lived there."

I sensed that Weinstein was beginning to warm up to me, and sure enough, he invited me to come and have breakfast with him at his hotel and meet the rest of his family. I accepted. His wife, two sons and a daughter greeted me. Breakfast consisted of a fresh, giant herring, some bread and tea. My stomach, accustomed by now to well-cooked French food, turned over at the sight of the lifeless fish awaiting mastication by all the hungry Weinsteins. I declined with thanks, blaming a special salt-free diet, but I did take a cup of tea. All during the meal they kept trying to find out the reason I had come to Prague. Finally, I admitted that I had come to see some Polish people.

"Well, who are they?" they asked.

"Oh, you wouldn't know them," I replied truthfully, thinking to myself that since they were figments of my imagination, they couldn't possibly know them.

"What exactly is your business?" they continued to press.

"I help people reach the places they need to go, like Palestine and South America."

"What about the United States," they asked.

"I can't help with that," I answered.

"Why? Is it so difficult to get visas for the United States?"

"Yes."

"OK. How about Venezuela?" the older boy asked.

"That can be arranged," I replied.

"We need four visas to Venezuela as soon as possible."

"All right," I heard myself saying. "I can get them for you by tonight." I didn't know how I'd do it, but come what may, I was going to do it.

I returned that evening with four tourist visas - visas that permitted landing in Venezuela but did not permit entry into the country without other supporting documents. I gave the precious papers to Mr. Weinstein.

"How much money do you want?" Weinstein asked me.

"No charge," I said. "I don't do things like this for money. Helping refugees is my business and that means saving people's lives. You can't put a price on that. Besides, I have an income and can afford to do good deeds." I noticed that Weinstein's eyes lit up when he heard that.

"If that's the case," Weinstein said, "we could use a few more Venezuelan visas."

I looked him straight in the eye and said, "I don't have an unlimited supply, but I can get you a few more." I brought them four more visas later that day, and it was that, I think, that cemented our "friendship." The next thing I knew, they were offering me a job.

"Why not become our man in Paris? We'll send you money, you get the things we need, documents, coffee, whatever." I agreed to the arrangement. The next day I told them about a couple I knew who needed to get into France and couldn't get the necessary papers. I stressed the fact that it was two people to prevent them guessing the papers were for the Rebbetzin. Until this very day, I don't know exactly what they had against her. In any case, Weinstein saw to it that I received French entry permits the following day. Without explaining why, I managed to get the Rebbetzin to a photo shop to take some passport pictures. Not only did I not want to raise her hopes in vain, but I didn't want her to pass the news on to her friends, because if it leaked, the Weinsteins would know about it.

The train for Paris was due to depart at 21:00 in the evening. At 20:15 I pulled up in a taxi outside the Rebbetzin's apartment house. I told her to get her things together because we were going to leave on the next train to Paris and we had very little time. Fortunately, she was prepared for this eventuality and had her things packed in one small valise. We reached the station at 20:55 and boarded the train with only five minutes to spare.

In anticipation of the border crossing into Germany an hour later, I suggested that she appear to be sleeping. Wrapping herself in a blanket and placing a kerchief over her face, she settled back in her seat and remained motionless. When the border guards came through the train to inspect papers and question passengers, I asked them not to wake "my mother" as she wasn't feeling well. They let her "sleep" in peace and I was able to deliver his Rebbetzin to a most grateful Rebbe in Paris. The Rebbe showered me with blessings.

It may be of some interest to round out my cousin's story at this point. The Rebbe stayed in Paris for a few years and later moved to America, where we were already living. My brother, Sruly, met him at the port in Mobile, Alabama, and took him to New York. My Uncle Joseph bought him a house on West 84th street near Riverside Drive, which he converted into a shul that drew many people to his side for advice and real *Yiddishe* warmth. The Rebbe had been "lucky" during the war. Instead of being sent to Auschwitz with the millions of other victims, he had been sent on that by now well-publicized transport of about 3,000 Hungarian Jews that wound up in Vienna instead. Most of the people on that transport survived the war and many of them went back home to Hungary to find out what had happened to their belongings.

The group that traveled back to the Rebbe's hometown discovered that his precious library containing thousands of ancient and even rare *sefarim* had survived intact and was waiting for him to retrieve it. The Rebbe was thunderstruck at this *hashgacha pratis* and with great joy had it shipped first to Paris, and then to America when he left Europe. It was while browsing through his collection in New York one day that I happened to come upon a copy of the *Chasam Sofer* that my brother, Pinchas, had given the Rebbe for a wedding present. It had an inscription written by Pinchas himself and was the only memento of Pinchas in existence. I most desperately wished to have that *sefer.* The Rebbe was not at all happy about parting with the gift he'd received from Pinchas and said that I could take any other *sefer* I wanted from the library. I reminded him of his many promises to me.

"You're right," he said, "a promise is a promise. Take the *sefer.*" This

was our sole connection to Pinchas and I felt I had to insist. Just recently, I gave this *sefer* to my grandson, Pinchas Zev Czermak, who has the privilege of maintaining this link with the past. The *sefer* holds a very special place in his heart.

The Rebbetzin passed away a short while ago and I was shocked to find myself named a beneficiary in her will. She graciously left me a silver *esrog* box, carrying on the long tradition of exchanging gifts that exists between our two families. May her memory be a blessing for her family and the entire nation.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

# On the Move Again

ALTHOUGH PARIS' JEWISH COMMUNITY WAS BEGINNING TO renew itself – there was a Yiddish theater, daily and weekly newspapers, kosher butcher shops and bakeries, clubs and many shuls – its religious atmosphere was going steadily downhill. Our eldest brother, Yankel, had decided to join Joe in business and had just been introduced to his future wife, the lovely Miriam Grunfeld. They settled down in Paris and only later followed us to America with their three children. They had a fourth child, a boy, in the United States and lived near us.

Yankel ended up in the nursing home business, but he still spent from two to six hours a day learning. His greatest pleasure was sitting with a *sefer* in his hands and learning Torah. He eventually became the vice president of the Viener yeshiva and a close adviser to the Rebbe. He was always a fine example to us all. He passed away at the age of 90, and is survived by his wife and children. We all miss our oldest brother and remember him fondly. May his memory be a blessing to all of us.

Life was beginning to return to normal, but my older brothers realized that Paris was not the ideal place for us to be. They saw, clearly, that we needed the nurturing of a religious environment. Their first step in this direction was to send my brothers and I to the United States to learn at Yeshiva Torah Vodaath in Brooklyn. We set sail on or about February 6, 1947 aboard a Danish freighter named *Train Marks*. I remember the gratitude all Jews felt at the time toward the Danes for their protection of our people against the

Nazis during the war, and that's why we wanted to travel on a Danish ship. There were only twelve passengers, the legal maximum permitted without a doctor on board. It was midwinter, the weather was terrible, the water choppy, and we were seasick for most of our two weeks on board. Yet we were so happy to wave goodbye to Europe that we didn't mind.

At night, I'd stroll about the deck and gaze up at the majestic expanse of the sky, studded with millions of sparkling stars. It brought home how small and alone we were, there, in the middle of the vast ocean. Hashem was up there looking down at us and smiling. Only He knew what was in store for us; we could only wonder. The two weeks of the trip passed ever so slowly, but at last we spied the American coastline and soon passed under the imposing Statue of Liberty, holding her torch aloft in the midnight sky. It was a sight we will treasure forever.

We were still traveling on our temporary Czech passports, which had actually expired, so we were directed to Ellis Island, the main receiving center for immigrants. How many tears had been shed on the rough floors of the great hall, how many pleas and supplications had been denied, we didn't know. We only knew that this was our gateway to freedom. Nevertheless, we were stranded on Ellis Island for several days. We had docked on Shabbos and spent a subdued Shabbos on the ship. Sunday passed in a haze of helplessness, because it was the gentile Sabbath. Monday turned out to be Washington's birthday – a national holiday – and no one came to work. We were stranded in the empty hall. Knowing that freedom was just around the corner made it that much harder to contain our impatience and we were sorely tempted to just break out and run away.

At last it was Tuesday. The reception hall came alive with the voices of refugees, sailors, clerks, secretaries - the beautiful cacophony of normal, peacetime, official business being transacted. Louie Galan, ex-mayor of Ungvar and our friend, was already in the United States and somehow had heard about our predicament. He went to the Czech consul and obtained passport extensions for all three of us and we were released the same afternoon. An uncle of ours, who had also arrived before us met us at the dock and took us to the yeshiva in Williamsburg. The yeshiva had signed affidavits guaranteeing that we would be provided with food, shelter and clothing, and wouldn't

"become a burden on the country." We would have to report to the Department of Immigration every three months to update our temporary residence permits. The only way we could remain in the United States permanently was by joining the army or marrying an American citizen, but more about that later.

While I was still in France, I'd met the Turkeh Rav again. He never forgot that my sister, Terry, had been instrumental in releasing him from prison in Ungvar, and our family and his family became very close. One Shabbos the Rav introduced me to Mr. Elia Pollak, an American citizen who happened to be in Paris for business reasons. Mr. Pollak and I found we had a lot in common and spent some time together. At the end of his stay, he gave me his phone number and address in the States and told me to look him up when I arrived there, a request I was more then happy to comply with. As a matter of fact, I called him almost as soon as we were settled in the yeshiva. He welcomed me warmly and evinced a touching concern about my lodgings and acclimatization. He invited me to join them at the *seudah shelishis* of his father, Reb Moshe Chaim Pollak on Bedford Ave, where many young people gathered together every week to sing *zemiros* and speak of a world now burned to ashes.

I was more than happy to accept his invitation and it was there that I met his niece, later to become my first wife, Leah Rosenfeld, *a"h*. Her parents, Reb Shlomo and Genendel Rosenfeld, were two of the nicest people I had ever met. Later I walked Leah home along Bedford Avenue and to us it seemed like the most romantic boulevard in the world. The next Friday night, Reb Elia invited Sonny, Sruly and me over for the Shabbos meal and Leah and her family were there. We knew it wouldn't be long before we would become engaged. Leah was one of those people who saw past the externals and could look into a person's soul. She was able to disregard my status as a "greener," a refugee, a newcomer whose likelihood of making a living in a new country was questionable and who could barely speak the language.

When some of Leah's friends began to press me about how I planned to support a family, given the fact that I wasn't fluent in English, I asked them how much they earned per week. The girls earned between twenty-five and forty dollars a week. I made a note of this and resolved to show them what I

was capable of. Walking down Lee Avenue one day, I spotted a broom factory. I walked in and inquired whether there were any job openings. Fortunately, they asked me to show them what I could do. In a relatively short time, I had assembled a broom using less material then they normally used and had produced a larger and more efficient broom than their standard product. They hired me on the spot, and I worked for them for the next two weeks, earning a total of ninety eight dollars and change. Leah's friends were most impressed when I showed them my salary check. In those post-war, post-depression years, people tended to judge everyone on how much money he made. Leah, herself, wasn't too concerned about it, but her friends finally stopped teasing her about the "greener" she was going to marry and treated me with more respect. A week later I quit this job and began to look around for a more promising field of endeavor. So in the end, the Turkeh Rav repaid us the favor we had done for him by introducing me, in a roundabout way, to my intended bride.

The period that I devoted to learning in Yeshiva Torah Vodaath while I tried to put my life in order was a welcome change from what I had gone through during the war. It allowed me to catch up, so to speak, on my learning and it also set the tone for my future. One thing bothered me at first. Harav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, the great *mashgiach* of Torah Vodaath, felt that the European *bachurim* should learn and dorm separately from the rest of the yeshiva. I thought it was most unfair to segregate us. It later became clear to me that "Mr. Mendlowitz," as he liked to be called, had a valid pedagogical reason for his decision. He understood that we European boys were a mixed group; we had come from many different backgrounds and most of us had a different mindset from the Americans. Some of these unfortunate orphans were only in the yeshiva because they had nowhere else to go and definitely needed special attention.

One Shabbos morning I finally saw how right he was. As I walked out of our dorm on the way to shul, four of my fellow students, who were standing on the street corner, called out to me. I walked over to see what they wanted.

"Hey, Katz," one of them said to me, "we're going to Coney Island to the beach. Do you want to come with us?" I stared at them in confusion.

"How do you propose to get to Coney Island? It's miles from here."

"C'mon, Katz," they laughed, "you ever hear of the subway? It goes directly there."

That, of course, showed me how astute Mr. Mendlowitz was, and I told him so at the first opportunity. Henceforth, I tried to get as much as I could out of the time I spent at Torah Vodaath, both in the "English" classes as well as in the *shiurim*.

As one of the younger siblings in the family, I considered it my duty to receive the approval of my older siblings still in Paris before I became officially engaged. In letter after letter they urged me to wait until they arrived before making a commitment. They asked me to wait "at least until Yankel gets his visa and can get there." There was also a long delay in receiving mail from overseas in those days, and many months were thus wasted while I waited.

"*Nu*, what's taking you so long to make up your mind?" my dear Uncle Yoshi (Joseph M. Rosenberger) asked me one day. "Yes," my Aunt Bertha added, "why aren't you engaged yet?" My aunt and uncle were extremely good to us.

I explained that I wanted my family to approve of my *kallah* and was willing to wait until they arrived. My uncle was very upset and wrote to my older brothers in Paris. He begged them to allow us to become engaged right away and said that he, as our uncle, would take full responsibility. He knew the girl and guaranteed that all would be well. The next letter arrived with their *brachos* for the match. Still, I felt the need for more support. Remembering my mother's advice that if I should ever need someone to step in and take my parents' place, I should turn to the Viener Rav. That's just what I did. Rav Yonason Shteif, the Viener Dayan whom we had turned to for guidance in Hungary, lived on the same street as my future father-in-law. I went to see him and told him of my wish to marry Leah Rosenfeld.

