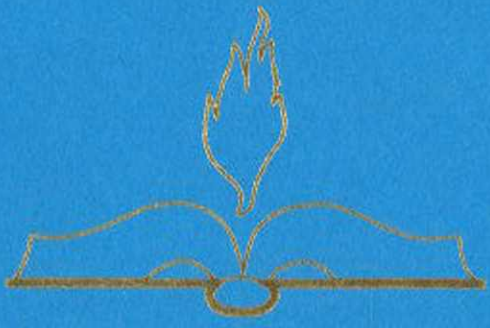
The Holocaust Diaries

COUNTERFEIT LIVES

AVRAHAM KRAKOWSKI



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AVRAHAM KRAKOWSKI

with
Avraham Yaakov Finkel

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כָּל זֹאת בָּאַתְנוּ וְלֹא שְׁכַחֲנוּךָ

(תהלים מד:יח)

All this has befallen us
yet we have not forgotten You.

(*Tehillim* 44:18)

Counterfeit Lives

מוקדש לזכר

אאמו"ר ר' שמעון יהודה
בר' יעקב מאיר ז"ל קרקובסקי
נכד הרהצו"ק האיש האלקי
הרבי ר' דוד מלעלוב זצ"ל זי"ע,
איש תם וישר חסיד נאמן לבית רדומסק.
נפטר כ"ז במרחשון תרצ"ה

אמי מורתי הצדקת מרת דינה
בת ר' יצחק גולדברג ז"ל
נספתה במחנה אושביץ ז' באלול תש"ג הי"ד

חמי הר'ר אשר אנשיל שולוביץ
נכד הרהצוק ר' יעקב מז'רנובצה
וזוגתו הצדקת מרת חיה טובה
מבית דנציגר הי"ד

ולזכר בית אדמו"ר רדומסק הי"ד

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

ONE TENDS TO THINK OF THE GERMAN CONCENTRATION camps as death factories, but they were far more than that. The camps constituted a vast system of exploitation by which the Jews could be robbed and manipulated until the last drop of profit was squeezed from them. The actual extermination camps represented only a small part of the entire system, although they were the intended last stop for every prisoner that entered the system.

The old, the very young and the sick were sent to their deaths immediately, but whoever was capable of work was first sent off for slave labor. Without adequate food, clothing or shelter, these unfortunate people worked incredibly long hours and under appalling conditions until they wasted away to the point where they were no longer useful to the German

war machine. Then they were sent on along the death route which their weaker family members had already travelled.

The German thus showed themselves to be robbers as well as murderers. They were not content with killing the Jews. They first stole everything the Jews possessed, then they robbed the dead bodies of their hair and gold teeth. And those allowed to live for a while were robbed of their labor and vitality.

The German venality also revealed itself in the infamous pillage of the museums of Europe, whereby hundreds of crates of priceless art treasures were stolen by high German officials. It was all part of the exposure of the vaunted German *volk* as common thieves as well as murderers.

In *Counterfeit Lives*, the ninth volume in *The Holocaust Diaries Collection*, Avraham Krakowski reveals yet another facet of this aspect of the German war effort. After suffering through the hellish torture of the ghetto and a brief stay in Auschwitz, the author was taken to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp as part of a specially selected group for a secret project. The project turned out to be a massive operation in which prisoners from all over Europe were employed in counterfeiting the currencies of the Allied countries, an unheard of enterprise for a civilized country. The thievery of the Germans knew no bounds.

Strangely enough, the singular nature of the counterfeiting operation created unusual working conditions for the prisoners. The tasks of printing, sorting and artificially aging the counterfeit currency required a high degree of skill and concentration, and the prisoners were therefore adequately fed and clothed. They were also spared the incessant harassment of camp guards to which all other prisoners were subjected. But it was a macabre ease that they enjoyed, a sort

of counterfeit life. They were privy to one of the darkest secrets of the German Reich, perhaps more embarrassing to the Germans than the slaughter of the Jews, and despite reassurances to the contrary, they knew they would never be allowed to live. And indeed, the events that led to the author's ultimate survival border on the miraculous.

One of the more poignant features of this deeply moving book is the author's irrepressible hope and faith. He and his fiancee join forces repeatedly to save themselves and other members of their families. Together, they go to Auschwitz, reassuring each other in the common parlance of the time that "*mir vellen zei iberleiben*, we will outlive them." And when the author is sent off to Sachsenhausen, he capitalizes on the special treatment of the prisoners and persuades his captors to allow him to send a letter to his fiancee in Auschwitz; it is the only recorded incidence of a letter being delivered to a prisoner in Auschwitz.

As do most of the volumes in *The Holocaust Diaries Collection*, *Counterfeit Lives* also offers the reader a rare glimpse into a world that no longer exists. In this particular case, it the world of the Radomsker *chassidus*. Today, hardly a trace remains of this vast movement, but in the pages of this book, it comes alive once again. Fascinated, we read about the Kesser Torah system of thirty-seven *yeshivos* throughout Poland and the excellence of its staff and students who came from all over Europe and beyond. We are humbled by the saintly Radomsker Rebbe and his thousands of *chassidim*, and we stand in awe his revered son-in-law Reb Moishele who presided over the Kesser Torah system. We marvel at the strength and vibrancy of the Radomsker communities all over Poland. And we shed a tear as we witness the destruction of all this glory, and we are left with a feeling of unspeakable

sadness and irreplaceable loss.

Counterfeit Lives was one of the first projected books in *The Holocaust Diaries Collection*, but its actual publication took somewhat longer than expected. One of the reasons was the author's admirable concern for the factual accuracy of his book in its most minute details. Even seemingly insignificant questions, such as the number of hours he was forced to stand at *Appell* on a particular day, were not allowed to pass without meticulous review. We were all impressed with the author's integrity and memory, and we considered it an honor and a privilege to collaborate with him in the preparation of this distinguished book.

We would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the professional efforts of Avraham Yaakov Finkel, who co-authored this book based on the author's original German-language manuscript and extensive interviews; Staff Editor Rachel Stine, whose contributions went far beyond the normal calls of editing; Raizy Kaufman, our editorial director, whose skill and perseverance brought this project to a successful conclusion; and all the staff members who contributed their talents and labors. May the *Ribono Shel Olam* bless our efforts and grant us the *zchus* of continuing this important work.

Y.Y.R.
Lakewood, N.J.
Elul, 5754 (1994)

BOOK ONE

Blissful Lives

CHAPTER 1

Growing up in Katowice

I GREW UP IN KATOWICE, A SOPHISTICATED METROPOLIS, situated in Upper Silesia, close to the pre-war Polish-German border. The proximity to Germany placed a cultural stamp on the city; its inhabitants spoke a flawless German, and German values and attitudes dominated the mindset of the Katowice populace. Museums, opera, ballet and theater performances abounded in this fashionably cosmopolitan city.

But this "*kleine* Berlin," as Katowice came to be known, had another face, the face I remember. It contained a thriving community of Orthodox Jewry, and because of its strategic location between Poland, Germany and Czechoslovakia, hundreds of Orthodox Jews, *chassidic* and otherwise passed through Katowice for business or to seek their *rebbes' berachos*.

I remember my father, Reb Shimon Yehudah Krakowski, and my mother, Moras Dinah Krakowski, not as the prominent citizens of a sophisticated Katowice, but as plain people seated at the *Shabbos* table, which reverberated with the sounds of lively Radomsker *niggunim*. I remember the Torah discussions with the endless roster of Torah luminaries who graced our house.

I see my father, not on his way to transact some business, but in his *beckishe* and *shtreimel*, a sable headdress that seemed like a crown to me. I see my mother, not only as she stood in the family store, but also as she sat at the table, dressed in her *Shabbos* finery, surrounded by the children and our guests.

My father's devotion to Torah, his charity and kindness fused with my mother's loving-kindness to set the guideposts for the development of their seven children. David, my eldest brother, had married and moved away to Koenigshuette when I was still quite young. Moshe Shlomo, a budding Torah scholar, was a source of great pride to our family. My brothers Pinchas and Alter Yecheskel and my sisters Katie and Rosa all doted on me, calling me "Bubbee" rather than by my real name, Avraham Yissachar. A younger brother had succumbed to crib death as a toddler, and although the tragedy was a devastating blow, our family pulled together, never forgetting the beautiful child or the sound of his laughter. As the baby of the family, I enjoyed the attention lavished on me by my parents, brothers, sisters and other relatives.

Our home was a blend of graciousness and *chassidic* warmth. It was a meeting place for sages, where the foremost *chassidic rebbes* and Torah activists of Galicia and Poland stopped over on their visits to Katowice. The presence of these towering figures shaped me and ingrained in my soul a burning love of Torah and *chassidus*.

Of the numerous guests that passed through our house, there is one who stands out in my memory for his sublime character and his incredible range and depth of Talmudic knowledge: Reb Yitzchak Glickman, the *moreh horaah* of Sosnowice. Reb Itzikel, as he was fondly called, was a venerable sage whose *tzidkus* and *geonus* were known throughout Poland.

Reb Itzikel had an elder cousin, also a descendant of Alesk, Reb Zalman Zilberfarb (later the Toporower Rav). When Reb Zalman was a candidate for *semichah* from Reb Itche Ettinger, he took little Itzikel with him to the oral examination. The little boy, then eleven years old, spontaneously answered questions posed to the candidate. After awarding *semichah* to Reb Zalman, the *rav* gave Itzikel a letter in which he wrote, "I never saw a child with so much knowledge. He is *mamish* like the children from *malchus bais David*."

The Glickman family has been close to us for many generations. To this day, a strong bond of friendship continues between our two families, both of whom are descendants of Reb Duvid Biderman, the Lelover Rebbe. Reb Itzikel was a son-in-law of Reb Alter Wolbromer, whose father was the son-in-law of Reb Moishe Lelover who was the son of Reb Duvid Lelover. My grandfather Reb Yaakov Meir had been very close with Reb Itzikel and Reb Alter.

As a boy, my father had been a steady guest in Reb Itzikel's house and considered it an honor to accompany the great *tzaddik* whenever the opportunity arose.

One *Pesach* before the *seder*, Reb Itzikel wanted to immerse in the *mikveh*. My father, who was a skinny teenager at the time, accompanied him there and helped him descend the narrow steps, holding a candle to illuminate the dark

stairway. He waited a while until Reb Itzikel emerged from the *mikveh* and then led him back up the steps.

Then Reb Itzikel stated an amazing prediction.

"Shimele," he said, "I foresee that you will live in Germany one day. You will be very successful and dress in a modern-style suit and hat. Remember to hold on to *mikvaos*."

In less than ten years, Reb Itzikel's prophecy came true in full measure. My father did grow up to be a Torah scholar and a highly respected member of the community who was successful at whatever he tried.

I recall how honored we felt when, for example, Rav Chanoch Tzvi Levine, the Bendiner Rav and Reb Aryeh Tzvi Frommer, the Kozhiglover Rav, two of the foremost *gedolim* of Poland visited our home.

I remember the *tzadikkim* who arrived unannounced at our home: Reb Hanoch Rubin from Kshanov, a brother and a son-in-law of Reb Itzikel and an outstanding *gaon*; Reb Yankele Abbes, also from Kshanov; Reb Yitzchak Elimelech Hakohen Singer from Sosnowice; Reb Elazar Rokeach from Drohobich; the two sons of Reb Alter Wolbromer, Reb Shalom of Czenstachow and Reb Yitzchak Mendel Rottenberg from Bendin; and their children and their grandchildren, one of whom was Reb Berel Rottenberg, the Woideslover Rav in Boro Park; Rav Shem Klingberg, the Dzialoshitzer Rebbe from Krakow and his son Reb Eizik; and tens more, honoring us with their presence. I recall leaving for *yeshivah* one morning and greeting one *rebbe*, only to come home that night and greet a second or a third.

But it was not only the renowned who were welcomed in our home. My father thrived on helping people who were in need, and with the unstinting assistance of my mother, our home became a haven for all wayfarers, ranging from great

rebbeim to fundraisers and simple travellers. They might arrive in town hungry and tired, at any hour of the day or night, and know that at the Krakowski home they would be offered a tasty hot meal and a comfortable place to sleep.

My concept of my father as a *baal tzeddakah* became ingrained at an early age, and when an old beggar approached me one day to ask where he might get some money for food, I directed him to our house without hesitation. After my father gave the man some coins, he asked the beggar how he had known to come there. The old man pointed to the vicinity of where I was playing and said, "The little boy told me to come here."

A few years later, attempting to emulate my father's *midah* of charity, I took on a more active role and became known as the *shtut schnorrer*, the city collector. On one occasion after *Shacharis,* not yet concerned with the niceties of tact and diplomacy, I approached Reb Ziesel Rosner, a wealthy man reputed to be quite generous to the needy. I explained my cause and suggested he donate one *zloty*. Reb Ziesel determined that a half *zloty* was sufficient. I tried but was unable to persuade him to give me the *zloty*. In frustration, I took his hat and ran home. I worried about Reb Ziesel all day, knowing how awkward he must have felt walking about in Katowice without a hat. By *Minchah*, I was afraid to return to *shul;* I knew he would be waiting for me.

Reb Ziesel was indeed waiting for me, but not in anger. He approached me and said, "Avrumeleh, we are both guilty. Here is your *zloty*; give me my hat, and we will both repent. From now on, don't speak when you are wearing your *tefillin*, and say ten *kapitlach Tehillim* every day."

I kept my word. Even in the concentration camps, I said ten *kapitlach Tehillim* every day, and though I did not have

tefillin in the camps, as soon as I was liberated, I resumed my promise not to speak while wearing *tefillin.*

Shortly after my childhood incident with the beggar, perhaps as a reward, my father delighted me one night with a chocolate violin. Like every small child, I was fond of chocolate, but the candy violin was meant to give me a taste for music appreciation as well. Soon thereafter, my parents hired a portly old German-Jewish instructor to teach me to play the violin.

My lessons began shortly after *Purim.* I quickly caught on, and after only ten lessons, I was able to play a simple tune. But *Pesach* and the seven weeks of *Sefirah* forced me to interrupt my music studies. The three week period between *Shivah Asar b'Tammuz* and *Tishah b'Av* meant another break, and shortly before *Rosh Hashanah*, my father gingerly approached the teacher.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said apologetically, "but Avraham won't be able to take any violin lessons until after *Sukkos.*"

"Mr. Krakowski," the teacher exploded, barely able to contain his anger. "How do you expect Avraham to master the violin with so many interruptions?"

"Well," my father stammered. "He'll have the whole winter to make up for lost time."

"*Das ist unmoeglich!* Impossible! I'm quitting."

Thus ended my career as a violin virtuoso. But there was music more sublime than that produced by the strings of an instrument.

One of the most distinguished guests to visit our house was the Bobover Rebbe, Rabbi Benzion Halberstam, the grandson of the legendary Divrei Chaim and the father of the present Bobover Rebbe. He was a charismatic *chassidic* personality, beloved throughout Poland and Galicia, attracting

thousands to the *chassidic* movement. He founded many Bobover *yeshivos* throughout Galicia. The Bobover Rebbe was also a gifted composer and created hundreds of original *niggunim*, some of which have become favorite classics. Although I was too young to remember his visits, my father spoke often of the great *tzaddik* and taught us thrilling Bobover *niggunim*, the soul-stirring marches and the moving melodies that evoke deep yearning for the nearness of the *Shechinah*, the spirit of Hashem. Even today, when *davening* as *shaliach tzibbur*, I often sing these old favorites that stir fond memories of the past and have the power to inspire and uplift.

Often, our home was chosen by *rebbeim* as the site for what was known as a *beschau*, the "neutral ground" where a prospective bride or groom could meet. Our ornately furnished living room provided the perfect setting for such discreet encounters, and my mother adroitly handled the potentially awkward situations.

There were many *beschaus* that culminated in *shidduchim*, but my parents were particularly proud to have been the hosts of the *beschau* of the Zawiertcher Rav's son Chaskel, the nephew of the Radomsker Rebbe. That date later culminated in a *shidduch* with the Piasetzner Rebbe's daughter. The Piasetzner Rebbe, Rabbi Klonymos Kalman Shapira, an *ish kadosh* and outstanding educator, was the last *chassidic rebbe* in the Warsaw ghetto, where he inspired the *chassidim* to give up their lives with courage *al kiddush Hashem* and with *ahavas Hashem*. He wrote the seminal *Chovas Hatalmidim*, an educational guide for *yeshivah* students. The moving speeches he gave in the Warsaw ghetto were published posthumously in a book under the title of *Esh Kadosh*.

The weeks before *Pesach* were especially hectic in our

household, with Mother going about her meticulous cleaning, searching for *chametz* under each bed, under dressers, in closets and corners and between the pages of *sefarim*. When I was about seven or eight years old, the Weintraub children, whom my Aunt Rosa and Uncle Pinchas Pelman had adopted, came over to play with me one day in the midst of pre-*Pesach* cleaning. My mother had removed the drapery and the linens from the bedrooms, stacking them in neat piles, ready to be laundered.

The unusual sight of the bare rooms spurred our imaginations, and in a sudden burst of creativity, we converted the bedding into a circus trampoline, performing "high-wire" acrobatics.

"Watch me!" I shouted. "Watch me jump!"

I felt a stabbing pain in my foot when I landed and couldn't get up. I howled at the top of my lungs until my mother came running. She calmly sized up the situation and immediately called my grandfather, Reb Yaakov Meir Krakowski. He was a great *tzaddik* and an expert in the art of folk medicine.

"A sprained ankle," said Zeide, taking one look at my swollen foot that had taken on all colors of the rainbow.

"For the next few weeks, until the swelling subsides, you've got to stay in bed."

My grandfather was an extraordinary man, renowned for his Torah scholarship, his generosity and countless acts of *chessed*. Every year before *Pesach*, he would bake *shmurah matzos* and distribute them proudly to the entire community of Sosnowice.

The single *mitzvah* closest to his heart, however, was that of *bikur cholim*, visiting and caring for the sick. Over the years, he had amassed a wealth of knowledge of ancient remedies,

potions, lotions and mystical remedies, which he dispensed freely. He was the busiest "doctor" in town, for he had effective cures for any malady, from headaches to hiccups, from stomach cramps to protracted labor. Eventually, he became known as Reb Yaakov Meir Mevaker, the one who visits the sick. People often described him as "*das richtiger Lelover einikel.*"

His wife, my Bobbe Alte Toby Feigel, matched him and perhaps outdid him in her acts of *chessed*. Before sitting down to a meal, she would go out and look for a needy person to whom she could give *tzeddakah*. Every traveller was welcome to spend the night at my grandparents' house, and night after night, all beds were occupied.

A shivering stranger knocked on her door one bitter night to ask for shelter. My grandfather showed him that every bed was occupied and apologetically turned him away. My grandmother, overhearing the conversation, ran out of her room and said to my grandfather, "What have you done?"

Then, she pulled my grandfather's fur-lined *Shabbos* coat from the closet and ran after the stranger. "Take this," she said. "It will keep you warm until you find a place to spend the night."

By the last day of *Yom Tov* after my circus act, I was back on my feet and headed straight for the kitchen to the delight of my loving family who were all assembled there, preparing the traditional *seudas pereidah* in farewell to *Yom Tov*.

This *seudah* was one of the beautiful Krakowski family traditions that had evolved over the years. Twice a year, on the last day of *Pesach* and on *Simchas Torah*, my mother would prepare an elaborate festive meal to which the entire community was invited. The rich and the poor, *talmidei chachamim* and the unlearned alike, all sat side by side, enjoying the

delectable food and drink, singing the rousing Radomsker *niggunim* in the spirit of *simchas Yom Tov*. My father, smiling broadly, would make the rounds among the guests, pouring drinks and wishing everyone *lechayim*.

During one *seudah*, Reb Mordechai Koschitzky, a frequent guest and friend of the family, went to the kitchen to retrieve a platter of food for the men. On his way there, he passed our large baroque stove whose corners were sculpted with winged cherubs. His happy expression suddenly turned sour, yet he said nothing. No one knew the source of his annoyance. After *Maariv*, he went into the kitchen for a meat cleaver. He headed straight for the ornate stove. Without a word, he swung the cleaver briskly and amputated the delicate noses of the cherubs.

My mother stood staring, and Reb Mordechai said, "It says in *Shemos* (20:4), '*Lo saaseh lecha pesel.* Do not make for yourself a sculptured image.' It is a *mitzvah* to deface *avodah zarah*, to deface idols. And these figures, Mrs. Krakowski, are pure *avodah zarah*!"

"If our good friend Reb Mordechai says it's a *mitzvah* to mutilate the cherubs," my mother said with a wan smile, "so be it. I accept it."

One of the guests who never missed the festivities after *Pesach* and *Simchas Torah* was Rav Yosef Blumenfeld, the Koenigshuetter Rav, a *talmid chacham* and renowned *posek*. When called upon, he was always ready to deliver a fascinating *dvar Torah*, weaving an elaborate tapestry of *midrashim*, spiced with many parables and stories about *gedolim* and *tzaddikim*.

During *Havdalah* after one *Yom Tov*, our phone rang insistently. It was Rav Blumenfeld calling from the local police station. "I was attacked by a gang of German hoodlums

on my way to your house after *Maariv*," he said. "They roughed me up pretty badly. And now, the police are holding *me* for questioning."

My father was outraged. "The justice of Sedom and Amorah, that's what this is!" my father exclaimed. "The criminals go free, and the victim is arrested."

Without wasting a minute, my uncle Pinchas Pelman ran to the police station, demanded to see the chief of police and quickly secured Rav Blumenfeld's release.

Fortunately, Rav Blumenfeld had suffered only a few minor bruises and a soiled hat that had been tossed into the dirt. But the entire incident cast a pall of gloom and despair over our community. We were overcome by a sense of defenselessness, realizing that we were at the mercy of the barbarians. This was not our first taste of the rabid anti-Semitism that lurked beneath the surface of our "cultured" neighbors, and Rav Blumenfeld made light of our dismay.

"Why are you making such a big fuss over this incident?" he asked. "It says that Eisav is an enemy of Yaakov. Accordingly, all *goyim* are inclined to hurt Jews. If they don't, they are lazy *goyim*."

Despite his comment, the incident foreshadowed the nightmarish tragedy that was to end in the horrors of the holocaust.

But at that time, no one in Katowice had an inkling of the depth of depravity to which our German neighbors would descend, and we continued to live in peace and to conduct ourselves in our customary ways.

My father ran our family business, a general store, the only one of its kind in town. The store offered a wide range of merchandise, from antiques and musical instruments to crystalware and china to men's suits and shoes, and was busy

enough to require considerable attention. One day, my father came home at midday to tell us that the Belzer Rebbe was passing through town on his way to Marienbad. The Rebbe's train would make a twenty-minute stopover.

"The whole town will be there," my father said. "Come, boys, a *gadol hador* is coming. Let's go."

The station platform swarmed with people from all the neighboring cities by the time my father and I arrived. They had been waiting for hours, but the wait meant nothing to them, so long as they could glimpse the Belzer Rebbe.

Finally, the train pulled into the station, and the Belzer Rebbe stood at an open window, holding out one hand to allow people to give him *shalom*. Hundreds of well-wishers surged forward for an opportunity to touch the hand of this *tzaddik*. The Rebbe reached out to shake hands with everyone, silently nodding his head, without saying one word. At last, it was my turn to shake the Rebbe's hand, and I stepped forward.

"*Ver bist du, yingele*?" the Rebbe asked. "Who are you, little boy?"

I was tongue-tied, overawed by the Rebbe's question.

"This is my youngest son," my father replied.

The Rebbe smiled at me and then waved at the huge crowd as the train slowly set into motion.

Those were the only words the Rebbe uttered on the station that day; he had not spoken to anyone else. The Rebbe had singled me out from the entire crowd and spoken four words to me! This great *tzaddik* had taken the time to speak to a little boy.

The incident caused an uproar, everyone wondering aloud about the little boy the Rebbe had favored. Though I was young, I was not too young to understand the magnitude

of the honor bestowed upon me. Over the years many *tzaddikim* had stayed at my house and given me *berachos*, but this was different. This was the Belzer Rebbe! An American boy's encounter with the President of the United States would pale in face of my experience with the Belzer Rebbe.

My encounter with the Belzer Rebbe stayed with me throughout my life, and I am forever grateful to my father for having taken me along with him to that rail station. But my father's gifts to me did not end with this incident. He frequently took me with him to Sosnowice to be at the Radomsker Rebbe's *tish*, the greatest joy in my childhood years. My father's dedication to the Radomsker Rebbe was so profound that there was not enough my father could do, from helping him bake *matzos* for *Pesach* to building the Radomsker *shtiebel* at 9 Tylna Mariacka in Katowice. I grew up in the world of Radomsk, and Radomsk has remained one of the most important parts of my life ever since.

CHAPTER 2

The Radomsker Rebbe

REB SHLOMO CHANOCH HAKOHEN RABINOWITZ WAS the last in the line of the Radomsker dynasty, which had been established by Reb Moshe Lelover, the son of Reb Duvid, the first Lelover Rebbe. Reb Duvid of Lelov was a *kedosh elyon*, a *tzaddik* of such caliber that his teacher, the Lubliner Rebbe proclaimed him to be the *yesod*, the basis of all *rebbeim*. The Kozhnitzer Maggid once posed a question to the Lubliner Rebbe pertaining to the *Zohar*. The Lubliner Rebbe responded by saying that Reb Duvid of Lelov was the only one capable of answering the question.

The Lelover Rebbe had three sons whose names, Avigdor, Moshe and Nechemiah, as the Yehudi Hakodesh noted, formed the word *Amen*. Leah, the Lelover Rebbe's fourth child, was married to the grandson of the Tosefos Yom Tov

and the Bach, Reb Yaakov Meir ben Elyakim of Cracow, or Krakowski.

Reb Moshe, later to become the son-in-law of the Yehudi Hakodesh, never saw the outside world until he was thirteen. Until that time, the only way Reb Duvid permitted his son outdoors was with a blindfold. When Moshe was thirteen, Reb Duvid said, "You have had a *nishmas ilui*, a soul of genius, and now you have a *nishmas gitte yid*, a soul of a good Jew; now you may be permitted to see the world."

After Reb Duvid was *niftar*, Reb Moshe and Reb Yitzchak Vorker, whom the Lelover Rebbe had raised as his own, searched for a Rebbe to fill the spiritual void that resulted with the passing of Reb Duvid. After months of searching, they arrived at the home of Reb Mottel of Chernobyl.

"Where are you from?" Reb Mottel asked.

"I come from Zhsurig," Reb Yitzchak replied.

Reb Mottel had never heard of that little town and turned to Reb Moshe. "And you? Where are you from?"

"I come from Lelov."

"In that case," Reb Mottel said. "I have a story to tell you. After my father Reb Nachum passed away, he came to me in a dream every night to deliver a *shiur*. Night after night, my father came to me in my sleep to deliver complete, detailed *shiurim*. Then he stopped appearing. I did not know what had happened, why he had stopped coming. I thought I had done something wrong and began to do *teshuvah* for some sin I may have committed. For forty days, I spent my hours in repentant prayer, yet no matter how fervently I prayed, my father did not reappear in my dreams. Finally, on the forty-first night, my father appeared again. 'My son,' he said. 'You have not sinned. I did not stop coming to you because of a sin. I stopped coming because a *tzaddik*, a *kedosh elyon*, Reb Duvid

Lelover, was *niftar*. All of Heaven assembled to honor him, and the encomiums lasted forty nights. That is the reason I could not come to you.'"

After hearing the story, Reb Yitzchak Vorker said, "This is his son, Reb Moshe of Lelov."

Reb Moshe, the son of the holy man thus honored in Heaven, was the second Lelover Rebbe.

Reb Moshe eventually emigrated to Eretz Yisrael, and before his journey, thousands of men, women and children came to Pshedbusch to receive one last *berachah*. At the *gezeigenung*, the farewell, Reb Moshe approached Reb Shlomo of Radomsk, one of his students, and asked to be blessed.

Reb Shlomo was aghast and started to cry. "How can *I* bless you? How can I bless a *rebbe*?"

"I command you to bless me," Reb Moshe said. "You're a *kohein*. Bless me."

Reb Shlomo did as the Rebbe bade him, crying throughout the prayer, and the assembled *chassidim* cried along.

"Why are you crying?" Reb Moshe chastised them. "You know I'm going to Eretz Yisrael, yet you cry! I wish you farewell, but you should know that there was a *Meseches Reb Duvid Lelover* that no one ever knew about, that no one knows, that no one will know until *Mashiach* comes, and there was a *Meseches Reb Moshe Lelover* also."

The Rebbe turned in a complete circle in front of the *chassidim*. "Take a good look at me," he said. "The image will be of good use to you."

The *chassidim* were inconsolable. "You're still crying?" the Rebbe said. "Isn't it enough that I'm leaving you Reb Shlomo Rabinowitz of Radomsk?"

Reb Shlomo Rabinowitz of Radomsk, whose *Sefer Tiferes Shlomo* can be found in virtually every *beis midrash* and

chassidic home, established the Radomsker dynasty of great *tzaddikim* and prolific writers. His son Rabbi Avraham Yissachar was the author of *Chessed l'Avraham.* His grandson Reb Yechezkel wrote *Kenesses Yechezkel.* And his great grandson Shlomo Chanoch Hakohen Rabinowitz was our Rebbe.

Reb Shlomo Chanoch initially refused to succeed Reb Yechezkel as *rebbe.* Only upon the insistence of the Belzer and Chortkover Rebbes did he assume the leadership of the Radomsker *chassidim* in 1911.

Next to the *chinuch* I received from my parents and *rebbeim,* no one had a more profound influence on my life than the Radomsker Rebbe. The Radomsker Rebbe was a great leader of Polish Jews and engendered enthusiasm for Torah and *chassidus* in the hearts of tens of thousands. A mere glimpse at the Radomsker Rebbe's face made one realize that one was in the presence of the holy.

Although the Radomsker Rebbe's knowledge and understanding of Torah, *Halachah* and *Kabbalah* were formidable, he was deeply humble and accessible to the plainest of men, to help, to encourage, to console. The Rebbe had two burning desires—to serve Hashem with every fiber of his being and to help every Jew. His *chassidim* responded by flocking to him in masses, clinging to him with matchless devotion, making Radomsk one of the foremost *chassidic* movements in Poland.

The Rebbe suffered greatly from the ravages of an advanced case of diabetes, yet his illness did not keep him from any of his missions or from his beloved *chassidim.* His physician worked around the multitudes to administer insulin shots immediately after the Rebbe recited the *Hamotzi* blessing on bread.

The Rebbe frequently had to travel to Berlin for his

treatment by diabetes specialists. On his visits to Berlin, he would stay at the home of Reb Hirsch Leib Koschitzky, one of my father's closest friends. On one occasion, after the Rebbe had undergone major surgery, Reb Hirsch Leib's young daughter, Reizel, was stricken with a general paralysis that left her unable to speak. A chief neurologist reported that nothing could be done for her.

The Radomsker Rebbe was notified immediately.

"Tell the parents not to worry," he said with confidence. "She will have a *refuah sheleimah* and live a normal life. She will get married, have children and be a healthy mother."

The Rebbe's *berachah* was fulfilled. Reizel recovered and grew up to be a healthy young lady. When the time came for her to get married, the Rebbe himself suggested a suitable match. Reizel married Reb Avraham Yaakov Rabinowitz of Kshanov, a relative of the Rebbe, and together they raised a wonderful family. Sadly, they were all murdered by the Germans.

On another occasion, the Rebbe's advice was sought in a case involving a young woman, Rivkah Horowitz, the daughter of Reb Yisrael Moshe Koschitzky. Rivkah fell ill with a rapidly spreading and very painful inflammation of the skin. Fifty years before the discovery of antibiotics, a *roiz*, as the disease is called in Yiddish, was a life-threatening disease.

Rivkah was rushed to a hospital in Breslau, Germany, where the doctors wanted to amputate her leg immediately because the inflammation was spreading and would affect vital organs. Rivkah's parents insisted the surgery be put off until they could notify the Radomsker Rebbe.

The Radomsker Rebbe instructed Rivkah's sister, Frumet Besser, to take oil left over from *Chanukah* and massage it into the affected leg.

Mrs. Besser arrived with the little vial and rushed to Rivkah's bedside.

The surgeon immediately protested. "I will not permit such hocus-pocus in this hospital. We're going ahead with the surgery tomorrow morning. We practice modern medicine in the hospital, not voodoo."

"Look, doctor," Mrs. Besser argued. "What do we have to lose? If it doesn't work, you still have time to amputate. Meanwhile, why don't we try it?"

The doctor reluctantly gave in, muttering silently under his breath.

A nurse administered the ointment of the *menorah* oil, and the patient spent a restful night. The following morning, when Rivkah was placed on the operating table, the surgeon discovered that the leg was completely healed.

"Nurse, roll the patient back to her room," the surgeon ordered, shaking his head in disbelief. "She is ready to be discharged."

When the Rebbe heard the good news, he explained that the *menorah* oil was an old anodyne for a *roiz* that dated back to the Baal Shem Tov. "It's really very simple," he said. "In *Maoz Tzur* we say, '*Uminosar kankanim naaseh neis lashoshanim.* And from the remnants of the flasks a miracle was wrought for the roses.' So you see, with the oil left over from last *Chanukah*, a miracle was performed for the *roiz*."

Today, Rivkah lives in Tel Aviv, a grandmother and great-grandmother many times over.

Before counseling a *chassid*, the Rebbe would *daven* for guidance from Hashem. His thoughts and actions were governed by an uncompromising adherence to the truth of that Divine guidance, and he did not balk from reversing his advice when he thought he had erred. Once, a young *chassid*

travelled from Sanz to Krenice, a famous resort where the Rebbe was vacationing, for advice regarding a vexing problem. The Rebbe saw the young man in conference; a few days later, however, the Rebbe dispatched a special messenger, asking the young man to return to Krenice.

"After thinking it over," said the Rebbe, "I concluded that I should have advised you differently. Please ignore my original recommendation."

The Radomsker Rebbe took a fatherly interest in every *chassid's* welfare, and every *chassid* felt as if he was the Rebbe's only son. He remembered all the names of the children of his *chassidim.*

One day, a *chassid,* who was the father of ten children, had an audience with the Rebbe and handed him his *kvittel,* a request of prayer on which one lists the names of all the members of one's family. After glancing at the *kvittel,* the Rebbe returned it to the petitioner.

"Didn't you forget to list the name of one of your children?" the Rebbe chided with a twinkle in his eye.

The *chassid* was overwhelmed. How could the Rebbe of tens of thousands of *chassidim* keep in mind the names of all his ten children?

The Radomsker Rebbe's love of each Jew was of such magnitude that he went out of his way to reach estranged Jews, encouraging them with gentle words, never reproaching or lecturing them. With kindness and empathy, he brought back many lost souls to Torah and *mitzvos.*

On one of his frequent visits to Berlin to consult his physician, the Radomsker Rebbe walked on the main street in the downtown section accompanied by Reb David Koschitzky. On the way, they passed Tietz's, the largest department store in Berlin.

"Let's go up to the stationery department," the Rebbe suggested.

A bizarre request, Reb David thought, but he complied with the Rebbe's wish and led the way. At the stationery department, the Rebbe tested a number of pens, writing on a scrap of paper the word *Amalek*, erasing it, over and over again. The Rebbe meant to fulfill thereby the *mitzvah* of *timcheh es zecher Amalek*, the commandment to obliterate the memory of Amalek. (*Devarim* 25:19)

Suddenly, the Rebbe said, "Look, David. Did you see who is passing behind us just now?"

Reb David dimly recognized the rapidly-approaching young salesman. During the ensuing conversation, Reb David realized that the young man had been a former Radomsker *chassid* who had been swept along by the modernity of Jewish life in Berlin; the young man had discarded *Yiddishkeit*, even desecrating *Shabbos* without compunction.

The Rebbe spoke to the young salesman affably and invited him to come and visit him at Reb David's house. That same afternoon, during a lengthy conversation, the Rebbe gently persuaded the wayward *chassid* to return to Torah. The young man became a wholehearted *baal teshuvah* and remained faithful to Torah and *mitzvos* for the rest of his life.

Only then did Reb David fully understand the reason the Rebbe had insisted on visiting a department store in the heart of Berlin.

The Radomsker Rebbe never sought honor, but as the Sages say, "He who runs from honor finds himself pursued by honors." The Rebbe enjoyed the respect and admiration of all the *chassidic rebbeim* and great Torah authorities.

My father once told me that while vacationing in the Marienbad spa, he had escorted the Radomsker Rebbe to a

seudas mitzvah arranged in honor of the venerable Belzer Rebbe, Rabbi Yissachar Dov Rokeach. Despite his advanced age, the Belzer Rebbe rose from his seat to greet the Radomsker Rebbe who was his junior by many decades and honored him with a seat at the head of the table.

There did not seem to be a person who was not in awe of the Radomsker Rebbe. Even those who were not Radomsker *chassidim* knew of the greatness of the Rebbe. In the Rebbe's hometown of Sosnowice lived a fascinating personality, Rabbi Yitzchak Elimelech Singer, a descendant of the great Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk and the Yid Hakadosh of Pshischa and a son-in-law of Rabbi Moshe of Wolbrom. His *Zichron Elimelech*, containing discourses on themes in the *Gemara*, evince his wide-ranging scholarship and keen mind.

Reb Elimelech'l, as he was affectionately called, was a wellspring of anecdotes about the Radomsker Rebbe that reveal the Rebbe's exceptional character. Invariably, Reb Elimelech'l introduced his stories with a standard formula.

"You know that I am not a Radomsker *chassid*," he would say. "But you who are—you have no idea what a great *tzaddik* your Rebbe is. Let me tell you a story about him from my own personal experience.

"Once, on the night of *Erev Rosh Hashanah*, I entered the Rebbe's *beis midrash*. It was three o'clock in the morning, and all was quiet. I took a *Gemara* off the shelf and started learning. Suddenly the door swung open, and the Rebbe appeared.

" 'What are you doing here in the middle of the night, Reb Elimelech'l?' the Rebbe asked. 'You are no youngster any more. You ought to get a good night's sleep and guard your health.'

"'How can I go to sleep when the *Yom Hadin*, the Day of

Judgment, is staring me in the face? Allow me to ask you a question, Radomsker Rebbe. Everyone knows that you are not in the best of health and under constant doctor's care; why aren't you sleeping at this hour of the night?'

"'You yourself just said that *Rosh Hashanah* is close at hand,' the Rebbe answered. 'And the thought of the upcoming *Yamim Noraim* simply does not let me sleep.'

"Having said this, the Rebbe seated himself beside me, and together we probed the mysteries of the Torah, uplifting and purifying our souls in anticipation of the holy day of *Rosh Hashanah*."

Reb Elimelech'l enjoyed telling us another story about the Radomsker Rebbe's presence at the *levayah* of Reb Yitzchak Glickman, the *dayan* of Sosnowice.

"I was there myself. I saw it with my own eyes," Reb Elimelech'l would begin. "Scores of *rebbeim* from near and far had come to pay homage to the departed sage. They all escorted the *niftar* to the cemetery, riding in comfortable coaches. Except for the Radomsker Rebbe. He walked the entire distance on foot.

"The Rebbe could have easily afforded the cost of all the carriages in the procession, and he was surely the most frail and sickly of the entire assemblage; still, with total disregard of discomfort and pain, he used all his energy to fulfill the *mitzvah* of escorting the departed on foot to his final resting place.

"*Nu, rabboisai*," Reb Elimelech'l ended his story. "And you thought that you knew what a great Rebbe you have."

Many stories about the Radomsker Rebbe still circulate among *chassidim*. One brief tale in particular is fascinating because it reveals the innate benevolence of the Rebbe.

Two *chassidic* businessmen, Reuven and Shimon, were

embroiled in a financial dispute.

"If you don't agree to my terms," Reuven threatened, "my *rebbe* will invoke a curse on your head."

Shimon, who was a Radomsker *chassid*, reported the threat to the Rebbe.

In dismay, the Rebbe turned to his brother-in-law, Rabbi David Halberstam of Zmigrod.

"Did you hear this, Reb David'l?" he said. "Please write a note to this *rebbe*, telling him that I myself am a *kohein*, and I only give *berachos*. I only *bentch Yidden*."

In 1978, when I had the honor and privilege of gathering and publishing the writings of the Radomsker Rebbe, I had this story in mind when I named them *Birkas Shlomo*, the Blessings of Shlomo, for the Rebbe's foremost desire in life was to be a wellspring of *berachos* for every single Jew.

But the full magnificence of the Radomsker Rebbe became manifest in the final chapter of his life. While the fires of the holocaust were burning in Poland, the Radomsker *chassidim* in England devised a scheme whereby the Rebbe was to be flown to safety in a private plane. When the plan was broached to the Rebbe, he adamantly refused to consider it.

"*Besoch ami ani yosheiv*," the Rebbe said. "I will stay with my children. I will not leave my *chassidim* to fend for themselves. I will share their lot. Whatever happens to them will happen to me."

The Rebbe refused to bow to the German demands that he shave off his beard and perform slave labor. He stayed in Warsaw, at the house of Reb Nassan Pinchas Ehrlich, until *Shabbos*, *Parshas Eikev*, on 18 *Av*, 1942, when the Nazis burst in. They killed the Rebbe, the Rebbetzin, their only daughter Reizel and her husband, the *gaon*, Reb David Moishle. Scores of Jews living in the Rebbe's house were also murdered.

Reb Dov Berish Ehrlich, the son of Reb Nassan Pinchas, miraculously escaped the massacre, and rumor had it that he managed to bring the Rebbe's remains to *kevurah* alongside the *kever* of the Novominsker Rebbe in the Gensher cemetery in Warsaw. However, when I visited Reb Dov Berish at his Brooklyn home, he vehemently denied the report.

"I ran around like a *versamte maus*, like a poisoned mouse," Reb Dov Berish said. "I was trying to save my own life. I have no idea what happened to the Rebbe's remains. '*Velo yada ish es kevuraso*. No man knows the place where he was buried, even to this day.' (*Devarim* 34:6) The rumor is absolutely false."

The Rebbe's tragic death brought to an end the illustrious Radomsker dynasty. Although half a century has elapsed since we suffered this loss, the wounds are still fresh and the pain intense. But through our Torah study and our carrying on his precious legacy, the holy *neshamah* of this *tzaddik* lives on. May Hashem avenge his blood, as well as the blood of all those martyrs who gave their lives *al kiddush Hashem*.

CHAPTER 3

Darkness at Noon

AT THE AGE OF FIFTY, MY FATHER WAS A VIBRANT MAN IN robust health. He was a captain of business and a leading figure in the Katowice Jewish community, admired and respected by all. As the right hand and confidant of the Radomsker Rebbe, he was the epitome of a dedicated *chassid*. And so, his untimely demise came as a thunderclap on a clear day. In retrospect, however, several incidents during his last days seemed to foretell his death.

Eight days before my father was *niftar*, he went to Radomsk to commemorate the *yahrzeit* of the Knesses Yechezkel. So many *chassidim* wanted to accompany the Radomsker Rebbe to his father's *kever*, that the *kehillah* chartered a special, all-Jewish train from Katowice through Sosnowice to Radomsk.

On the train back to Sosnowice, the *chassidim* crowded

around the Rebbe to shake his hand and say good-bye. The Radomsker Rebbe urged everyone to take his seat, announcing that he would walk through the train.

My father accompanied the Radomsker Rebbe through the train. As they made their way through the narrow aisles, the conductor approached the Rebbe. My father gave the conductor twenty *zlotys*, because it was the custom to appease conductors.

The following Sunday, the Rebbe instructed Yechezkel Lazar, his *shammash*, to repay my father. My father, in turn, instructed the *shammash* to give ten of the *zlotys* to Bikur Cholim and ten to the Kesser Torah Yeshivah.

The *shammash* later told us, "Usually, it took days, weeks, months to do Reb Shimon's bidding, but that time, I carried out his wishes immediately, that same night."

A second incident that seemed to foretell the loss of our dear father involved Reb Yankele Abbes, one of our favorite house guests. Reb Yankele had a long-established custom of spending six *Shabbosim* with the Radomsker Rebbe. Rather than journey directly to Sosnowice, he would stop in Katowice on Thursday and visit with us for a while. Then he would spend the entire night learning, as he had been doing for forty years. Friday morning, Reb Yankele would make the short trip to Sosnowice and return again on Sunday to spend the night in our home before returning to Kshanov.

Reb Yankele Abbes was with us Sunday, a week after the *yahrzeit* of the Knesses Yechezkel. After supper, my father took him upstairs to Reb Shmuel Nassan Shollowitz. My father's purpose was to help Reb Yankele, who needed money to marry off his two daughters.

During the evening, however, Reb Yankele could not resist regaling my father and Reb Shmuel with stories about

Reb Avraham Yosef Igra, the Zheliner Rebbe. For years, he had been in a childless marriage with the daughter of Reb Mordechai, the Nadverner Rebbe. Years elapsed, yet there was no progeny. The Zheliner Rebbe's wife approached her father and said. "You help all your *chassidim*; why can't you help me?"

The Nadverner Rebbe said, "I cannot help if you married a *malach*, an angel."

The Zheliner Rebbe had lived all his life in Kshanov. During World War I, Reb Shimele Biderman, a great-grandson of the Lelover Rebbe came from Jerusalem to Krakow. The day Turkey broke its alliance with Austria, Reb Shimele went to Kshanov and was immediately arrested as a Palestinian national. The *kvittlech* he carried in his luggage seemed just cause for accusing him of espionage.

After days of interrogation, the *kehillah* finally secured his release. When Reb Shimele was freed, the Zheliner Rebbe said, "A town that can arrest a great-grandson of Reb Duvid Lelover is not a town in which I can live." A few months later, the Zheliner passed away in Krakow, to where he had moved almost immediately after the arrest and release of the Lelover Rebbe's great-grandson.

After this introduction, Reb Yankele Abbes told a story that had been passed down from the Berdichever to the Zheliner Rebbe.

During the High Holy Days one year, Heaven was aghast at the infamous stories Satan had collected against the Jews, in particular against one man. The angel Michael went in search of some good deed which would save him. He found one item that might proffer salvation to Satan's exemplar: this Jew had given a woman with seven children one ruble that prevented their starvation. The one meritorious item

tipped the Heavenly scales in favor of the otherwise sinful man. Satan raged that a mountain of sins was outweighed by one good deed and searched for one sin that would tip the scales back to the detriment of the man. He discovered that the year before this great philanthropic event, the same man had stolen one ruble from a starving widow and her seven children. As a result of his theft, the family died of starvation. The stolen ruble was placed on the scale of sins, yet the ruble given in charity still had more weight. Satan indignantly asked why the stolen ruble did not outweigh the other. The angel answered, "The ruble given in charity was intended to save the life of the family; the ruble stolen was intended as theft, not as murder."

When Reb Yankele Abbes finished his story, Reb Shmuel Nassan Shollowitz turned to my father and asked, "How many rubles have you already given, Shimon? You have nothing to fear."

That night, my father made a *siyum* of *Mishnayos* and started anew *Mesechte Berachos* which ends with the statement, "Just as a person is obligated to say a blessing over good things, he is also required to say a blessing over bad things."

Upon reaching that statement, my father said, "That's one thing I have always found difficult to understand."

Reb Yankele had an illustrative story to help my father.

Two brothers, Reb Shmelke Horowitz of Nikolsburg and Reb Pinchas, the Baal Haflaah, approached the Maggid of Mezritch and asked him to explain that very saying. The Maggid directed them to the *beis midrash* where they would find the Rebbe Reb Zisha, who would explain the *pasuk.*

At the *beis midrash*, they discovered that the Rebbe Reb Zisha was an emaciated figure, dressed in tatters. The two brothers posed their question. "Are you sure the Maggid sent

you to me?" asked Reb Zisha in wonderment. "You must ask someone else, someone who has suffered, because I myself have never experienced anything but good."

The brothers knew full well that Reb Zisha had experienced nothing but misfortune all his life and understood why the Maggid had sent them to this starving old man for an explanation of the puzzling statement.

The morning after Reb Yankele told my father this story, the three of us went to *Shacharis*. When we had finished *davening*, my father said to me, "Go on ahead with Reb Yankele. I'll be home soon."

That was the last time I heard my father speak.

Strangely enough, on the way home, Reb Yankele Abbes told me the following story:

After a lesson on Divine Providence, the Baal Shem Tov went with his *talmidim* into a forest one bright summer day. As they walked along, he pointed to a falling leaf. He picked it up and turned it over. On the back of the leaf was a tiny worm. "See," the Baal Shem Tov said. "Everything is under Divine Providence. The worm had asked Hashem for help, for it had been atop this leaf, burning in the sun. Hashem caused the leaf to fall from the tree top-side down to protect the worm from the heat."

I glowed with Reb Yankele's story, but it had no personal connection to me as yet. Nor did I consider it as we sat at home waiting for my father to return. Hours elapsed. By noon, we sensed that something was wrong.

Then, a neighbor came in and brought us the bad news. "Mrs. Krakowski," he said hesitantly, "I don't know how to tell you this, but your husband is in the hospital. I'm terribly sorry."

We rushed to the hospital. On our way there, we met

Rosa. Her ashen face and bleary eyes told us everything. Then she said, "*Baruch Dayan Haemes*. Blessed is the True Judge."

A disgruntled tenant had murdered my father.

My father owned a nine-story apartment building with thirty-three apartments. Although my father had an enormous mortgage, he was considerate to tenants who found it difficult to pay the rent. For some, he lowered the rent; others did not pay at all. Over a period of the first four to five years for example, eighteen people stopped paying rent because they were poor.

One man, however, who had the means to pay rent, simply stopped paying. Herman Beitner, the manager of the building, went to court and got an eviction order, effective that Monday, the twenty-seventh day of *Cheshvan*.

Herman Beitner had not yet arrived with the eviction notice, but when my father heard about it, he said, "I cannot allow a Jew to be evicted from his apartment."

He decided he would talk to the tenant and come to some agreement. Perhaps, he would lower the rent; perhaps, he would allow the tenant to pay the arrears slowly.

He went to the man's apartment and said, "Let's go into another room where we can talk in private. Maybe we can make some settlement."

The man pulled out a knife and thrust it into my father's heart.

The attack was without provocation. It was beyond our ken, inexplicable to all except as Divine Providence.

Mother was overcome with grief. With Katie and Rosa at her side, she wept uncontrollably, unable to comprehend the suddenness with which her husband had been taken. Our lives were shattered that dark noon. How would we go on?

Even today, I am overcome by pain at the recollection of

the dreadful event. I adored my father; he was the paragon of Torah and *midos tovos*, the model I have tried to emulate all my life. In retrospect, I am consoled by the thought that Father accomplished so much good in his brief life that Hashem took him into Gan Eden and spared him the agony of the devastation that lay ahead.

News of my father's passing made a tremendous impact on the Jewish community of Katowice, since he had won the love and respect of all who knew him. Upon hearing the tragic news, my grandfather, Reb Yaakov Meir Krakowski, rushed to Katowice to make the agonizing arrangements for the *kevurah* of his son in the Sosnowice *beis olam*. Although utterly devastated by the dreadful loss, my grandfather remained strong, fortifying us to carry on Father's legacy.

The *levayah* was an unparalleled public outpouring of grief. Thousands of people lined the route of the cortege to bid a last farewell to their beloved Reb Shimon Krakowski. Great rabbis, including Rabbi Fogelman and Rabbi Chameides of Katowice delivered the *hespedim*. In a memorable eulogy, Rabbi Yosef Blumenfeld, the Koenigshuetter Rav, quoted the *Gemara* in *Berachos* (9a):

"*Kedai hu Rabbi Shimon lismoch alav beshaas hadechak*," he said tearfully. "Rabbi Shimon Krakowski can be relied on in an emergency."

After the *levayah*, the president of the *chevrah kadisha* approached my grandfather.

"Your son was the pillar of the community," he told him. "He was a beacon of light to our community and the entire region. All his life, he gave selflessly of himself, liberally donating his time and money, never asking for anything in return. His passing has left a gaping void; we cannot begin to repay him for all the good he has done for Katowice and

Sosnowice Jewry, and we will accept no payment for his *kevurah*."

My grandfather insisted on paying a symbolic fifty *zlotys* for the most distinguished grave site in the cemetery, next to the mausoleum of Reb Itzikel Glickman.

The Radomsker Rebbe had been so close to my father that he mourned as if he had lost his own brother. For three days he spoke to no one, refusing to come out of his chambers. When the Rebbe finally did emerge, his eyes reflected unspeakable sadness. With a heavy heart he entered our home for *nichum aveilim*, accompanied by his son-in-law, to offer consolation to the bereaved. He said very little, but his sorrowful expression bespoke his inner torment. He was one with us, sharing our anguish and our loss.

"Your father was an *ehrlicher mann*," the Rebbe said. "It meant a lot to him to know that his children's lives are devoted to Torah and *avodah*."

The Rebbe's words gave us solace in our darkest hour.

About a month after the *shloshim*, the initial thirty-day mourning period, the Radomsker Rebbe dispatched Uncle Pinchas Pelman to our house, requesting that my mother send along my father's coin collection. Bewildered, my mother did as he bade. About a week later, Pinchas Pelman returned to our house with the coins and relayed the Rebbe's message: she was to give each of her children a few of the coins as a *segulah*, as a talisman.

I was never without that coin until it was ripped from my hands by the Nazis a few years later.

CHAPTER 4

A Shidduch with Royalty

THE RADOMSKER REBBE WAS A TOWER OF STRENGTH TO my mother and the family after my father's passing. We knew we could turn to him whenever major or minor problems cropped up, and we could count on him to lend a sympathetic ear and assist us with wise counsel and helpful deeds.

My father had always relied on the Rebbe's advice and would not dream of making a major decision without consulting the Rebbe, whether it concerned business affairs or family matters. In particular, when my sisters and brothers came of age, it was the Rebbe who selected the prospective spouses and with great sensitivity brought the *shidduchim* to a happy conclusion.

Ours was an especially close-knit family, but of all my

brothers and sisters I felt closest to Rosa and Pinchas, particularly to Pinchas. Perhaps it was the admiration of a youngster for an older brother, for Pinchas was a likable, outgoing boy and an excellent student, the personification of everything I dreamed of becoming. I had been a young child when David, Moshe and Katie had married, too young to be privy to the sensitive whispers that culminated in an engagement and wedding. But I was older when Pinchas came of age to be married and more interested in the discussions that went on behind closed doors each time a prospective match was mentioned.

When my father had been alive, I had overheard him talking to my mother about a *shidduch* for Pinchas. The girl's name was Ruchtche Minditch, the granddaughter of Reb Mechel Leib Minditch, the Rebbe's own uncle. Father was very much in favor of the *shidduch* since the girl had an excellent reputation and was of outstanding lineage. But Mother was somewhat hesitant.

My father had tried to convince my mother that the *shidduch* would be ideal. Reb Mechel Leib was a great *talmid chacham*, a *mekubal*, a grandson of the Nashchizer Rebbe and a nephew of the Trisker Maggid. Everyone had been of the opinion that Ruchtche was a splendid girl, and the Rebbe felt that the two were well-suited to one another. What more could my mother possibly want?

My mother had agreed that Ruchtche must indeed be a fine girl, and she trusted the Rebbe's judgment. Nevertheless, she was of the mind that a *rebbe* should be matched with a *rebbe* and a *chassid* with a *chassid*. If Pinchas were to marry Ruchtche, he would be marrying into a *rebbe's* family, akin to marrying into royalty with all the ceremony that entailed. To be sure, it would mean honor and prestige, but it would also

entail great responsibility. My mother had not been certain about Pinchas's readiness for such responsibility and wanted more time to consider the matter before making a commitment.

The *shidduch* had been left up in the air and was not discussed any more. Following my father's passing, my sister Katie, who was married to Reb Yecheskel Najer, gave birth to her first child, the first grandson to be named after my father. The *simchah* gave a lift to the entire family, and my mother, who suffered the loss most acutely, was able to smile again.

Excitement mounted as the day of the *bris* approached. The Rebbe had sent word that he had accepted the invitation to be *sandek* for the grandchild of two distinguished Radomsker *chassidim*, my father and Reb Simchah Kalman Najer.

On the morning of the *bris*, our relatives and friends crowded the living room. It seemed as if all of Katowice wanted to share our *simchah*. The living room buzzed with small talk, but a respectful hush fell over the crowd when the Rebbe made his entrance with his family and his retainers.

He was led to the special armchair prepared for the *sandek*, but he declined the seat and made an announcement whose sensitivity moved my mother to tears. He suggested that the *bris* be held in the grandfather's private chamber.

Two weeks later, the Rebbe sent a personal message that he planned to attend the *pidyon haben* and that we should not invite a large crowd. We were all flabbergasted, since such a thing was practically unheard of. Since the Rebbe was a *kohein*, people usually came to him for the *pidyon*, and here, he was offering to come to us! We tried to comply with his wishes, but in spite of our efforts, there was still a large turnout for the *seudah*. After the *seudah*, he asked that my

mother be called in, and in the presence of the assembled guests, he made an astonishing remark. "With the *Aibeshter's* help, this *simchah* will lead to further *simchos*. The girl I mentioned some time ago is truly a fine girl. You'll be very happy with her. It was Shimon's wish to do this *shidduch*, and I urge you to go ahead with it." In view of the personal nature of this remark, we now understood why the Rebbe had requested a small turnout.

Immediately after the *pidyon haben*, my mother had a long talk with Pinchas, and the match was concluded. And so, with the Rebbe's blessing, one *simchah* led to another. The Rebbe himself made the wedding and the *sheva berachos* in his house, as though Ruchtche had been his daughter.

Ruchtche won our hearts from the start. She was deeply religious, intelligent and well-versed in Torah as well as in secular subjects. She was one of the family, a sister who shared our sorrow and our happiness which reached a peak a year after the marriage when Ruchtche gave birth to a little boy. He was named Yisrael David.

Ruchtche's grandfather, Reb Mechel Leib, was one of the foremost members of the *kehillah* of Czenstechov. Throughout Poland he was known for his wide-ranging knowledge in *Gemara* and *halachah*. In addition, he was a Kabbalist of the first order, thoroughly familiar with the *Zohar*, the writings of the holy Ari, Rabbi Moshe Cordovero and other Kabbalists. His insight into everything, from the mundane to the spiritual, was uncanny. He also had an extensive knowledge of applied Kabbalah, having delved into the mysteries of the esoteric *nistar*, the hidden aspects of Torah.

This extraordinary man was a connoisseur of fine objects of religious art, and he had assembled a collection of antique *leichters*, *besamim* boxes, *megillos*, hand-illuminated *Haggados*,

shofars, ancient manuscripts and a large assortments of beautiful *bechers*. But the object closest to his heart, his most precious heirloom, was a massive silver *menorah* that had once belonged to the Rizhiner Rebbe. The *menorah* weighed about a hundred pounds and was ornately adorned with handcrafted lions, eagles and other creatures. He placed this *menorah* in a sack and left it with Ruchtche; it remained with her until the Germans ransacked our home and stole it. Sadly, the priceless *menorah* has never been recovered.