"Moishe, give me a few days to find out about the family. I understand that you've waited a long time already, so I'll do it right away. The Rosenfelds are wonderful neighbors," he continued, "but it's worthwhile to look a little

deeper when it concerns a *shidduch*."

I tried to thank him for his concern, but he brushed off my thanks saying, "I remember your parents very well, Moishele. I spent plenty of time in their home in the 1920s and I owe them much more then I can ever repay. So thank you for giving me a chance to help you and please don't hesitate to call on me if you need anything else." Three days later I returned to his house to hear the verdict.

"Good news, Moshe Ber," he said. "I inquired about the girl and her family and heard only good things. May you have the greatest good fortune together!"

I was very happy that the Rav approved and invited him then and there to an engagement party we would be making the following week at the Rosenfeld's home. I also invited Reb Avraham Yitzchak Cohen, who was Rivka Cohen's father and had also been my *kvater*, happy that a representative from my home town could be at the *simchah*. Rav Shteif wrote a beautiful *tenai'im* for the engagement, which Reb Cohen signed as a witness, and my joy overflowed. I felt tremendous gratitude to these two special people who were there for me at this deeply emotional time and always stood by me. Although I profoundly missed my parents, they gave me strength to face the future.

The next step was planning the *chasuna*. We finally decided to get married in a civil ceremony on December 9, 1947 and the *chuppah*, the real wedding, would take place on January 18, 1948 in the Israel Manor in Brooklyn. Letters flew back and forth over the ocean as the big day approached. Was there any chance for Yankel, at least, to come? My cousin, the Hauthauser Rebbe had by then arrived from Europe and he honored us by being the *mesader kiddushin*. He and my Uncle Yoshi, who was always there at my side, ensured that the ceremony was performed as it should be. Unfortunately, my eldest brother, Yankel, didn't make it; it was too difficult at the time to get a visa for the United States.

CHAPTER TWENTY

# Earning a Living

NOW A MARRIED MAN, I LEFT THE WARM AND HAPPY CONFINES of Torah Vodaath and the wise counsel of Rabbi Mendlowitz and moved to Manhattan. Leah and I rented an apartment above the Hauthauser Rebbe's shul at 353 West 84th Street, near Riverside Drive. We lived on the top floor of the duplex, and my brothers, who moved with me, occupied the lower level. Although it wasn't exactly an ideal setup for newlyweds, Leah was a most gracious hostess to my brothers and made sure they lacked for nothing. She acted like a mother to the boys and they knew they could turn to her with their problems. Our first daughter, Chaya, was born on June 11, 1949, her sister Miriam on March 10, 1953, and last but certainly not least, Debbie arrived on March 1, 1957. They were the most beautiful family a man could wish for and I loved them with all my heart.

Along with my new responsibilities came the question of how I would support a family. The brush business was obviously my first choice. I went to see a few factories and met the wholesalers, I ordered stationery and printed catalogs, and I tried to break into the field as a salesman. I soon found that there was an enormous amount of competition in this line and the big businesses sold directly to the stores, cutting out the need for middlemen. My attention next focused on the great shortages I knew existed on the continent at that time. I still had many contacts in Europe and wrote to them asking for lists of all the commodities they lacked. They sent me orders, and I began shipping packages of food supplies and other basic items, which I was able

to buy at wholesale rates. About ten packages a week went out and four to five dollars per package came in. This netted me what was a good profit in those days for I had no expenses and almost zero overhead.

Moreover, right after the war, the European governments were not permitting transfer of foreign currency between countries as did the United States. Also, Europeans still didn't trust the banks after the disappearance of so many accounts and securities during the war. This created a financial vacuum, which I was able to move into, because people felt more secure dealing with people they knew. I was soon transferring funds for businesses and individuals around the world. (I still have the receipts for the 3,000 dollars I sent the Reichman family while they were in Tangiers.) Naturally, I tried to do what I could for my brothers in Europe at the same time. Before long I was the "man in America" for a growing exchange business, which lasted until the European banks lifted their ban on transferring funds. I had been writing checks for thousands of dollars every day and receiving commissions on them, and I ended up learning the banking business as well.

At that point, my uncle suggested that I get involved in the real estate business, at which he had been successful, and he taught me what he knew. Before long I was able to close some sizeable real estate deals on my own and had become proficient in a new line of work. Apparently, *The New York Times* thought so too, since on the morning after I concluded a really large deal, I awakened to find this headline in their financial news section: "Youngest man in the real estate business acquires building in Manhattan." The article mentioned the price I had paid for the building and a little synopsis of my war-time history. Within the year, I had resold the building at a huge profit. I was twenty-four years old, the war was over, the family was safe, I was happily married, I had acquired citizenship thanks to my marriage, and business was booming. *Baruch Hashem*, what more could a man desire!

Soon my two younger brothers were ready to leave yeshiva and needed to earn a living. Sonny also married a lovely American girl and became a citizen. Sruly served for a while in the American army, which earned him his

citizenship papers. I looked around and purchased a supermarket in the Bronx, where we could all be in business together. The services of the store manager, a union member, were part of the deal, however, his salary put a large a dent in our weekly income. He was being paid one hundred dollars a week at a time when a bag of sugar cost thirty-nine cents. We just couldn't afford him. We couldn't fire him; the union wouldn't allow it. With no choice, I contacted someone who knew someone who knew someone with some clout in the union and arranged to meet the man to discuss the situation.

Enrico Riccotti inherited the dark Italian looks of his Milanese grandfather and the physical strength of generations of laborers. The union had needed someone skilled in the language of the immigrant workers and strong enough to discourage opposition, and Enrico was perfect for the job. Enrico agreed to meet me at a coffee shop near his office. When I arrived, Marty's smelled of freshly baked knishes and my stomach reminded me that I had missed breakfast. There was a pleasant breeze from two ceiling fans revolving slowly above, and as I sat down Marty came over to take my order: a tall glass of Coca-Cola with ice. Enrico came in a few minutes later and ordered a full breakfast; on my tab of course. We chatted for a few minutes about the weather and then he started the negotiations.

"You know," he began, "the union isn't really a bad thing. I mean just look at all this from the employee's point of view. Without the union, he'd be making pennies."

"Maybe so," I countered, "but because of the union my store isn't making any money. Things can't go on this way. If you were in business, you wouldn't tolerate a situation like that. You'd throw the guy out in a second."

"So whaddya want me to do?" he asked.

"I want you to get this guy a job somewhere else," I replied, figuring that somewhere along the way I would have to make it worth Enrico's while to arrange the deal.

"Okay," he said, "I'll see what I can do." He finished his breakfast and promised to get back to me within the week.

He kept his word. The deal was that I pay the union man three hundred dollars - a colossal sum! - and close up the supermarket. Two weeks later, I should open it again under a different name. I had no idea how much of the

three hundred would go to Enrico, but as long as he arranged another job for the man somewhere else and kept him out of our store, I considered it a fair exchange. We reopened two weeks later under a different name and went on to make the operation profitable enough for all the partners to make a decent living. That was enough for me.

We closed the store on Shabbos and opened on Sundays, not a common practice in the bustling, business-oriented city of New York. Our predominantly Jewish customers were pleased to be able to replenish their shelves after Shabbos. The decision to stay closed on Shabbos, however, brought us to the attention of Police Captain Paul Murrow and his band of crooked officers. Actually, the "blue laws" in effect in those days prohibited businesses from operating on Sunday, the gentile Sabbath. These laws didn't affect most shopkeepers, who stayed open on Saturday, but they made a huge difference to us. There was no question that the Katz family would not open a store on Shabbos, but we couldn't afford to keep it closed on Sunday as well. Unfortunately, that situation necessitated my going into "partnership" with Paul Murrow, the precinct captain. Murrow would get five dollars a week from us, and he in return would ensure that nobody bothered me when I opened on Sunday mornings.

It was a satisfactory arrangement for all concerned and I learned a lot about "honest" thieves. Usually, they keep their side of the bargain. The arrangement worked smoothly until the week that Murrow went on vacation. We opened the store as usual on Sunday morning, greeting our customers with cheerful smiles. At ten o'clock I looked up to see two patrol officers from the local precinct walking into the store.

"Mr. Katz," said Officer Francis Tooley, introducing himself, "we've got a bit of a problem here. You cannot open this supermarket on Sunday any more. We've got blue laws in this state and yer violatin' them week in and week out. This cannot continue."

"Officer Tooley," I said politely, "What am I supposed to do? We're closed all day Saturday and I just can't afford to keep the store closed on Sunday as well."

"Well, sure an' that's not my problem," he replied. He walked over to the sign we had placed in the window stating that from October 15 we would be

open on Saturday nights and ripped it off the window. Turning to me, he said, "But I see that you *are* open on Saturday, too!" I tried to explain that the Sabbath begins and ends at sundown, but he wouldn't listen. Then he motioned me to follow him to the back of the store.

"Listen, Katz, for twenty bucks apiece, me and my partner'll leave and never bother you again."

*Boy, forty dollars is a lot of money. Nope! I'm not giving them that kind of money.* "Tell me, officer, do you have a warrant to remove the sign you just ripped down? Maybe you'd better just put that sign right back."

Officer Tooley's face turned red. The customers at the front of the store watched in horror as Tooley swung back his arm and punched me in the stomach. I couldn't take that lying down. I grabbed his arm and twisted it sharply to the right and then punched him in the jaw with my other hand.

"This is not Germany," I yelled at him. "You're supposed to uphold the law, not use it for your own purposes!" He tried to hit me again, but I punched right back. Naturally, he wanted to arrest me for assaulting an officer, but his fellow officer calmed him down and persuaded him to cut it short and leave. Tooley agreed to leave, but promised he'd be back. Sure enough, a few days later he returned with a summons to appear in court, not because of the fight – after all, he'd hit me first – but for violation of the blue laws of New York State. I was to appear in court in three days' time and I had no idea what to expect.

The newspapers went to town on the story. They quoted witnesses who painted me as the hero and the police as the villains. The headlines ran from "Officer's Fists Bring Grim Reminder of Hitler's Camps" to "Holocaust Survivor Protects Himself Against Police." The press, it seemed, was on my side but that would hold no weight in court. In those days, New York City had its very own Shomer Shabbos Association which did its utmost to protect and defend any Jew who was trying to keep Shabbos. A Mr. Feldman from the association was appointed to defend me, and we met beforehand to go over the story and make sure there would be no surprises at the hearing.

Curiously, the hearing was set for "United Nations Day." The judge was a distinguished looking man with the Italian name of Canelli. He sat high up on his bench and surveyed the packed court. The lawyer for the plaintiff

opened with the charge. Feldman responded for the defense, relating the entire story. He explained how the officers had tried to intimidate me into closing my store, how they had ripped down a sign, to which I had objected verbally. Then he related how they'd responded with a physical attack. As a Holocaust survivor, he said, I was particularly sensitive to such a perversion of justice and had not been able to control myself from responding in kind.

"Your honor," Feldman said in closing, "Mr. Katz is an upstanding, law-abiding citizen who is only trying to support himself honestly. Please help him do so. Thank you."

Judge Canelli then gave a little speech about respecting the rights of others and then gave me a suspended sentence. In a flash Feldman was on his feet. "Your honor," he said, "please do not sentence Mr. Katz at all; it will remain a blot on his record. He's a Sabbath-observing Jew who doesn't deserve this!"

"No, Mr. Feldman," said the judge, "I can't let him off without some sentence.

"Well then," Feldman said, "we'll demand a retrial."

"Listen," he said to me, "you look like a nice fellow and I don't know who the judge would be at a retrial, or how he would decide. That, and the fact that you are a Holocaust survivor, convinces me to let you off this time, but please just try to obey the law from now on and be a good citizen of the United States."

"Your honor, tell me exactly what you want me to do and I'll do it. Should I close up on Sunday as well as Saturday? You decide."

The judge thought a moment and replied, "I'm not so important that you have to listen to what I say. Do what you have to do, and I wish you lots of luck." We thanked the judge and went home. A few days later, Paul Murrow returned from his vacation and straightened Officer Tooley out regarding trespassing on his territory.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

# Building Anew

NEOPHYTES IN THE REAL ESTATE BUSINESS NOW, SONNY, SRULY and I purchased a building in Manhattan. Its interior, we soon realized, was in such poor condition that it violated many rules of the building code. The necessary renovations and repairs would require a huge investment, which we weren't in a position to lay out. I felt I had no choice but to do the work myself, ignoring the fact that this was totally outside of my competence and dangerous besides. I went from floor to floor very methodically, fixing whatever needed to be fixed, whether it was electrical work, plumbing or carpentry. One job, however, seemed too tough even for someone with my determination. A window on the top floor needed to be made shatterproof by inserting a special kind of strong wire netting between the layers of glass. I had no idea how to go about working with glass, and I wasn't about to lower myself down from the roof to accomplish the job, so I called in a glazier. The glazier did the job in a matter of hours and left, causing me to wonder if perhaps I had erred in not hiring professionals to do all the work.

At that point I hired a contractor to inspect the building and make sure it would meet the city's building code requirements. We began a tour of the building. While he was making his inspection on the seventh floor, I walked down the stairs. Just as I reached the landing between the sixth and fifth floors, I heard a loud curse and a shout, "Look out! Look out!" I moved close to the wall just before a heavy hammer came whizzing past my head and landed with a crash, opening up a huge crack in the marble under my

feet. Before I could catch my breath, the crack widened, and in seconds, the whole landing broke loose and fell through to the floor below, where it crashed through the next landing and carried that landing with it to the floor below. I lost my footing and began to fly through space, following the path of destruction caused by the runaway hammer. I fell three floors, with pieces of broken marble raining down around me! At the third-floor level I managed to catch hold of something solid to break my fall, and thereby saved myself from certain death.