Reb Mechel Leib had a small leather travelling case, which greatly aroused my curiosity. What enchanted objects did it contain? Was it filled with diamonds and pearls? What would happen to me if I peeked inside? Would I be struck blind? My youthful imagination conjured up all kinds of bizarre possibilities.

Reb Mechel Leib took note of my interest, and on his next visit, he opened the case and took out a small box. Inside was a saucer of fine porcelain china, decorated with a single red rose and a ribbon.

"This plate belonged to my great-grandfather, Reb Mordechai of Neshchiz, one of the great *chassidic* masters," Reb Mechel explained. "With the help of this plate, he was able to revive the dead. That's why I always keep it near me."

One night, Reb Mechel let me guard the case while he had to go on an errand. Glancing around furtively, I opened it, gingerly took out the box with the precious plate and ran with it to my aunt Rosa Pelman. Tante Rosa and Uncle Pinchas were childless, and this *segulah* would surely help her. I quickly poured some milk into the saucer and held it out to my aunt. "Drink this, Tante Rosa," I said, explaining to her the source of the plate. "It is a miraculous plate." She eagerly drank from it, but sadly, the *segulah* never worked for her. She

and her husband were not blessed with children of their own, but they adopted and lovingly raised orphaned children whom they imbued with dedication to Torah and *mitzvos*.

When Reb Mechel Leib was well into his eighties, he suffered a stroke. The Radomsker Rebbe was alerted, and *Tehillim* and special *tefillos* were said around the clock for his speedy recovery.

Despite his critical condition, Reb Mechel Leib remained conscious and summoned Ruchtche to his bedside. "Please bring me the *gartel* of my great-grandfather," he said. "It is a powerful *segulah*."

Frantically, Ruchtche and her mother searched for the *gartel* of the Neshchizer Rebbe, but it had vanished without a trace. Meanwhile, Reb Mechel Leib's condition rapidly deteriorated. Still, the special *gartel* could not be found, and no other *gartel* would do.

In frustration, the family quietly went through the motions of celebrating *Pesach*, fearing the worst. Miraculously, right after *Pesach*, the *gartel* appeared. With his last ounce of strength, Reb Mechel Leib motioned his instructions as to how the *gartel* should be placed upon him, and the next morning, he was healed.

Reb Mechel Leib and Ruchtche were extremely close to one another, and she inherited many of her grandfather's noble characteristics. She had a keen intelligence, yet she was humble. She was an *eishes chayil*, a woman of valor, who created an idyllic marriage for Pinchas, just as the Rebbe had predicted. Ruchtche and her little boy Yisrael David offered their lives *al kiddush Hashem* five months after Pinchas had passed away after a protracted illness in the ghetto. *Hashem yikom damam*. May Hashem avenge their deaths.

CHAPTER 5

The Kesser Torah Yeshivos

ONE OF THE GREATEST ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE REBBE OF Radomsk was the establishment of thirty-seven Kesser Torah *yeshivos* throughout Poland and Galicia, financed out of his private funds. The *yeshivos* were directed and supervised by Rabbi David Moshe Rabinowitz, the Rebbe's son-in-law and cousin, a Talmudist and *Halachist* of prodigious greatness. His selfless character and the clarity of his expositions attracted the most outstanding students from Galicia, Poland and even distant Lithuania. In choosing *roshei yeshivah*, he disregarded Radomsker affiliation but sought rather excellent qualifications; his selections included Reb Shimale Zhelikhover who later became *rosh yeshivah* of Lublin, Reb Yisrael Yitzchak Pikarsky, who later became *rosh yeshivah* of Lubavitch and Reb Shmuel Aharon Miller, the Labever

Rav. Reb Moishele, as he was affectionately called, delivered a series of high-level *shiurim* himself to a group of exceptional *talmidim*, who had to pass a rigorous test before being admitted.

This group of students lived in Kibbutz Govoha, a special campus consisting of spacious dormitories, a large dining room and a kitchen. Rabbi Yosef Lasser, the *dayan* of Tarnow and an eminent *talmid chacham*, was the *rosh yeshivah.*

These *talmidim* were not only outstanding scholastically but also models of ethical behavior. They were kind, helpful, patient and respectful of their parents, *rebbeim* and each other. Their characters had been honed by Reb Moishele.

Reb Moishele cherished each of his students, and not surprisingly, the *talmidim* reciprocated with an outpouring of love for their *nasi.*

Twice each week, on Tuesdays and Fridays, Reb Moishele would give a dazzling *pilpul shiur* in a hall overflowing with men eager to hear him construct an intellectual skyscraper, building *gag al gag*, a roof on top of a roof. People came from all over Europe to Sosnowice for the spiritual delight of listening to Reb Moishele's brilliant discourses.

"I was unaware that such a jewel existed in Poland," wrote the legendary Reb Chaim Ozer Grodzensky of Vilna after meeting Reb Moishele for the first time.

Rav Shmuel Engel of Radomiszla wrote about him in glowing terms in his *haskamah* to Reb Moishele's *Sefer Zivchei Kohein*, "Rarely are we privileged to find a *gaon* of his caliber in our midst."

The *gaon* Rav Menachem Ziemba of Warsaw also wrote about Reb Moishele in laudatory terms.

In the darkest hours of the Warsaw ghetto, Reb Moishele remained steadfast and undaunted. During the final days, he

and five students hid in a small room and immersed themselves in the study of *Mesechte Taanis* in compliance with a directive of the rabbis of Poland. The rabbis had convened a meeting at which they weighed the advisability of proclaiming a *taanis tzibbur*, a public fast, to arouse Hashem's compassion for His people. Because of the precarious health of the Jewish population, however, they agreed that instead of fasting, people should study *Mesechte Taanis*, the tractate dealing with the laws of fast days. Their decision was based on the saying of the Sages in *Menachos* 110a: "Whoever involves himself in the study of an offering is regarded as if he had actually brought an offering." The rabbis reasoned that, by the same token, whoever studies *Mesechte Taanis* and learns the laws of a fast is considered to have observed a fast.

Reb Moishele and his *talmidim* joined the *kedoshim* of the Warsaw ghetto who offered their lives *al kiddush Hashem*.

In the summer of 1935, my mother sent me and my brother Pinchas to spend a few weeks with my uncle in Krenice, a famous summer resort. The Radomsker Rebbe who also vacationing there at the time. On *Shabbos*, following *Shacharis*, I enjoyed a sumptuous meal at our hotel and then took a leisurely stroll along the tree-lined main street of the resort. As I admired the row of posh hotels, I heard beautiful singing coming from the distance. Dashing ahead, I came to Hotel Zhelazuwka, owned by Mr. Herbst, where an overflow of *chassidim* had spilled onto the broad veranda.

"What's going on?" I inquired.

"*Der Bobover Rebbe fihrt tish*," came the reply.

I felt a surge of excitement, an irrepressible desire to join in the exuberant singing, to get a glimpse of the Rebbe and hear his Torah discourse. I managed to make my way upstairs

and found standing room in the rear of the large dining hall. Even by craning my neck, I could not see the Rebbe, yet to my utter surprise, I was suddenly picked up, lifted above the sea of *shtreimlech*, passed from hand to hand until I found myself standing in front of the Bobover Rebbe.

"*Shalom aleichem*, Bobover Rav, *a gitten Shabbos*," I said, my voice shaking with emotion.

"What is your name?" the Rebbe asked.

My voice was barely audible when I answered, "Avraham Yissachar Krakowski."

The room was filled with hundreds of *chassidim*, and the Rebbe was singling me out!

"Do you remember that I stayed at your parents' house?" the Rebbe asked.

"I'm too young to remember," I replied. "But I heard about it."

I was overwhelmed. I was given the seat behind the Bobover Rebbe and his son Reb Shloime, the present Bobover Rebbe. I realized at once that the Rebbe, with great sensitivity, accorded me this honor to express his gratitude to my late father for the hospitality he had enjoyed at our home.

Presently, a large *kugel* was placed on the table. The Rebbe partook of a morsel and began to "*teil shirayim*," distribute small portions of the *kugel* to all the people—to everyone, that is, except me. I was mystified, but I kept quiet, of course, happy just to be sitting so near the Rebbe.

Soon it was time for *Birchas Hamazon*, and seven silver goblets were placed on our table, one for each of the seven men seated there.

"Bring one more *becher*, please," the Rebbe requested.

Everyone watched in amazement as an eighth *becher* was placed in front of me and filled with wine.

Pandemonium broke loose as people speculated wildly about the identity of that young *bachur* and the reason for his being singled out for such an honor. The Rebbe's son Reb Shloime rose to still the commotion. "You're probably wondering why the Rebbe gave him a *becher*," he said calmly. "Let me explain. You see, this *bachur* is a guest at a hotel where an elaborate *milchige shalosh seudos* will be served. The Rebbe did not give him from the *fleishige kugel*, because he did not want him to miss out on that feast. He is getting a *becher* of wine instead."

I was deeply touched by the Rebbe's sensitivity, suffused with a warm glow that sustained me for years to come.

I would need such sustenance in the trying days ahead. Every encounter I had with the *tzaddikim* in my youth, every lesson I had learned in Kesser Torah under Reb Moishele, every holy word I had heard from the Radomsker Rebbe, every memory I had of my father would be a priceless fortification for my soul in my days of travail.

It was 1935, the twilight of life as I knew it.

BOOK TWO

Shattered Lives

CHAPTER 6

Darkness Descends

BY 1935, ADOLF HITLER HAD ALREADY BEEN IN POWER AS Chancellor of Germany for two years, the entire German people having ecstatically acclaimed him as Fuhrer in 1933. The day of his rise to power marked the beginning of the end of European Jewry.

With methodical precision, Hitler carried out his program of world conquest according to the blueprint he had drawn in his manifesto *Mein Kampf*. It is a book which the civilized world dismissed as the mad ravings of a deranged mind, a miscalculation for which it paid a heavy price. Following his prearranged agenda, Hitler occupied the Saar Basin in 1935; in 1937, he then moved his army into the demilitarized Rhineland; and in March 1938, he annexed Austria in what became known as the *Anschluss*. Next came

the occupation of the Sudentenland section of Czechoslovakia. This takeover set the stage for the notorious Munich Conference where British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain caved in to Hitler's demands. On his return to London, Chamberlain initiated a policy of appeasement that led to the German occupation of Prague in March of 1939 and the seizure of the city of Danzig a few month later. Intoxicated with success, Hitler began to threaten Poland, and, after concluding a "non-aggression" treaty with his arch enemy, the Soviet Union, he launched his infamous *blitzkrieg* against Poland on Friday, September 1, 1939. Within six weeks, the German Wehrmacht crushed the Polish army. As a result, 3,250,000 Jews fell under German domination to be "destroyed, massacred and exterminated, young and old, children and women, and their possessions plundered." (*Esther* 3:13)

We followed the events leading up to the war and listened to Hitler's harangues. He spelled out in no uncertain terms what was in store for us: he would rid the entire world of the Jews.

I recall walking home from the *shtiebel* late one evening during those last days. As I passed the railroad depot, I met Mr. Gerhardt, one of my former teachers in grade school. We chatted amiably for a few minutes, and then he said, "My boy, bad times are coming for you Jews. Go away from here. Go to Israel."

There had already been a radio-address by Skladkowski, the prime minister of Poland, who blatantly urged the people to wage economic war against the Jews. The Poles were not to "harm" the Jews; they were merely to "boycott" them. Those who had theretofore shown a modicum of restraint heard the tacit sanction of their prime minister and cheerful-

ly extended the "economic war" to petty harassments and eventually to brutal attacks and pogroms. There was no more time to go to Israel; there was barely enough time to go to Sosnowice.

Thursday afternoon of August 31, one day before the German invasion of Poland and the outbreak of World War II, the Germans began shooting at the Poles from their *volksbund*. The Poles were returning fire, and we were caught in the middle. This skirmish temporarily took the focus off the Jews and provided us with the opportunity to flee Katowice; my mother announced that we were going to Sosnowice.

Rosa, her husband Chaskel Kimmelman and I helped my mother pack hurriedly, taking with us whatever we could. We did not know if we would ever see our home again, but at least we would be with our family. Katie and her husband Chaskel Najer ran a store in Sosnowice, the Pelmans also lived there, as did my grandfather Reb Yaakov Meir and Pinchas and Ruchtche who had been given the keys to Reb Yitzchak Aaron Zeldowitz's apartment. Reb Yitzchak had moved to Stryj, a few hundred miles south of Sosnowice.

But there was no escape from the German guns. The German onslaught began Friday, September 1, 1939, the day after we relocated, and the first German troops appeared in Sosnowice on Monday. At two o'clock that day, the German hordes roared into the town on their motorcycles. They dashed up and down the streets, shooting the terror-stricken, panicked people, killing randomly whomever they could.

I was in Chaskel Najer's store when we heard the clamor of the approaching vehicles and the rifle shots, and I rushed to Uncle Pinchas's apartment. My brother-in-law Chaskel Najer, who lived in the same apartment house as the Radomsker Rebbe, ran home to be with Katie and the

children. My mother, who was outside at the time, also ran immediately to Katie's house.

The Germans, however, had a broader agenda than the whimsical murder of a few Jews, and they continued riding through the streets, racing up and down stairways, smashing their way through houses and apartments. They shouted their ugly command over and over. "*Juden raus! Juden raus!* All Jews out into the street!"

The war against the Jews had begun.

Fear and confusion paralyzed us. To obey or not to obey the command? Should we go voluntarily or wait until they dragged us outside? We would ask ourselves these questions a thousand times in the desolate years ahead.

My mother, alerted by the savage screams of the approaching soldiers, quietly left the apartment through the back door, taking her two grandchildren with her. Everyone else who was at Katie's apartment obeyed and went out onto the street to stand in mute terror in front of the Germans.

"*Laufen!*" the German command rang out. "Run!"

People started to flee in all directions, the sounds of the frightened flight mixing with the sadistic laughter of their German tormentors.

Suddenly, a rifle shot rang out, and Chaskel's father, Reb Simchah Kalman Najer, a learned and highly respected *chassid*, fell to the ground with a bullet to his head. The blond, blue-eyed German who had fired the shot surveyed the gruesome scene. The great hero had chalked up his first victory of the war. He smirked triumphantly as he watched the life flow out of this *tzaddik* who was dying *al kiddush Hashem*. But still he was not satisfied. Reb Simchah's son Chaim Meir had stopped beside his father's fallen figure, and the German fired at him as well. The bullet struck Chaim

Meir's foot. The blood flowed, but even this was not sufficient.

The Germans knew that the way to demoralize an enemy army is to capture its commander-in-chief. And so, within an hour of their arrival, they came looking for the Rebbe, our spiritual commander-in-chief. But the Rebbe was away from Sosnowice, and the Germans banged on his door in vain.

Three hours later, still trembling with fear, my mother arrived safely with the children at Uncle Pinchas and Tante Rosa's apartment. In a tearful embrace, she explained that she had run off to another part of town and hidden in a park.

The other Jews of Sosnowice who had obeyed the Nazis' order to come out into the street were marched to Schoen's warehouse at the edge of town. There they were locked up and left without food or water for two days. Wednesday, the SS captain unlocked the door to the warehouse and demanded to know who was the *Judenaelteste*, the elder of the Jews.

Moniek Merin, a member of the board of directors of the Sosnowice Jewish community, stepped forward. "*Ich bin der Judenaelteste.*"

"Tell your people they can go home," the German said. "But they have to come back tomorrow morning for work assignment. I'll hold you personally responsible if anyone does not show up."

"*Jawohl,*" Moniek acknowledged. "I'll make sure they'll all be here."

Moniek did his job well, and Thursday morning all the Jews reported for work. Some people were appointed as street cleaners, others were ordered to remove the bodies that had been lying in the streets for two days, and yet others were given the task to dig a mass grave.

Volunteers from the *chevrah kadisha*, led by Chanina

Melchjar, undertook to conduct the *taharah* and provide a proper burial for the *kedoshim*, but everything had to be done secretly and in great haste. At the request of the rabbis of the community, Reb Simchah Kalman Najer was interred in an individual *kever*. The *kever* was not marked, however, and relatives who searched for the grave during and after the war were unable to locate it.

The initial roundup had an immediate effect on us, of course. But after the Jews were released from Schoen's warehouse, after we buried our dead, we were ordered to go back to our homes, to open our shops for business and to live an ostensibly normal life. The entire community was thoroughly browbeaten, living in fear and anxiety. We were flooded daily with new decrees that threatened our lives. All Jews, men, women and children, had to sew the *Judenstern*, a yellow star with the word Jew, onto outer garments; we had to observe an eight o'clock curfew; we could walk on only one side of the street, and we were not permitted to use public transportation. Yet we were to resume our normal lives.

But for now, the Germans left us alone, and with a resiliency innate to people suffering centuries of persecution, we adjusted to the new set of circumstances. We even began to wonder how our house and the store in Katowice had survived the German invasion.

Rosa and Katie elected themselves to make the short trip to Katowice, for it would be safer for them than for one of us boys with our telltale beards and *peyos*. Mother tried to dissuade them from taking the trip, fearing for their safety and perhaps afraid of the report the girls might bring back. But in the end she relented. "Go *lechayim uleshalom*," Mother said. "But please be careful."

Entering our beautiful home, my sisters were aghast.

What had not been carted off was overturned and smashed, reflecting the mindless hatred of the Germans who destroyed for the sake of destruction.

"Oh look!" Rosa cried, horrified. "The living room is in shambles!"

"Mother's *leichters*, Father's *menorah*, the silver, the crystal—everything's gone!" Katie wept.

Looking around the room, Rosa saw a *Gemara* and a *Tiferes Shlomo* that had been thrown to the floor. She picked them up and placed them into her carrying bag.

The store, too, had been ransacked and pillaged. But the loss of our possessions did not hurt so much. My parents and *rebbeim* had ingrained in me that only Torah has lasting worth. But I could not resist asking about Father's "*simchah* wine."

"Gone," said Katie. "Of course."

That grieved me bitterly. It was not an ordinary collection of wine I lamented. It had been my father's practice to buy several bottles of rare and expensive wine on the occasion of the birth of each of his children and grandchildren. Over the years, he had assembled a rich variety of the finest kosher wines from Eretz Yisrael, Hungary, Italy and France. These he would label with the name of the newborn and put aside in a special cabinet. The bottles sat untouched for years until a *bar-mitzvah*, engagement or wedding of one of the children. At each occasion, he would open the cabinet, pull out the appropriate bottle and serve it to the child, relating the story behind the wine. He would then invite the guests to recite *hatov vehameitiv*, a *berachah* which should be said when a superior kind of wine is brought to the table.

To us, these *simchah* wines symbolized all the good years of happiness and joy Hashem had granted our family. The

German marauders had carted away the entire contents of that cabinet, and with it, they destroyed the last tangible reminder of the sweet years of my youth. My home, saturated with Torah, *chessed*, *simchah* and embracing love was gone.

A short time later, in May 1944, my mother was summoned to police headquarters for a hearing. We were frightened out of our wits, for even if it only involved a minor matter, it was dangerous to have one's name inscribed in police records. I accompanied my mother to police headquarters and stood by her side as she was questioned about the house in Berlin my parents had bought in partnership with the Rebbe in 1923. Then, we were released. After the war, I managed to acquire a copy of the "judgment" that resulted from that hearing. The Germans had ruled that since we were Jews, the sale in Berlin was retroactively void, and ownership of the house reverted to the gentile sellers. At the time, of course, we did not know any of this. We were just happy to have escaped with our lives.

We learned also to tolerate the quickly-formed Judenrat, the Jewish Council. It was the initial step toward eliminating the Jews, and the Germans established such a council in every major Jewish community. These councils acted as lackeys for the Germans, doing much of their dirty work. They provided hostages, forced labor and lists of names of Jews to be shipped to Auschwitz. They also collected taxes and goods for the Germans.

The Germans had been impressed with Moniek Merin's servility at the first round-up, and they appointed him the official *Judenaelteste*, chief of the Judenrat, a post he held until the liquidation of the ghetto in 1943. He and many other council members may have been people of good intent who believed that they were acting as a buffer between the ruthless

Germans and the Jewish population. They thought they would ease the plight of the Jews. When they realized that they were being used by the Germans to facilitate the destruction of their brothers and sisters, some of them committed suicide. Others justified their membership in the council in the belief that at least they and their families would be spared. The Germans, true to their perfidious character, showed their gratitude by killing all of them in the end.

Moniek, however, took to his job with alacrity. About two years after being appointed head of the Judenrat, he convened an urgent meeting of all the rabbis of Sosnowice. "I want to let you know," Moniek announced gravely, "that the Germans are demanding from me a list of families to be 'resettled.'"

Rabbi Shayele Englard, one of the leading Sosnowice rabbis, jumped up. "Moniek, you *shaygetz!*" he shouted, pounding his fist on the table. "Who gave you the right to send people away to an unknown destination? Who are you to decide who shall live and who shall die?"

Moniek did not answer and had the decency to hang his head. But a few weeks later, when the Germans ordered the Judenrat to appropriate three or four large houses and prepare the occupants for "resettlement," the house in which Rabbi Englard lived was one of the residences selected. Then, of course, he and his family were carried off, taken away for "resettlement." Some people suspected Moniek of delivering Rabbi Englard for *Aussiedlung,* but it is clearly unfair to make such an accusation without proof.

Aussiedlung. Resettlement. What did that mean? Where was Rabbi Englard going to be resettled? We had heard enough stories by then not to be lulled into complacency by the German euphemism. But we were not sure. In a sickening

test, it was Rabbi Englard's fate that would provide the definitive answer. If a resourceful man such as Rabbi Englard did not get word to us within a week of his "resettlement," our fears would be confirmed. A week elapsed, then two, and we heard nothing. We could have waited an eternity. No one ever heard from him again.

Rabbi Englard's deportation devastated the whole community, but our family felt doubly vulnerable. We lived in the Zeldowitz apartment at Targova Street 4, while Rabbi Englard had lived in the house next to ours, at Targova Street 2. It was so close. What if the Germans went in numeric order? What if they took us next?

CHAPTER 7

The Stadium

BY THE SUMMER OF 1942, THE GERMANS HAD SPREAD across Poland, killing Jewish victims with savage fury, decimating *shtetl* after *shtetl*. It was as if Pharaoh had risen from the grave, marching again, devouring our people. The Jews of Sosnowice, however, retained a measure of optimism. We thought the timing would save us, that if we could just hold out for a few days or weeks, the front would shift, and at the last minute, when all seemed lost, we would be saved. Some of us thought we would be saved by virtue of our geography, that though the Germans were murdering Jews in the interior of Poland, they would continue to leave the Jews in Upper Silesia alone.

For a while events bore out the optimism. Compared to Jews in interior Poland, we lived in relative tranquility. The

Jews in central Poland were brutalized, hounded and massacred by *Einsatzgruppen*, mobile murder squads, who went from town to town randomly killing Jews. Many from Cracow sought refuge in Sosnowice, hoping to escape the scourge of persecutions. The truth was that we had gained only a temporary stay of execution, and on August 12, 1942, destruction descended on our city. Sosnowice swarmed with green-clad Nazis who posted their official proclamation for us to read:

> *All Jews of Sosnowice, regardless of age or health, are summoned to present themselves for registration at the Sports Arena at Jahn Square, at 7:30 a.m. Failure to appear is punishable by death.*

At seven o'clock the next morning, we streamed into Jahn Square, twenty-five thousand men, women and children, carrying rucksacks, blankets and lunches in jars, wax-paper and thermos bottles as if at some mass picnic. Children were racing in their games, mothers were rocking infants in carriages, and men were standing around in small groups trading theories. Soon people began unwrapping their lunches to eat their belated breakfasts.

My mother watched the chaotic spectacle in quiet bewilderment from one of the benches on the shady side of the field. Smiling half-heartedly, she made a heroic attempt to reassure us, while trying hard to believe her own words. "It's only for registration," she said in an unsure voice. "Before long, we'll all be going home."

But the gates of the Stadium were suddenly slammed shut, and military police armed with submachine guns barred all the exits. More ominous were the public address systems

and searchlights that were being installed at the four corners of the Stadium. Submachine guns and search lights at high noon seemed an odd way to conduct a mere registration.

We were trapped.

I went looking for Pola to whom I had become engaged that spring. She was standing with her family. Happy as I was to see her, we found we had little to say to each other beyond some dull speculation.

"What's going to happen to us?" she asked quietly.

There was nothing to say. I was struck with the realization that we had been tricked into coming to the Stadium, tricked into delivering ourselves into the hands of the SS. We knew the Germans were annihilating Jews. We had heard enough stories, and we realized only too well that this time it was our turn, and our lives were at stake.

"They tricked us," I said at last. "And we're cornered."

"No," Pola said fiercely. "*Mir velen zei iberleben.* We're going to survive. No matter what."

Her fortitude bolstered me for a while, but then my heart sank again. We watched as the SS officers seated themselves behind large tables set up on the soccer field. A few minutes later, the loudspeakers blared out instructions for us to come forward with our identification papers and work certificates.

There was general hesitation. No one wanted to be first. The officials, rather ominously, made no effort at all to hurry us along. Soon, people began to feel it might well be to their advantage to get it over with quickly and not irritate the SS police by keeping them waiting. As the day grew hotter and hotter, people began to crowd up to the tables and even fight for their place in line. By this time, even bad news seemed preferable to the suspense of not knowing what was in store.

Standing at a distance, Pola and I saw people being

divided into four separate groups. I found it impossible to guess the purpose of this categorizing. All around me, nervousness was increasing with each minute. It was as though we were all infants again, utterly dependent upon the whim of some adult.

Suddenly, I saw Pola hurrying toward me through the crowd. I had been so nervous, I had not even known she had left our group. She had the answer. The ones on the left were marked for "resettlement," whatever that meant; those in the next column would be checked a second time; the third group would be put to work in a labor battalion, and the group on the right would be allowed to go home.

The sun was nearly down, yet no one in our two families had reported to the tables. Most of the people had been classified already, and we realized that we would not be able to put it off much longer. Only a few stragglers remained grouped around the tables, and it occurred to us that if the Germans grew hungry or tired, they might very well take their annoyance out on us.

The crying and screaming among those who had been classified and separated from their families grew louder and filled us with fear, but Pola ventured out once more to investigate.

Some ten minutes later, she came back with the grim report that the group selected for "resettlement" was by far the largest and consisted mainly of old people, invalids and children. It was obvious that they were marked for extermination. However, she had gathered the impression that one of the SS officers at the tables seemed to have a spark of humanity and was assigning quite a few people to the group on the right which would be permitted to go back to their homes.

My older brother, Pinchas, who was working for the city as a street sweeper, volunteered to go first. With his wife and four-year-old son, he presented himself to the man whom Pola had identified as having a trace of compassion. With pounding hearts, we watched as the German examined my brother's papers, asked a few questions, hesitated for a moment and then directed the family toward the group on the right. They would be allowed to go home!

It was a good omen, but we waited for a few minutes in case the official should feel obliged to balance his act of mercy by sending some of the following applicants to one of the other groups.

Among the group marked for "resettlement" stood the *moreh horaah* of Sosnowice, Reb Shiyele Glickman, the son of the saintly Reb Itzikel Glickman. His *rebbetzin* was crying bitterly.

"We have no reason to complain," Reb Shiyele said in a calm voice befitting such a holy *tzaddik*. "If we have to, we'll dance with joy into *mesiras nefesh* as our ancestors did during the Crusades. But now, we have the *zchus* to leave two wonderful sons who will say *Kaddish* for us. So let us rejoice. *Ki vesimchah seitzeiu.* Through joy will we be released from all adversity." (Reb Shiyele and his *rebbetzin* were somehow spared at that particular time.)

Reb Elimelech Singer, the brilliant author of *Zichron Elimelech*, had also been directed to join the group on the left for *Aussiedlung*. Reb Elimelech'l, who had a comment or a story for every occasion, stood in silence.

"*Nu*, Reb Elimelech," a friend challenged him. "What do you have to say about this?"

"Let me tell you a story," Reb Elimelech'l replied. "The Vorker Rebbe, Rabbi Yitzchak Kalish of Vorki, and the Gerer

Rebbe, the Chiddushei Harim, were travelling together to Warsaw. When they reached their destination, they discovered that someone had rifled their rucksacks and stolen their *tefillin* and *talleisim*. The Chiddushei Harim immediately demanded that the carriage driver take responsibility for the theft. Seeing that Reb Yitzchak Kalish sat quietly unconcerned, the Chiddushei Harim asked, 'Why don't you say something, too?' Reb Yitzchak continued to sit quietly for another moment before answering. 'As soon as I stepped into this wagon I declared that my *pekel* was *hefker,* so nothing was stolen from me.'

"And I," Reb Elimelech'l said, pointing a finger at himself, "I declared *my pekel* to be *hefker.* Nothing was stolen from me either. Hashem owns my life; let Him do with me whatever He wants."

Most of us, however, had not attained the level of Reb Shiyele Glickman or of Reb Elimelech'l Singer, and the terror escalated, made palpable by the intensifying sound of crying. The selection was not yet over.

Now Pola approached the table with her parents, upright and with a quiet dignity, which at this moment seemed horribly audacious to me. I scarcely dared to breathe as she looked the German straight in the eye. Seconds seemed to last an eternity, but Pola and her family were sent to the right. Once more, I had reason to admire her courage and the soundness of her instincts about people.

It was quite dark by now, and only a handful of us were left, including my mother and my unmarried brother Alter Yecheskel. I was not too worried about Yecheskel, who worked in a carpentry shop, or about myself, "usefully" employed as a clerk in the city administration. Our mother, however, was a woman of sixty, whose only occupation was to

keep house for her two unmarried sons, and of course, she had no working papers. But it was she who got us moving. "Come, children. We're in Hashem's hands anyway."