I hung on until the fire brigade arrived and rescued me, all the while thanking Hashem for having granted me another miracle. What had I done to merit such help from Heaven? An ambulance rushed me to the hospital where I was once again interviewed by reporters and made the subject of headlines in the local newspapers. This time they said: "Tale of a Lucky Man - the Gestapo Couldn't Kill Him and Neither Could a Fall." I just thanked the One above for allowing me to survive, and I figured He was keeping me alive to make sure I carried out whatever missions He planned on sending my way in the future.

This particular building was obviously not one of my more successful purchases. I soon discovered to my chagrin that the building's superintendent was an alcoholic and could not be relied on. Having fired him, I had to look around for a new one. My uncle said he knew a man who might be suitable, and we arranged to meet and go together to interview the fellow. As I was about to leave the building to meet my uncle, I smelled smoke. It was December, and I knew that some of the residents had set up their holiday trees in the basement, electrical lights and all. Some wires must have shorted out and set the trees on fire. Once again, I unhesitatingly rushed in to fix things, not realizing that here in America people didn't try to put out fires by themselves. You're supposed to call the fire department and remove yourself as quickly as possible from a burning building.

I ran down to the smoke-filled basement, found an empty bucket and filled it with water from the sink near the laundry room. Carrying the bucket, I returned to the fire and tried to douse it, but it was now out of control. The flames were spreading toward the exit and the smoke was becoming so thick I began to cough. Dropping the bucket, I headed for the exit, but by now

I couldn't see a thing. My clothes started to scorch from the intense heat and my eyes were tearing. I remembered reading somewhere that the best thing to do in such a situation is to get down on the floor where it's cooler, because heat rises, and that's what I did. I lay down on the floor and prayed.

Meanwhile my uncle was waiting for me. He kept looking at his watch, and when it was five minutes past the time we had arranged to meet, he knew something was wrong. *Moishe is never late*, he told himself and began running as fast as he could to my building, where I had said I would be until our appointment. When he turned the corner he saw fire trucks everywhere, their hoses looped around like gigantic strands of spaghetti and he feared the worst. He ran over to the fire chief and told him he was afraid that his nephew was trapped inside the building. The firemen rushed into the building and down the stairs toward the basement, apparently the source of the billowing black clouds. They had powerful torches with them but the beams could hardly cut through the smoke. One of them stepped on me inadvertently and so they found me passed out on the floor.

When the reporters came to interview me at the hospital, they said jokingly that they would have to leave a photographer on permanent standby in the hospital in case I turned up there again. When Hashem determines that a person is to survive, there's nothing anyone can do to prevent it.

Once I was fairly well established in the real estate business, something else turned up that attracted my interest. I had met and become quite friendly with a lawyer by the name of Rabbi Jacob Griffel, one of the finest people I've ever met. He had been deeply involved in rescue work during the war and there's a book that tells his story. We worked together on a number of projects and I have extremely fond memories of him. As a lawyer, he had become involved in the oil business and he convinced me to branch out and invest in oil as well. One day he came to see me and I could tell he was upset. I knew all about the extremely dangerous missions he had undertaken for Agudas Yisroel in Turkey during the war, and I knew, too, that he had experienced much heartbreak during his life. If Rabbi Griffel was upset, that

meant he was once again a man with a mission.

"What's the matter?" I asked him.

"Moishe," he said, "Ben Gurion and his Labor Party are trying to pass a law in the Israeli Knesset to draft all Israeli girls into the army. We must prevent this at all costs!"

"Rabbi Griffel," I said, "this is too big an undertaking for me to handle."

Nevertheless, between us we found and hired a professional writer who wrote an excellent polemic explaining in detail why drafting Jewish girls into the army would destroy the character of the fledgling Jewish state. We ended up with a 100-page booklet. Rabbi Griffel asked me to accompany him to Israel to present it to Ben Gurion personally, but I couldn't accompany him. He went alone, and I don't know whether our efforts influenced Ben Gurion or not, but *baruch Hashem*, the terrible bill never became a law.

In 1956 Hungary was in turmoil again. The Hungarians attempted, unsuccessfully, to throw off Russian communist domination and the Jews were in the middle once more. Hungarians of all stripes were able to flee Hungary during the brief window of time vouchsafed them by the revolution. When it was finally over, many of these refugees found themselves in Vienna, the crossroads of Europe. They gathered daily at the American Consulate, hoping to be granted an interview with the consul himself or one of his assistants and receive emergency visas to the United States. Word came through to me that some of my cousins were stranded in Vienna, living together in one large room. I decided to go to Vienna and see what I could do for them.

They had enough to eat and they had a roof over their heads, provided by the Joint and Agudas Yisroel. The only thing they needed was someone with influence to help them get out of the country and into America. With great *siyatta diShmaya* and a healthy dose of *proteksia*, I was able to secure an appointment with the American consul. He received me cordially in his office and I showed him my credentials: letters I had brought with me bearing the approbation of influential Congressmen and the CEOs of some top financial institutions. Each of them had written a personal letter asking the

consul to assist me in any way possible. The consul was visibly impressed by my American backing and he assured me that the refugees I had named would be granted entry to the United States within a month or two. A visit to the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) in Vienna confirmed that they, too, were working toward the same goal. In the next ten weeks, almost all my relatives had been allowed into the United States. Many of these newcomers became frequent guests at the Katz home and we looked after them until they were able to stand on their own feet. We are still close with many of them until today.



My family and I had, meanwhile, moved to Far Rockaway in 1954. The only Orthodox day school in the area at the time was coeducational. It was a very good school, but it wasn't what I wanted for my children. Having no other choice, we sent our girls there. When our oldest daughter reached fifth grade, however, we came up against the birthday party syndrome: families had begun to compete in staging bigger and fancier parties for the kids. The crucial issue for me was the fact that boys and girls attended these bashes and my girls were getting too big for this. Things reached a head when my wife's brother, Avrohom Sholom, *z"l*, an educator himself, happened to be at our home one afternoon during our daughter's birthday party. He was aghast at what he saw and gave me a serious scolding. He stressed how unhealthy this environment was for the girls and suggested that perhaps I ought to see about starting a new school in the area

There were plenty of boys in the neighborhood, but not so many girls. It looked like my girls would have to commute to Brooklyn for school, but that was no reason I couldn't work toward establishing a day school for boys. The demand for it in the area was growing by the day. I passed the word that there would be a meeting at my house to discuss the need for a new school. All of seven people showed up: Sidney Glick, Yonasan Steinmetz, Louis Newman, Yiddel Klein, Bernard Lifshitz, Moshe Weinberg and Arno Rhein. Taking the floor, I introduced myself and gave a little talk about what I felt our goals should be. The bottom line, of course, was fund-raising,

and I asked each one of them to pledge a serious amount so that we could get started. All seven pledged five hundred dollars each, giving us a grand total of thirty-five hundred dollars, an impressive figure in those years.

We set to work. As in every new project, there are always detractors, people who have negative things to say about the situation and here, too, there was no dearth of people ready to badmouth me and my group. Suddenly, people were asking, "Who is this Moishe Katz who wants to make a "yeshiva" here? We ran away from Brooklyn and its yeshivos and narrow-minded people and now we've got a yeshiva being forced down our throats here. We don't want our children to sit in school twelve hours a day!"

Nevertheless, we worked all through the summer and on into the month of Elul to turn our dream into reality. By the High Holy Days, things were rapidly falling into place. On *Rosh Hashanah* afternoon, throngs of people streamed past my house off Beach Ninth Street on their way to *Tashlich*. Many people stopped me to ask questions about the day school, mostly about the curriculum. I didn't even know what a curriculum was at that point, so I answered them all with an invitation to stop by my house later to discuss it. As soon as I could, I ran over to see my friend, Hymie Cohen, who was the principal in a local public school. I told him he had ten minutes to explain to me what a curriculum is. He looked at me as if I were crazy and said that to describe a curriculum properly he would need a minimum of five hours.

"I don't need an entire curriculum," I hastened to explain, "I just need to know what the word means."

We sat together for ten minutes and he gave me a short rundown on how a curriculum worked and what I probably would like to include in "my" future school's program of studies. I raced back home in time to receive a sizeable crowd, all of whom were eager to hear exactly what our educational goals were. I informed them that our curriculum would be modeled after that of Yeshiva Torah Vodaath, my old yeshiva, as its program was the best example of a well-balanced education that I could think of. Much to my relief, that went over well. They figured that this "rebel" had a fairly good idea of what he was doing and in the meantime, I hoped, the pressure would abate.

This was the beginning of the Yeshiva of South Shore, today a thriving yeshiva complex on Long Island. An early issue was the matter of choosing a principal. The board had already rejected a number of candidates for various reasons when someone suggested Rabbi Benjamin Kamenetzky from the East New York section of Brooklyn. Sidney Glick and I went to see him and he impressed us as the perfect candidate. He accepted the position and agreed to set up the school for us. It took a few weeks because he had to move to the area with his family, but then the work began in earnest, and work it was. Rabbi Kamenetzky dedicated himself day and night to the yeshiva, with selfless commitment rarely seen in those times. His own daughters had to commute daily to Brooklyn for their schooling – a grueling trip for youngsters. In my opinion, it was due mainly to his efforts that almost the whole neighborhood eventually embraced *Yiddishkeit* and that the yeshiva became a landmark institution in the area. After all, the board members were all occupied with their own affairs and it was Rabbi Benjamin Kamenetzky that carried all the responsibility on his shoulders.

He persuaded a generous member of the community to donate a building to house the school. We started off with one grade and added a new one each year. It was a struggle to keep going, but slowly we became more and more accepted in the community. The hardest part, of course, was meeting the payroll. There was always an emergency meeting to attend, always another crisis to resolve. There were times I had to lock the office door and prevent the board members from leaving until we figured out how we would cover our monthly budget. They had elected me Chairman of the Board and I was, therefore, able to ensure that all the board members were Torah observers who understood the unique needs of our institution. We chose our teachers very carefully, too, as they would be the role models for our children. Every important decision was subject to *daas* Torah, the advice of our leading rabbis; we submitted all our questions to Harav Moshe Feinstein, Harav Yaakaov Kamenetsky and Harav Aaron Kotler, *ztz"l*. Eventually, the yeshiva was functioning fully and had grown to the point where we could now think of establishing a girls' school. Rabbi Benjamin Kamenetzky, *shlita*, retained supervision of the boys' school and asked me to take full responsibility for a girls' school. I agreed.

When a meeting was called at Hirsch's Hotel on 14th Street in Far Rockaway, about seventy people attended, a far cry from our first parlor meeting a few years before. Accepting a suggestion by Mrs. Rosylin Eichen, the crowd voted to call the new school "Torah Academy for Girls," which became known popularly as "TAG." Rabbi Eugene Jacobs was the first principal and his wife, Mrs. Malka Jacobs, ran the nursery school. When a local public school was abandoned, we applied to the city for possession and received its two buildings for our new school. We were in business.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

# Growth of a Community

SOON AFTER WE MOVED INTO OUR NEW PREMISES, WE WERE shocked to hear about the fire that devastated Yeshivas Chaim Berlin on Stone Avenue in Brooklyn. The yeshiva was now bereft of premises and could look forward to a bleak future. A delegation of the yeshiva's trustees came to see me to ask about using one of our newly acquired school buildings, and that was the start of the warm relationship I was to enjoy with their Rosh Yeshiva, Harav Yitzchak Hutner. We were happy to accede to their request, though many problems cropped up right in the beginning. There was the issue of boys and girls studying in close proximity; there was the problem of having no kitchen to prepare meals for the yeshiva boys; and there was the necessity to provide the yeshiva with equipment and furniture to replace part of what had been destroyed in the fire. First we arranged places for the boys to eat; then we tackled the other problems, one at a time.

That year on *Rosh Hashanah*, close to one hundred fifty people came from Brooklyn to be with Harav Hutner for the Holy Days. We arranged places for all of them to sleep and set up a kitchen to feed them all. Our community rallied around Harav Hutner and provided him with constant assistance. We all understood that this was a significant institution and it spoke well for us to have it in our neighborhood. During this period, I became very close to Rav Hutner. I met with him often and was delighted to be able to help him. He had a brilliant intellect and any conversation with him was stimulating. It was just a pleasure to be around him. Eventually, younger

people, like Rabbi Avraham Fruchthandler, became involved with the yeshiva and succeeded in raising funds to erect a new building on Coney Island Avenue in Brooklyn.

A day or two before Chaim Berlin was scheduled to move back to Brooklyn, Rav Hutner called and asked me to come over so we could say a proper goodbye to one another. I arrived promptly and sat down across from the Rav, waiting to hear what this holy man wanted to tell me. He began by saying that the yeshiva was ready to leave, but that he wasn't prepared to go until we had said farewell personally.

"Reb Moishe," he said, "I know you don't want to be honored for your part in saving our yeshiva, nor do you want any public recognition for the *chessed* you do. But I need to give you something in return for all the help you have given Yeshivas Chaim Berlin. Reb Moishe," he continued, "I want to give you a *brachah*. Just between you and me, a *brachah* for whatever you need."

"Rebbe," I answered, "*Baruch Hashem* I have everything a man could want: *parnassah*, health, a beautiful family. I'm very satisfied with my lot."

"Everyone needs something," he replied.

"Rebbe," I finally said, "may I be frank?"

"One hundred percent," he answered.

"There is one thing that I would truly appreciate receiving a *brachah* for."

*"Nu?"*

"Please give me a *brachah* that my *emunah* in Hashem should increase inside of me. I have *emunah*, a strong faith in Hashem, but I feel that it's not strong enough. I would appreciate it if the Rav would bless me that I may acquire total *emunah* in the *Ribbono shel Olam*."