The German looked at us in exasperation as we shuffled up to his table; it had been a long day in the hot sun, and he was eager to go home. I realized with a sinking heart that we had waited too long, and he had grown tired and irascible.

We stood stiffly and respectfully in front of him and, not daring to breathe, showed him our working papers. Without looking at us, he impatiently snapped his fingers for my mother's documents.

"What about her card?" he said coldly.

Yecheskel's face was white with tension. "She doesn't have a job, sir," he said politely. "She keeps house for us."

The official shot him a glare of irritation. Then he calmly made his decision. "*Die beiden nach rechts; die alte nach links.* The two men go to the right; the old woman goes to the left."

I was so stunned for a moment that by the time I could turn around to embrace my mother, two soldiers with poised rifle-butts had already wedged between us. I don't know how long Yecheskel and I stood there, staring at each other. We were still standing motionless, when we were pelted by a violent thunderstorm.

But even the rain was unable to wash away our tears. Neither of us was able to think about going home. I could not shake the picture of my mother sitting on the grass near one of the goal posts of the soccer field, drenched from head to foot.

It must have been close to one o'clock in the morning before I was able to think coherently again. I caught a glimpse of Moniek and ran over to him. "Please, Moniek. Can you help us?"

He promised to do everything he could to get my mother released, but he returned a while later with bad news. "Forget it," he said bluntly. "Not a chance. She's marked for *Aussiedlung.*"

Near the doors of the Stadium, I saw the familiar face of Itche Weintraub, one of the Pelman's adopted sons. He was dressed in the shabby uniform of the *Ordnungsdienst* (OD), the Jewish Auxiliary Police. He acknowledged me at once, and when he saw the state I was in, he promised to do everything in his power to help my mother.

Together we scouted the edges of the group marked for deportation, trying to catch a glimpse of my mother. But an SS man spotted us even through the veil of the heavy rain and ordered us to leave the Stadium at once. At the exit, passing through a checkpoint designed to catch those who ran away, I was filled with hopelessness. Even if we had managed to rescue my mother from the group, we could never have gotten her out of the Stadium. I spent the night trying to contact people who might have sufficient influence to buy my mother's release, but the prospects looked hopeless. No one knew anything.

It was after daybreak when I arrived at our apartment building to find a policeman stationed at the front door. "Sorry, you can't go in," he said curtly. "This building has been commandeered to house the people who have been designated for *Aussiedlung.*"

Later I learned that six such large houses had been cleared to put up the ten thousand men, women and children who were slated to be shipped off to the east. None of us could understand why they kept people in such unimaginably crowded conditions instead of sending them straight on to their ultimate destination, Oswieczim, a small town the

Germans called Auschwitz. At that time, Auschwitz did not have any particular connotation, and I reasoned that transportation and accommodations at Auschwitz were overtaxed.

It seemed so clear to me that Hashem was intervening. The delay made it possible to save some of the deportees by paying large ransoms to some officials who were humane enough to value wealth above duty. However, to approach these functionaries was not a job for amateurs, and almost at once, a number of "fixers" sprang up to act as intermediaries.

It was easy to feel bitter about these men who made a brief but profitable business of this traffic, for naturally they charged a good fee for their services. What of the people who had no money to buy back their lives? But each face-to-face contact with one of the capricious Gestapo men was made at the risk of their own lives. Without their shrewdness and daring, many more would have been sent to their deaths at that time.

At the same time, the Jewish Auxiliary Police risked their lives to rescue as many people as they could. With great ingenuity they snatched the victims directly from under the noses of the SS without collecting a fee. My mother and sister were rescued by such men.

Mother sat on the floor of one of those "resettlement" buildings, crushed by crying people. Unable to overcome her growing despair, she prayed to Hashem. She was so engrossed, she barely heard the soft voice. "Come with me," Itche Weintraub said, leaning over her. "I'm going to get you out of here."

My mother got up and followed him through a maze of rooms and hallways crowded with people.

"The exits are guarded," he said grimly. "But we can get out through the chimney flue."

With courage born of *emunah peshutah*, Mother, who had not climbed anything other than a flight of stairs since childhood, followed Itche up the chimney sweep's ladder to the roof, clambered across several other roofs and climbed down to freedom.

We wept with joy when we finally saw her on Friday morning. She was covered with black soot, but *baruch Hashem*, unharmed, snatched from certain death by the mercy of Hashem and the kindness of Itche Weintraub who had risked his life to save her.

The happiness of our reunion was dampened by the thought that Katie and her two children were among those who had been sent to the left, among the ten thousand people who had been squeezed into the six buildings. In an ironic twist, Katie had been assigned to our own apartment at Targova 4. She stayed there for several days.

All those nights, I was unable to fall asleep. The thick, sultry August air was oppressive; there was not the slightest breeze to bring relief. How ghastly it must be for Katie and her children cooped up with hundreds of people in a single room, I thought. How ghastly that she was imprisoned in her own home with thousands of strangers. Who would help her? It seemed too much to think that she, too, would be rescued.

For Katie also, hope was dim. Four thousand had already been herded into cattle cars and taken to Auschwitz earlier that day. Hundreds of people were caged in one sweltering room awaiting their fate. Katie sat on the floor huddled over her two babies.

Holding the children close to her, she prayed out loud, "*Hamalach hagoel osi mikol ra, yevareich es hanearim, veyikarei*

vahem shemi. May the angel who delivered me from all evil bless the lads and let them carry my name."

Suddenly, she heard a voice whispering urgently, "Katie, Katie."

She looked up at a figure standing above her. Squinting through her tears, she made out the familiar figure who had silently entered the crowded room.

"Itche!" she whispered. "What are you doing here?" She dared not believe there was an escape from this nightmare.

Itche reached into a bag and thrust something white at her. "Put this on," he urged. "Hurry, before they see us."

Katie was pulling the white nurse's uniform over her clothes when one of the boys awoke and started crying.

"He must be quiet," Itche insisted. "Otherwise, we're finished." Then, glancing at the sobbing child, his tone softened. "Let's not make any noise, and maybe I can find some milk for your little ones."

Katie followed Itche through the darkness, groping her way through the narrow crush of the corridors, the children close behind her. Once outside, however, she discovered her children missing. Her eyes widened with terror as she made a desperate lunge back toward the house.

"No!" shouted Itche. "You can't go back. The Germans are already preparing the next transport to Auschwitz. This is your only chance!"

"I don't care," Katie screamed. "I'm going back inside for my babies!"

Then she heard a tiny voice crying, "Mommy." In the darkness of the night she had not noticed that they had run ahead of her. Katie wept with relief as she embraced the boys, saying over and over again, "I'll never leave you. I'll never leave you. Not as long as I live!"

In the morning when the bell rang, I ran to the door. There stood Katie with the two boys. "Itche got us out," she said and stumbled into the room.

Itche. A *malach* disguised as an OD man.

A few days later, when sufficient freight and cattle cars were once again available, the six apartment houses were emptied. Some eight or nine thousand Jews made the trip to Auschwitz. Of these, not one was ever seen again.

At about this time, my grandfather Reb Yaakov Meir fell ill. We used to bring him food and other necessities, but he slowly wasted away. On the twenty-third of *Teves*, 1943, he passed away.

Hardly anyone had known that my grandfather was ill, and the news of his passing took people by surprise

"What a dreadful war this is!" one person was heard to comment. "Imagine! Here is a person who gave his whole life to tending the sick, and when he himself is sick, no one knows to visit him."

Still, my grandfather did spend his last days in relative peace. One day, my grandfather was captured during an *Aussiedlung*. We were frightened for him, but my grandfather reassured us that "Tadek will get me out." This Tadek, my grandfather's neighbor, was a scoundrel who was always currying favor with the Gestapo, but he had a soft spot for my grandfather. True to my grandfather's expectation, Tadek moved heaven and earth and gained my grandfather's release. A short while later, Tadek ran afoul of his Gestapo associates, and he was executed.

Tadek's demise wasn't much lamented by the Jewish population, but it was generally acknowledged that he had a "great *zchus* in saving Reb Yaakov Meir from the *Aussiedlung*."

CHAPTER 8

Life in Shrodula

WITH HASHEM'S HELP WE SURVIVED THE SELECTION at the Stadium and were back in our homes. But we knew that we were living on borrowed time. We had gained a temporary reprieve, but the sword was hanging over our heads. We were exempt from deportation only so long as we worked for the benefit of the Third Reich and had working papers. But by now, most of the jobs had vanished; the various workshops that produced goods for the German war effort had shut down for lack of raw materials or electric power. Even so, Hitler's program of exterminating every last Jew was going full speed ahead, and killing Jews took precedence over winning the war. Trains that were essential for transporting war material to the eastern front were diverted for shipping Jews to the death camps. The

Germans were prepared to lose the war in order to kill Jews. "*Sinah mekalkeles es hashurah,*" our Sages say. "Hate destroys sound judgment."

Clandestine short-wave radio programs reported Allied victories on all fronts, but we were in a race against time, holding on, hoping for a miracle. We went from the radio to our prayers.

For weeks, the rumor mills had been buzzing with the ominous news that the Germans were preparing a ghetto near Sosnowice. They had already relocated the residents of Shrodula and soon began to erect a fence around that dismally poor suburb of Sosnowice. By the end of 1942, we had all been transferred to the ramshackle houses of the newly-formed ghetto.

Overcrowded conditions made life almost unbearable. Eight or ten people lived in a room measuring twelve feet by twelve feet. Food was scarce, and on the days we were allowed to leave the ghetto, we stood in lines with our special permits from two in the morning, waiting for the shops to open, hoping to buy bread or potatoes. By the time the sun rose, we had to report for work.

One of the first projects we organized as soon as we were settled was a system of guards who would alert the residents of each apartment house of an impending raid, the dreaded *Aktion.* The first time I stood watch, I was paired with Reb Shiyele Glickman. While standing guard, we discussed Torah and told one another stories of *tzaddikim.*

Reb Shiyele was telling me a story of the Baal Shem Tov, when he suddenly broke off in the middle and pointed with excitement at a dark garden. "Look at that cement basin. It was probably a reservoir for a vegetable garden. It would make a perfect *mikveh.* What do you say?"

I was taken aback. Had Reb Shiyele lost his mind? A *mikveh* in the ghetto?

He saw the doubt on my face and persisted. "Remember the *berachah* my father gave your father when he helped him go to the *mikveh?* Now it's your turn to enable others to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *mikveh.*"

The next morning, before daybreak, several friends and I erected a fence around the basin by nailing together some old boards, and after the first heavy rain, forty measures had collected. Shrodula had a *mikveh.*

After establishing our guard, we set to work building bunkers, camouflaged hideaways stocked with food, where we would be safe until an *Aktion* passed. The bunkers were built behind false walls, in holes dug beneath the cellar floor or in other ingenious places. All work on the bunkers had to be done at night, of course. During the day, we were marched in groups to our various places of work, urged on by the Jewish OD, the henchmen of the SS who themselves were closely supervised by SS guards.

We were put to work repairing roads, collecting refuse and debris, clearing bomb sites and sometimes dismantling unexploded bombs. Since none of us was experienced at this sort of thing, removing detonator caps was a hazardous operation, one that cost many lives.

One day, for no apparent reason, an entire work crew, foreman and all, was marched to the railroad station, herded into a boxcar and dispatched for "resettlement," a journey from which no one ever returned.

"Who knows if our *Arbeitskommando*, if our work unit won't be next?" I said to my unit. "I'm not showing up for work tomorrow. I'll take my chances hiding out in our bunker."

The others also decided to hide out, and a new pattern emerged. Each morning, more of the men failed to report for work and spent the daylight hours hiding in bunkers, coming out only in the evening for a quick stretch and a breath of air.

Curfew was at eight o'clock in the evening. After that, we milled around in the inner courtyard for another hour or two, since our rooms had barely enough space in which to lie down.

For the children, all these bewildering regulations were most difficult of all. One evening, shortly after curfew, a neighbor's child, a boy of about four, wandered into the street just as a German foot patrol arrived from the other direction.

With a fury far exceeding the gravity of the crime, an SS *Rottenfuehrer* shouted at the child to halt.

The boy ran crying through the street, bewildered by his threatening tone and frightened by the glittering bayonet pointed at him. A German soldier set off in pursuit of the boy, holding his bayonet tilted like a hunter pursuing a wild boar.

Afraid that he might kill the child, I ran out, grabbed the boy and pulled him into the courtyard. Then I slapped his face hard. "Didn't I tell you to stay indoors?" I yelled, shaking him violently. "Get inside! I'll teach you a lesson you're not going to forget."

"Are you responsible for this boy?" the German asked gruffly.

I grunted noncomittally, avoiding a direct answer. Luckily, the child was too frightened to contradict me.

"Don't let this happen again," the German said. "Next time, you *Saujuden*, you dirty Jews, won't be so lucky."

I had saved the child's life, but I was filled with anguish. What had we done to deserve this? What had that child done?

Who created these monsters? The answer came to me in a sudden recollection. In the *Tochachah*, the Torah predicts, "Hashem will bring upon you a nation . . . swooping down like an eagle . . . a sadistic nation, that has no respect for the old and no mercy for the young." (*Devarim* 28:49-50)

Life in the ghetto was a dreary, terror-filled existence; we prayed for a miracle but anticipated the worst. Inexorably, the time was approaching when the Germans would conduct an *Aussiedlung* and round up people to be dispatched on their final journey to Auschwitz.

There was one moment of joy when Kalman Tishman got married. Reb Shiyele, the *mesader kiddushin*, officiated, but even that holy respite was desecrated, for Moniek brought some curious members of the Gestapo. He warned us not to attempt to shake the hands of the Gestapo, as if we would have, for the Nazis had no desire to touch Jews—they merely wanted to see and photograph us as we engaged in our quaint customs.

The only inviolably bright moments, not subject to defilement by anything or by anyone, were the times I spent engrossed in studying *Gemara*, when the disputes of Abbaye and Rava lifted me out of my misery and transported me to the Radomsker Yeshivah and my beloved *nasi yeshivah*, Reb Moishele. The rest of the time, I was filled with deep despair that even the *Yamim Tovim* could not dispel.

It was the spring of 1943, and soon my first *Pesach* in the ghetto would arrive. Perhaps it would be my last. Instead of the excitement that comes with the onset of *Yom Tov*, the cramped quarters of the ghetto were filled with gloom. Reb Shiyele Glickman sent *matzos* to his son Yossele in the Ludwigsdorf Labor Camp. But that little package only stressed our dismal condition.

The overall gloom was dispelled, one day, by an unexpected visit to Shrodula. Rosa's husband, Chaskel Kimmelman, had received a two-week furlough from the Zeibusch Labor Camp and had come to the ghetto to be with us for *Pesach*. But the joy of reunion quickly turned to dejection as we reminisced about the magnificent *sedarim* of the past.

"We don't have to buy *maror* this year," Chaskel said with a touch of caustic humor. "*Kulo maror.* We have nothing but bitterness. *Maror* every step of the way."

"We don't need salt water, either," my mother sighed.

By *erev Pesach*, Chaskel had lost the bit of humor he had displayed a few days earlier and was uncharacteristically quiet. I had never seen him so downhearted. He would go off into some corner and sit for hours. Sometimes, his lips would move silently as if he were arguing with something inside himself. I thought he was envisioning his inevitable return to the *Arbeitslager*. But on the first day of *Pesach*, he unburdened himself to me, expressing what each of us had been struggling to leave unspoken.

"Death is hanging over our heads," he said almost matter-of-factly. "Soon the time will come that we'll have to make choices like the ones we've always had to make. Like the ones at the time of the *churban Beis Hamikdash* and during the Crusades. Like the ones we had to make during the Spanish Inquisition. Like the ones we had to make in *Tach Vetat* during the Chmielnicki massacres in the Ukraine."

"What kind of choices?" I asked.

He paused, gathering courage. "What if something happened and I had to choose between saving my mother or my wife?" he blurted out. "It's tearing me apart. Whom will I save? My mother who gave me life, or my wife who is the light of my life? Which one?"

I felt my heart being torn to pieces by the implications of the questions. What had become of us? What had happened to the civilized world in which we had grown up? What kind of horrible hell were we living in that we should be faced with such ghastly questions?

For several long moments, there was only silence.

"You have only one mother," I finally blurted out, because I felt compelled to answer, not because I believed I knew the answer.

He looked at me sadly and said, "It would be the most difficult decision in all my life, and I pray to the *Ribono Shel Olam* that I'll never have to face the challenge, but I would save my Reizele."

In the end, he was never forced to make the choice. He perished along with Rosa, his family and the other six million *kedoshim*.

CHAPTER 9

A Visitation of Death

NIGHT AFTER NIGHT, ROTATING TEAMS OF WATCHMEN kept their eyes trained on the SS Headquarters building across the street from the ghetto wall. They were to signal us in the event the lights were turned on at night, the telltale sign of an impending *Aktion*. If that were to happen, we planned to hide in the bunker we had prepared.

Our bunker was in an adjacent house, occupied by my uncle Pinchas Pelman and the Chentchiner Rebbe, Reb Yehoshua Heschel Horowitz-Sternfeld. The Chentchiner Rebbe, a direct patrolineal descendant of the Chozeh of Lublin and one of the oldest *chassidic rebbes* in Poland, was Reb Shiyele Glickman's father-in-law. It was concealed behind a false wall in the attic and measured about thirty-five by thirty-five feet, the slanting roof eating up precious space.

Walking or even standing upright was impossible at the farthest end. This space was to provide shelter for fifty-six people. The entrance was a castered door, hidden behind a bookcase. To enter the bunker, we would remove several shelves of books and roll the door aside. Once inside, we would replace the shelves and slide the door shut, making our hideout detection-proof. We laid in an ample supply of staples, enough to hold out for several days if the need arose. For water and toilet facilities, we would sneak into the house, preferably at night. We would not have the luxury of daylight or fresh air, for our bunker had only one small window directly below the roof.

One day in May, 1943, one of the watchmen alerted us that the SS were engaging in an *Aussiedlung* in Kamionka, a ghetto a little over a mile from Shrodula. We watched with our binoculars as people were running down the streets, pursued by Germans. They were catching the young men first, slamming them into trucks, not yet bothering with the elderly. Those would be easy to round up.

"Once they finish off Kamionka," the watchman said, "Shrodula will be next."

The dreaded moment had arrived. We began ferrying the elderly and families with babies from our house across the courtyard into the bunker. Running back and forth in a dither, I was pondering whether to escort my mother into the bunker now or wait until the very last moment.

In the center of the courtyard stood the Chentchiner Rebbe, unperturbed by the commotion, engrossed in a *Gemara* after having given one last *berachah* to hundreds of *chassidim* who came to say good-bye. It was an incongruous sight. Oblivious to the turmoil swirling about him, he was chanting the Talmudic sing-song for everyone to hear.

"Avrum, *vos loifst du*?" he asked me. "Why are you running back and forth?"

"Rebbe," I stammered. "Shouldn't you be joining the others in the bunker?"

"Come over here, Avrum. Let's learn together," he said. "You know what the *Gemara* says. '*Torah maginah umatzlah.* The Torah has the power to protect you and save you.' (*Sotah* 21a) The Torah, not the bunker, is our safeguard."

And so, in the midst of the frenzy, he studied with me with a fervor such as I had never encountered. *Aussiedlung*, Germans, threats, fear, bunkers—they all faded into nothingness in the face of such *hislahavus*.

The Chentchiner Rebbe's prayer did shield us that day. The Germans changed course, and the dreaded *Aussiedlung* did not take place. The following morning, the people left the bunker and returned to their homes.

Dismal days of harassment and hard labor followed each other in numbing succession. As the weeks went by, we felt that the prophecy of the *Tochachah* was literally coming true, "In the morning you will say, 'If it were only night,' and in the evening you will say, 'If it were only morning.'" (*Devarim* 28:67) But the morning brought new visitations of horror, and we read the new posting with fear.

> *A high-ranking SS officer with his delegation is coming to inspect the ghetto. All houses and courts must be immaculately clean. All ghetto inmates must remain indoors for the duration of the visit. Violation of this ordinance is punishable by death.*

We learned from the OD that the high-ranking officer was the notorious Adolf Eichmann, Hitler's deputy in charge of

"Jewish affairs." In civilian life, Eichmann had been an ordinary salesman for an Austrian oil company. When he was fired from his job, he became active in the Nazi party and worked his way up to a position as a minor bureaucrat. In a typically German fashion, his uniform gave him a taste of power which he insatiably began to amass, rising to the terrible height that made the world tremble. His impact on the world is reminiscent of Shlomo Hamelech's description in *Mishlei* (30:21-22): "The earth shudders at . . . a slave who becomes king."

Eichmann was appointed in 1942 as the chief executor of the *Loesung der Judenfrage*, the "Final Solution," to the Jewish question, and he carried out his assignment with such fiendish efficiency, that by the end of the war, he had come close to achieving his goal of rendering Europe *Judenrein.* Six million Jews perished through his orchestration. Fewer than 50,000 Jews had survived in Poland; at least 2,600,000 Polish Jews had been annihilated.

In preparation for Eichmann's inspection, the entire ghetto population went about cleaning windows, sweeping floors, tidying kitchens and washing sidewalks. At eleven a.m. the next day, a dozen overanxious Germans began scurrying around the ghetto, making sure that everything was ready for the distinguished guest, due to arrive within the hour. The streets emptied, and the eerie silence lent the ghetto the appearance of a ghost town.

The appointed hour arrived, but no one showed up.

The following day, however, a military and Gestapo motorcade unexpectedly entered the ghetto just before noon. The Germans roared up and down the streets, pausing only long enough to take some snapshots of each other against the ghetto background. They were about to leave

again, when one of the officers in the lead car happened to notice a middle-aged man out in the street. The motorcade came to a halt right under our window. The general stepped out of his car with an eloquently smug grin. Jews were his toys, to be degraded, subjugated, tortured and killed. He had the expectant look of someone relishing an anticipated amusement.

"Where do you work?" he demanded of the man.

"In the carpentry shop, sir," the old man replied.

"Then why aren't you there?"

The old man reached into his pocket and took out a slip of paper. "I'm sick, sir," he said. "Look, I'll show you. I have a doctor's certificate."

"This is not a health resort," the officer said contemptuously. "If you're well enough to stroll around, you're well enough to work, *verfluchter Jude*, dirty Jew!"

The old man stood waiting quietly.

"Arrest him," ordered the officer. "And mark him for 'special treatment.'"

"Special treatment" was a German euphemism for murder. The hapless man was led away and was never seen again. What was his name? Did he have a family? No one knew, and what was worse, no one cared any more. Death had become so commonplace that we had become inured to it. What was happening to us? To me? I knew very well that for self-preservation, the mind numbs emotions. It was instinct to shut down when trauma was laid upon trauma. But it was an instinct I would have to fight. I would not allow the Germans to blunt my feelings of compassion. I would not turn into a cold shell. I would remain a man.

CHAPTER 10

Going Into Hiding

THE SUMMER OF 1943 WAS UNCOMMONLY HOT, AND under the cramped conditions of the ghetto, the heat was unbearable. Laboring long hours at back-breaking work in the sweltering heat, day after day, brought me close to the breaking point.

Just when I thought that things could not get any worse, something happened that taught me how wrong I was.

Shabbos, July 31, 1943, is a day I will never forget. The day itself passed quite uneventfully though I had a sense of foreboding that I could not shake. When our watchmen brought us the news late *Motzei Shabbos*, I was hardly surprised.

"The lights are on at SS Headquarters. This is it," they said. "Tomorrow they're going to have a general deportation.

The entire ghetto will be liquidated. Those who are able to work will be sent to an *Arbeitslager.* The others will be shipped to you-know-where."

As predicted, Sunday morning the *Aussiedlung* began. But this time, there was an ominous civility to the strategy. The Germans did not shoot at us or break down our doors and drag us out to the assembly point. They made an announcement.

> *The ghetto area has been sequestered by the German Wehrmacht for military purposes. All ghetto residents are to vacate their premises and assemble on Zeilenweg at 11 a.m. sharp for the purposes of relocation. Failure to comply with this order is punishable by death.*

We tried to interpret, to read between the lines of the notice. We did not know if the Germans merely intended to move us to a different location, or if they meant to transport us to Auschwitz and had worded the announcement to ensure cooperation and prevent a panic.

Most of us, however, could not help but recall the treachery of the Stadium where we had been summoned for "Registration." That harmless little word had meant the death of nine thousand of our people.

"We're not going to fall for it again," Uncle Pinchas said. "It's just a trick to get us to report to Zeilenweg for *Aussiedlung.* Let's go into the bunker, and with the *Aibeshter's* help, a *yeshuah* will come."

It did not take long for everyone to agree that entering the bunker was the only alternative. In any case, perhaps there was truth to the rumors that the tide on the battlefront had turned and that Italy was about to surrender. Time was surely

on our side. And we remembered that, "He who trusts in Hashem shall be surrounded with favor." (*Tehillim* 32:10)

I quickly notified Pola and her parents of our decision, and they, too, joined our group. All in all, we were fifty-six people, ranging in age from babies whom their mothers tried desperately to keep from crying to my ninety-year-old maternal grandfather, Reb Yitzchak Goldberg, who had escaped the first deportation simply by staying home when the rest of us had gone to the Stadium.

The stifling heat of the August sun beating down on the roof above us, the trapped heat, the smells, the tight quarters and the whimpering infants made the bunker intolerable. Within the hour, every one of us was drenched and gasping for breath, our nerves dangerously frayed, but the presence of the holy Chentchiner Rebbe was an inspiration to us all. Each of us could see his own pain mirrored in the pain-wracked face of the Rebbe, who seemed to carry all our burdens on his aged shoulders.

Everyone remained considerate. No one said a harsh word or raised a voice in anger even if he had been shoved or accidentally stepped on. The usually boisterous children, who seemed to have learned that life was at stake, were quiet, smiles wiped from their little faces. They stared at the Rebbe, their eyes round and somber.

Although the old and infirm Rebbe suffered terribly, he continually learned *Gemara* or recited *Tehillim* from memory, sustaining us with his courage and faith. We sensed the presence of the *Shechinah,* even in those depths, in fulfillment of Hashem's promise to be with us in our distress: "*Imo Anochi betzarah.*" (*Tehillim* 91:15)

We sat praying quietly until late that night when we heard a knock in the pattern of our secret code. Itche Weintraub,

our link to the outside world, squeezed into the bunker.

"The Germans have extended their deadline," he said by way of greeting. "You can still report voluntarily at Zeilenweg without fear of punishment."

Then he turned to me and Pola. "Take my advice and go with Pola to Zeilenweg tomorrow morning. Young people are being sent away to an *Arbeitslager.* The worst that can happen to you is that you'll be recruited into a labor unit. You'll work hard, but at least you'll stay alive. If they catch you hiding in here, it's the end for you."

With that, Itche left the bunker.

"I'm not going to volunteer," Pola said firmly. "I can't leave my parents here to fend for themselves. Forget it."

"What shall I tell you?" my mother said when I asked her. "Ask the Chentchiner Rebbe. See what he says."

I wound my way to the Rebbe and presented my dilemma. But he closed his eyes and murmured, "Do what you think is right. And may the *Ribono Shel Olam* protect you."

I still could not decide.

All night long we heard shots echoing through the ghetto as Germans flushed out Jews from their bunkers. Things quieted down in the morning. By noon, being cooped up in the oppressive heat of the bunker had become intolerable. I had such a strong attack of claustrophobia that I no longer cared what would happen, and I ventured out into the attic to survey the scene in the street down below.

A burly SS man with a cocked gun was pursuing his victim, shouting, "Halt!"

Up ahead, the hunted man, stooped with the weight of his knapsack, came to a stop.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"I am on my way to report."

"Step on it. *Los, los.* Faster, on the double!"

Seconds later, shots rang out. The man with the knapsack lay crumpled on the street. The German neatly placed the gun back into his holster.

I rushed back into the bunker, trying to regain my composure. Inside, an infant who had been frightened by the shooting was crying loudly. We looked at the baby in terror. If it continued to cry, we would be found. The mother gently covered the child's face with a pillow to muffle her cries. The crying soon stopped. Thinking that the baby had fallen asleep, the mother removed the pillow. But it had not been sleep that silenced the crying. The child lay lifeless, smothered by the pillow.

The woman shook the baby and pinched it, hoping to make her cry out, but the baby was beyond help. She let out an ear-piercing shriek and was gathering breath for another when we motioned her to keep still. Nausea overcame me. A mother with a dead infant, and she was not even allowed to vent her crushing grief. Silently, she let her tears flow freely, clutching her baby. We did not try to console her. How could we soothe her bitter anguish?

I felt a surge of impotent rage, a rush of hatred, emotions I had never felt before. Hitler and the German people were the ones who had killed this baby, killed countless others, plunged us into this misery. I stood rigidly and cursed through clenched teeth. "May the German people be cursed until the end of time. May the *nevuah* of Yeshayahu be fulfilled. 'May we go out and gaze at their corpses; their worms shall not die, nor their fire be quenched; they shall be a horror to all flesh.'" (*Yeshayahu* 66:24)

The image of that mother cradling the body of her dead child, stifling her own bitter cry, still haunts me today. To me

it symbolizes all the pain and all the torment the evil German nation inflicted on our people.

Itche came back the next night. The Germans had extended the period of registration for another thirty-six hours. We had until Wednesday morning.

Again, he tried to persuade me. "This is your last chance," he begged. "I myself am going to register. All the Jewish Police are going. Listen to me, Avrum. Go and report in the morning."

I wavered, but the thought of leaving my mother made it seem an impossible option.

Pola saw me wavering. "No, Avrum," she said. "Don't go. Whatever happens, we'll stay together and survive this nightmare. Trust me. We'll make it with Hashem's help. All we need is *bitachon*."