The Rav looked at me for a long time before replying that my request was a very special one and that he wanted to make a *lechaim* to celebrate both the request and our friendship. He took out some whiskey and sponge cake and set it on the table. "Let's take a sip," he said, "and make a *lechaim*." He began humming a *niggun* and before I knew what was happening, Harav Yitzchak Hutner, Rosh Yeshivas Chaim Berlin, had me by the arm and was taking me for a dance around the room.

"That's wonderful, Reb Moishe," he finally said. "We Roshei Yeshiva

also need improvement. You are right to ask for it, and if you truly desire it and ask Hashem for it every day, you will get it. That is my *brachah*." And that was how we parted. Our friendship continued even after he moved away and there were many times he called me to discuss a particular challenge the yeshiva was facing and asked my help. I went to visit him a number of times on Coney Island Avenue, the friendship remaining strong through the years. I respected him and loved him greatly.

During the mid-1970s the PLO carried out a number of terrorist hijacks on civilian airliners. One of these attacks was simultaneously orchestrated on a number of planes, bringing them down in Jordan. The entire world looked on, waiting to see the outcome. The Jewish world was particularly agog because Harav Yitzchak Hutner, his daughter and son-in-law, Harav Yonasan David, were on one of those planes. Jewish groups pressed the Israeli government to do something. Rabbi Avraham David and Mr. Tuvia Obermeister of Yeshivas Chaim Berlin came to me to ask if there was something I could do, having somehow heard that I had connections at the United Nations. Now, the truth was that at one time I had been introduced to the president of the Green Cross, an international adjunct of the Red Cross with major connections in the Arab world. The president was an Arab of Lebanese origin and had boasted of all the hospitals his organization supported and all the good they did, so we thought it was worth a try.

We tracked him down and made an appointment with him. When I explained the situation, this humanitarian took out his personal telephone book and in front of us put in a call to the Saudi ambassador to the United Nations. The ambassador, of course, directed us to someone else, who suggested we call someone else, and so on, until we were told that Rav Yitzchak Hutner had been taken to a Jordanian hospital. That was apparently all we were going to learn for the time being. We thanked the man and left, most unhappy at having learned next to nothing. He did promise to keep us informed of any new developments, and he kept his word.

Within twenty-four hours, he called and told us that he had personally

checked with all the hospitals in Jordan and Rabbi Hutner was not in any of them. He reported that the Rabbi was still with the other hostages and, so far, the negotiations with the Palestinians had achieved nothing. The PLO was demanding millions of dollars, which, of course, none of the hostages had access to and which none of the governments involved were inclined to pay. No one wanted to set a precedent for paying off terrorists.

The hostages were still in captivity on *Yom Kippur.* I need not describe the *davening* that year on *Yom Kippur.* It was unlike any other *Yom Kippur* I have ever experienced. On *Sukkos* morning, a messenger knocked on my door as I was leaving for shul, saying that he had a message for me from my contact at the Green Cross. "The Rav was to be released that afternoon, with the rest of the captives to follow over the next few days." He also informed me that he had no hand in all this; he just wanted me to know the good news as soon as possible.

Leo Karmel and I set off on foot to Brooklyn to pass on the good news to the Rebbetzin. Our intentions were the best and we started walking, but after covering an appreciable distance, we realized we wouldn't be able to do it. We stopped off at the first taxi company we found and arranged to have a driver sent with a short, verbal message to the Rebbetzin. I told him to say, "Moishe Katz wants you to know that the Rav has been freed." After about an hour or so, he returned and reported that, though he had to employ the help of a neighbor, the Rebbetzin finally understood the message.

When it was all over, Harav Hutner called me and thanked me for my small part in attempting to end his ordeal. He invited me to an evening of celebration and thanksgiving that his students and colleagues had arranged at the yeshiva. The Rav wanted to acknowledge my help publicly that evening, but I refused to allow it. All I had done was inform the Rebbetzin a day before she would have found out anyway.



The Yeshiva of South Shore had grown, *baruch Hashem*, and the board now saw the need for a professional public relations man to polish our image in the political spheres of influence. One morning, our PR man informed

Rabbi Kamenetzky and me that he had arranged for us to be invited to a gala dinner honoring Nelson Rockefeller, governor of New York State. We were expected to attend in formal attire: tuxedos, bowties, the works. The PR man took us up to the head table and introduced us to the governor, who graciously inquired about our institution. I seized the opportunity to hand him an invitation to the yeshiva's upcoming dinner, which was to be held at the Waldorf Astoria, and the guest of honor was to be Mr. Morris Morgenstern, a well-known banker, whom the governor knew.

"Mr. Katz," he said, "if my schedule allows it, I will certainly attend your dinner."

I offered to pick him up in a limousine, but he said that would not be necessary. He assured me that he would try to come and said, "Be in touch, and I might surprise you." What tact! Gracious even in refusal.

The yeshiva wanted to honor me at this dinner for my role as a founder. I refused the honor at first, but was pressured into accepting it by Mr. Irving Bunim, that renowned man of *chessed*. In my opinion, Irving Bunim was one of the great men of our generation. Compassionate, a doer, he neglected his own business in his constant efforts to help others. He was the man behind Harav Aaron Kotler, *ztz"l*, and the moving force behind the Lakewood Yeshiva. It was difficult to refuse Mr. Bunim, and in the end I received the award.

A few years later, Torah Umesorah, the organization that established Orthodox Jewish day schools all over America, also wanted to honor me for my support. This time I had to give in to the personal request of Harav Aaron Kotler, who said he would be presenting the award and begged me not to let him down. How could I refuse a *gadol* of his stature?

Although the public school buildings we were permitted to take over for TAG couldn't have been put to better use, the city of New York must have regretted their largesse. A few years later they took TAG to court, demanding the return of the two buildings to the Board of Education. We, naturally, hired lawyers who pulled out all the stops in filing motions and pleas,

but they weren't able to convince the city to grant us even a two-year extension until our new building would be ready. With no other recourse in sight, I asked the committee to let me take over the fight and run it without interference from TAG's lawyers. They agreed and even offered the services of one of their lawyers. I refused and turned instead to my good friend Bernard Katzen, who had agreed to take the case *pro bono* and in whom I had great trust.

"Moishe," he said after going over the papers, "we're going to have to move mountains, but I think we'll be able to win this case."

We went to war. We obtained letters from every single Jewish organization we could think of. Every one of them supported our request for a temporary extension until our building would be ready. Bernard prepared a petition stating that he, Bernard Katzen, representing millions of Jewish people across New York State, was begging the judge to grant us a two-year extension. The hearing took place at one of the courthouses in downtown Manhattan. The city's lawyers were determined to win at all costs. What they couldn't understand, they claimed, was why the needs of thousands of Far Rockaway schoolchildren should be turned aside in favor of the needs of a few hundred Jewish children. The neighborhood, they said, was in desperate need of additional school buildings. Why should this small Jewish school have the exclusive use of these public buildings, they asked, when they could attend the public school together with the other children? We stood our ground and defended ourselves, explaining over and over that the needs of the Jewish kids were different from their gentile contemporaries, and that joining schools was just not an option. The court awarded us a year's extension.

That year flew by and our building was not ready. Again we went to court, this time with pictures of our almost completed new school building. We explained that we were working day and night to finish the building and that in the meantime we had nowhere else to go. The court granted us one final extension for a few months, and by that time, *baruch Hashem,* the new building on Beach Sixth Street was ready. Rabbi Moshe Weitman was the principal, and the board elected me president. My job was greatly enhanced by the good advice I received all along from my dear friend, Rabbi Amos

Bunim, a man who proves the adage, "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree." I will always value highly his friendship and loyalty.

One day, Rabbi Bunim asked me to share with him the *mitzvah* of inviting the boys of the Sh'or Yoshuv Yeshiva for Shabbos meals. Indeed, thereafter, the Bunim house became known as the House of Sh'or Yoshuv, and the Bunims hosted more than fifty boys at a sumptuous *seudah shlishis* every Shabbos. Their home has always been the exemplification of *chessed par excellence* and a role model for our community. Moreover, Rabbi Bunim is always ready to travel anywhere at the drop of a hat to be at the service of *Klal Yisroel*. His wife, Dr. Sarah Bunim, *a"h*, did no less in her *pro bono* work as a psychologist in the community. I treasure his friendship and loyalty. May Hashem be with them and all their family.

In a few years, TAG became a major school in the area and many girls came from out of town to attend. Soon the student body grew beyond the capacity of the new building and we acquired more land a block away. We were privileged to build there a beautiful, modern high-school building that was a joy to behold.

A short while before the high school building was completed, tragedy struck the Katz family. My dear wife Leah, who had been a partner in all my endeavors through the years, was hospitalized with a terrible illness. She suffered through many difficult, painful treatments, which brought her no relief, but she accepted everything with love.

The long months of her illness were the most unbearable of my life. At the end of 1996, the battle seemed to let up a bit, just enough to give us hope. To our utter devastation, she was *nifteres* on February 1, 1997, on a Shabbos, giving back her pure *neshamah* to Hashem in the manner of the great *tzaddikim* who return to Heaven on the holiest day of the week. Her funeral was on Sunday at twelve o'clock in TAG's old building. Rabbi Weitman of TAG and Rabbi Reisman of the Agudah Shul of Far Rockaway spoke, as well as my three sons-in-law.

The auditorium of TAG's new building is dedicated to my late wife Leah

bas Shlomo (Rosenfeld), and a large plaque on the wall recounts her devotion to TAG over the many years from its inception. She always stood beside me, supporting my efforts, pushing for the success of the school, never complaining when school business kept me out night after night. Her great understanding always placed the school's needs before our own. And now she was no more. May her memory always be a *zechus* and *meilitz yosher* for us, the family that loved her so much.

With the help of G-d, TAG has outgrown building after building, each new building filled to capacity not long after its erection. I have taken great pleasure in my involvement with the construction of this citadel of Torah and enjoyed watching our many students moving on and up. Some are married to *kollel* students, others to young professional men who unfailingly set aside time to learn every day. Recently, we had the pleasure of accepting the granddaughter of one of our original students. The third generation of students is now enrolled, and I am very proud and grateful to Hashem for what we have been able to accomplish.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

# My Legacy

ONE THURSDAY EVENING, MY VERY GOOD FRIEND, MOSHE Friedman, came to see me with a young rabbi, already an educator of note and someone who would go on to establish one of the finest educational institutions of his day. His name was Rabbi Shlomo Freifeld, *z"l*, and he was determined to open a yeshiva for young men who were having trouble finding their place in the mainstream yeshivos. He felt, and rightly so, that he could reach these boys and build them into upstanding young men who would be a credit to the Jewish world. The yeshiva would be called "Sh'or Yashuv" and he needed the backing of people who believed in him and would support his vision. He impressed me – so much so that my mind immediately began working on the issue of finding a building for his dream school.

It occurred to me that the Agudah Shul of Far Rockaway only used its old building in the morning, in the early evening and on Shabbos. It was the ideal location for a small yeshiva of modest needs and few students. It may be hard to believe today, but at that time Sh'or Yashuv had a student body of seven. It was already ten o'clock at night, but I called Rabbi Pinchas Kanner, president of the Agudah. I apologized to him for disturbing him at that late hour, explaining that it was an emergency. Could we come over to his house right away for a short meeting? Rabbi Kanner told us to hurry over, joking that we would find him in his pajamas. I drove over to his house with Moshe and Rabbi Freifeld, feeling a burning need to get this brand new project off the ground. The rabbi was waiting for us (in a suit and tie) and welcomed us

graciously. Rabbi Freifeld presented his plans for the yeshiva and described the need he felt it would be filling in the community. I asked Rabbi Kanner if we might have the use of the Agudah building for the yeshiva. Rabbi Kanner agreed immediately, saying, "If Moishe Katz asks for something, he deserves to have it."

There was no money, only seven good boys, so we invited them to spend Shabbos with us whenever they wanted to. It was rare for a Shabbos to go by without hosting four or five of the *bachurim*. Eventually, the yeshiva, with the assistance of people in the community, managed to purchase an old funeral home on Central Avenue in Far Rockaway. Rabbi Freifeld was jubilant about this, smiling and blessing everyone who had helped, and it was uphill from there. I only wish Rabbi Freifeld had lived to see his flourishing yeshiva today. Housed in a magnificent campus in the heart of the Jewish community, Sh'or Yashuv has developed into a community of *talmidei chachamim* and pure Jewish children who would have filled his heart with *simchah*. When I stop to think about it, I am amazed at the amount of good that one person like Rabbi Shlomo Freifeld can accomplish with will power and persistence. I'm sure that he's looking down from heaven and smiling at all his boys.

Our home became known as *the* address for parlor meetings in the Five Towns (Cedarhurst, Woodmere, Lawrence, Far Rockaway and Hewlett). My wife, Leah, was always more than happy to hostess a meeting in our home and prepared beautiful buffet tables for every occasion. One parlor meeting that stands out in my memory was the one we hosted for Harav Moshe Feinstein and his Mesivta Tifereth Yerushalayim (MTJ) on the Lower East Side. It was on a night in February and it began to snow heavily. Would people turn up? I stood at the window and watched as the first cars drove up and parked outside. There's only one Reb Moshe and people came. Oh boy, did they come! The house was soon packed with people listening to every word emanating from the great man's mouth. It was so crowded that many had to remain standing on the porch, straining to hear the Rosh Yeshiva's

words. At that parlor meeting we raised over twenty thousand dollars for MTJ, a very substantial amount in those days.

At 11:30 most people had gone and the house was a bit quieter. Reb Moshe was finally able to sit down to drink a cup of tea. My little girl, Debbie, was in the kitchen preparing a cup of tea, and I took it from her and set it down in front of Rav Feinstein. She burst into tears.

"What's wrong Debbie," I asked.

"I wanted to give the tea to the *gadol*," she sobbed.

Reb Moshe heard the commotion and wanted to know what the matter was. I explained, and the Rav was amazed that such a little girl would think of such a thing. I told Debbie that we would prepare another cup of tea for the Rosh Yeshiva and she would serve it. She put the cup of tea in his hand and he thanked her for it, turning the occasion into a moment she'd remember for the rest of her life. We hosted a parlor meeting for MTJ every year after that for several years, each time raising an extraordinary amount of money.

My daughter, Miriam, married into the Schiff family; my son-in-law, Moshe, is the nephew of Harav David Feinstein. When their first baby was born, I received a phone call at ten in the evening from the Rosh Yeshiva.

"*Du ret Moishe Feinstein*," he began. No titles, nothing. I was so shocked I couldn't open my mouth. The silence continued until the Rebbetzin came on the line. "The Rosh Yeshiva wants to talk to you," she said. "Speak!"

He returned to the phone and said he was calling to wish me "Mazel Tov" on the birth of my granddaughter. I was still speechless and couldn't even say thank you. Can you imagine! As if he had nothing to do except call me up. Such a great man. Our family will never forget the Rosh Yeshiva.

Our oldest daughter, Chaya, is married to Chaim Czermak. Their wedding day was an especially momentous occasion for me, because my father's name was Chaim and my mother was Chaya. I always knew that if I had merited having a boy we would name him Chaim; now it seemed that I was able to perpetuate my parents' memory through my descendants. This sense of connection was a great consolation to me. Chaya and Chaim have five children, may they live and be well: Aliza Rochel and Elchonon Pressman, Tammy and Meir Shlomo Schloss, Pinchas Zev who married Mindy Simon,

Shlomie who married Esther Israel, and Avi.

Miriam our second child, married Moshe Schiff. They have three children, may they live and be well: Chaya Michal and Dovid Berger, Dovid Tzvi and Bashi Weiss, and Malkie and Yossi Levine. And our youngest daughter, Debbie, married Shimy Zoimen from Chicago. They have five children, *baruch Hashem*: Chaim and Leah Willner, Yocheved and Shmuli Zilber, Yosef and Adina Cyperstein, Shlomo Dovid and Ruchama Chana. Almost all of my grandchildren are married with children of their own, thank G-d. Hashem has truly blessed me with great *nachas* from my children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren - and they are my legacy. Each and every one of them means the world to me; I love them more then I can ever begin to express.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

# From Strength to Strength

AFTER EVERY HOLOCAUST LECTURE THAT I GIVE, I OPEN UP the floor to questions and answers. There are times when the questions are particularly insightful or require a more detailed knowledge of the Holocaust than I possess. In cases such as these, I take the person's phone number and try to find the answers so that I can call them back within a day or two.

After one such lecture, a student in the audience asked how I felt about buying German-made appliances or cars. I answered this question by quoting my brother, Yisroel, with whom I entirely agree. Yisroel is a survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau and many other camps. "The Germans took everything away from the Jewish people," he would say. "They extracted the gold from our teeth, they melted down our fat and used it for soap and they made lampshades from our skin. They cut off the hair from our heads and sent it straight to Germany. What did they do with it? They used it to stuff mattresses or they sold it to German car manufacturers to pad the seats in their buses and cars. Human hair is quite good for that, you understand."

And so my friends, when you're sitting in your brand new Mercedes-Benz, you might just possibly be sitting on a seat stuffed with the hair of your uncle or your grandmother. You may think that is overly dramatic, but it's the truth!

Sometimes they ask me how I feel about traveling to Germany, a land stained with so much of our blood. I told them that the only time I went to Germany was to visit my brother, Yisroel, when he was stationed in

Nuremberg during his service with the U.S. army. He was there for two years and I made sure to visit him to let him know that we were thinking of him all the time. Yisroel always used to say that the world is in constant flux: What's up one day, is down again the day after. How ironic it was that Yisroel, who had been an inmate in German concentration camps under the tyrannical control of the S.S. fanatics, was now a cook stationed on an army base that had once been a Nazi base, a Jew giving orders to all the German workers under him. To compound the irony, it was happening in Nuremberg, the former site of huge Nazi rallies where thousands of Germans had cheered them on. Yet Yisroel never mistreated the workers under his command. I was so proud of my younger brother in his American uniform. I'm still proud of him.

Strange though it may seem now, the propaganda we grew up hearing had a devastating effect on our psyches, and it took years to free ourselves from it. The newspapers were filled daily with anti-Jewish diatribes and rife with caricatures and cartoons ridiculing the Jewish nation. Jews were depicted as elderly, hunchbacked and ugly, with beaked noses and clawed hands, forever drenched in the blood of their Aryan neighbors. The editorials, opinion pieces and radio announcements were designed, not at all subtly, to make us think of ourselves as subhuman. And make no mistake about it, we grew up feeling inferior. It was inevitable. We read and heard all this and it was totally depressing to hear constant references to Jews as swindlers, manipulators and worse.

Hermann Goebels, the Nazi in charge of propaganda, had one thing right: "If you repeat a lie often enough, people begin to think it's the truth." And that's exactly what happened to me. Sometimes I felt that I was unlucky to have been born a Jew. There were the numerous beatings I suffered on the street, the insults in school and the restrictions on our activities at every turn. Shopping, just buying groceries, was an ordeal. How lucky the gentiles were, I thought, not to have to put up with this. All this constantly weighed me down.

That feeling of fear, the desire not to be singled out, persisted all through the war and afterward. Even when I reached America, my fears continued and the dreams did not diminish. Terrible memories haunted me in my sleep. I was still prey to the feeling: what would happen to us next? Would the Americans allow us to flourish in their country or would the government turn its back on us and allow a drunken rabble to torch our homes and shatter our store windows as the German government did on Kristallnacht? Even though we were at peace, I feared for the future.

Then my brother, Yisroel, went to Belgium to marry his lovely *kallah*, Isabel. The entire family traveled to the wedding. We have a beautiful portrait of all nine of us at the wedding, smiling broadly and filled with happiness to be together on such a joyous occasion. We all still look at that photograph and derive strength from it.

Yisroel and his bride left shortly after the wedding for their honeymoon in the Holy Land. By then I had been traveling back and forth from the States to Europe fairly often on business and was there to meet the young couple when they returned to Belgium. I was understandably curious about this "Jewish country" I had yet to see and pressed them for more and more details about it.

"Moishe Ber, it's really a *Jewish* country," Yisroel told me excitedly.

"Is it true they have their own army too?"

"You bet! Soldiers with rifles," he replied, "a real army, and a navy and police force, too. It's truly amazing what they've built in a few years!"

This was on a Wednesday. I could hardly believe what I was hearing and my heart told me I just had to see it for myself. In fact, I couldn't hold myself back one second longer. I packed a bag with some essentials and took a taxi to the airport, where I tried to book passage on the next flight to Tel Aviv. Unfortunately, there were no direct flights until the following day, but they told me I could travel to Rome and catch a connecting flight that would land in Israel at midnight. That's precisely what I did, and I arrived in Tel Aviv at twelve o'clock that same evening.

Even the plane trip was a remarkably strengthening experience for me. From the stewardess, who inquired *in Hebrew* whether I'd like a cup of orange juice, to the passengers all around me singing "*Am Yisroel Chai*," I

was overcome with emotion. I actually kissed the ground of the Holy Land when we landed. What an experience! Israel was real! I traveled all over the country. Amazing sights abounded, like the driver of a large semi-trailer, a *chassidishe* Jew, who parked at the side of the road so he could wash his hands, put on his *gartel* and *daven Mincha* next to a tree.

Then there were the taxi drivers, jabbering away in Hebrew. I enjoyed the grocery stores and the yeshivos and the restaurants – chefs and storekeepers and *roshei yeshiva* who hailed from all over the world. That was when it struck me that I had actually absorbed all the lies about my nation. I became aware that I had swallowed it all and it was all propaganda, all totally untrue. We are a wonderful people and if the world had only allowed us to live unmolested, the rest of the world would know it, too.

My pride in *Klal Yisroel* was rejuvenated by that visit to Eretz Yisroel; a part of me that had been missing for so long was restored. I had arrived with a heavy burden of inherent fears and daily nightmares, but I was a different person when I left. When I arrived home, the family could see the change in me. I promised them that we would all soon be going together as a family to the Land of our People.

One afternoon I was taking care of some paper work at the Yeshiva of South Shore when I heard a commotion in the hallway outside my office. I got up to see what was going on and there was a very angry young man emerging from the bursar's office. He was shouting at the people inside and reproving them. I saw him stop at the door for a moment listening to what the person inside the room was saying, then he shouted some more, slammed the door and walked out of the building.

Slipping on my jacket, I chased after him and caught up with him in the parking lot outside the school. He was breathing hard and still red in the face from his earlier confrontation. I didn't know what had taken place but was determined to find out.

"Excuse me," I said.

"Yes," he replied without looking at me.

"Are you by any chance going to Far Rockaway and could give me a lift?"

"Sure," he said, "I'll give you a ride." As I entered his car, I waved goodbye mentally to my own car parked on the other side of the lot, knowing that I'd have to return for it later.

The man had calmed down and I introduced myself. He said he was Irving Maisel and he worked for the New York City Department of Housing. When I asked him what had brought him to South Shore, he told me that he had wanted to enroll his little boy in a religious kindergarten but that the board had turned him down when he said he couldn't afford to pay the tuition. They had told him that kindergarten was a luxury, and if he couldn't afford it, he should come back the following year, because the regular grades were subsidized. I knew that Mr. Maisel would never be coming back - not him! - his pride had been wounded.

"It isn't as if I wanted a free ride," he told me. "I'm a contractor, and I can fix just about anything in the building line. I offered them my services in lieu of payment, but they turned me down flat. They told me I should just pay tuition and they'd take care of the building." He was upset and, in my opinion, rightfully so. When he dropped me off in front of my house, I told him to give me twenty-four hours and the matter would be straightened out to his liking. He, of course, insisted that he didn't want anyone's charity.

"What charity? If you really are a contractor and I'm willing to assume that you are, then what you can do for the yeshiva is a lot more valuable than money. I know what contractors charge today for the smallest service. It would be great to have someone like you working for the yeshiva." His expression changed from one of utter dejection to one of hope.

The next day I arrived at the Maisel's home with his son, Howie's admission card in my hand, and that was the start of a deep friendship that has carried on through the years and remains rock solid. My wife invited the Maisels for the meal on the following Shabbos and we found Irving to be a true gentleman and his wife a most gracious and pleasant woman. The fact that they weren't yet religious didn't affect our friendship in the least, for I have always felt that a Jew is a Jew, no matter what point he has reached in his religious life.

The Young Israel of Far Rockaway was new on the scene and getting

organized just about then. Relying on my friendship with Irving, someone nominated him as vice president. At some point during the nomination process, however, they found out that the Maisel family had not yet reached complete observance, and they came to me to solve the problem.

Irving and I met for lunch at a deli. I figured that we'd be able to get things straightened out much better after a good meal. The conversation rambled aimlessly through the pickles, coleslaw and garlic bread, and we only came to the real issue when the waiter brought our sandwiches to the table. As we squirted ketchup and mustard over our corned beef, I revealed to him the extent of the problem. It was clear that he would have to make a decision one way or the other. Either he would remain where he was in partial observance, in which case becoming an officer of the Young Israel was out of the question, or the family would commit to Orthodoxy and he'd be welcomed with open arms. After thinking it over, the family decided to take the quantum leap into the as yet unknown world of Torah and *mitzvos*.

The way Irving accepted his religion reminded me of *Klal Yisroel's* acceptance of the Torah at Sinai: *Na'aseh venishmah*, "We will do it and then we will listen." He was willing to go the whole way, like a locomotive rolling full-speed ahead, pulling its additional cars up the mountain behind him. The family began coming to our house every week for the Shabbos meal, and we all looked forward to it the entire week. They became stronger in their faith and more committed as time went on, and I watched proudly as my friend, Irving, shouldered more and more responsibility in the community.

With Irving as its private contractor, the Yeshiva of South Shore began to look like the most expensive private school. Anything broken was immediately fixed and any problem was dealt with right away. He repaid the board many times over, working far and above what could realistically be expected of him. When South Shore held its first *melaveh malkah* for the benefit of the yeshiva, Mr. Irving Maisel organized it and took over all the preparations for the evening himself, including the catering. He is a man who doesn't waste time in idle talk; it just isn't in his nature. He believes that actions are better than words and he accomplished alone what would ordinarily take ten men to do.

In 1965 our family moved from Far Rockaway to Lawrence, making it

impractical for the Maisels to come to our home every Shabbos. We agreed that they would come once a month, on *Shabbos Mevorchim* instead. But we missed each other, and before long the Maisels bought a house about a block away from ours. Irving's son, Howie, was in the first graduating class of the yeshiva, and he and I looked back on eight years of working together as a team for the yeshiva. We also worked together for TAG, as it too was important to both of us, and Irving eventually served as its vice president. In his capacity as a building inspector for the city, he was instrumental in helping many yeshivos in Brooklyn to conform to the city building code. Either he'd make the necessary improvements himself or he sent them the right man for the job at the right price.

Eventually, the Young Israel of Far Rockaway outgrew its premises and opened a fund-raising drive for a new building. Irving was elected chairman of the drive. Money was scarce, but with his usual enthusiasm, ebullience and charm, Irving inspired everyone to reach greater heights. The campaign dragged on, however, waiting for the right push to lift it off the ground. One day he ran into the man who would spark that push. Mr. Jacob Landau was a successful businessman who was so impressed by what Irving and the Young Israel had to offer the community that he handed him a check for 25,000 dollars – a princely amount in those days.

That check, together with a number of smaller pledges, was sufficient to take the building drive into blast-off. Within a very short time, Irving pulled together a team of the best workers he knew for the project and supervised the construction personally from beginning to end. Every time I drive past Beach Ninth Street in the heart of Far Rockaway, I think of all the work he put in to make the building a reality and I tell myself, "That's the building my friend, Irving, built."