CHAPTER 11

A Close Call

THE HEAT AND THE SUFFOCATING AIR IN THE BUNKER were taking their toll. The first to succumb was my grandfather, Reb Yitzchak Goldberg from Kshanov. He lay on the floor, struggling to breathe and soon passed out. We moved him into the apartment below and tried to tend to him. We moistened his lips and his face, and before long, he regained consciousness. At night, we came back with some food and found that his condition had improved.

Many of us in the bunker were also on the verge of collapse. People had to get a breath of fresh air, and the bunker urgently needed cleaning. Warily, in total silence, the entire bunker population, all fifty-six of us, came out into the attic and the apartment. At the same time, a few of us tidied up the bunker as best we could.

Our movements, however cautious, alerted a patrol of some ten or twelve policemen. Suddenly, the house was surrounded. We quickly scrambled back into the bunker and slid the door shut. Seconds later, we could hear the boots of the German policemen pounding up the stairs into the attic.

"*Kommt raus, oder wir schiessen!*" a voice barked. "Come out, or we'll shoot!"

We stood in frozen terror and did not answer.

"We know you're in there!" the voice continued to threaten. "If you don't come out this instant, we'll blow up the whole place!"

I knew we had to give up. They would begin tossing grenades in minutes.

"Just one second," I said to the people in the bunker. I quickly reached into my knapsack and pulled out a two-pound bag of coffee I had prepared for just such an emergency. Coffee was a rare commodity, and the Germans were notorious for their fondness for coffee. I might be able to do some good with it.

"Please don't shoot! We're all coming out!" I called out as I emerged from the bunker. I approached the sergeant with outward cool and held out the bag of coffee. "I assure you," I repeated, "everyone is coming out, *Hauptwachtmeister*. It's just that one of us is a very old man. He's disabled and can't walk." I had the Chentchiner Rebbe in mind.

His eyes lit up when he saw the coffee. "All right," he grumbled. "I'll send up some men from the *Arbeitskommando* with a stretcher. But everyone else better be out of there."

"They are all coming out, sir," I said.

One by one, the bedraggled occupants were surfacing from our bunker, gathering into small groups.

The sergeant motioned me to follow him as he went back

toward the house to see if anyone stayed inside. He seemed to regard me as the group's spokesman. I did not disillusion him, and the two of us entered the bunker. Strewn about were the personal possessions of twelve families.

"Go ahead, sir," I said to the sergeant. "Help yourself; take anything you want. We have to leave everything behind anyway. There are some umbrellas here and a pair of new boots."

The sergeant did not seem very interested in our pitiful possessions, but he began to rummage about nonetheless.

"By the way," I said casually, "what are they going to do to us?"

He was holding an umbrella in front of him as if trying to decide whether it was a good purchase. "Don't worry," he said. "Your lives aren't in any danger. You'll just be put to work, that's all."

Although I knew that this could not be true, I detected a spark of humanity in his behavior. He was trying to put me at ease when he could have slapped and kicked me for my impudence, or shot me, for that matter.

"Let's go down now," he said after one final check of the bunker. "The old man will be picked up later."

Out in the street, our people had been joined by another group, the Gelbart family, who had been flushed out of a neighboring bunker. The two groups were surrounded by heavily armed SS guards and stood quietly, wondering what would happen to them.

I spied the water pump and asked the sergeant whether we might wash up. He nodded and people formed a line to refresh themselves with the cool well water. The sergeant watched with a strange detachment, and I invited him to go upstairs once again. He could pick up the things he left

behind, and perhaps, he might even find other useful items. He ought not let good things go to waste.

Satisfied that the situation was well in hand, he went back into the apartment, motioning me to follow him. While he returned to the bunker, I hurried down to the lower floor to look for my grandfather. I found him lying motionless in his bed, his eyes closed, breathing faintly. Watching him sleeping peacefully, I did not have the heart to wake him up. What could I have said to him? All I did was leave a fresh glass of water near his bed, and taking one long parting look, I left. It was the last time I saw him.

I rushed back into the bunker where the *Hauptwachtmeister* waited. Strangely, he had not taken anything at all. A detail arrived with the stretcher and placed the Chentchiner Rebbe on it. The sergeant looked on quietly, and said, "*Das ist doch ein Engel!* That man must be an angel!"

While I was still in the bunker with the Germans, Jurkowski, one of the Jewish militia men, came running to tell me that Pola was assembled with a group in front of the Judenrat. The Germans had formed a labor group who would be housed in the Braun shop.

As I learned later, Pola had not stood about idly while I went back up with the German to the bunker. She had sought some plan of escape, when she suddenly noticed that one of the arrested Jews from another bunker was a member of the Air Raid Patrol.

"Do you have your armband?" she asked him in desperation.

"Actually, I do," he replied.

"Then put it on," Pola said, "and maybe, seeing the armband, the Germans will let us go over to the Judenrat building. Maybe something is going on there. Let's not just sit

here quietly and wait to be led away."

Sure enough, the ruse worked, and the Germans allowed the Air Raid Patroller and Pola to go to the Judenrat building, where they discovered the work detail being organized.

There was hope! But now Pola was faced with a new dilemma. How could she get word to me that I should get to the Judenrat building as quickly as possible? The minutes were ticking by, bringing disaster even closer.

In a panic, she ran from Jewish policeman to Jewish policeman, begging someone to carry the message to me, but no one wanted to risk leaving the safety of the group at the Judenrat.

Finally, a Jewish policeman of her acquaintance, a man named Jurkowski, agreed to come get me.

"Come quickly," he said. "Pola is calling you. There is no time to waste. Pola told me to come get you and her sister Sala. Come quickly!"

"Pola?" In the chaos, I had not even noticed that she was gone. "Where is Pola?"

"Pola is at the Judenrat," he repeated. He then told me about the newly formed work detail.

"What about my mother and the rest of the family? What's going to happen to them?"

"Don't ask questions. Just come with me, and hurry; every minute counts."

Quickly I turned to the police sergeant. He had overheard our conversation and waved me on. "Go right ahead," he said.

I was encouraged by his affable attitude and decided to press my luck. "Please, Herr Hauptwachtmeister. Allow my family to go back into the bunker. Don't ship them off."

He nodded and gave me a meaningful wink. "Get going,"

he said. "And hurry up."

I was stunned. His job was to round up Jews. Why did he let them live? There were at least ten other SS present who saw him, who could have reported him, who could have overrode his leniency. But he seemed not to care.

In retrospect, the entire behavior of the sergeant was so strange and unexpected that I can only assume he was a Heavenly messenger sent to deliver us from certain death.

I ran happily to tell my mother that she would be allowed back into the bunker. In the meantime, I did not have a second to lose. Looming in the distance was the Judenrat building. In front of the main door a large crowd had gathered, obviously the newly-formed work brigade. Pola was there already. This was our chance at survival, but would I still make it? I had to run as fast as I could.

"Hold it right there!" A policeman blocked my way, proud to have bagged another victim.

"I have permission from the *Hauptwachtmeister* to go to the Judenrat," I said, my voice shaking with tension. "Please let me go."

He was intent on holding me up and poked his gun into my ribs, berating me and the filthy, lying Jews. He went on for a good minute while I stood praying for a miracle. "*Ribono shel Olam. Beyadcha afkid ruchi.* Into Your Hand I entrust my spirit."

I suddenly sensed someone standing next to me and turned to see the *Hauptwachtmeister* who had been watching the scene. "*Ja, er kann gehn,*" he shouted. "Yes, he has permission to go."

Without any further delay, I was off to the Judenrat. Joining me were Pola's sister Sala, my aunt, Rosa Pelman and Frieda, the granddaughter of the Chentchiner Rebbe. They

had all pushed through on the strength of the *Haupt-wachtmeister's* permission to me.

By the time I reached the Judenrat building, the group was just about to leave, about six hundred men and women, marching in two separate columns, five abreast. Alongside the group, SS Commander Dreier and his men were riding on white horses. Stealthily, I sneaked into the front row of the men's column, and my heart skipped a beat when I spotted Pola in the last row of the women's column marching ahead of us. Anxiously, she glanced back at the men's column, wondering whether I had received her message and had made it in time. She smiled with obvious relief when she saw me marching behind her, and without a trace of fear, she called out loudly, "*Mir velen zei iberleben*. With the *Aibeshter's* help, we'll survive and outlive them."

Baruch Hashem, for the moment at least, the specter of death had been lifted. We had experienced a long series of *nissim geluyim* that day, inexplicable overt miracles. Who could know what tomorrow would bring?

CHAPTER 12

The Shoe Factory

OUR MARCH ENDED AT THE GATE OF THE BRAUN SHOE Factory. The plant which had been producing shoes for the German war effort was now emptied of all work benches and machinery. The large workshops that had been buzzing with activity only weeks before were filled with triple-decker, wooden bunks, separated by narrow aisles. Braun's had been converted into a concentration camp.

The columns came to a halt outside the camp, and the long line for registration slowly crept forward. Everyone received a blue armband imprinted with the letters AK, an abbreviation of *Arbeitskommando*, labor detail. We were also issued an *Arbeitskarte*, a worker's identification card, stamped with the official SS seal. This card certified that we were assigned to the clean-up detail; it was our passport to life. We

had to carry it on our person at all times; any person caught without it would be shot at once, since failure to have a card was considered proof that one had illegally sneaked into the labor detail.

Sleeping quarters for men and women were allocated, and after a quick lunch in the factory mess hall, we were taken to our work. The Germans organized various labor units to work at different assignments, and Pola and I managed to work close to one another. My detail was put to work emptying the homes of the Jews who had been deported. We carried out the furniture and bedding, and stacked clothing, dishes and silverware in piles to be carted off later.

Arriving at the work site, I was surprised to find Chaskel Najer who had been with us in the bunker. He was wearing the blue AK armband.

"Chaskel! When did you get here? What happened to Mother and the others?"

Chaskel told me that the *Hauptwachtmeister*, who had shipped the occupants of the Gelbart bunker to Auschwitz, had also, for some reason, kept his promise to me and led everyone else back into the bunker. The sergeant had permitted Chaskel to join the group at the Judenrat because he already worked as a street cleaner.

The *Hauptwachtmeister's* kindness was a mystery. Sometimes, however, Hashem uses even *reshaim* as His agents of rescue. I thought of the Rebbe of Nikolsburg, Reb Shmelke, who frequently talked about the holy spark trapped even inside the souls of wicked people. Here was this German police sergeant, a descendant of Amalek, with a spark of humaneness.

"Almost everybody is back in the bunker," Chaskel was saying. "But your brother and aunt and a few others reported

for *Aussiedlung*. They couldn't bear to go back in the bunker." Sadly, they all perished at the hands of the Nazis.

After work, we were marched back to our quarters in the Braun's camp under SS supervision. I thought all night of my mother and the people in the bunker. They must have run out of food by now. How would I get supplies to them? How could I get word to them about us? There was little point figuring ways to sneak out of Braun's, for the camp was guarded all night, and no one was allowed to leave or to enter.

The opportunity arose the following morning. Before we filed out for work, the women's *kommando* was ordered to gather food and prepare lunch for the men's unit at the work site. Here was our chance to get in touch with the bunker. It was a risky operation, but Pola undertook it with courage and *mesiras nefesh*. Under the pretext of searching for food for the men, she strayed from her unit and ran to the bunker and sneaked in. The good news and the food Pola brought fortified the people in the bunker. Pola also looked in on my grandfather, still lying unmolested in the apartment below, but he seemed to be in a coma. There was nothing she could do for him.

Even though the news about my grandfather was not good, I was gratified to know that my mother was well, and I worked with a sense of relief for the rest of the morning. But at one o'clock, we were ordered back to Braun's, where all the work details were assembled and lined up outside the plant. The brief respite from terror was over. The assemblage could mean only one thing: a dreaded selection.

I realized that it was indeed a selection when an SS announced that the previous work certificates and blue armbands were invalid. As soon as he had made the announcement, people began to panic and run. The SS opened

fire and mowed them down with quick bursts of machine-gun fire. We stood frozen in terror, surrounded by a multitude of bloody corpses. The screams of the living blended with the *Shema Yisrael* of the dying. Rising above the din were the bestial shouts of the oppressors, "*Frauen nach links!* Women go to the left."

A long column of one hundred and fifty young women, including Pola and her sister, were herded toward an assembly point outside the camp.

Now the Germans turned to the men, selecting those who were to live or to die. In wild panic, people began pushing and shoving in the belief that the end of the line provided a better chance for life. The SS responded with a wild shooting spree and quickly restored order, lining us up in rows of four abreast. The *Oberscharfuehrer* proceeded to split the column in two. One half for work, the other destined for an inferno.

It seemed that my luck had run out, for I was in the contingent to be sent for *Aussiedlung*. I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. This was the end. There was no way out. No, said an inner voice. Don't give up hope in Hashem's compassion, even if the cutting edge of the sword is resting on your throat.

The Germans must have realized that they were losing too many useful laborers, for suddenly they scanned our column of condemned and pulled out several robust young men.

One of the SS men stopped in front of me and growled, "*Geh 'rueber!* Move over there!"

Thank you, *Ribono Shel Olam*, I whispered in my mind. Thank you for saving me. I had felt the sharp edge of the sword on my throat, yet, "You have saved me from the depths of Sheol." (*Tehillim* 86:13)

Chaskel Najer was not as fortunate, however. He tried

desperately to squeeze through together with me, but an SS man beat him back with a blow of his rifle butt. To this day, I can still see him pleading with the SS man. "I'm only thirty-three. I'm a mechanic. I can fix anything. Please let me go."

The German answered with a blow to Chaskel's head that sent him reeling to the floor, blood streaming down his face. Soon, the entire group was led away in the direction of the railroad station. None of them survived.

And so, my sister Katie became a living widow, her two children living orphans. I'll never forget Chaskel, a kind-hearted, gentle *talmid chacham*. He was a beautiful rose in the garden of Hashem.

CHAPTER 13

Days of Woe and Sorrow

THOSE OF US THAT REMAINED WERE ISSUED NEW WORK certificates after the selection. How long those cards would remain valid was anyone's guess. But at least we had gained valuable time.

Soon the column of women came back, though greatly reduced. Like the men's column, their group had also been cut in half, and I looked anxiously for Pola as the women trudged back wearily. Both she and her sister were among the survivors, and I felt myself blessed that they had not been loaded on the freight train for *Aussiedlung*. To my astonishment, I also spotted Aunt Rosa in a distant corner of the camp and ran over to her. How had they overlooked this old woman?

"I hid," she said in response to my questions. "When they

ordered everyone to line up outside, I hid in one of the toilets. But I don't have a work certificate. So if they catch me, I'm done for."

The following Tuesday, the Germans conducted another selection and rounded up a fresh contingent of people for deportation. Aunt Rosa hid again, but this time, she was discovered and herded in with the other luckless people who were taken to Auschwitz.

The next morning, we went back to work removing the contents of the ghetto homes whose occupants had been deported. We carried out toys, dolls and photo albums, and also *menorahs*, *Shabbos leichters*, *Gemaras*, *sefarim*, *siddurim*, mute testimony to the vibrant Jewish life that had once pulsated in these homes. It came as no surprise that the Germans wanted our silver; they would make use of that. But of what use were our children's toys, our photos, our *sefarim*? We soon learned the answer.

In anticipation of winning the war, the Germans made plans to build a large museum in Prague to display the artifacts of the "Jewish race" they had destroyed. To fill that projected museum, all the Polish Judaica was collected for eventual shipment to Germany. We swallowed our rage and began collecting. But when the Germans designated a special group of six Jews to the task of collecting *Sifrei Torah*, we quietly rebelled and used their command to our benefit.

The six men selected for the task included Reb Anshel Shollowitz, Pola's father; Reb Berel Ernst; Reb Beirach Secensky; Reb David Leib Kisner; Reb Yosef Abramchik; and Reb Avraham Lieberman. Their survival depended on delivering two or three *Sifrei Torah* every week. They would be given ration stamps so long as they met the quota. But they were elderly, with little energy for the task, and with them, we

made the best bargain of our lives. We would search for the *Sifrei Torah* and notify them of their whereabouts, and they would sit and learn and say *Tehillim* in our behalf.

The *Sifrei Torah* and the objects from the Sosnowice ghetto were stored temporarily in a wing of the Judenrat building which was set up as a mini-museum under the direction of SS Untersturmfuehrer Scheufele. Ruchtche and Mrs. Zelinger worked in this mini-museum, sorting, cleaning and dusting the various items. Once, I had occasion to go to the Judenrat building, and when I went into the museum, I stopped in my tracks. Jammed one on top of another were hundreds of *bechers*, *menorahs*, *leichters*, *besamim halters*, *Sifrei Torah*, Torah mantles and various other *tashmishei kedushah.* I knew that we had been collecting the Judaica, but to see it all in one room, to see hundreds and hundreds of our holy things, broke something inside me. I wept.

I stopped after a while and looked at Ruchtche, wondering if her thoughts had turned to her husband, my brother Pinchas, who had passed away in the ghetto on *Rosh Chodesh Tammuz.* I thought bitterly of the woman who had watched the funeral procession. Looking at the crying mourners, she had said, "Why are they crying? I wish we all could die so peacefully." This expression of envy mirrored my frame of mind and the despondent frame of mind of the Jews in the ghetto.

We could not bring ourselves to tell people of their dead or even of those who had been deported. Pola, who had resumed her job of providing meals for the men, went daily to the bunker with food, but she did not tell Katie that Chaskel Najer had been taken in an *Aussiedlung.*

Pola continued to look after my grandfather Reb Yitzchak Goldberg, who had been placed in the kitchen. His condition

deteriorated with every passing day, and a few days later, he passed away.

By now, we all realized that the Braun camp was little more than a staging area before we would be shipped off for *Aussiedlung*. Day after day, the SS methodically combed the ghetto searching for bunkers. The ill-fated occupants were locked up in jail until the following Tuesday, the day on which the weekly freight train left for Auschwitz. Whenever the human haul from the ghetto fell short of the prescribed quota, they filled up the train by raiding Braun's camp for additional victims.

Many people, including Pola's sister-in-law Kreindel, were unable to endure the horrors of living in a bunker and sneaked into the Braun camp where they mingled with the laborers, hoping to elude the Germans. Unwittingly, Kreindel was responsible for our bunker being discovered by the SS for the second time.

On September 8, she sneaked back into the ghetto to see her husband who was still in the bunker. An SS man suddenly appeared and pointed his gun at her. "Show me where the bunker is," he demanded. "I know that's where you're going now."

The terrified woman had no choice but to reveal the location to him, and within minutes, the entire bunker population, including my mother, was marched off to jail. I tried everything to have them released, but it was hopeless. The Germans held on to their prey and would not let go. Neither begging nor bribery could move them. We knew that, inevitably, on Tuesday the death train would come rolling in.

I did manage to visit my mother, Katie and her children, Shimon Shalom David and Baruch Yehudah, in their cell one

time and bring them food. The faces of the little boys lit up when they saw me.

"When are we going home, Uncle Avrum?" they asked innocently.

I bit my lips, holding back my tears. "Soon, soon, *tayere kinderlech*."

But when I turned to my mother, the tears coursed down my face. My mother, my precious mother who had always been the center of my life, was being snatched away from me, not by illness or some other natural catastrophe but by the murderous madness of the Germans. There she sat before me, vibrant and full of life, my dear, beloved mother, and we both knew she would be on the death train. What could we do? What could we say to each other?

We sat there with trembling lips and fluttering hearts. I think I mumbled something to the effect that she should make sure her *sheitel* was nice; perhaps the murderers would think her fit for labor. But in truth, there was nothing to say. The hopelessness was overwhelming.

We embraced silently, and then we said good-bye.

I never saw my mother again, except in my mind's eye.

CHAPTER 14

The Shooter

FOR A WHILE WE FELT A SLIGHT REPRIEVE FROM THE terror that surrounded us. Ten thousand Jews had already been deported from the ghetto, and the task of emptying out all the apartments and houses might keep us busy for many months, perhaps years. We calculated that as long as the Germans needed us for our labor they would not deport us. And the Gestapo, busy for the moment with other matters, did not bother us much. With one exception. And no one would have dreamed of even attempting to offer this solitary German money that we sometimes found.

His name was Dahlenberg, but among ourselves he was simply known as "the Shooter." An encounter with him was a clash between the *kochos hatumah* and the spirit of *kedushah vetaharah*. He was the "hand of Eisav" choking the "voice of

Yaakov," who never went to bed without having killed several people. He would begin by mercilessly torturing his victims, inflicting senseless torment, and when he had beaten his prey to a pulp, he would finish him off with a well-aimed bullet between the eyes. Surveying the fruit of his labor, a body sprawled at an awkward angle or spilling blood, he would smile smugly and clap his hands in glee. "*Die Sache hat geklappt!* I've done a good job!"

While the others took it for granted that all the bunkers had long been rooted out, it had become a private campaign for the Shooter to demonstrate how lax they had been in their search. It was not so difficult to locate bunkers; all it required was a plodding diligence and a commanding voice, but each bunker he rooted out left him feeling as exhilarated as a man who had just made some amazing discovery against impossible odds.

Most of the people were too exhausted to resist after being locked in the bunkers without food or water for weeks, and they complied with his commands instantly. Yet he took great pleasure in humiliating them before shooting them in the head or arresting them.

Once, though, he surprised us by going to a good deal of trouble for a woman he had shot in the foot, when he discovered that she had just given birth the day before and that the baby had managed to live almost until that morning. He had her carried straight to the Army hospital and ordered a doctor to remove the bullet from her foot.

For an entire week, he visited her daily, brought her food and asked her how she felt.

One day she was able to answer, "I'm better."

"I'm so glad to hear that, my dear. Do you think you can sit up now?"

"Oh, yes," she replied.

"Then sit up."

She obeyed, and he calmly shot her through the head.

Another time, while a fresh contingent was being rounded up for *Aussiedlung*, he fired from behind at a woman who was carrying a small child. She crashed to the ground, still carrying the child. But it turned out the bullet had not hit her at all; it had passed between her arm and her ribs, leaving a large hole in her coat. It was sheer fright which had knocked her off her feet. The child was unhurt also. Too dazed to think of playing dead, she got up again.

The Shooter, who prided himself on never missing his target, was so surprised, he told her cheerfully, "Since I didn't hit you the first time, I'll let you live."

Still, the woman was afraid to turn her back on him.

"Go on," he urged. "I won't hurt you."

She began to walk away. This time, for some reason, he kept his word.

But it was not only his whimsical notions of justice which gave him such inhuman dimensions; his very appearance was just as unreal. He had cold blue eyes, features devoid of any passion, and a ready smile which was almost feminine.

Late one afternoon, I happened to be watching from the window of our dormitory as the Shooter stopped Reb Berel Ernst, one of the group that collected *Sifrei Torah* for the Germans. A distinguished member of the Sosnowice *kehillah*, his face had a radiance that reflected purity. For no apparent reason, Dahlenberg suddenly slashed Reb Berel across the face with his riding crop. Then, as though pleased with the effect, he did it again several more times. The Shooter gleefully watched the elderly man slump to the ground, writhing in pain. Suddenly he pulled out his gun and,

playfully, it turned out, took aim at the man's head. Horrified, I witnessed the scene, gnashing my teeth in suppressed anger. Surprisingly, Dahlenberg, the unpredictable "Shooter," did not fire his gun.

"*Mach dass Du fort kommst!*" he snarled. "Get away from here!"

Later that day, still fuming with indignation, I related the incident to Pola and some of her friends. "If he hadn't had a gun, I would have crippled him," I finished in an irate outburst to which no one paid particular attention.

It was one of Dahlenberg's fancies to come into our buildings after we were through with the day's work and stroll around, chatting with us, particularly with the girls. Apparently starved for approval, he tried in a roundabout way to find out what the girls thought of him, as though his popularity with them meant a great deal to him. Needless to say, they did not disappoint him.

Several days later, after the incident with Reb Berel, two girls in the clean-up *kommando*, Hanka Kucinska and Franka Yachimovicz, found a mandolin in one of the empty apartments. Sitting on top of the bed, Hanka began to play a tune, when suddenly Dahlenberg walked in. Instantly, she stopped and tried to hide the mandolin under her blanket.

"Come on," he coaxed her. "Won't you keep playing? I love to listen to music."

"I'm too scared to continue," Hanka replied, aware that taking the mandolin was an offense punishable by death.

"Don't worry," the Shooter said soothingly. "If I had known that you play an instrument, I would have brought you a mandolin myself."

The girls, feeling more at ease now, conversed freely. One word led to another, and in an unguarded moment, Hanka

made a careless remark. "Oh yes," she blurted out. "You can do with us what you like because you've got a gun."

"And if I didn't?" he challenged.

"One of our men said he would cripple you."

Dahlenberg turned crimson. "Oh? And which one, may I ask?" Terrified by her foolish remark, Hanka tried desperately to change the subject. But Dahlenberg's pride had been hurt, and he would not let it go. "Which one?"

"No one. I was just making a joke."

"Who was it?" he insisted. "Which one of those dirty Jews was bragging he could cripple me?"

"I don't know. Honestly. I swear!" She was in tears.

The Shooter kept pressing her to name the man. Hanka, as frightened as she was, continued to refuse. The stand-off ended when the Shooter finally remembered that it was his lunch hour and started to leave. But he told her he would be back at two o'clock, and by then, he expected her to remember the name. He left the alternative to their imaginations.

As soon as he was gone, Pola came running to tell me what had happened. She pleaded with me to go into hiding at once, because if he began to torture her, Hanka would surely give my name. I was just as frightened as she was, but I knew that the Shooter would take my disappearance as an added provocation and would not rest until he had found me.

I tried to reassure her that the two o'clock deadline was probably just a face-saving bluff, and by now he had other things to occupy his mind. But if he came back, she was to give him my name instantly.

I had put on a bold front, but inside I trembled. At lunch I could not eat a bite of food.

Two o'clock came and went. Nothing happened. By two-thirty, he still had not shown up, and the next time that I saw

him, he seemed to have forgotten about the incident. Hashem in His mercy had answered my plea and saved me once again.

In those troubled times, when death was stalking us and hope was fading, we always turned to Hashem. And those of us who were Radomsker *chassidim* found strength in each other's company and the inspiring memories we shared. One evening, after we came back from a hard day's work, Reb Yossel Abramchik, a devoted Radomsker *chassid*, came over to me to remind me that that evening was the eighteenth day of *Cheshvan*, the *yahrzeit* of the Kenesses Yechezkel. Reb Yossel would gather a *minyan*, and I would try to procure a few slices of bread for a *seudah* in honor of the *tzaddik*.

I stepped into the kitchen and timidly asked for a slice of bread.

"Get out of here! Are you out of your mind?" the kitchen workers shouted derisively. "You want to make a *yahrzeit seudah*? Here in Braun's Labor Camp? Just watch out that the Shooter doesn't find out about this."

I came back empty-handed to find Reb Yossel Abramchik surrounded by the *minyan* he had rounded up. One of the men, Reb Yaakov Halberstam-Rosenfeld of Kshanov, told us all to follow him.

Reb Yaakov, a highly respected *rebbe* and a descendant of the Sanzer dynasty, lived in a small room, hidden from the SS. There we had a "proper" *seudah*, consisting of a couple of slices of bread. We sang Radomsker *niggunim* and recounted anecdotes and *divrei Torah* from the great *tzaddik*, the Kenesses Yechezkel.

"*Zchuso yagein aleinu*," we said in parting. "May his merit protect us."

CHAPTER 15

Train Ride to Hell

THE FRIGID WINTER OF 1943 BEGAN TO MAKE ITSELF known. Braun's Labor Camp was covered with snow, and a blast of icy air blew through the cracked windows of our unheated buildings. Sometimes, in the grip of mad exaltation, we thought we could hear the footsteps of *Mashiach*. Soon the *shofar* of *Mashiach* would resound and announce the end of our suffering. Soon Hashem would pour out His wrath on the evil Reich. We had only to hold out.

The tides had already turned, and we were still alive while the seemingly invincible Germans were going down in defeat on all fronts. The Sixth Army under General Paulus had been mauled at Stalingrad, and over ninety thousand German soldiers were trapped. German forces were in retreat along the entire Russian front. Rommel's vaunted Afrika Korps

had been routed by the Anglo-American forces under Montgomery at El Alamein; the Allies had won the war in North Africa; and the front had moved to southern Italy. Allied bombers were turning German cities into heaps of rubble.

The only battle the Germans were winning was their murderous campaign against the Jews, a war they pursued with hellish fury. The weekly transports to Auschwitz had depleted the ghetto population, and although we had dark suspicions of dreadful things happening there, no one knew with certainty what fate awaited the deportees.

Then one day, two teenage boys who had escaped from Auschwitz appeared in the ghetto. They had come to warn us, to tell us the Germans were gassing and burning people by the thousands each day. They urged us to do everything we could to break out of the ghetto, because in Auschwitz, we did not stand a chance. "They'll gas you," they said. "They will gas you."

No one believed their horror stories. This could not be true. We were, after all, living in the twentieth century. Maybe they were going to make us work hard, but gassing?

Then, on the morning of December 16, 1943, when we lined up for our regular work detail, we suddenly found ourselves surrounded by SS men, their machine-guns pointed at us. The selection process started. Some people made a run for it, but they did not get very far; shots rang out in all directions, and the dead bodies strewn on the ground discouraged any further escape attempts. Since I was a strong fellow who had a trade, I might have been able to stay behind, but when I saw that Pola and her family had been marked for *Aussiedlung*, I made no attempt to remain in the camp and was quickly assigned to the column slated for "resettlement."