There was a feeling of euphoria in the air, a sharing in what was happening across the ocean in Eretz Yisroel. Many people in the community began thinking of *making aliyah*, going "up" to live in Israel. Wherever I went, people were talking about going themselves or about their friends and relatives who were going. My friend, Irving, felt the winds of *aliyah* in the air and, because he was a doer, took them to heart. The Maisels were moving to

Israel, and we and all his friends were filled with conflicting emotions: heartbreak at losing our dear friends and understanding the great *mitzvah* they were embarking on. Before we knew it, we were escorting them to the pier, trying to imagine what life would be like without them.

Dinah, their youngest, came over to me and asked me tearfully, "When will we ever see you again?" I promised Dinah that I would come to her wedding. Well, the years passed quickly, but we kept in close touch. Irving would stay at my house whenever he came to the States. Sure enough, the day arrived when Dinah herself called me.

"Uncle Moishe," she says, "I'm engaged, *baruch Hashem*. I hope you remember your promise."

Of course I remembered; there was no need to remind me. Yet when I checked my calendar, I saw to my dismay that her wedding day coincided with the annual electronics show in Las Vegas that was a must for me to attend for business reasons. A promise is a promise, however. I had given Dinah my word and I would keep it, even if the business had to close down for a few days. When they called out, "*Rabbi* Moishe Katz to the *chuppah* to recite a *brachah*!" I didn't move. I had never been called "Rabbi" before.

"Moishe, Moishe," Irving finally called out to me. "They mean *you*!"

What joy, what *nachas*!

On my last visit to Israel in 2004, the Maisels invited me to the annual family *seudah* they hold on *chol hamo'ed Sukkos*. What a beautiful sight greeted me when I entered their *sukkah*. All their children and grandchildren filled the *sukkah* – it was bursting at the seams. Young *kollel avreichim* in black hats and yeshiva *bachurim* in knitted *yarmulkes*, who came in from towns and *moshavim* in outlying areas; Shimy is the *menahel* of a yeshiva, Dovi manages the Magen David Adom in Jerusalem. They were learning in the Mir, in Torah Or and in Ofakim. It was on this occasion, by the way, that one of Irving's grandsons-in-law, Nachman Seltzer and I decided to collaborate on this book.

At one point, Irving put an arm around me and with the other indicated the bright kaleidoscope around us, all the observant offspring of our dear friends Irving and Helen Maisel. "They're all yours," he said to me.

May Hashem grant them *nachas* from their family without pain or sickness for many years, and may He shower them with blessings.

# Epilogue

I FEEL THAT MY DEBT IS ETERNAL TO THE TENANT FARMER and his wife who had sheltered me on Dr. Janos Toth's farm, for all they did for my brother, Sonny, and me. We made it even harder for them by eating only kosher food, but they gave us freely and willingly all the bread, fruit and eggs they could spare. By hiding us, they risked their own lives.

When my siblings and I returned to Ungvar and then left for good, we gave Stefan and his wife all the household furniture and linens we recovered from the unworthy citizens who had looted them from our old home. I could do no less. Once I was established in New York, though, I never let one of their holidays pass without sending presents to the family, and still do so. When their children married, I sent each of them full sets of bedroom, dining room and kitchen furniture. All my children's beautiful clothes enjoyed a second life with the Polyi children and grandchildren. About ten years ago, when the farmer himself had already passed away, I decided to make things easier for his elderly widow. I ordered an entire modern bathroom for her home, including fixtures, tiles for the walls and floor, and a hot-water heater. Her children are master craftsmen and they installed it all themselves.

The Polyis were the first and only family in town with indoor plumbing. Naturally, this generated a good deal of jealousy among the neighbors, and my friends came to be known as "the Jew lovers." The jealousy was so ingrained that none of the Polyi children married anyone from their town. I suppose that the financial help I gave them made it worth their while to sacrifice the friendship of their neighbors. I am still in touch with the farmer's

grandchildren, and they know they can call on me if they need anything. This is a debt that I will honor all my life.

With amazing *hashgacha pratis*, nine of the ten children in our family survived the war. That is an unbelievable *chessed* of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* and not something to be taken lightly. Some time ago, I was invited to address a gathering at City College on the subject of the Holocaust. After my talk, some of the professors who had been in the audience gathered around to talk to me. They couldn't quite believe what they had heard from me that afternoon. How was it possible for a family of ten to have sustained such a high survival rate? And furthermore, they questioned the accuracy of the picture I drew of a family of heroes. Each of my siblings had acted heroically. How could that be? Nine survivors - all heroes? Surely I was exaggerating.

No, I wasn't exaggerating in the least, I told them. Every single one of us had managed to achieve acts of what could only be called heroism, helping and saving each other and as many of our brethren as we could. But, I explained, it was easy to understand why this was so. Our behavior during the war was the direct result of our upbringing. Growing up in a home such as ours, with parents like ours, how could we not have turned out the way we did?

As children, we constantly witnessed our parents' acts of selflessness. From hosting twenty guests a night while still a *bachur* to running an entire forgery operation to provide refugees with vital documents, our father remained a beacon of light in a world gone mad. From providing for the needy throughout the week to helping to release fellow Jews from jail, our mother was an icon of *chessed* to an entire town. Father and Mother were always there for us and for their fellow Jews, and it makes perfect sense that their children would try to do the same. As we know, children learn not from what you tell them, but rather from what they see you do, and my parents carried out that axiom to perfection.

One thing above all: throughout the terrible years of the Holocaust, we all

kept Hashem at the forefront of our minds, as we had been taught. We knew that He was there with us from morning till night, always looking out for us. I clung to my half-pair of *tefillin,* Terry would not relinquish the *mezuzah* hidden in her cigarette case, and the rest of us hung on to our faith with the strongest determination. My brothers and sisters are amazing people and not only do I admire them boundlessly, but I also appreciate everything they have done for me through the years. I am proud of them all.

**Yankel**, *z"l*, born in 1913, the eldest and a recognized Torah scholar from an early age, gave *shiurim* all his life until he passed away in 2003. Although he was always successful in business, he never failed to devote several hours a day to learning Torah. He and his wife, Miriam, née Gruenfeld, moved to the United States in 1960 from Paris, where he had been in business with our brother, Joe. Yankel – I can see him now, with his boundless *emunah*, sawing through the walls of a cattle car on the way to Auschwitz, knowing that Hashem has His own plans even while ours seem to be falling apart.

**Pinchas**, *Hy"d*, born in 1914, an early pioneer in *kiruv* (outreach), married Chana Stern of Vulchovitz. He studied in the Belzer Yeshiva in Poland for many years and later learned daily with the Vizhnitzer Rebbe, Reb Chaim Meir, *zy"a*. Pinchas, whom we all admired and loved, stayed with my brother, Sruly to the end. He, his wife and their two daughters, Malka and Sheindel, were consumed in the ashes of Auschwitz. May they all have been reunited in the World to Come.

**Chana**, born in 1916, tried so hard to save our parents and was arrested for it, but, with the help of G-d, escaped and managed to keep an eye on the rest of us until we were reunited. Her concern for all her siblings was unsurpassed. Her marriage to Yisroel Lichtenstein in Orea-Mare, Romania, was the first wedding the Vizhnitzer Rebbe performed after the war. They eventually moved from Paris to New York and built a *bayis neeman beYisrael*, with children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren who follow in their footsteps of *emes* and *chessed*.

**Joe**, Yosef, born in 1918, slipped out of Hungary in time to avoid arrest in 1938 and spent the war years in Switzerland, on his own. He made his way to Paris after the war and established a business there. He generously took us all in after the war and enabled us to start new lives. He and Yankel sent

Sonny, Sruly and me to New York to yeshiva to continue the studies so abruptly halted by war. He was the perfect salve to heal our wounded souls. He later moved to the United States, married Lola Stein and raised a beautiful family, *kein yirbu.*

**Louie** (Mordechai), born in 1919, spent months on the run to avoid getting caught up in a forced labor gang. Outgoing, a doer, he escaped to Slovakia, where, living as a gentile, he provided food and assistance to countless Jews in hiding, endangering his own excellent cover without any regard for himself. He helped Manca enter Slovakia too. When he arrived at last in the United States with his wife, Claire Herman, he soon established himself in business all over again. Louie, besides raising wonderful children and grandchildren, may they live and be well, dedicated himself to preserving the memory of those slaughtered *al kiddush Hashem* in Ungvar and its environs.

**Terry**, *a"h*, born in 1920, was a true heroine of *chessed*, who as a young woman brought kosher food and moral support to prisoners and helped get the Turkeh Rav released from jail. She kept her faith while living as a gentile and even managed to evade the clutches of Eichmann himself while trying to save her siblings. She married Reb Shulem Klein, *a"h*, of Kosice, in Paris in 1946 and they settled in Montreal, Canada, where they established a house of *chessed* and raised a wonderful family.

**Manca** the businesswoman, born in 1922, dared to keep the family business running in secret as long as she could, and managed to live and work under the nose of the Nazis in Slovakia, where she tried her best to save Yankel from deportation. At the war's end she chased across half of Europe, convinced that her brother, Louie, was still alive. Finding him on the brink of death, she nursed him back to health. After the war, Manca married Akiva Menachem Pifko of Zurich and maintained an open house there, graciously receiving guests from all over the world.

My dear, wartime companion, **Sonny** (Yissachar), born in 1926, saved my life with his level head and deep *emunah* many times over in situations fraught with the utmost danger. Sonny, Sruly and I sailed together to New York in 1947 and renewed the deep commitment to *Yiddishkeit* learned at the feet of our parents in Ungvar those many months and years before. Sonny married

Marilyn Maisel of Brooklyn, and he and Sruly and I were in business together for many years. His wonderful family, children and grandchildren, reflect his many virtues.

**Sruly** (Yisroel), my baby brother, born in 1928, risked his life countless times for Father and Pinchas in the camps at the tender age of sixteen with total *mesirus nefesh*. He served in the U.S. army when he left yeshiva, and eventually married Isabelle Fixler of Antwerp. Sruly often shares the lecture platform with me to carry out our mission to tell the world about the Holocaust. The students all love him and find in him a wonderful role model.

These are my heroic siblings, who, *bechasdei Hashem*, accompanied me through the hell of wartime Europe, sometimes together and sometimes apart, but by the grace of G-d, survived to tell the tale. I love you all.



My grandparents,
Israel Chaim and Sheindel Rosenfeld in Paks, Hungary.



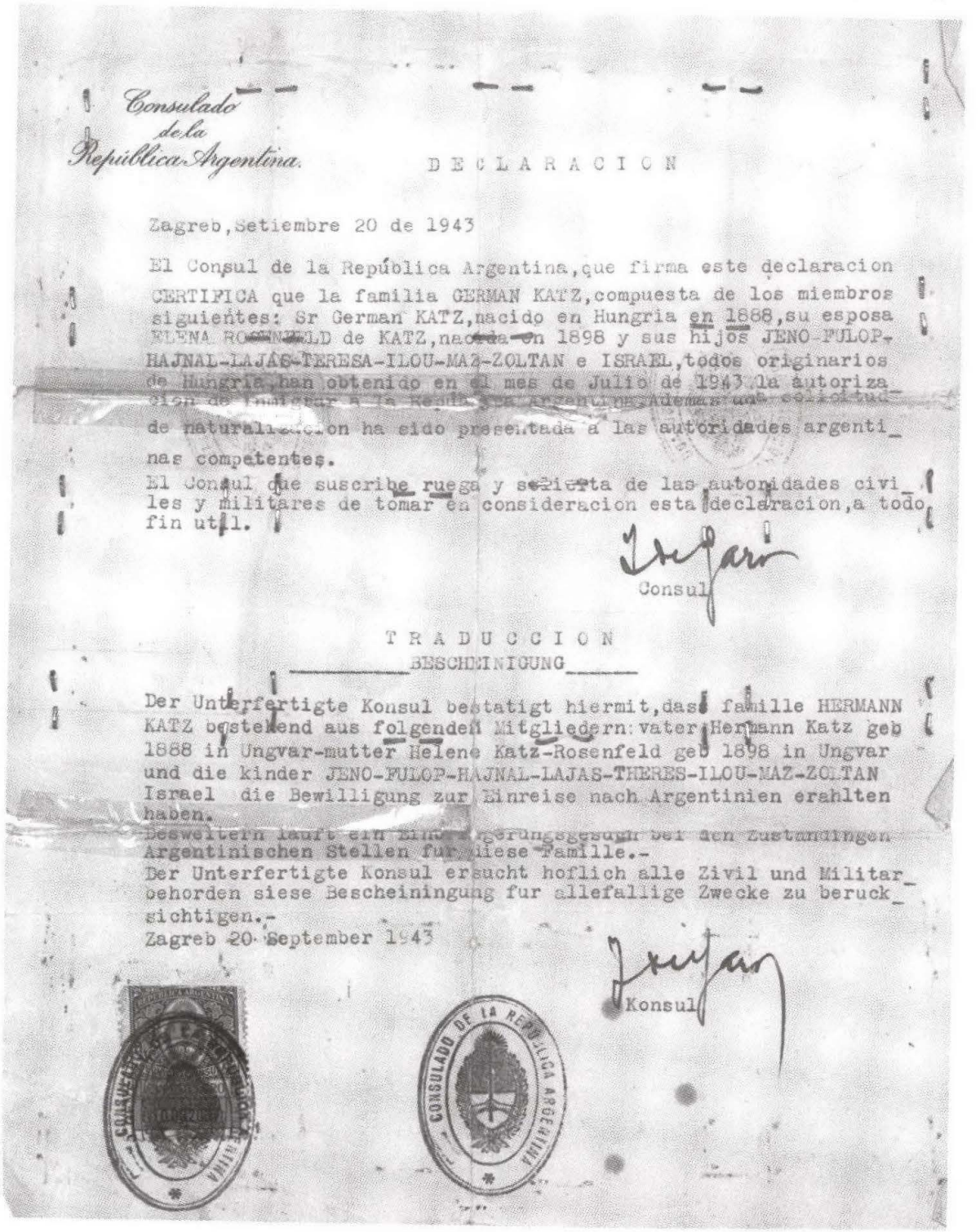
Bencion Goldberger saved my brother, Sruly, at the death march in January, 1945 evacuating Auschwitz.