Eight hundred men and women were marched to a

neighboring village. We were taken to Kamionka, the ghetto of Bendzin, where we spent the night on the concrete floor of an abandoned warehouse, miserable, hungry and chilled to the bone. The next morning, we were taken to a railroad siding, some three miles outside the village. Those who fell back, stumbled or simply could not make it were shot and left to die by the side of the road. People went to pick up the wounded and the dying; more shots were fired, but they refused to abandon the injured.

"Get back in line," the SS guards shouted. "Back in line, you hear!"

More shots rang out, and a wild scramble ensued. People were screaming in panic, screaming in pain, shoving one another to flee the guns, stumbling over the dead and the dying.

"Come on, Avrum," Pola urged. "Let's make a break for it. Let's rip off our *Judenstern* and run. Now is our chance! Remember what those two boys said, Avrum. Let's not go like sheep to slaughter."

I looked around. There was nowhere to run or hide. In all directions, as far as the eye could see, were acres of flat farmlands, covered in snow. We would be so easy to spot and pick off. And I simply told Pola, "It's not a good idea." Then seeing her face, I echoed her own refrain, "You'll see, Pola. *Mir velen zei iberleben*!"

We waited at the siding until mid-afternoon, stamping our feet to keep our toes from freezing and envying our guards their noon meal of deliciously thick hot pea soup. Finally, a train made up of rickety old boxcars backed into the siding. Amid wild shouting and savage blows of rifle butts, we were squeezed into the wagons, about eighty persons to a cattle car, leaving us barely enough room to breathe.

Slowly, the train set into motion. Peering through the cracks in the wall, we could tell that we were heading in the direction of Auschwitz. I tried to convince myself that the stories the two escaped boys had told were untrue or, at least, wild exaggerations, but as the wheels rolled inexorably forward, I kept hearing the parting words of those boys, over and over. *They'll gas you. They will gas you.*

No. They would *not* gas me. Hashem had protected me thus far. He would not abandon me. "*Ad heinah azarunu rachamecha velo azavunu chasadecha, veal titsheinu lanetzach,*" I prayed silently. "Until now Your mercy has helped me, and Your kindness has not forsaken me; do not abandon me forever." But I could still hear the boys. *They'll gas you. They will gas you.*

I needed more than *bitachon* to sustain me through the dreadful days that lay ahead. I needed concrete deeds, *mitzvos maasios*, to lift me out of the German malevolence. At the very outset of our arrival in Shrodula, I had made it a point to be conscientious about three *mitzvos* in particular, to fulfill them even in the most trying times. I had pledged never to eat bread without first washing for *netilas yadayim*; I would always eat the *melaveh malkah* meal, even if it consisted of only a *kezayis* of a dry crust of bread; and, mindful of the Magein Avraham who says that whoever recites *Kiddush Levanah* will be protected from harm during that entire month, I would never fail to say *Kiddush Levanah*. And on that fateful train ride to hell, beset by fears, I resolved that, come what may, I would continue to observe these three *mitzvos*. And with Hashem's help, I did.

Thus bolstered, I took a diamond ring, a gold watch-chain and four hundred German marks from the lining of my pants. The watch, the chain , the ring and half of the marks,

I gave to Pola. "Take these," I told her. "They may save your life someday."

The train began to slow down. People who had been looking through the cracks at the desolation that lay ahead, began shrieking in panic and shoving themselves away from the door. Except Mrs. Josefowitz, a woman in her eighties. She had been one of the most respected women in Sosnowice, and even now, unlike most of us, she was full of life and vigor, with all her wits about her. As the train now shuddered to a halt, she turned to us with a twinkle in her sharp eyes. With a smile, like a child possessed of some delightful secret, she said, "Shall I take it *now*?"

"It" was a small, blue cyanide capsule.

And as we looked at it with mingled horror and envy, she explained matter-of-factly. "After all, my husband and son are already up there," pointing a finger at the ceiling of the boxcar and the Heaven beyond. "And why leave matters to those swine out there?"

I assured her, as though I knew what I was talking about, that there was still time for that. "Don't abandon hope. Hashem can intervene, even at the last moment, when everything seems lost. Don't abandon hope."

BOOK THREE

On the Planet of Doom

CHAPTER 16

The Valley of Death

THE SLIDING DOORS OF OUR BOXCAR OPENED TO AN ear-splitting din. "*Alle raus! Schnell, raus, raus! Alle raus!* Quick, quick, everybody out! Leave everything behind."

Blinded by the sudden daylight, we stood in deathlike silence, staring at the mocking sign over the gate: ARBEIT MACHT FREI. In the distance, we saw red and yellow billows of fire and thick black smoke whose strange odor wafted our way. We were in Birkenau, the death camp of Auschwitz. We had arrived in the *Gei Tzalmaves,* in the Valley of Death.

Still in a stupor, stiff from standing for hours, we climbed or stumbled out of the boxcars. Those hesitating to jump onto the platform were pulled down by guards. Soon, the announcements came. "Everybody line up, men on the right,

women on the left! Mothers with children, old people, go to the trucks." A line of trucks stood waiting a short distance away.

Mrs. Josefowitz somehow had managed to mingle with the younger women on the platform who were being terrorized by the roaring SS guards with their snarling dogs. It would not be long before the guards discovered her, and she had already seen enough. Her hand was at her mouth. She bit down hard and swallowed. The guards spotted her too, but they were too late, and in her final moments, she shot them a contemptuous glance. Seconds later, when it was all over, the guards were not only angry at her unauthorized action but actually upset.

Pola and I knew that the time had come. For a fleeting moment we looked silently into each other's eyes. And then we said good-bye. "Be strong. *Mir velen zei iberleben,* Pola. You'll see. *Auf Wiedersehen.*"

We lined up. There was no shooting here. About thirty SS men with their bloodhounds surrounded us, while ten more went through the lines to make sure no one had hidden any children. Those who were found were promptly sent to the waiting trucks; their next stop was the gas chambers and crematoria in Birkenau, about two kilometers from the gates of Auschwitz.

Heart-rending scenes ensued when mothers said good-bye to their children who were pushed into the trucks. Sometimes the mothers followed the children into the trucks rather than part with them. Near me was a woman with an eight-year-old boy. She had told him to hide among the men. After a while, the SS spotted him, but he ran quickly to hide in another group. This grim hide-and-seek game went on almost playfully for a while, the boy deftly mingling with

another column of men, but he was caught and tossed onto the waiting trucks.

Pola's twelve-year-old brother Fromush was also caught and sent to the trucks. He vainly kept telling the SS who had him by the arm, "But I'm grown up. I can work just like everyone else. Please let me stay." The guard dragged him to the truck and stuffed him in. We never saw him again.

From the distance, a shiny black limousine came driving up. Three officers stepped out and positioned themselves in front of our column. The one who stood in the middle had a strange, sardonic smile. As we learned later, his name was Josef Mengele, the doctor who made the selections for the entire camp. We were ordered to form a single file, step up to face him and state our age. Mengele, elegant in gleaming boots, erect and slim, casually glanced at each man. With a nonchalant flick of his glove-clad thumb, he pointed to the left or the right. The left meant the trucks.

We filed past the doctor. Directly in front of me was a man I knew, a chemist from Vienna. "I am thirty-five years old," he said loudly.

The doctor, looking pointedly at his bald head, showed signs of disbelief. The chemist began desperately to fumble for credentials which would establish his true age, but Mengele had already pointed to the trucks. Some minutes later, he began shouting to the doctor, waving his papers, "Look, Herr Doktor, I've found my birth certificate. Let me show you!" But Mengele did not react. It was too late.

I was next. I was badly shaken by the incident, but I stepped forward and stood straight, my head held high. "*Ich bin funf-un-dzwanzig Jahre alt,*" I said resolutely. "I am twenty-five years old."

The seconds that followed seemed to last an eternity.

Mengele's wrist arced to the right. I had won a reprieve.

When I joined the small group of men standing on the right, I realized that the largest part of our contingent had been sent to the trucks. We stared for a while at the chimneys in the distance that incessantly belched the fiery, putrid smoke and wondered what strange products were being manufactured in those factories. And then, through the twilight that had set in, I peered in the direction of the women to see what had become of Pola. I was not certain, but I thought I saw her and her sister Sala among those who were sent to the right.

We were surrounded now by SS and their bloodhounds and marched into the camp. As we were marching, I silently *davened Kabbalas Shabbos* and *Lecha Dodi.* In the Radomsker *niggun*, I hummed, "*Vehayu limeshisah shosayich.* May your oppressors be downtrodden, and may those who would devour you be cast off."

As we neared our destination, the SS men began asking us if we had any money or valuables. "Better hand them over to *us*. They'll take it away from you anyhow, and make you eat some dirt on top of it."

I did not know what to do. An SS man and his dog were close beside me. It was hard to tell which of them looked more threatening. Finally, I handed him ten marks, and to my relief, he went on.

We stopped before a long barracks marked *Sauna.* By that time, I was so weary and so numb, both physically and emotionally, that nothing at all could shock me. But as we went through the wide doors, it was as though I had suddenly been admitted into Hell. There was a cacophony of terrifying screams, shouts and curses. From all sides, *kapos* swooped down on us, swinging their wooden clubs indiscriminately.

"*Ausziehen! Alles Sachen ablegen!*" The *kapos* barked out commands and followed those with a string of obscene curses that made me shiver. "Get undressed! Deposit all of your valuables and personal effects! Do you think they sent you here to live?"

Later, I understood that this was merely to terrify us and confuse us so that we would not dare think of hiding anything. But we did not know that then, and seized by panic, we complied instantly. Adding to our fear was the fact that it was not the SS who were cursing and beating us, but prisoners like ourselves, many of them Jews. The Germans, in a demonic ploy, had created a system of *kapos*, who for the promise of an extra day of life or even an extra ration of bread, tormented their own brothers and sisters. If Jews treated us with such brutality, what were the Germans capable of?

The gate opened again, and an empty truck drove in. A handful of prisoners jumped down, and our clothes and belongings swiftly disappeared. We looked on, naked and shivering. At that moment, I felt less regret for my shirt and trousers than for my certificate of *semichah* and the special coin I had always carried with me. My *semichah* and my *segulah* coin were my most precious belongings, and now they were gone. But the Germans could not take my *emunah* and *bitachon*.

Presently, we were beaten up some more, this time simply because, as one of the prisoners snarled at us, "You've been loose, living with your families, eating like pigs, living with your wives, while we've been here for more than two years. Now you're going to find out what it's like in here."

When things had quieted down somewhat, we approached some of the more decent-looking "monitors" to ask what

would happen to us and what would happen to those members of our families who had been put on the trucks.

"Those people are all dead already," we were bluntly informed. "And you, you'll be shaved and bathed; and then you'll be on the way to the incinerators, too."

Part of the prophecy was fulfilled almost at once. Another group of monitors came in, made us line up and rapidly shaved us with blunt razors. They shaved every place on our bodies where a hair was to be found. It was a bloody business, for they were not gentle at all. But if anyone let out a sound, he was silenced with a blow and with humorous remarks like, "A little cologne maybe? A manicure?"

While having the hair scraped off my body, I convinced myself that this could only be a good sign. After all, if they were going to kill us at once, why bother to remove the hair? And why, I thought, as they led us into a shower room, would they make us bathe? Nevertheless, I stared at the showerheads in the ceiling, wondering whether water or gas would come out. It was water.

After the shower, we waited, still naked, in the large room for about four hours until we were given clothes: blue and white striped trousers, jacket and cap, a pair of long winter stockings and a pair of wooden clogs. Short men got long pants, thin men baggy ones, the broad-shouldered narrow jackets. We looked grotesque. We laughed at each other hysterically, laughed and laughed, unable to stop.

When two boys appeared with an accordion, we stopped laughing and stared in bewildered silence. The two commenced entertaining us with some songs. Thus we sat, listening to songs of Auschwitz for the rest of the night.

CHAPTER 17

Number 169178

AT EIGHT O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING, WE WERE JOSTLED into another room amid further shouting and shoving. We lined up for registration, and our names, dates of birth and professions were recorded. All the information was entered meticulously on index cards and stored in a huge filing system. When I stood in front of the prisoner recording the information, I declared, "*Ich bin Buchhalter von Beruf.* I am an accountant."

I had given this as my profession from the very start, at the registration on the soccer Stadium in Sosnowice. To have stated rabbi or *yeshivah* student would have meant suicide. Besides, I was quite good at figures and knew a great deal about bookkeeping. As it turned out, this answer was to stand me in good stead later on.

Then I was told to sit down at a table where a *haeftling*, a prisoner, grabbed my forearm. He dipped a stylus in a special kind of ink and was about to tattoo a number into my flesh.

"Is it going to hurt?" I asked apprehensively.

"Fool that you are," came the answer between quick stabs. "Be happy you're getting a number, because a number means life."

As I was being tattooed, I was overcome with a deep sense of depression. What was the use of clinging to life? They had killed my family, beaten me, robbed me of everything I owned, my *semichah* and even my clothes. Now they were stripping me of my name and identity. They were branding me like cattle and turning me into a commodity. What was I but a six-digit number?

"Ver bist du, yingele?" I heard a voice asking, and suddenly, I was a young boy again, transported from Auschwitz, standing with my father on the crowded train platform in front of a train, in front of the Belzer Rebbe. *"Ver bist du, yingele?"* he was asking. Now, as the stylus bit into my arm, I heard those words again, as if to say, "Remember who you are—the son of noble parents, of grandparents who were *tzaddikim,* the descendant of Reb Duvid Lelover. They are watching over you, and their *zchus* will protect you."

I looked down. On my forearm were the numbers 169178. I immediately noticed that the *gematria*, the numerical value, of 169 was 16, which became 17 with the addition of the *kollel*, the collective 1. Similarly, the *gematria* of 178, with the *kollel*, was 17. 17 was an auspicious number since it was the *gematria* of *tov*, good.

After some more thought, it occurred to me that the *gematria*, of all my individual numbers, was thirty-two or *lamed beis*, which in the Hebrew alphabet spelled *leiv*, heart.

Maybe Hashem was sending me a signal, telling me to take heart. "*Karov Hashem lenishberei leiv.* Hashem is close to the brokenhearted." (*Tehillim* 34:19) Nor did I need to be brokenhearted, for it says, "*Kavei el Hashem chazak veameitz libecha.* Put your hope in Hashem, and He will fill your heart with courage." (*Tehillim* 27:14) I remembered that *lamed beis* form the last and the first letters of the Torah, so it was as if I carried the whole Torah on my arm.

Staring fixedly at my arm, I continued, and added the three and the two of the thirty-two and arrived at five. The number five corresponds to the letter *hei* which signifies Hashem. His sign was with me, on my arm. The Germans had taken my *tefillin*, the *"os al yodecha*, the sign on [my] arm"; now my number replaced the *tefillin* as the Divine sign.

And I realized that *hei* had additional significance; it was the letter that was added to the name of Avraham as a sign that he would become a "multitude of nations." (*Bereishis* 17:5) It seemed as if Hashem was telling me through the letter *hei* that I would survive this nightmare and be blessed with a family.

Instead of a mark of humiliation, my serial number 169178 became a source of inspiration and hope to me. I smiled, and the *haeftling* looked at me oddly. He probably thought I had lost my sanity.

Sometime before noon, we were finally given our first meal, some watery soup with a few cubes of spoiled turnips floating in it. The smell was revolting, but this was to be the main staple of our diet from then on. For every two men there was a two-liter dish. Sharing mine was Pola's elder brother Mendel, who turned his head from the concoction. I urged him to eat, but he was unable to stop himself from gagging.

Later in the day, we were assigned to Barracks 6 in the

quarantine camp. It was *Shabbos*, a sunny, mild winter day. As we marched past a long row of barracks to our new quarters, the sun glinted on piles of corpses stacked in front of the barracks doors. Occasionally, I heard voices calling my name. I looked at those who were calling me, but I did not recognize a single one of them. After a while though, I began to identify them as friends with whom I had grown up. Now they were walking skeletons, slowly moving shadows. They had come to Auschwitz three months earlier.

At last, we reached the quarantine station. Here, we were left standing in front of the barracks for about an hour. Then the *Blockaelteste*, the block monitor, arrived accompanied by his *Stubendienst*, his assistants. "You will be treated well here," he announced somewhat mechanically. "But remember, you don't have first or last names any more, only the numbers tattooed on your arms! Make sure you memorize your number!"

Then he called the roll by the numbers, and we had to answer, "Here!" There were many who became confused and could not recall their numbers, and while standing at attention, were not allowed to sneak a look. They were promptly beaten up by the monitor's assistants. Then the barracks chief drilled us for half an hour on the proper behavior when an SS man entered. At the command, *"Muetzen ab!"* we were instantly to remove our caps and stand at attention. *"Muetzen auf!"* was the signal for putting them back on.

When at last we were allowed to enter the barracks, we discovered that it was a converted horse stable with a number of very small windows directly under the roof. In addition to the more than three hundred men in our group, there were three hundred Jewish prisoners from Holland who had arrived three weeks earlier. Thus, a total of more than six

hundred men occupied a space of about one-hundred-fifty feet by thirty feet. Five men were assigned to a three-tiered bunk, and everyone received a blanket and a straw pillow. After we were shown our new quarters, we listened to more instructions on proper behavior. Essentially, we were forbidden to talk. We were permitted speech only to answer questions. The *Stubendienst* were present with their truncheons to enforce these orders.

We received our ration of bread for the day at half past five. It consisted of about half a pound of dark bread, a dab of margarine and a spoonful of jelly. The barracks chief ordered two of the Jewish boys from Holland, who were professional entertainers, to sing something for the newcomers. We were also finally permitted to speak to each other, but we were struck again with the incongruity of entertainment, when out there, near our doors, were tidy rows of corpses, like cords of wood.

At eight p.m., the lights were switched off, which was just as well, since we knew we would be called at five in the morning.

The last thing I did before falling into a blessed sleep was to hide a dry piece of bread for the next day. When we were awakened, I looked for the bread under my pillow. It was gone.

CHAPTER 18

A Soft Job in Auschwitz

IT WAS STILL DARK OUTSIDE, AND ACCOMPANIED BY THE shouts and beatings of the *Stubendienst*, we dressed hurriedly. After drinking a foul-smelling brew that was supposed to be tea, we were ordered to line up outside for *Appell.*

The monitors selected some of us to go back inside and carry out those who had died during the night. We were to lay them down neatly in front of the barracks, so that even though they could no longer answer, "Here!" they might still be marked present. At the *Appell*, they even counted the dead.

Twice each day, in a sacred concentration camp ceremony, we all had to line up in rows of five abreast to be counted, the strong, the weak, the sick, the dying and also the dead.

Like a miser keeps on counting out his money, the Germans counted out their Jewish prisoners. Though tens of thousands were killed each day, to the practical German mind, the tally had to agree, the books had to balance. "*Es muss stimmen.*"

And so, the *Stubendienst* men made sure that the rows were straight. "*Vordermann und Seitenrichtung!*" they shouted. "Line up behind the man in front of and next to you!" We stood for almost two hours. Every few minutes, one of the men from Holland who had already had three weeks of this, began to pass out. But each of them was quickly caught and held upright by his neighbor, so that he would not be marked sick.

Finally, the *Oberscharfuehrer*, the master sergeant, arrived.

"*Muetzen ab!*" the *Blockaelteste* barked, standing at attention, trying to impress the Germans. "Hats off!"

Everyone obediently removed his cap.

"Six hundred and fifty-five prisoners," he reported. "Ten dead!"

The SS man reviewed the rows, counting the living and also counting the dead. We were the lucky ones. The count checked out. The *Appell* was finally over. If it had not checked out, we would have been made to stand, as later we often were, an entire day without food in the rain or the freezing weather.

After two days, some of our friends and relatives from the other barracks were allowed to visit us. We gave them what little news we could from home and of an outside world that already seemed as foreign and distant as the moon, and they told us of conditions inside.

"Hang on at all costs," was the advice I heard over and over again. "Don't lie in your bunk moping and feeling sorry

for yourself. Keep busy, keep moving! If you lose heart and give up on life, you'll turn into a *Musselmann*, and you'll never make it." A *Musselmann* was someone who had lost the will to live and simply lay down and died.

Taking the advice to heart, I volunteered for the detail that had the job of fetching the food. This, I had been tipped off, would give me the chance to get a double ration. The next morning, I was awakened at four. I had not realized that my volunteering also meant giving up an hour's sleep. Eight men from our barracks went to the kitchen to pick up two cauldrons of tea, four men to each cauldron, which was suspended on long poles. One of the monitors went with us to supervise. We stopped in front of the kitchen and lined up. We had hardly done this when an SS man rushed out with a whip in his hand, screaming that we had failed to stand at proper attention.

Finally, we got our "tea." The distance back was about two hundred yards, but the ground was muddy and sucked at our clumsy shoes. We also encountered deep ditches. We had been warned what the consequences were when one spilled food, and at noon that day, one of the men stumbled while crossing a ditch, losing a shoe and spilling some food. He was beaten to death and carried outside in the next morning's *Appell.*

After the evening *Appell*, we were allowed to move around the camp. While taking a walk, I heard someone call my name. The voice sounded familiar, but I did not recognize the haggard figure that approached me.

"Berish," he said, identifying himself and smiling grimly. "Berish Gottlieb."

It was my best friend's brother. I had known them both since childhood.

"Akiva died last night," he went on in a flat monotone. "On *Shabbos*, when we heard you were here, he pulled together all his strength to walk over to Block 6 to see you, but he was not allowed in. He begged the monitor. He told him how weak he was and how much he wanted to see you once more, but it was no use. On Sunday, he couldn't walk. Yesterday he died and lay in front of the barracks until this morning. Here are his cap and his spoon." He paused for a minute and added, "That's how things are here."

It was an old cap, with the red insignia of the camp, but better than mine; the wooden spoon, though still usable, was no more than a stub. I did not want to take these things, but Berish pressed them into my hand. Four weeks later, he was dead, too. He had just turned twenty.

Dr. Rzendowsky, our old family doctor who was working as a physician in Auschwitz, also came to my barracks that night. I did not recognize him either. After inquiring about my family—not about their health, but about which of them was still alive, he put his arm around my shoulder and warned me about lying down during the day and becoming a *Musselmann*. "I'm going to speak with Buchweiz (the registrar of my barracks,) and I will ask him to give you a job as a *Stubendienst*. It's a soft job. All you have to do is dish out the food, sweep and wash the barracks floor, stoke the stove and anything else the barracks chief tells you to do."

The next morning, my number was called. I reported and was appointed *Stubendienst*, and I was introduced to my superior monitors from whom I was to take orders. I was immediately told to wash the floor, which I did with scrupulous care, sweeping away the accumulated dirt, mopping the floor and liberally sprinkling it with disinfectant. When I was finished, I stood around waiting for further instructions.

Seeing me standing idly, the barracks chief approached me and slapped my face. "What are you doing, standing there like an idiot? Don't you see they're *talking* over there on the bunks? Why don't you take a stick and crack them over the head? Move!"

I went back to my bunk and did nothing. And with that, my "soft" job was finished.

CHAPTER 19

The January Selections

ON THE SAME DAY, IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE *APPELL*, WE were given a work assignment, which entailed picking up heavy logs at the far end of the camp and carrying them back to our barracks to be used as firewood. Stragglers were beaten savagely by *kapos,* who accompanied their beatings with obscenities and threats. The repertoire of insults and expletives was quite limited, and the guards repeated the same litany of profanities with predictable regularity. After a while, we became completely inured to them; tirades that only yesterday had made us tremble with fear left us indifferent.

With the help of Yaakov Hoffmann, a good friend of mine who had some influence in the camp, I obtained my next job, that of peeling and dicing potatoes and turnips in

the *Schaelkueche*, the "peeling kitchen." It was an excellent job, for I could do the work while sitting on a chair. It had an added advantage; I could eat as many raw potatoes as I wanted, as long as I did not get caught. Being as hungry as I was, a raw potato was a genuine delicacy.

A few days later, I received a message from an inmate who had arrived together with us. He had secured a job as a roofer in the women's camp and had seen Pola. As proof, he showed me a scrap of newspaper on which, among other names, I recognized Pola's signature. My heart jumped with joy.

"Would you send her my regards," I asked him, "and hand her a slip of paper with my signature?"

"Of course," he replied. "But it'll cost you a day's ration of bread."

I was not embittered by this small charge. After all, he not only had the expense of procuring the scrap of paper and the pencil, but he also risked his life by carrying messages. Had he been caught, he would have been shot on the spot. Without a moment's hesitation, I gave him my bread ration and happily placed my signature on the crumpled slip of paper he handed me.

One morning, we were awakened by shouting. *"Juden, antreten!* Jews, line up!" It was the selections of January 5, 1944, something that the veteran inmates had been warning us about for days. No one was permitted to leave. Everyone stripped, lined up inside the barracks and waited for the next order.

Mengele entered with his entourage, and we instantly removed our caps, even before we heard *"Muetzen ab!"*

All inmates filed past Mengele with their tongues extended, for it was the condition and the color of that organ by which Mengele gauged our health and made his decision.

With that ever-present sardonic smile and cold, hard eyes, Mengele glanced at each man and gestured to the right or to the left. Those who were sent to the left had their numbers marked down by the barracks secretary. This he did under the close supervision of the SS men who made sure every number was properly recorded and no one was skipped.

After the selection, everyone got dressed; then, at dinner, each of us ate his meal as though nothing had happened. I was in a state of denial. Though it was common knowledge that the men selected by Mengele were slated for the gas chambers, I refused to believe it, preferring to swallow the German propaganda line that those too weak to work were being sent to a convalescent camp. But later that afternoon, when the numbers on the list were called, I could no longer delude myself. I watched the emaciated men being shoved onto waiting trucks, I watched the trucks heading toward the crematorium with its belching flames, and I could no longer pretend. They were being sent to the gas chambers.

It would not be long before I took the same ride, would it? I tried to banish that bleak reverie by thinking of my serial number, the sign of life inscribed on my arm. The daily horrors, however, the hunger, the thirst, the degradation, the pain and, more than anything else, the rising death toll of friends who had not lived through the night made it more and more difficult not to lose heart.

Now, a typhus epidemic was spreading through the barracks, claiming new victims each day. One week after the selection, I woke up with a raging fever. I was unable to eat anything. I felt parched, consumed by thirst, and I longed to drink great quantities of cold water. But fresh water was hard to come by, and the camp water was undrinkable and polluted. If I wanted to eat some bread, water for washing my

hands could be found only in the washing barracks, a distance away. To make things worse, I suffered a bad case of diarrhea. I did not need a doctor to tell me that I had caught typhus; I recognized the symptoms too well.

I grew steadily weaker and more apathetic, longing to stay in my bunk, dozing, longing to get it over with, to die in peace, to put an end to my hopeless dreams and futile planning. Dr. Rzendowsky's admonition rang in my ears, "If you lie on your bunkbed, you'll turn into a *Musselmann*." But sleep was irresistible. My eyelids drooped, and I felt the constant urge to drift off.

Behind the red fever of my eyelids, I saw my mother in the ghetto jail cell. She did not say a word, but she smiled as if to say, "Be strong. Have *bitachon* in the *Aibeshter*; He will save you." Pola was there then, waving and shouting defiantly, "*Mir velen zei iberleben.*" I opened my eyes and determined to live, for Pola's sake, if not for mine. With Hashem's help, I would endure. Summoning what little strength I had left, I got up and forced myself to go back to work.

I continued working, growing steadily weaker, sometimes hallucinating so badly that I did not know what was real and what was the fever. I did not know anything except that I would survive. By January 19, 1944, I thought the end had surely arrived.

We were at work when the ominous announcement resounded. *"Juden antreten!"*

We rushed back to our barracks, since a curfew would be declared shortly, and anyone found roaming the camp grounds would be shot on sight. I had very little hope of surviving this selection. The typhus had ravaged me, leaving me thin, pale and frail like an old man.

Stricken with terror, we stood in line, awaiting the arrival

of the Angel of Death, quietly murmuring *Tehillim* or any prayer we could remember. By now, none of us deluded himself any more about the outcome of a selection. All of us knew it meant death, and thus, even the atheists prayed, seeking solace in a *tefillah* recollected from childhood.

"*Ach–tung!*"

Mengele and his staff came barging into the barracks, tramping ruthlessly through the aisles, shooting anyone lying in his bunkbed. Any inmate whose looks displeased the staffers was marked for gassing even before the start of the physical examination.

I tried to cover up my pallor by vigorously rubbing my cheeks to put some color in them, and I scraped off the white coating on my tongue. Still, Pola's brother, Mendel, told me that my tongue looked pretty bad. When my turn came to be examined by Mengele, I tried to get by with putting out only the tip of my tongue.

"*Zunge rausstrecken!*" hollered the SS man. "Stick out your tongue!"

I had no choice but to extend my tongue all the way. Ordinarily, the entire procedure, quite a simple one, would take a second. If Mengele determined that a prisoner's tongue was too pale, he instantly flicked his thumb to the left. Sometimes, he would tell a prisoner to turn around, and if his back showed signs of having been whipped, Mengele would point to the left. Now, however, the doctor scrutinized me, examining my tongue for nearly a minute. The tension was agonizing; I thought my nerves would snap. When at long last he ordered me to turn around, I knew I was safe; he would find no welts or bruises on my back.

"I thought for sure that you were done for," Mendel said later. "Mengele kept looking and looking." Although Mendel

had survived the January 19 selection, he perished in the Buna concentration camp a few weeks later.

January 19, 1944, proved to be one of the worst days in the bloodstained history of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Two-thirds of the quarantine camp population had been marked for the gas chambers. The survivors felt relieved, but I had a gnawing sense of guilt for remaining alive.

I have often wondered what went on in the mind of Mengele as he inspected me. He had to have seen my white-coated tongue. What prompted him to send me to the right? My survival was a *nes*, a miracle. Of that I am certain.