The last Rabbi of Ungvar was taken to Auschwitz in June 1944.



This two page document was issued by the Consul General of Argentina dated September 23, 1943, Zagreb, Yugoslavia. It asks the civil and military authorities to help the Katz family emigrate to Argentina.



Consulado de la República Argentina.

DECLARACION

Zagreb, Setiembre 20 de 1943

El Consul de la República Argentina, que firma este declaracion CERTIFICA que la familia GERMAN KATZ, compuesta de los miembros siguientes: Sr German KATZ, nacido en Hungria en 1888, su esposa ELENA ROSENFELD de KATZ, nacida en 1898 y sus hijos JENO-FULOP-HAJNAL-LAJAS-TERESA-ILOU-MAZ-ZOLTAN e ISRAEL, todos originarios de Hungria, han obtenido en el mes de Julio de 1943 la autorizacion de inmigrar a la Republica Argentina. Ademas una solicitud de naturalizacion ha sido presentada a las autoridades argentinas competentes.

El Consul que suscribe ruega y se cierta de las autoridades civiles y militares de tomar en consideracion esta declaracion, a todo fin util.

Consul

TRADUCCION

BESCHEINIGUNG

Der Unterfertigte Konsul bestatigt hiermit, dass familie HERMANN KATZ bestehend aus folgenden Mitgliedern: vater Hermann Katz geb 1888 in Ungvar-mutter Helene Katz-Rosenfeld geb 1898 in Ungvar und die kinder JENO-FULOP-HAJNAL-LAJAS-THERES-ILOU-MAZ-ZOLTAN Israel die Bewilligung zur Einreise nach Argentinien erahlten haben.

Desweitern lauft ein Einreisegenehmigungsgesuch bei den Zustandingen Argentinischen Stellen fur diese Familie.-

Der Unterfertigte Konsul ersucht hoflich alle Zivil und Militar behorden siese Bescheiningung fur allefallige Zwecke zu beruck sichtigen.-

Zagreb 20 September 1943

Konsul

CONSULADO DE LA REPUBLICA ARGENTINA

It was secured by my brother, Joe, in Switzerland.



Summer 1945. The first Jewish wedding after the war, going to the Chupa with the Vizinitzer Rebbe R'Chaim Meir at my sister, Chana's wedding at Oredea Mare, Romania. I am at the left of the Rebbe.



My cousins. 1947 – Miriam and Devora Friedfertig arriving in Palestine – saved in a Catholic orphanage.



January,1947, Marseilles, France going to America. My brother, Yankel saying goodbye to his three brothers.



My brother's child, Malkie. The only picture of my brother Pinchas' family – all perished in the Holocaust.



1933. My brother, Sonny, *top third from left.*



1936.
My father *(right)* with
Mr. Yacov Lezer Feldman,
murdered in Auschwitz.



1938. *Left to right:*
My oldest
brother, Yankel,
Moshe, my father,
and Louie.



1944. Moshe Katz as a gentile.



1944. Sonny Katz as a policeman.



Moshe in the Russian army with a Russian soldier.



Mrs. Polyi, Moshe and Ilus (Mrs. Polyi's daughter).
1980 Visit to Budapest for Mrs. Polyi's medical treatment.

# MY RIGHTEOUS GENTILES



Mr. Stefan Polyi
Manager of the Farm



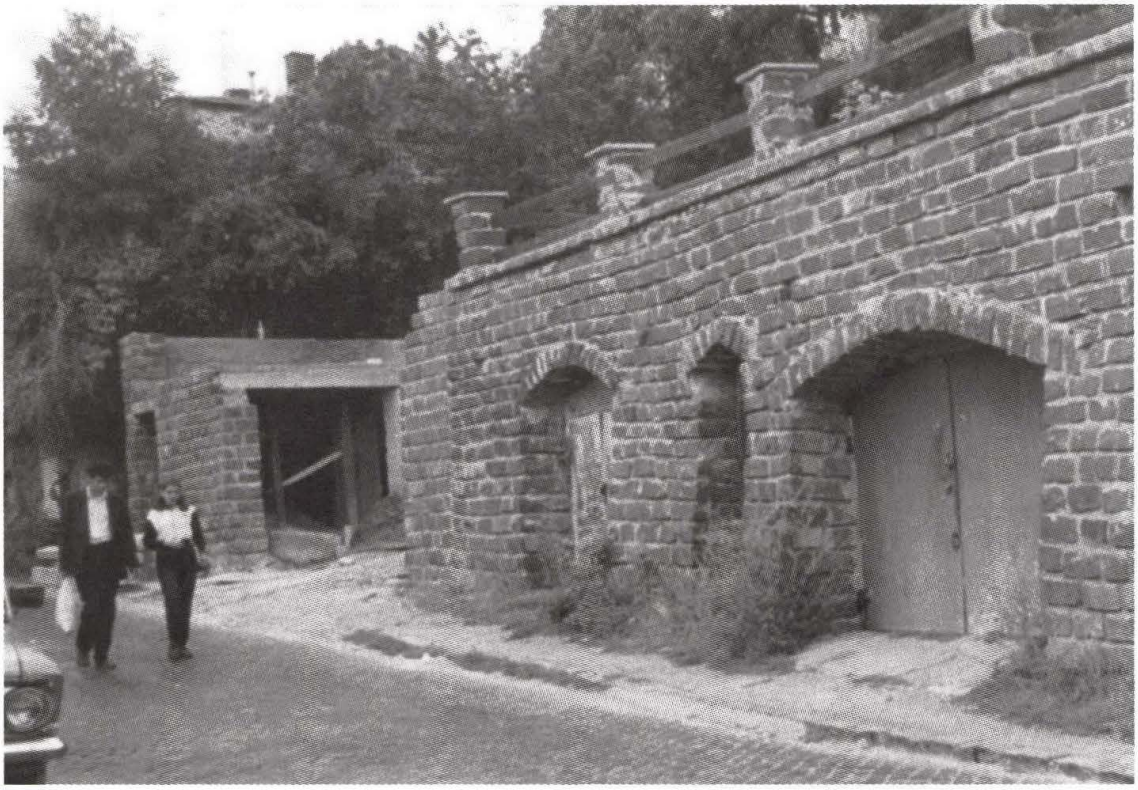
Mrs. Margita Polyi
Wife of Mr. Stefan Polyi



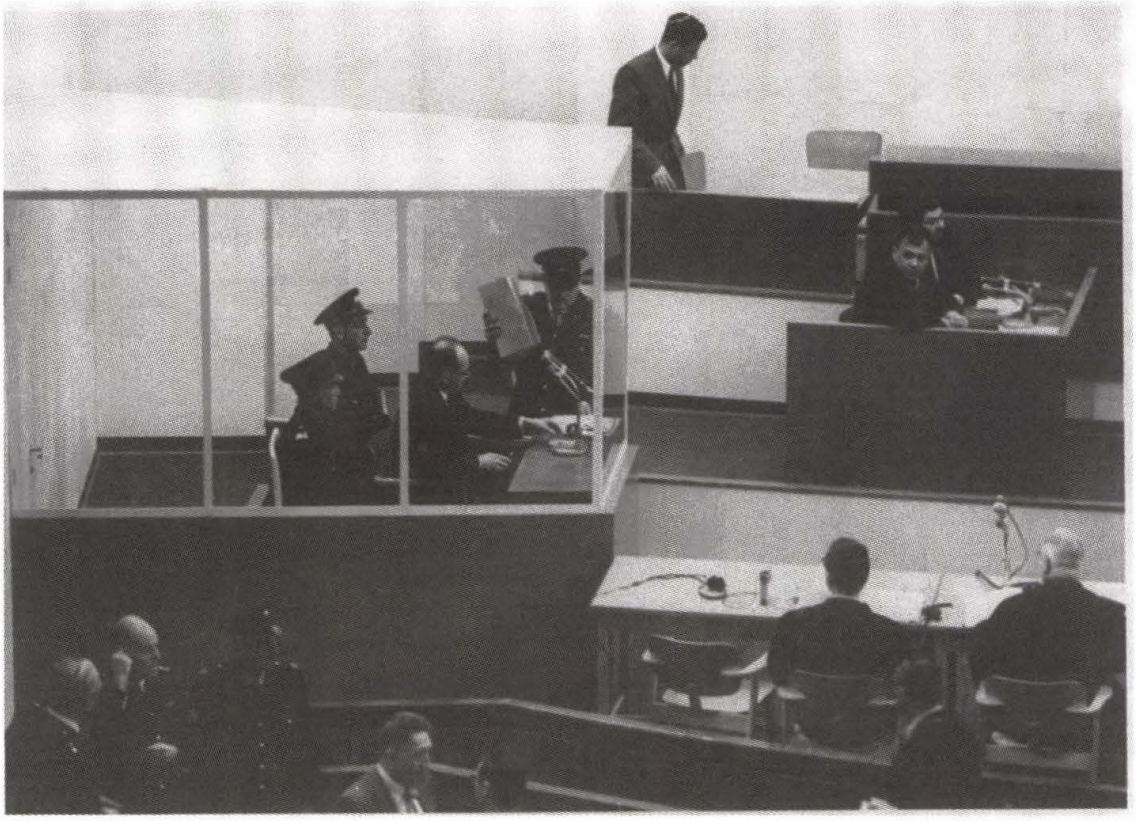
Mr. and Mrs. Halmos, owner of supermarket – albeit discovering my Jewishness, protected me and gave me food for Jews in hiding.



The entrance to the farm where I was, from
April 20, 1944 to July 20, 1944.



The entrance to the wine cellar, where over twenty Jews,
including my brother, Sonny, and Rivka Kohn hid.






The Eichmann Trial and a Permit to attend it, April 25, 1961.



16. OLDAL AMERIKAI MAGYAR NÉPSZAVA / SZABADSÁG 2000. május 5., péntek

**Gyászoljuk egy Igaz Ember elvesztését**

**Margita POLYI**
**1921-2000**

***

**We mourn the great loss of our righteous gentile**
**Mrs. Margita POLYI**
**1921-2000**

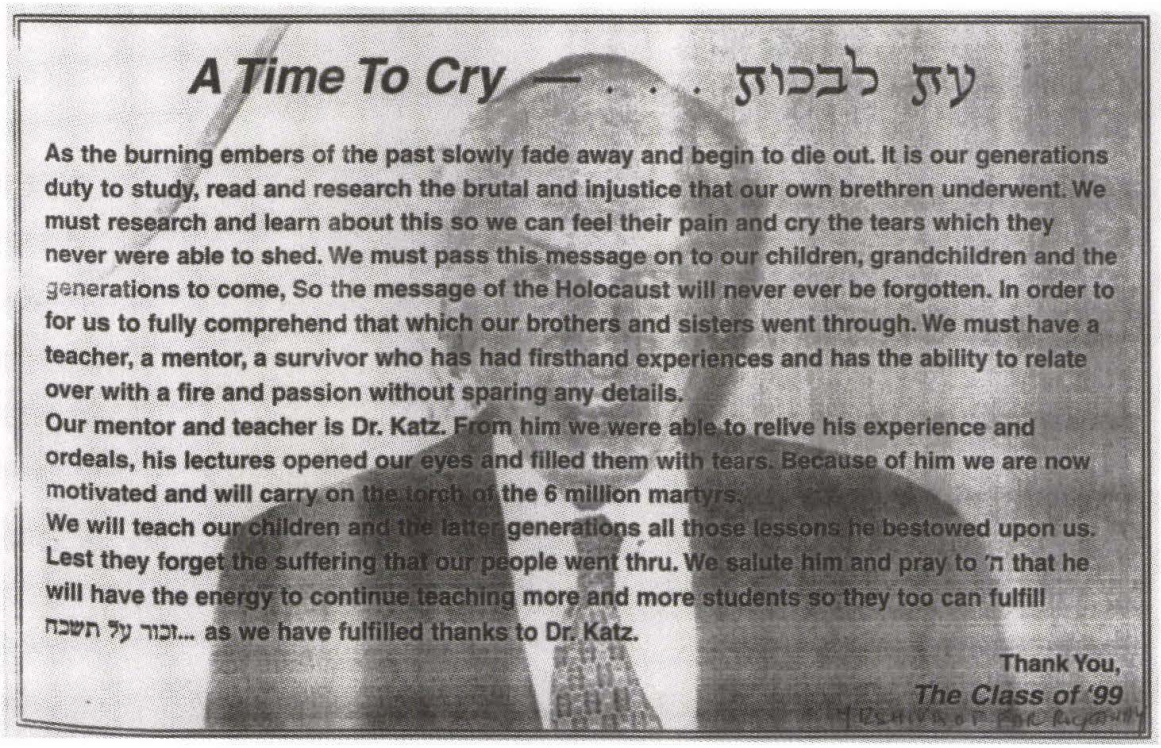
Through her and her late husband Mr. Stefan Polyi of Bottany, Slovakia - they performed noble acts of courage, tolerance, and humanity. They risked their lives daily to save my brother and myself from certain death thereby being responsible for bringing forth three generations consisting of 39 lives.
May we all learn to have the courage to fight evil and to love mankind from this very brave couple.
May her gentle soul rest in peace.
With unforgettable gratitude and love forever,
Maurice Katz and family
Lawrence, N.Y. 11559-1706

Margita Polyi
1921-2000.