CHAPTER 20

The Man from Berlin

AFTER THE SELECTION, WE WERE SERVED LUNCH. I FELT too sick to eat and remained in my bunkbed. I fell asleep almost at once. I must have been sleeping for a couple of hours when I was suddenly awakened by a shout.

It took me some moments to realize that the *Blockschreiber*, a man named Buchweitz was calling my serial number. Still burning with fever, I thought he was calling out the numbers of the people to be gassed and tried to convince him that he was making a mistake. "The doctor sent me to the right," I said. "I've been cleared. You're making a mistake."

The *Blockschreiber* gave me a puzzled look and tapped his forehead as a sign that he doubted my sanity. "You're supposed to be an accountant, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am."

"Well then, get over to the registration building. They want you there right away."

On my way to the building, I tried to reassure myself that I was probably needed for some clerical job. But when I arrived, I saw a crowd of about a thousand people standing in front of the entrance, many who had been selected to die, all clamoring to get in. It seemed unlikely that so many were needed for clerical work. Indeed, an acquaintance told me that a high-ranking official had just arrived from Berlin to choose a number of specialists for a special project. So important was the project that the official had access to any inmate, even those marked for extermination. That explained why everyone was pushing to get in. For those who had been targeted for the gas chambers, the special project meant life.

How in the world would I find my way into the building with a thousand desperate people besieging the entrance? I do not remember how I made it. It seemed as though an invisible hand lifted me up and deposited me inside. I stood in a daze with one hundred inmates milling around.

"*Antreten in Fuenferreihen!* Line up in rows of five abreast!"

We formed twenty straight rows, standing stiffly at attention until *Sturmbannfuehrer* Krueger, a slight man, appeared and scrutinized the prisoners. I held my breath as he stepped up to the first man.

"What kind of work do you do?" he said politely.

"I am a printer, sir, with fifteen years of experience."

"All right, put him down," Krueger directed his adjutant who was holding a clipboard.

"I have a brother here who varnishes furniture," the printer tossed out daringly. "We'd like to stay together."

The brother had been sent to the left by Mengele, but

Krueger, quite amiably, said, "All right. Put his number down, too."

He selected mainly printers, lithographers, photoengravers, typesetters and other trades connected with the graphic arts. I began to feel I had been called by mistake, since I had never worked in any branch of the printing business.

Gradually, as Krueger either accepted or rejected candidates, the column became shorter. I tried to hide behind a tall, husky man of my acquaintance named David Levandowski, because I hoped that in this way I could save his life. I had been sent to the "right" and was therefore in no immediate danger, but Levandowski had been sent to the "left." If the Germans did not see me they might choose Levandowski, and he would be saved.

Presently, Krueger had selected about twenty-five men. Levandowski, however, had not been taken. "*Genug!*" he said. "That's all!"

The SS men began to chase us out of the building.

"Just a minute!" Krueger called. "I need a few more."

We lined up again, and once more, I tried to stay behind Levandowski. Krueger picked five more men, then suddenly he spotted me. "You over there," he said. "Come on up here. I'd like to talk to you."

I stood in front of him.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-five."

"What kind of work do you do?"

"I'm an accountant."

Apparently, he wanted some proof because he said, "Let's see your hands."

In spite of the rough work I had been doing, my hands apparently still looked soft enough to convince him. "Take

down his number too," he told the adjutant with the clipboard.

And so I became the thirty-first on Krueger's team, the very last one to be chosen. I had made no effort to promote myself; it was Hashem Who was pulling the strings of my destiny. Levandowski was not taken.

Of the thirty-one prisoners Krueger selected, nineteen had been designated for the gas chambers that morning. Hashem's unseen Presence had saved them from death.

The next morning, before the *Appell*, we reported back to the registration building as ordered. From there, we could see the kitchen which was usually bustling with activity before dawn. The few inmates working there shuffled about forlornly, since almost the entire kitchen crew, including the foreman and the *kapos*, had been assigned to the gas chambers and were waiting to be picked up by the trucks. As we waited for the office to open, the doomed kitchen workers looked at us in desperate envy.

The *Lageraelteste*, the Jewish camp leader, walked up to us. Even in the short time I had been in Auschwitz, I knew him as something of a legend. He was a Slovak Jew who used his position to ease the plight of others whenever he could. Sadly, he was killed when the Germans liquidated Auschwitz in anticipation of the advancing Russian army. His early-morning summons was another demonstration of his humanitarian character and keen foresight.

"I apologize for making you get up this early in the morning," he said. "But I arranged to have you assembled here before the *Appell*, to prevent the SS from double-crossing Krueger. I was afraid that while Krueger slept, the SS would grab the nineteen men who have been marked for gassing and send them to the gas chambers. It seems that you

people are the Lucky 31. You'll survive this hell, I hope."

This man's self-sacrificing idealism shone like a radiant star in Auschwitz. I will never forget him.

The *Lageraelteste* then put us on a truck and rushed us over to Camp D, where we would await transfer to our new location. We were told that it would be the Sachsenhausen concentration camp near Berlin.

The Germans installed our group in a large block of about eight hundred prisoners. We were joined by twenty-five other inmates drawn from satellite camps, fifty-six inmates in all, ready for shipment. We were a mixed bag of nationalities—thirty-one Jewish prisoners and a contingent of twenty-five Poles, Dutchman, Frenchmen, Yugoslavs and Belgians. We had little in common except that most of us were professionals in the art of printing.

We drew "worker's rations," while we waited to be transported. Among other things, that meant twice as much bread as we had received in the quarantine camp. But I did not touch the food. I was more feverish than ever, and I wanted nothing more than water and sleep. I was able to swap my bread ration for some aspirin which helped me perspire, but at the same time weakened me further.

I noticed that my bunkmates seemed to resent me and were beginning to avoid me, which was quite understandable. Neither they nor I knew what was wrong with me. It might have been the flu or another contagious disease. If they spoke to me at all, it was to tell me to go to the clinic. But an SS doctor might send me to the gas chambers or back to the quarantine camp which could mean that I would miss the transport. I was too tired and sick to defend myself and did not respond to their comments. Fortunately, however, Chaim and Feivel Hollander, two of the men, old friends from home,

stood by me and convincingly said, "Look, fellows, it's just a bad cold, that's all. He doesn't have to see a doctor. Give it a couple of days, and he'll be as good as new." They helped me trade my bread ration for aspirin, and they made sure I had enough to drink.

Days passed, and our shipment still was not called. Meanwhile, I grew steadily weaker, and most of my fellow inmates avoided me quite openly. Even my two old friends had given up hope of saving me.

The crisis came early one morning with the announcement of a special roll call to check for lice. Every inmate of Camp D had to be present. There were terrible warnings to those who might try to avoid it, but I simply did not have the strength to crawl out of bed, let alone stand for the two hours such an inspection would take. I curled up in a corner of my cot and, with the help of my two skeptical friends, camouflaged myself under the blanket.

A few minutes later, a pair of guards burst in to check the barracks. I do not know how long I held my breath, but they passed without spotting me. I was safe. For twelve days, we were kept in suspense, as my condition went from bad to worse. The persistent fever had weakened me to the point that I had trouble walking. Finally, on the twelfth day, things began to stir, and we were commanded to go to the showers, after which we received an entire loaf of bread, a good-sized lump of margarine and a chunk of salami.

We did not eat. Our party of fifty-six inmates set out for the Auschwitz municipal railroad depot, a distance of about one and a half miles, where we were to catch the train. The column marched at a brisk pace, too rapid for me and an elderly bookbinder named Fingerhut from Zawiercie who had a bad leg. Finding ourselves at the end of the column and

steadily losing ground, we knew we were in trouble.

"Stragglers are fair game for the SS," I said. "We've got to keep up with the others. Come on, let's step on it!"

We strained every nerve. Locking arms, we held on to each other, and by encouraging each other, we managed to catch up with the group. But unfortunately, my bag of food slipped out of my hand.

The lost food turned out not to matter too much because when our march ended, near the Auschwitz depot, we were put in a decent building and given dinner. The aroma of the soup made my mouth water; however, much as I forced myself, after three or four spoonfuls, I was unable to continue. After dinner, although we had showered only a few hours earlier, we were once again ordered to take a shower. Then, naked and dripping, we were told to wait outside in the icy cold.

I do not know why they made us stand naked in the freezing weather. Perhaps they were jealous of these few Jews who seemed to be escaping the gas chambers and wanted to impose one last bit of torture. Whatever their diabolic reasoning, as I stood with a dangerously high fever in the frigid February air, I did not believe that I would survive any longer.

The ordeal ended half an hour later, and we were led into yet another barracks and issued new clothing and food for the trip. Afraid I might lose my rations again, someone carried my bag of food for me to the railroad station. To our amazement, a regular passenger train was waiting for us.

"Imagine, a passenger train with seats!"

"Traveling like human beings, can you believe it?"

"And we have enough food until we get there!"

Of course, we were put into an isolated car and placed

under heavy SS guard, but it seemed like the pinnacle of luxury to me.

It sounds strange, but somehow, standing in the freezing cold without clothes cured me of the fever. I fell asleep as soon as the train began moving and apparently slept so restlessly that, to this day, my friends who were with me on that train tell me that they were convinced I was in the throes of death rather than a fitful sleep.

We had arrived in Breslau by the time I awoke. Again, I was tormented with a raging thirst, and my friends asked one of the guards for permission to fetch some water. The guard, who must have been a decent sort, brought us a full pail of fresh water. My friends, who themselves were thirsty, let me go first. I believe I must have gulped down half the pail before my thirst was quenched.

"Would you let me have one of my sandwiches?" I asked my friends after the train began moving again. I did not eat very much, but it was the first time in three weeks that I felt hungry for a slice of bread.

BOOK FOUR

Counterfeit Lives

CHAPTER 21

Treated with Kid Gloves

AROUND SEVEN THE FOLLOWING MORNING, OUR TRAIN pulled into the Berlin main railway station. I had been in Auschwitz for several months, and my first vision of civilian life confused me. All around me I saw stocky, well-dressed Germans with attache cases, heavy-set women in fur coats, and rosy-cheeked students, dashing happily in all directions. In my drab convict outfit, I felt like a creature from outer space that had just landed on a different planet. Was it real or was it all a mirage?

We were marched to a different platform where we would transfer to a commuter train bound for Oranienburg, a small town about fifteen miles north of Berlin. Although feeling faint, I studied the faces of the people in the station to observe their reactions to a group of prisoners marching

by. Most people glanced at us with stone-faced impassivity as though the sight of a crew of emaciated concentration camp inmates was an everyday occurrence. Others furtively turned their heads and looked back at us, wondering what major crimes we had committed. Then there were those who could not suppress a smug smile of contentment, and one bulging matron laughed outright into our faces, as if to say, "Good for you, you dirty Jews!"

So, it was not a simple matter of a group of outcasts intimidating the German populace! The Germans believed in the annihilation of the Jews, agreed with it—all of them! As I saw the young German students carrying their books, I could not help but think that they were going to the same universities that Mengele, a prominent German physician, had attended. The German intellectual elite—the artists and thinkers, the scientists, philosophers, lawyers, physicians—lent legitimacy and respectability to the Nazi movement; the rest followed cheerfully. The German people, with few exceptions, were and are guilty of those crimes. Germany is an accursed nation, a stain on the world that will never be expunged.

It was useless then to expect even one person to betray the slightest trace of sympathy, and as we marched along, I turned my face away from those people and looked toward the waiting train.

From Oranienburg, we were taken to nearby Sachsenhausen, a large concentration camp arranged in a large circle of some fifty cinder-block barracks housing thousands of prisoners. At the registration desk, one of the older prisoners was introduced to us as our *Blockaelteste*, the barracks chief. Then we were issued serial numbers in a business-like manner. The shouting and cursing we had come to

expect did not materialize.

I was assigned number 75211, printed on a white cloth strip and sewn onto my jacket. As in Auschwitz, I calculated the numeric value and found that the *gematria* of 75211 was 16, which together with the *kollel*, the collective 1, added up to 17, the *gematria* of *tov*, good.

Ah, another sign from Heaven. Seven is the number of *kedushah*, of the holy. The seventh day is *Shabbos*; *Shavuos* arrives after counting seven weeks of *Sefirah; shemittah* is a seven-year cycle; *yovel* follows seven cycles of *shemittah*; a bride and groom recite *sheva berachos*; and the *menorah* in the *Beis Hamikdash* had seven branches. This number of *kedushah* was imprinted on my jacket, over my heart.

On the way into the barracks, I recalled the *pasuk* from *Mishlei* (3:3): "*Kosveim al luach libecha.* Write them on the tablet of your heart." With the seven of *kedushah* written on my heart and the thirty-two of *leiv* engraved on my arm, I felt enveloped by the protective shield of the *Shechinah*. Rather than feeling abandoned and lonely, I sensed Hashem's closeness.

Our barracks chief led us to Barracks 18, our new home in Sachsenhausen. That seemed yet another message from the *Ribono Shel Olam*, for it spells *chai*, life. At the barracks we were welcomed with a bowl of the most delicious hot oatmeal, cooked in milk with sugar, and afterwards, hot coffee with cream and sugar, as much as we wanted. It was incredible. We were seated at tables eating good, clean food with spoons and knives and forks; in my condition, however, I couldn't eat more than four or five spoonfuls of the tantalizing food. The dormitories contained individual cots, not the three-tiered bunk beds of Auschwitz upon which five men slept. And there were private lockers for personal

effects. Compared to Auschwitz, this was a four-star hotel, and I wondered about the soft reception and why we had been brought here.

My main concern, however, was to regain my health as quickly as possible without tipping off the Germans that I had ever been sick. My fever was down, but I still had a bad cold and could not stop coughing. I was sure that it was one of the aftereffects of my bout of typhus, but my friends thought that I had the symptoms of tuberculosis. Being sick in Sachsenhausen was no different from being sick in Auschwitz. Anyone suspected of being a carrier of a contagious disease was killed immediately by the SS.

Fingerhut, the little bookbinder who had helped me on the march toward the Auschwitz depot, contracted tuberculosis. He did his utmost not to let the Germans get a hold of him and died without violence and with a measure of dignity.

As a case in point, another fellow prisoner, a man named Frenkel, showed signs of the disease and was summoned to the clinic. He did not return.

During supper, a new barracks chief came to see us. I suppressed my coughing and sneezing, so that the fellows at my table would not shun me and thus alert the barracks chief. He seemed not to notice anything and greeted us rather jovially. "A hearty appetite, everybody. I just want to let you know that you'll stay in quarantine for the next four weeks. After that, you'll start work." He then appointed from among us two *Stubendiensten*, as the barracks assistants were called. One of them was named Moshe Gottleib.

We still did not have the slightest inkling of what this work was to be, but no one dared to ask him. Whatever it was, it had saved us from the Auschwitz gas chambers.

Gradually, my strength returned. After two weeks, I felt

much better and suddenly had a voracious appetite. Although the camp food was adequate, I found myself tormented almost continuously by an insatiable craving for food.

I decided to risk reporting to the camp clinic, hoping to be diagnosed as suffering from malnutrition and thus receive an extra food ration. At the clinic, for the first time in months, I had an opportunity to look into a mirror. I was shocked by what I saw. That scrawny, hollow-eyed creature could not be me. I was nothing but skin and bones, a walking cadaver.

I weighed in at eighty-eight pounds, fifty pounds less than my normal weight. The doctor who examined me was himself a prisoner and sympathetic towards his fellow inmates. He certified me as suffering from acute malnutrition but warned me not to expect immediate results. "Be patient," he urged. "It will take a while for the prescription to filter down through the bureaucracy."

Back at the barracks, my companions reproached me. "How could you be so trusting and go to the clinic?" they said. "They can use this diagnosis as a reason for sending you back to Auschwitz. Don't you know, back in Auschwitz, the sick list is always the last step before the gas chambers?"

"Things are different over here," I said halfheartedly. I began to have second thoughts though and could not sleep all that night, afraid that they might be right.

But at dinner time the following day, the barracks chief announced that I was to get *nachschlag*, a double ration. I breathed easier, and my fellow inmates regretted they had not followed my example.

I was gaining strength by the day, but I had not recovered completely and still felt quite weak in the knees. Although the morning roll calls took only five minutes, we were not permitted in the barracks until a clean-up detail swept and

mopped the quarters. That took nearly two hours, and I found it extremely difficult to stay on my feet outside in the cold that long. I longed to be indoors, not only to save my strength, but also because it would have been the perfect time to say my morning prayers. I could not have *davened Shacharis* outside, for the guards did not permit us to wear caps, nor did I want to arouse their suspicion by standing alone in a corner.

I decided to ask Moshe Gottlieb, our assistant barracks chief, for permission to stay inside and *daven* during clean-up.

"Go right ahead," he said, smiling. "*Un hob mich in zinnen.* Have me in mind when you're praying."

I am grateful to him to this day.

Not everyone was as supportive and understanding as Gottlieb of the special needs of a *frum* Jew. There were some who hated observant Jews with a passion and did everything in their power to make my life miserable. One fellow in particular, by the name of Heitler, who himself came from a *frum* family, tried to gain popularity by amusing himself at my expense.

Since I was still quite weak, I used every spare moment to catch some sleep. While the others chatted among themselves to pass the time, I would lie down on a bench in the corner of the room, pull my jacket over my head and go to sleep. My frequent napping provided Heitler the perfect opportunity to harass me, and he would entice his friends, urge them to "have some fun with our *tzaddik*." He amused himself in childish ways to the uproarious hilarity of his comrades. He would sneak over to where I napped and tip the bench until I slid off. Or he would tickle the insides of my ears with pieces of thread, awakening me with a start. He had endless little torments. There was nothing to do but avoid

him as much as possible.

As the days went by, some of the men in our barracks thought up a variety of reasons to explain why the Germans had brought us to Sachsenhausen and came up with the strangest theories. We knew that our work would be related to printing, and one fellow suggested that the Nazis intended to publish their diaries and biographies, using us as slave labor to save the expense of printing, typesetting and binding.

We did know that we would be put to work in Barracks 19 and that a group of Jewish prisoners was engaged there in some mysterious project. Although Barracks 19 was adjacent to ours, we had no contact with those inmates, since their barracks was completely isolated and enclosed by a barbed wire fence.

One day, Gottlieb informed us that some men from Barracks 19 were coming to our quarters to do some carpentry and electrical work. Before their arrival, he instructed, "You may talk with them about anything you like. But don't ask about the nature of their work."

Six men, accompanied by SS guards, arrived. We were happy to meet the people from across the fence, and they were curious to find out about us and the places from which we had come. In the course of the conversation, I discovered that one of the men, Leo Krebs from Beuthen, had an uncle whom I had known very well back home in Katowice.

"Can I get you something?" Krebs asked me obligingly.

"I'm terribly hungry, and I would like to have some bread," I replied.

When Krebs and his co-workers came again the next day to do some assembly work on the machines, he brought me a loaf of bread. I was amazed to see how freely and cordially

Krebs and the others conversed with their SS guards.

A few days later, on a Thursday, we were told that some of us would be transferred to Block 19 and that we were to clean our clothes and blankets. While we were cleaning, we hung our blankets on the block fence, and we noticed that one of the opaque windows in Barracks 19 was open. An engraver named Aaron Lodz and others were peering out and beckoned us to come closer. Though we were apprehensive, we were curious enough to approach the barbed wire fence.

"Where are you from?" they whispered. Invariably, this was the first question inmates asked one another.

"And where are you from?" we asked. "Do you have any spare cigarettes? What kind of work are you doing there?"

Before they could answer, the window abruptly slammed shut. Evidently, they had been caught red-handed. Minutes later, Hauptscharfuehrer Werner burst into our barracks. He was red-faced as he asked, "Who was talking to the prisoners in there?"

No one stirred. My heart pounded so loudly, I could feel the vibrations in my ears.

"I demand an answer!" He drew his pistol and looked at his watch. "You have five minutes."

We exchanged frightened glances. How could we have forgotten so quickly that our lives still depended on the whim of the guards? Werner now slowly put away his watch, but he left his pistol unholstered.

Almost before I had a chance to think, I stepped forward. "It was I who talked to them, sir."

He glared at me. "What did you say to them?"

"I asked for spare bread and cigarettes."

"What else?"

"Nothing else, sir."

"Who were the others?"

I simply shrugged.

"I'm warning you!"

"I was the one who spoke. I just asked them if they could throw me some bread and cigarettes; and just then the window shut. That's all."

He looked me in the eye again, then he holstered his pistol and grudgingly said, "You're lucky, but watch yourself."

CHAPTER 22

In the Service of the Reich

UNTIL THAT POINT, THOUGH WE HAD BEEN CURIOUS, most of us had not been overly concerned with what was going on in Barracks 19. We assumed it had something to do with the war effort, but as long as there was some prospect that we might come out of it alive, we didn't much care what it was. After the incident with Hauptscharfuehrer Werner, however, everyone was itching to know more. Why all the secrecy? Why the hermetic isolation? What undercover operation was being conducted behind those walls? The mystery would soon be solved.

The following *Shabbos*, the barbed wire fence separating Barracks 18 and 19 was taken down. A new fence was erected around both barracks, and even the overhead space between the two barracks was closed off, so that the two barracks

became one unit. Barracks 18 would now house all the men, and Barracks 19 would serve solely as a workshop.

We all filed into the mess hall and met the veteran inmates from Barracks 19. They were German, Czechoslovakian, Polish, Austrian, French, Belgian and Dutch. There was even one Norwegian. The majority of the German and Czech prisoners were of mixed ancestry, having only one Jewish parent or grandparent and were known as *Halbjuden* and *Vierteljuden*, half-Jews or quarter-Jews. These inmates received food parcels from their non-Jewish wives or parents who lived back home unmolested, so that they rarely touched the camp food. They ate the bread, and on Sundays, they ate the potatoes and soup. Because of their privileged status, they came to be known as "the prominents."

Meeting Jews of mixed ancestry brought home to me the tragedy of the assimilation that gave birth to these "people without identity." At the turn of the twentieth century, the Jewish parents and grandparents of these half-Jews had accommodated the times and drifted into Reform. Some abandoned Judaism entirely and passionately adopted German culture, intermarried and converted to Christianity by the thousands. In an orgy of deep-seated self-loathing, they tried to convince the Germans of their new identity. "Look, we are Germans!" they cried out. "We really mean it!"

Then the bubble burst. These Jews who had made such desperate efforts to throw off the yoke of Torah had a rude awakening. In the days of the Inquisition, conversion to Catholicism provided an escape from Torquemada and his Dominican priests. In the Nazi era, however, there was no escape from the Germans. They intended to wipe out the entire race, even those with minute traces of Jewish blood. They were not impressed by the worship or emulation of such

Halbjuden and *Vierteljuden* and forced them, along with the rest of Jews, to wear the *Judenstern*. The Jewish identity they had tried so desperately to toss off was forced back on these "hyphenated" Jews. To the Germans, they were all Jews, to be exterminated in the gas chambers alongside their full-blooded Jewish brothers and sisters.

However contemptible the *Halbjuden* and *Vierteljuden* were to me, I crowded around them with the rest of the inmates, for they had the answer to the question that had been on our minds ever since our arrival in Sachsenhausen.

Presently, one of the old-timers shared the secret with us. "Have you ever heard of phony money, forgery, counterfeiting? Well, that's precisely what we are doing here, manufacturing counterfeit foreign bank notes, British pounds and such, for the *Reichsicherheitshauptamt*, the German security service."

Everyone stood in open-mouthed wonderment. I was flabbergasted. Counterfeiting of all things! It all added up—the need for printers, photographers and engravers.

The counterfeit shop had been in operation for about one year. Ironically, many of the workers in Barracks 19 had no prior experience with counterfeiting. Rather, they had been selected on the basis of former occupations which suggested good coordination, a steady hand, above-average intelligence and a willingness to learn. What other reason could they have had for choosing Piepel who had been a circus clown? Another odd choice for our team was Diego Kaufman, a veterinarian from Czechoslovakia.

Our group of novices and the veteran inmates from Barracks 19 were divided into six work details: printing under Max Bober from Berlin, engraving under Zitrin from Lodz, binding under Hans Kurzweil from Vienna, sorting under

Oskar Stein from Prague and drafting and lithography. There was also a sorter, Felix Tragholz from Vienna, who was also responsible for minor carpentry jobs and for burning every scrap of waste paper.

The incineration process was extremely important to the Germans, and not even the tiniest sliver of paper was allowed to leave the shop; even the smoke was filtered to prevent minute particles of charred paper from escaping and the ashes discarded with utmost care, since any trace of burned paper money would jeopardize the entire operation.

We finally arrived at the large cutting, sorting and artificial aging room, the *Reisserei*, *Sortirerei* and *Altmacherei*. Although I knew what to expect, I was still overwhelmed. Piled on the tables, I saw batches of what looked like bank notes. I took a closer look. They were bank notes. There must have been hundreds of thousands of British 20-pound notes.

In one corner of the room, I noticed a long row of neatly stacked wooden crates. Some of them were open, and I drifted over to the crates, trying to peek inside, hoping to get a clue as to what was awaiting us. I glanced into an open crate and gasped in shock. The crate brimmed with stacks of white paper marked with the Brittania emblem. Those were blanks for printing British paper money, and there must have been millions of them.

We learned that it was in the *Reisserei* where the blanks were cut. Each blank was the size of four bank notes. Cutting the blank sheets into individual bills was a delicate operation. At that time, British pound notes were cut only on three sides. The fourth side was rough-edged, and the men who worked in the *Reisserei* had to duplicate that deckle-edge effect by tearing it against a straight-edge ruler. When the blanks were thus readied, they were imprinted and sorted and then

underwent an aging process to give them an authentic look.

What the old-timer had told us was true. Barracks 19 was a giant counterfeit factory; an incredible fortune of money was being printed right there. It was mind-boggling.

I barely had the time to absorb it all, when the door opened and the *Blockaelteste* came in to announce that Sturmbannfuehrer Krueger would address us in the hall. Krueger was the man who had chosen the "thirty-one lucky ones" in Auschwitz. Without much ceremony, he launched into a brief, informal speech.

"You are being entrusted with a state secret of the highest order," he said. "From this day on, you are, in effect, an arm of the Reich's *Sicherheitshauptamt*, the Reich's Secret Security Office."

He paused for a moment to allow the significance of his words to sink in. Then he continued, pointing at the wooden crates. "You are collectively responsible for seeing to it that no one shall ever find out what is contained in those boxes and what is being done here. Don't breathe a word of this to anyone. *Not to anyone.* Even if the *Lagerkommandant* of Sachsenhausen were to ask you a question about this operation, you refuse to answer."

His voice lowered with the magnitude of his confidence. "Your assignment is nothing more and nothing less than the manufacture of enemy bank notes."

I tried to digest the bewildering points Krueger had presented. How had I, barely alive a few weeks ago, suddenly come to be a trusted employee of the dreaded Security Service? Krueger's phrase "no one shall ever find out" had a menacing ring of finality to it. I realized bitterly that my new, deceptively easy life was as valueless as the counterfeit notes we would produce, good until discovered, then to go up in

smoke. It was a certainty that once our job was completed, we would be liquidated.

"You will be treated very well here," Krueger continued. "I'll personally see to it that you get good food."

He ended the meeting by introducing the new barracks chief, barracks superintendents and the foremen of the various counterfeiting departments, and then, to our amazement, he had beer brought in. Raising his hand in a mock toast, he said, "Have a good time, fellows. Monday morning you start work and go full speed ahead."

We were indeed treated well. We would work hard but would get plenty of rest. We would counterfeit only seven hours a day in alternating schedules, working an eight-to-three shift one week and a three-to-ten the next. We had strict orders to get twelve hours of sleep each night. This was not out of concern for our welfare but rather to rest our eyes for the exacting work.

The barracks chief, Arthur Lewin, Atze for short, also treated us well. He had come from Berlin and had been a concentration camp inmate since 1938. He had replaced Leo Krebs as barracks chief shortly before our arrival. Despite Atze's long stint in Sachsenhausen, he was a jolly fellow who did his best to ensure our comfort and well-being.

That evening, after dinner, some of the inmates put on a concert. During the hustle and bustle, I slipped into another room to *daven Minchah*. When I came out, I met the *stubenateste* Piepel, the former clown whose real name was Gutig, standing near his locker.

"Would you like some bread?" he asked me. "Are you hungry?"

Gratefully, I accepted the bread he offered me.

"You know, of course," he continued, "that you are all

going to die. I'm the only one that's going to survive. And you know why? Because I'm not Jewish."

Ironically, Piepel would eventually be liquidated for stealing some of the counterfeit pounds, while all the others survived.

That evening, we received our cigarette rations, but being that it was still *Shabbos*, I did not take mine.

After *Shabbos*, I asked Atze if I could still have my cigarettes, explaining that as a religious Jew I couldn't take them on *Shabbos*.

"Shabbos?" he exploded. *"Shabbos?* Are you out of your mind? Don't you know where you are?"

Nevertheless, I stood my ground. Interestingly enough, after the next *Shabbos*, when I had again not taken my cigarette ration, Atze brought me my cigarettes and slipped in a packet of loose tobacco as well.

Our only torment at the hands of the SS occurred when we showered. Every Sunday we were taken to the bathhouse, a brick building with a dressing hall and large room with long rows of overhead shower heads spaced ten feet apart. We had to succumb to a meticulous search before we were allowed to leave our part of the camp, turning our pockets inside out to make sure that we had not secreted away scraps of paper, and a general curfew was in effect while we were led through the *appelplatz*. The shower operator, the only outsider in the bath house, was scrupulously guarded by an SS man to prevent him from speaking to us. The SS man often amused himself by ordering the shower operator to turn the valve alternately to scalding and ice cold water. Through a window in the shower room door, the sadist watched with glee as we frantically scrambled away from the shower heads.