We mourn the great loss of our righteous gentile Mrs. Margita Polyi, 1921-2000. Through her and her late husband Mr. Stefan Polyi of Bottany, Slovakia – they performed noble acts of courage, tolerance, and humanity. They risked their lives daily to save my brother and myself from certain death, thereby being responsible for bringing forth three generations consisting of 39 lives. May we all learn to have the courage to fight evil and to love mankind from this very brave couple. May her gentle soul rest in peace. With unforgettable gratitude and love forever,

Maurice Katz and family, Lawrence, NY 1155-1706

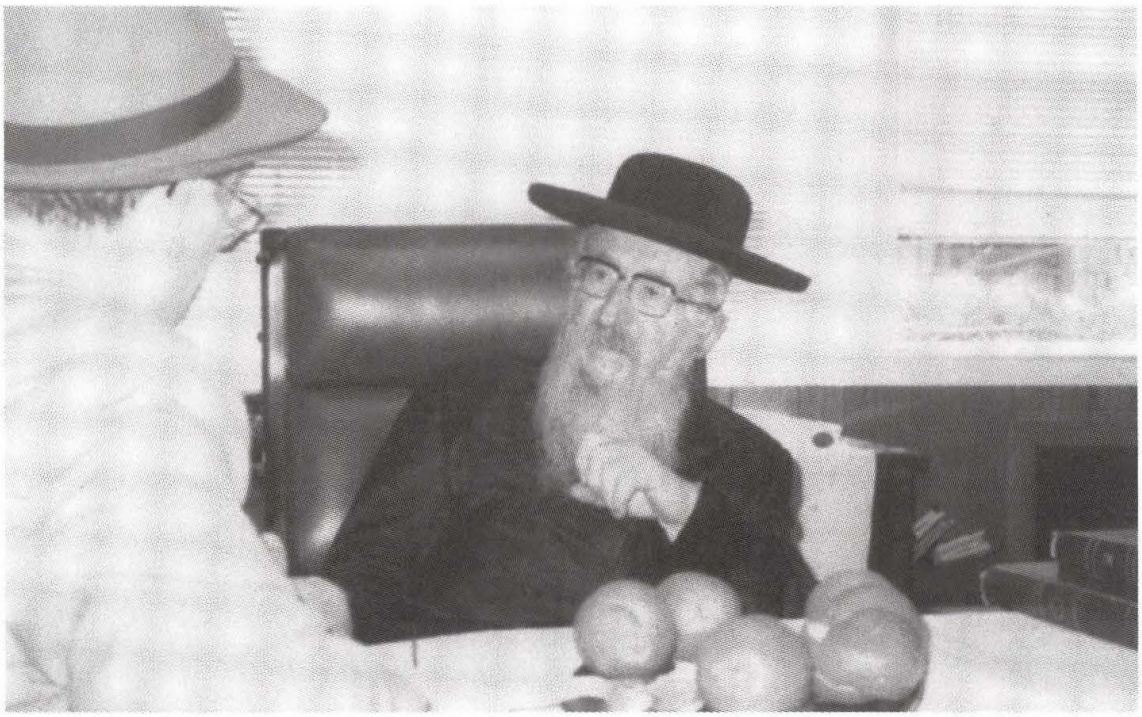



From the 1999 Yeshiva of Far Rockaway Yearbook.



1948 – At my Chosson's tisch
*Top, left to right:* Sruly, Mr. Honig, brother Sonny
and Mr. Friedman.
*Bottom, left to right:* Rabbi Moshe Horovitz, my dear uncle
and mentor, Joseph M. Rosenberger, who along with my aunt,
Bertha, brought us to the U.S. and opened their house to us, and me.



With my cousin, the Viener Rebbe, guiding me to cope
with the Holocaust according to the Torah.



1954. My brother, Sruly, in the U.S. Army in Nuremberg, Germany exactly ten years since he was in the concentration camp in Germany.




Picture of auditorium dedicated to my late wife, Leah Bas Shlomo Rosenfeld.



In Antwerp, Belgium at the wedding of my brother, Sruly.

*Standing, left to right:* Moshe, Yankel, Sruly, Josef, Louie and Sonny.
*Sitting, left to right:* Manca, Chana and Terry.

Nine brothers and sisters survived the Holocaust.
Brother Pinchas perished *(no pictures available)*.



With Governor Nelson Rockefeller
and Rabbi Benjamin Kamenetzky.




At Mesivta of Lakewood. Yeshiva boys after my lectures, asking questions about the Churban Europe.




With Mr. Ceslav Mordovitz, famous Auschwitz escapee.



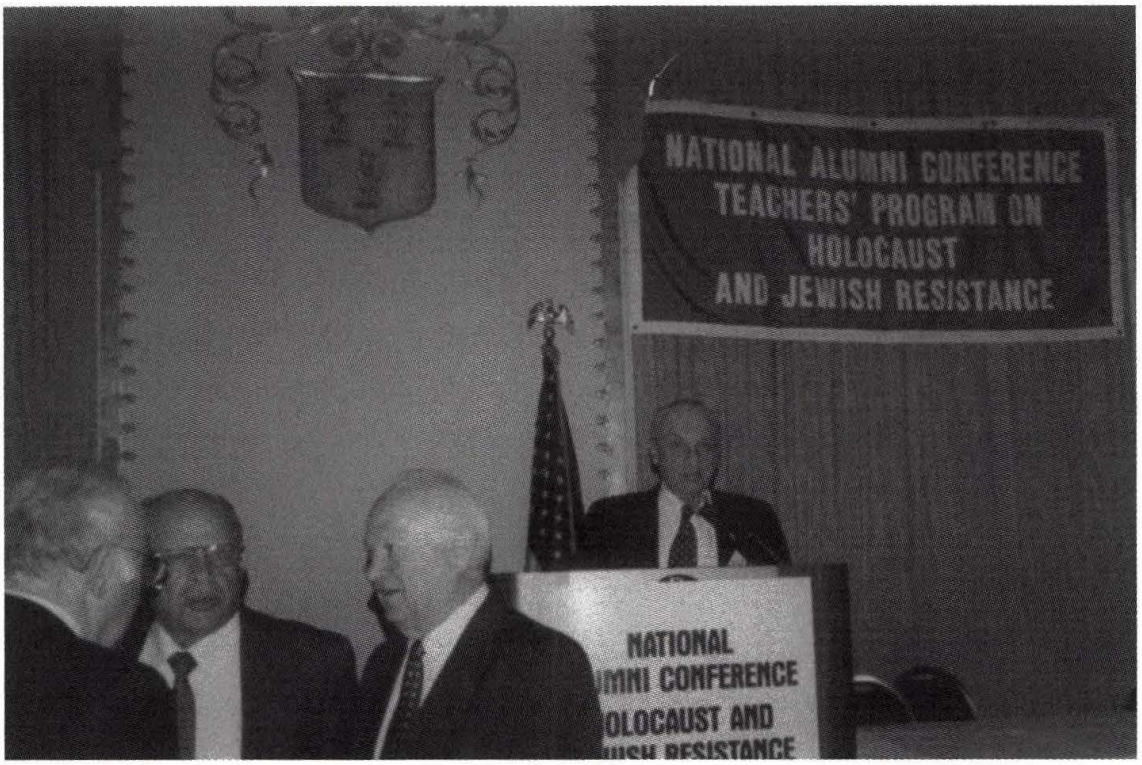
With Israel Singer.



With Dennis Ross.



With Senator George Mitchell.




At Conference in Washington, D.C.

# MY REVENGE

Hitler's aim was to wipe us out.
My answer to him is to build future generations.



Family Chanuka Party 2002




Family Chanuka Party 2005

# GLOSSARY

| | |
|---|---|
| *Al kiddush Hashem* | For the sanctification of the Holy Name |
| *A"h* | May she (or he) rest in peace |
| *Am Yisroel Chai* | The Jewish people lives on |
| *Arrow Cross* | Hungarian Fascist Party |
| *Avodah* | Service of G-d |
| *baal chessed* | Person who performs acts of kindness |
| *Bachur, bachurim* | Unmarried man, men |
| *Baruch Hashem* | Thank G-d |
| *Bayis Neman be Yisrael* | A faithful home in Israel |
| *Bechasdei Hashem* | With the kindness of G-d |
| *Beis medrash* | Study hall |
| *Brachah, brachos* | Blessing, blessings |
| *Bren* | Fire, fiery |
| *Bris milah* | Ritual circumcision |
| *Challos* | Braided Sabbath/Holy Day loaf |
| *Chassidus* | Chassidism |
| *Chasuna* | Wedding |
| *Chavrusa* | Torah study partner |
| *Cheder* | Elementary level Torah school |
| *Chessed* | Acts of kindness |
| *Chol hamo'ed* | Interim days of Pesach or Sukkos holiday |
| *Cholent* | Hot stew left cooking overnight on Sabbath |
| חמשה חומשי תורה | Five books of Moses (plural) |
| *Chuppah* | Wedding canopy, wedding ceremony |

| | |
|---|---|
| *Churban* | Destruction |
| *Daven, davening* | Pray, praying |
| *Dayan* | Rabbinical judge |
| *Emes* | Truth |
| *Emunah* | Faith |
| *Esrog* | Citron |
| *Gabbai* | Synagogue official or assistant |
| *Gadol* | Torah luminary |
| *Gartel* | Cloth belt worn by Chassidim when praying |
| *Geshmak, geshmakeh* | Enjoyment, enjoyable |
| *Gestapo* | Nazi secret police |
| *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* | The Holy One, blessed is He |
| *Hallel* | Prayer of praise said on Holy Days |
| *Hashem* | The Name |
| *Hashem Yerachem* | May the Merciful One take pity |
| *Hashgacha pratis* | Divine providence |
| *Hy"d* | May Hashem revenge their blood |
| *Kallah* | Bride |
| *Kehillah* | Congregation, community |
| *Kein yirbu* | May they increase |
| *Kinderlach* | Children |
| *Klal Yisroel* | The Jewish people |
| *Kollel* | Rabbinical College |
| *Kollel Avreichim* | Rabbinical College for married people |
| *Kugel* | Baked pudding |
| *Kvater* | One who receives an honor at a bris milah |
| *Lechaim* | To life |
| *Mashgiach* | Supervisor |
| *Mazel tov* | May you enjoy good fortune |
| *Melaveh malkah* | The traditional evening meal after Shabbos |
| *Meilitz Yosher* | Correct Protector |
| *Menahel* | Principal |
| *Mentch* | Decent person (lit.: human being) |

| | |
|---|---|
| *Mesader kiddushin* | One who performs wedding ceremony |
| *Mesirus nefesh* | Total dedication, self-sacrifice |
| *Mezuzah* | Parchment scroll affixed to doorpost |
| *Mincha* | Afternoon prayer service |
| *Minyan* | Ten-man quorum for prayer service (pl.) |
| *Mishloach Monos* | Gift parcels exchanged on Purim |
| *Mitzvah (mitzvos)* | Commandment (pl.) |
| *Moshavim* | Settlements |
| *Mossad* | Israeli secret service |
| *Nachas* | Pride, satisfaction |
| *Neshama*h | Soul |
| *Niftar, nifteres* | One who has passed away (m., f.) |
| *Niggun* | Melody |
| *Nu* | So |
| *Olam haba* | World to Come |
| *Otzar sefarim* | Book collection |
| *Peyos* | sidecurls |
| *Proteksia* | Influence |
| *Rebbe* | Teacher |
| *Ribbono shel Olam* | L-rd of the world |
| *Rosh (Roshei) Yeshiva* | Head (heads) of a yeshiva |
| *Rosh Chodesh* | First day(s) of the Jewish month |
| *Rosh Hashanah* | Jewish New Year |
| *Sandek* | One who has the honor of holding the baby at his bris milah |
| *Sefarim* | Holy books |
| *Seudah* | Festive meal |
| *Seudah shelishis* | The third Shabbos meal |
| *Shabbos Mevorchim* | Shabbos when the new month is blessed |
| *Shalom Aleichim* | Greeting |
| *Shema Yisroel* | Hear O Israel – fundamental prayer of faith in G-d |
| *Sheva brachos* | Seven festive meals for newlyweds |
| *Sheyichye* | May he continue to live |

| | |
|---|---|
| *Shlita* | May he live and be well |
| *Shidduch* | Match |
| *Shlug Kapores* | Swing a live chicken for atonement pre-Yom Kippur |
| *Shochet* | Ritual slaughterer |
| *Shtiebel* | Small shul |
| *Shtreimel* | Traditional fur hat worn by Chassidim on Shabbos and festive occasions |
| *Shul* | Synagogue |
| *Siddur* | Prayerbook (pl.) |
| *Simchah* | Joyous occasion |
| *Siyatta diShmaya* | the help of G-d |
| *Sukkah* | Roofless dwelling during the Sukkos holiday |
| *Talmid chacham* | Torah scholar |
| *Talmid (talmidim)* | Student (pl.) |
| *Tashlich* | Ceremony of casting away sins at the new year |
| *Tefillin* | phylacteries |
| *Tenai'im* | Terms of engagement |
| *Tzaddik, tzaddikim* | Righteous man, men |
| *Tzitzis* | Four-cornered, fringed garment |
| *Yarmulkes* | Skull caps |
| *Yemach shemam* | May their name be blotted out |
| *Yerei Shamayim* | Those who fear G-d |
| *Yeshiva ketana* | Yeshiva at high-school level |
| Yeshiva, yeshivos | Religious school(s) |
| *Yidden* | Jews |
| *Yiddishe* | Jewish |
| *Yiddishkeit* | Judaism |
| *Zchus* | Merit |
| *Z"l (Zichrono levracha)* | May his memory be blessed |
| *Zy"a (Zechuso yagen aleinu)* | May his virtues guard us |