Every *Shabbos*, Krueger would arrive with a large satchel

to pick up the week's production of British pound notes. Always in a good mood, he spoke cordially to the experienced inmates and inquired about their welfare and treatment.

These questions did not pass unnoticed by our SS Hauptscharfuehrers, Beckman and Werner. Beckman, an easygoing fellow, liked nothing better than to lounge and relax in the sun. Werner, a tall, blond Aryan, was an ambitious, dedicated Nazi who lived by the motto of "*Befehl ist Befehl.* Orders are orders." At Sachsenhausen, this worked in our favor, for Krueger could not officially permit us to be beaten or abused, and his solicitous interest in our welfare kept the SS in line. In fact, they often competed for our favor. Nevertheless, disciplinary sports punishments were permitted and frequently imposed by Werner and Beckman.

Krueger himself was somewhat of a mystery to me. I realized that to him we were the geese that laid the golden eggs who needed to be fed and tended. We would be providing them with British pounds. If we were weak or overworked, the delicate work would suffer.

Still, to us he was a guardian angel in the garb of an SS man. I saw him as a *shaliach* sent by Hashem to save our lives and especially the lives of the nineteen condemned men. After the war, several inmates of Barracks 19 testified in his defense at his trial in Paris, and he was sentenced to serving only a short term in prison.

CHAPTER 23

The Counterfeiting Operation

AFTER OUR TOUR OF BARRACKS 19, WE TRADED THEORIES about the purpose of the counterfeit operation. Some of the veteran inmates believed that the top echelon Nazis intended to salt away the counterfeit money in Swiss bank accounts in the hope of living in luxury after the war. After the war, we would discover that the Germans' main objective was to destabilize the British economy. By funneling billions of pounds into Britain's economy, the Germans hoped to generate run-away inflation, a loss of confidence in the soundness of the pound sterling and an eventual collapse of the British monetary system.

Allied investigators would also discover that these counterfeit British notes financed Cicero, a major spying operation in Turkey.

The old-timers gave us some seemingly inconsequential information about the operation. They informed us that the blanks were manufactured at a different location. Much later, while emptying one of the cases of blanks, I found a scrap of paper inscribed with Hebrew letters. I realized that Jewish slave laborers produced blanks for the counterfeit notes. It is likely that no one in the world, other than the few of us in Barracks 18 knew of them, albeit indirectly. And it is likely that this is the only place where these unknown *kedoshim* are memorialized.

The engraved metal plates used to print the bills were also made outside Sachsenhausen. They came in from Friedenthal near Oranienburg, the nerve center of the Wehrmacht's espionage network, a heavily guarded, super-secret vast complex that lay deep within a dense, fenced-in forest. It was surrounded by a battery of anti-aircraft artillery and patrolled by SS guards and their bloodhounds, eager to tear intruders to pieces. In the bindery supervised by Hans Kurzweil of Vienna, photographers, retouchers and bookbinders produced bogus passports and cryptographic codes for the German Defense Department. These passports were used by German spies and operatives to infiltrate Allied and neutral countries. Once there, the Germans used secret codes to radio their messages to the Home Office.

This information was not idle chatter, for the men of Barracks 19 had seen the complex firsthand on their trips to pick up stereotype plates to be finished by Zitrin, Italienner and Tiefenbach. I myself would go to Friedenthal in due time to pick up various chemicals, dyes and other materials for the manufacture of bank notes.

I was not happy to be the recipient of such intelligence. Every piece of information was a dark secret of the Reich, and

our chances of getting out were slim, "close to nil," as one of the inmates put it. The more we knew, the more dangerous we became to the Germans. They could never allow us to fall into the hands of their enemies.

That evening, I lay on my cot and reviewed the bizarre impressions of the day that had passed. The inmate's prognosis about our bleak chances of survival kept me awake. I stared at the ceiling in a turmoil until I recalled a poignant insight I had heard once on a *pasuk* in *Bereishis* 28:14.

Why are the Jewish people likened to the dust of the earth? Everyone steps on the dust of the earth, but ultimately, it is the dust of the earth that covers over every grave. The same holds true for the Jewish people. Every nation steps on us and oppresses us, but in the end, the Jewish people will triumph and outlive them all. I comforted myself with these thoughts. We would come out of this and dance on the graves of our German oppressors.

At breakfast the next morning, I was met with an incongruous sight of a vase with a few red carnations on the table next to mine.

"What are these flowers?" I asked.

"They're for Kurt Levinski. He's thirty-five today, and he's the oldest in our bunch. Imagine, the poor fellow has been a prisoner since 1933, for the last eleven years."

To this day, I do not know how these red carnations found their way into our barracks. It was the only time I saw an object of beauty while I was in the camps, but I found something much more enduring than the quickly-fading red flowers.

When we returned from the showers later that morning, one of the veterans of Barracks 19 gingerly stepped up to me and politely introduced himself. He was slender, of medium

height and had the unmistakable intense look of an intellectual.

"My name is Avigdor Glanzer," he said, smiling warmly.

I nodded in noncommittal acknowledgment, uncertain but curious about this scholarly-looking person.

"I am a *chassidishe Yid*, and I'm trying to observe as many *mitzvos* as I can under the circumstances," he told me. "Last Thursday, Heitler was making fun of the big *shlemiel* in his group, a guy who was so religious that he *davened* every day. He pointed you out."

By this time, Heitler had stopped harassing me, for he had been caught stealing and was publicly reprimanded by the barracks chief and warned that he would be reported to the *Scharfuehrer*. None of his friends had come to his defense; the warning and the loss of his buddies' support put an end to his bullying, and I had no more trouble from him. But whatever harm he had intended worked in my favor, for it was through his mocking comment that I met Avigdor Glanzer.

"I've been watching you," Glanzer was saying. "And I think it's time we got together. I don't have to tell you what this entire operation is all about, and that we'll need great *rachmei Shamayim*, Divine mercy, to get out of this alive. So let's stick together. Maybe we can even learn *bechavrusa*, as steady study partners."

My heart jumped. A *chassidishe Yid* who thought the way I thought, who, like me, tried to cling to Hashem and His Torah, even in this corrupt environment.

Glanzer turned out not only to be my learning partner but also looked out for my well-being and alerted me to dangers of which I was ignorant. I had been assigned to work as a sorter under Oskar Stein, a Jew who had converted to Catholicism. He was a "prominent" whose Catholic wife

regularly sent him food parcels. Glanzer warned me that Stein detested *frum* Jews, probably because they reminded him of his father. When Heitler informed Stein that I was *frum*, the foreman didn't want me working under him. He tried his best to get rid of me but, in the end, decided to give me one chance to prove myself as a sorter.

Glanzer, who also worked under him as a quality controller, gave me an ominous warning. "I know how he thinks. You had better watch your step."

"In what way?"

"He has his eyes on you because of your health," Glanzer continued. "You are still coughing a great deal."

I shivered with fear. How could I control my cough, especially in my sleep?

"Don't worry," Glanzer reassured me. "I can tell your cough is nothing serious. You'll be fine in a day or two. Drink as much liquid as you can, and make sure you get enough sleep."

Glanzer spoke with such authority that I believed him, and a few days later, my cough disappeared as he had predicted. My admiration of Glanzer grew with each passing word. He was well-versed in the sciences, and he was a talented linguist. He had moved from Krakow to Grossverdan where he mastered Hungarian. He spoke that difficult language without an accent and even wrote poetry and lyric verse in Hungarian. That evening our conversation turned to Torah, and I discovered, much to my delight, that he was also a tremendous scholar.

"What *mesechte* did you learn last?" he asked.

"I learned *Nedarim*," I replied.

"All right," Reb Avigdor said cheerfully. "*Lamir lernen a blatt Gemara.* Let's start learning *Gemara*."

Amazingly, Reb Avigdor had memorized the entire *mesechte* word for word, along with the *Ran*, a running commentary to the complex *Gemara*. For my part, I could still recall many of the lectures Reb Moishele had given on some of the *mesechtes* I had learned in the *yeshivah*. Thus, we had quite a bit of material with which to work. We learned together day after day, and it was Torah *shebaal peh*, Oral Torah, in the true sense of the word, studying completely from memory.

We forgot our troubles as we immersed in the *Yam Hatalmud*, the Sea of Talmud, its sweetness bringing us the immeasurable peace described in *Tehillim* (119:92): "Were not Your Torah my delight, I would have perished in my affliction."

These words came alive to us as we probed the depth of the thoughts of *Chazal*. We felt like Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son Rabbi Elazar who hid from the Romans in a cave and studied Torah. Reb Avigdor turned out to be a phenomenal scholar who had *Shas* at his fingertips. Learning with him was truly an *oneg ruchni*, a spiritual delight.

Before we went to sleep that night, I asked Reb Avigdor what my work as a sorter would entail. "You're a bright fellow," he reassured me. "Don't worry about the work. Stein will show you the ropes, but if you have questions, don't bother him. Ask me. I've been a sorter myself until recently. I know the work. Now I've been assigned to quality control, and it's my job to check the work of the sorters."

But the next thing Reb Avigdor told me really excited me.

"You might be interested to know that everyone is allowed to write one letter every other month, and next Tuesday is *Schreibtag*, letter-writing day. Of course, hardly any of us has anyone to write to, but there's a Jewish community in Prague. If you write to them, they'll put your name into

their files. Then, once a month you will receive a food parcel. You'll get a big loaf of bread, some lumps of sugar, a few cookies and some garlic."

In concentration camps, garlic was much in demand for its medicinal value. In a place where a visit to the clinic might end in a death sentence, garlic was a cure-all. It was a proven remedy against colds, pneumonia, diarrhea and all infectious diseases.

"If I am allowed to write one letter," I replied, "it would be to my *kallah* in Auschwitz, although I'm not even sure she's still there."

I knew the odds of Pola receiving my letter were small, for mail would have to pass the censors. If the censors let it through, the barracks chief would likely tear it up. But the mere thought that through some miracle Pola might receive my letter was worth more than all the food packages from Prague.

CHAPTER 24

Counterfeit Money

THE NEXT MORNING, WE STARTED OUR WORK. I WAS directed to the sorting section where the experienced sorters were already bent over their work stations. Oskar Stein handed each of them the daily quota, a batch of five hundred bank notes to be sorted. He then turned to us novices and assigned us our seats.

Each seat was equipped with a light box, a wooden rectangular object with a pane of matted glass as its top. On the right side of the box was an on-off light switch. We were to place a bank note on the back-lit matted glass, and the light would shine through and reveal any imperfection, either in the paper or in the printing.

"Everyone turn the bulb on and off," Oskar said.

After we played with the light switches for a few minutes,

he went on to explain the classification system of the notes. The bills were to be separated into five categories. Class A consisted of flawless notes that could be passed in England without arousing any suspicion. Class B bills contained minor typographical errors such as often occur even in genuine bills and were circulated in the British Commonwealth and the colonies. Class C had notes with somewhat more serious imperfections, the kind of flaws, however, that do occasionally crop up in genuine currency. They were intended for distribution in other foreign countries. Class D notes with glaring flaws would be dropped over England. Finally, Class E consisted of bills of such poor quality that anyone would know at first glance that they were counterfeit. These were to be carefully counted and then burned.

Oskar spoke methodically and carefully, frequently asking if we needed clarification, reassuring us that we could count on his help. If we were in doubt about the quality of a bank note, we were to ask him.

"Now," Oskar said. "I'll start by handing each of you a few genuine bills."

We carefully examined the bills, paying attention to the smallest detail. We were to fix in our minds the image of the "Britannia" figure and the exact location of the oval watermark on the paper. "Britannia" had to be perfectly centered in that oval watermark. If it protruded even slightly, the note was invalid. We also were to etch into our memories the curl in the tail of the letter *f* in the "Bank of England" logo, the dots over the letter *i* in the signature of the Secretary of the Exchequer and other such small but significant details.

After examining legitimate bills, Oskar handed us several counterfeit bills to train our eyes in detecting minute differences. He pointed out some tiny wood splinters, a defect

which could sometimes be removed using the small pen knives we had been issued. Then we were to classify the bill according to the outcome of the surgery.

If possible, we were to try to remove such defects with pins, because the British were in the habit of pinning their notes together with safety pins and carrying money in their billfolds like that. Once we would start sorting for real, we would pierce five and ten-pound notes two or three times to give them the look of the genuine currency. The twenty and fifty-pound notes, however, were not to have more than one or two pinholes because few Englishmen carried such large denominations. Hundred-pound notes were not produced because they would be too conspicuous, and recipients would look them over too carefully.

After sorting the notes, the people who had done the cutting returned to age the notes artificially in order to give them the authentic look of bills that have been in circulation for a long time. This was accomplished by rolling the bills into balls, then unfurling them and putting them under a press.

Oskar looked at us expectantly, but we had no questions for him. He finished his instruction by saying, "Don't hesitate to use the knife. Even if you ruin a few bills, it won't matter because we have plenty of the stuff. When in doubt, always place the note in a lower category. And now, fellows, just look over the notes in the batches in front of you without sorting them."

We practiced for the next ten days and then went to work in earnest. I became quite adept at the task of sorting and noted that Oskar did not display any particular dislike toward me. I knew that I was on trial as a sorter, but I found that I was able to do the job.

We had to work on *Shabbos*, of course, and though I left

my light box on all day rather than turn it on and off to conserve electricity, as we were instructed to do, sitting at my work bench on *Shabbos* depressed me terribly. Inevitably, my thoughts would wander to the beautiful *Shabbosim* back home. I saw myself sitting at the sparkling *Shabbos* table, singing *zemiros* with my father and the whole family. Softly, I began humming the *zemiros* which brought back the sweet flavor of the *Shabbos*, and tears streamed down my face as I thought of the radiant world that had gone up in smoke.

"*Was meckerst Du?*" came the voice of the fellow sitting across the table from me. "What are you belly-aching about?"

It was Nieft, a young fellow from Berlin. He had been a member of the Hitler Jugend, the Hitler Youth, until it was discovered that his mother was of Jewish descent. Well-fed and confident, he felt superior to us novices since he received food parcels from home every week. In his eyes, I was the quintessential Jew, the source of all his trouble, a member of the nation he had been indoctrinated to despise in the Hitler Jugend.

"You left your light burning in your box," he hissed maliciously. "You know, that's sabotage. I could report you to the *Scharfuehrer* for that."

I turned away, pretending not to hear him, but in a rage, I stabbed the penknife into my pile of notes. *Baruch Hashem*, he did not see, but I made a mental note to avoid Nieft at all cost.

On the first *Shabbos*, Oskar came over to me. "Krakowski, you're one of the youngest on our team, so you will clean the incinerator on Saturday before *Sturmbannfuehrer* Krueger comes by."

I did not know if Oskar chose me because he knew I was a *frum* Jew and wanted to harass me, or if it was simply a

matter of chance. There was nothing I could do in any case, since it was clearly a case of *pikuach nefesh*, of saving my life. Refusing to obey would have been insubordination, and I would have been liquidated. The *rabbinic* rule instructs that the "duty of saving a life overrides the laws of *Shabbos*," but I was still in distress.

This went on for many weeks. *Shabbos* after *Shabbos*, Oskar ordered me to clean the incinerator. Reb Avigdor Glanzer saw my distress and said, "You're doing the right thing, Avrum." Still, I was hardly comforted.

I worked efficiently, and the controllers invariably agreed with my classifications. Even Oskar had no objections to my work, and aside from making me clean the incinerator every *Shabbos*, he did not show any particular animosity toward me. Oskar was basically a loner, and his position as foreman satisfied his desire to remain aloof from the rest of the men. He seemed comfortable without friends. When the others played cards or engaged in harmless small talk, he would sit by himself in a remote corner.

One day during the evening hours, as I was sitting at the table talking with friends, Oskar came over to me with half a loaf of fresh bread he had just received from his Catholic wife. "Here, Krakowski, how about a piece of bread?"

The delicious smell of the bread was overpowering, for by this time I had fully recovered, a fact that was proven by an incessant, ravenous hunger. I ached to sink my teeth into Oskar's bread, but I resisted. I did not understand his motivation. It seemed unlikely that he wanted to strike up a friendship, especially with me. In any case, he was not making a peace offering. As it stood, he continued to force me to work on *Shabbos* when he could have chosen from dozens of other workers. I could not forgive this apostate for forcing

me to clean the incinerator every *Shabbos* and was in no mood to respond to his friendly overtures. And I simply said, "No thanks, Oskar. I have enough."

Chaim Hollander, the man next to me, kicked my leg. "Take it, you idiot," he whispered.

Oskar repeated his offer, and I declined again. "Thanks, I really have all I want."

He was obviously annoyed at my refusal, yet, at the same time, he was impressed by my courage in turning down his offer. But when he invited me to a game of chess a few days later, I accepted. From then on, we were friends, and he relieved me of the job of cleaning the incinerator on *Shabbos*. I was delighted, and so was Reb Avigdor. It was a friendship that was to bear rich fruit in the days to come.

CHAPTER 25

The Big Fire

DURING APRIL AND MAY, 1944, THE ALLIED BOMBINGS OF Berlin were stepped up. Day and night, the drone of the B-17's told us that the time of vengeance against the Germans was near. The sound of the engines was music to our ears.

Berlin was only fifteen miles away from us, and the thousands of explosions rattled our windows. The glow of rising flames reddened the sky. Crisscrossing searchlights and tracer rockets shot up from the dark earth and lent an almost festive air to the night sky. The anti-aircraft guns in nearby Oranienburg released volley after volley in a vain effort to shoot down the invading bombers. At last, the Germans were getting a dose of their own medicine. Watching the Germans fail time and time again, I cheered inwardly.

The bombers came without letup—the Americans during the day, the British during the night.

Then, during one of the raids on Berlin, we heard the air-splitting crash of a close hit. A stray, incendiary bomb fell on Barracks 17, setting the structure ablaze, spurting ferocious waves of fire onto the roof of our own barracks. Soon, a huge cloud of black smoke enveloped the entire area.

We knew that if the fire were to spread to our barracks, we would be lost. Barracks 18 and 19 were enclosed by barbed wire which was strung even between the roofs of the two barracks. We were isolated, and the Germans did not allow any fire-fighting equipment to enter our super-secret area. They certainly would not allow us to escape to safety, and if the counterfeiting plant would burn down, our usefulness to the Germans would end. They would eliminate us pitilessly.

The roof of Barracks 18 was now ablaze, the flames devouring the wood and the roofing paper. We looked out, but a company of SS men with machine guns blocked the entrance to our compound.

"It's up to you men to see to it that Barracks 18 does not burn down," the *Hauptscharfuehrer* told us. "We won't let anyone else do the job for you."

There was not a minute to spare. We knew that our lives were at stake, but we stood in paralyzed fear, watching the spreading fire, hearing the crackling of burning wood.

Suddenly, Ernst Gottlieb and Leo Krebs came forward.

"You men, form a bucket brigade!" Krebs ordered. "Pass buckets of water to one another from the washroom to the roof."

By the time we formed a line, Krebs and Gottlieb had already climbed up onto the blazing roof, ignoring the

scorching heat and thick, black smoke. For a moment, it seemed as if they were being consumed by the raging fire. The two black figures moved frantically against the roaring fire, pouring bucket after bucket on the walls of fire. We watched them worriedly, wondering if they would contain the fire. Our lives depended on their ability to do so. Minutes seemed to last an eternity, but the flames began to subside. *Baruch Hashem*, the blaze was under control, and the smoldering embers were soon extinguished.

Cheers rang out when the two black-faced, soot-covered heroes climbed down from the roof. Gottlieb smiled at us and promptly fainted. He recovered quickly, however. (Gottlieb not only recovered from his fire-fighting ordeal, but also made it out of Sachsenhausen. Today, Ernst Gottlieb lives in Tel Aviv where he runs an upholstery business.)

When things had quieted down, we began to wonder whether we had in fact been hit by a stray bomb or one aimed at our barracks by the Allies who had gotten wind of our counterfeiting factory. We wondered also whether more bombings were in store for us. Our conversations were dominated by such thoughts for days to come.

Several days after the fire, we returned to our work, but there was a break in the routine. The Germans were evidently hungry for more British pounds, for seventeen more prisoners arrived from Auschwitz. We now were ordered to work day and night, in two ten-hour shifts.

Anxiously, I inquired of the new arrivals if any of them had seen Pola.

"I'm almost sure that I've seen her and her sister going into Union munitions factory in Auschwitz," one of the newcomers said. "They were wearing white scarves over their heads because their hair was shaved off."

I was ecstatic. Pola had survived until now, and with Hashem's help we both would make it! The *Ribono Shel Olam* was answering the *tefillos* I was saying in the lion's den. Oh, I would continue writing to Pola, but hereafter, I would address my letters to her c/o "Union," Auschwitz.

One night, *Hauptscharfuehrer* Werner made an offhand remark about our prospects for survival. "You fellows had better pray that we win the war, for you know what to expect if we lose," he said. "You're big boys. You know that this operation is top secret. If we're going down in defeat, this whole business along with all you guys will be destroyed."

Seeing our faces, he went on with a ludicrous consolation. "But if we win, you'll get a piece of land in the Harz Mountain region. There, you and your families will be able to settle. In isolation, of course."

"What families?" I blurted out. "Whom do you think you're kidding? I came here from Auschwitz! I have no family any more. Don't give me that!"

I knew I had made a mistake bursting out this way, but I had not been able to contain myself. Werner gave me a dirty look and walked away. But I knew he remembered me from the first week in quarantine. I was the one who had stepped forward to confess that I had talked to the men in Barracks 19. He was bound to retaliate. I wondered when my next run-in with him would occur. It was soon to follow.

A few days later, I found Werner peering over my shoulder as I was busy sorting bank notes. I happened to be repairing a bill with penknife and pin. The bill was good enough to be graded Class B, but because he was watching me, I decided to put it in Class C to be on the safe side. Werner snatched up the bill and took it to Oskar Stein. He himself had no direct control over the work because the

duties of the SS in the camp were restricted to administrative function, but he could try to intimidate Oskar Stein into disapproving my work.

Oskar appeared a few minutes later and informed me, "Werner thought that since the bill had a pinhole, it should be classified D instead of C. He accuses you of sabotage."

Although Oskar defended my classification, Werner filed an official charge of sabotage in Berlin. Oskar told me not to worry, however. According to him, I could even have graded the note into a higher category.

I felt reassured by Oskar's comment. But by now, I had antagonized Werner three times, and I knew that he was waiting for a chance to retaliate. It was only a question of when and how.

Writing Day came around, a happy day for me, for I would be able to communicate with Pola again. But I had another reason for being so happy. The radio loudspeaker in our plant announced that Rome had been taken by the Allied armies.

"The fall of Rome means the end of Germany," I said to Reb Avigdor. "According to *Chazal*, when Rome falls, Yaakov will triumph. And Eisav symbolizes Germany."

I sat down with some elation to write to Pola. I wrote in German, so that the letter would pass the censor. "*Ich bin G.s.D. gesund*," I began. *G.s.D* is a commonly-used abbreviation for *Gott sei Dank*, thank G-d. I wrote that I was well and in good health. I also asked her to give regards to Mrs. Fajerman and Mrs. Lasker, the wives of two men who were with me.

During the afternoon shift at work, I was called to the front desk, which was essentially the domain of the SS. The only times prisoners were summoned were for infractions. I

was not aware of having broken any rules and thought that they were calling me with the results of Werner's charge of sabotage. Worried sick, I approached the desk.

Standing next to Atze was a one-armed *Oberscharfuehrer* holding my letter to Pola.

"What does '*G.s.D.*' stand for?" he asked.

"*Gott sei Dank*," I replied blandly, but I could not help smiling at his abominable ignorance.

Werner burst into the room at the moment I uttered the words. Clearly in a foul mood after learning of the German reverses at the front, he stepped up to me and savagely slapped my face, left and right.

He launched into a long tirade. Finally, he ended. "*Hast Du verstanden?*" he was still furious. "Do you understand?"

I did not understand but calmly said, "*Jawohl.*"

"*Marsch, hau ab!*" he shouted. "Go on, get going!"

I took a few minutes to go back to my bench, pausing in the corridor of the print shop to collect myself and to reflect on Werner's attack. What had raised his ire and why in the world had he struck me?

As I stood there, an *Oberscharfuehrer*, a decent fellow, came up to me.

"Hauptscharfueher Werner sent me to express his apologies," he said. "He didn't know what was going on." The *Oberscharfuehrer* twirled his index finger in the air near his forehead. "You know how he is. He thought you were making fun of him by writing, because you had told him you had no relatives left to whom to write. As soon as Atze explained everything, Werner felt bad. He wants to apologize."

"Tell Werner," I said angrily, "that I got the beating, and he can have his apology."

I went back to work, my head still smarting from the

pummeling I had received. Minutes later, Atze ambled up to me. "Here is your letter, Krakowski," he said. "Rewrite it without abbreviations. I'm really sorry he hit you."

I rewrote the letter and put it in the mail bin. Interestingly, of the five or six letters I sent from Sachsenhausen, this was the only one Pola ever received.

A few days later, Oskar Stein informed me that Werner's complaint against my work had been rejected by Berlin.

CHAPTER 26

Miscellaneous Jobs

THE WORK PROGRESSED AT THE REGULAR PACE, AND the pound notes came off the assembly line with predictable regularity. The Germans had found a gold mine in Barracks 19; they were rolling in money; they had "money to burn."

One day, quite unexpectedly, orders came down from Berlin to stop producing pound notes.

"Why are we stopping?" we wondered with trepidation.

"If we don't print money, they don't need us any more," I said to Reb Avigdor. "And you know what that means."

"We are in the hands of the *Ribono Shel Olam*," Reb Avigdor said. "*Er fihrt die welt*. He guides the world. Put your trust in Him."

For two long, worrisome days we sat in our barracks,

unemployed, with time on our hands. While Reb Avigdor and I learned Torah, the others conjured up all sorts of ominous scenarios.

On the third day, Werner summoned us to Barracks 19 and made a short speech that dispelled our anxiety.

"Don't be in the dumps," he said. "This is only a temporary shut-down. We've been getting intelligence reports that the British Secret Service discovered our serial numbers and alerted the banks. Now we're waiting to find out exactly how much the British know. As soon as this mess is cleared up, we'll resume production. In the meantime, you'll be getting other work." Of course, no one believed him.

Two days later, Krueger appeared and reiterated Werner's explanation. He also had our new assignments. We were given perforated sheets of postage stamps of the Soviet Union, Britain and British dominions. The British stamps displayed the head of King George VI with the imperial crown. On genuine stamps, a cross topped the crown; on ours, the cross had been replaced by the Star of David. There was a similar deviation on the Russian stamps; the Star of David replaced the hammer and sickle over Stalin's head. Except for these modifications, the stamps looked genuine. The connotation of this substitution was less than subtle: England and the Soviet Union were carrying on the war for the benefit of the Jews.

It was our job to separate the sheets into single strips of six stamps or double strips of two rows of six stamps. These strips were then inserted into small glassine envelopes, twelve stamps to an envelope, the way they are sold to collectors. A few days later, we heard a special radio report that the stamps had surfaced in Sweden and were being snapped up by collectors who were willing to pay top dollar for them. The

stamp business was not nearly as lucrative for the Germans as printing money. Its primary objective was probably the spreading of anti-Semitic propaganda.

After we were finished with the stamps, we were given a new and uncommon assignment. A shipment of boxes arrived from Gestapo archives in France, Belgium and Holland, containing papers, documents and correspondence that had been confiscated by the Germans.

It was our task to sort this material and make separate piles of paper, cardboard, photographs and paper clips. While segregating the material, we had the opportunity to take a close look at the documents, and we could tell by their contents that the Germans had taken these materials from Jewish homes after the families had been deported.

One day, while separating documents, a Viennese by the name of Felix Tragholz jumped out of his chair as if struck by lightning. "Look what I just found," he exclaimed ecstatically. "A picture of my brother and sister in Paris. I haven't seen them since 1939. I can't believe it!"

His euphoria quickly gave way to despondency. "Finding these pictures can mean only one thing," he said. "They've been deported. My brother and sister have been shipped to the gas chambers of Auschwitz."

He collapsed on his bench, sobbing bitterly. We tried to comfort him, telling him that they might have survived, but he was not to be consoled and clung to the photograph desperately. After a few minutes, he calmed himself and approached the *Hauptscharfuehrer* for permission to keep it.

"This matter has to be referred to Berlin," he was informed curtly. "I'll send the picture to Headquarters."

A week later, Felix received the reply.

"*Gesuch abgeleht.* Petition denied."

In the process of sorting the papers, I came across several interesting documents. For example, I found the passport of General Siroki, the last pre-war Minister of Defense of Czechoslovakia. I recognized him by the eye-patch he wore. I have no idea how this passport wound up in the Paris archives.

Even more fascinating was a letter written in Russian. I stared in amazement at the sender's name and address. It was none other than Vladimir "Zev" Jabotinsky, the founder of the Revisionist Zionists and the mentor of Menachem Begin. We were not permitted to read any of the material we were sorting, but I was curious about this letter. I stuffed the letter under my shirt and took it to someone who spoke Russian. The letter was dated 1921 and addressed to an influential Jewish person who lived in Paris. Jabotinsky offered him a large sum of money in order to persuade the notorious anti-semite Petlura, who was also in Paris at the time, to stop the pogroms in the Ukraine.

Reflecting on the letter, I was struck by the fact that throughout the slow centuries of our *galus*, though we had been subjected to persecutions and expulsion, there had always been people to influence or bribe the anti-semites. There had always been a country or two that had welcomed Jewish refugees. But in our present *galus*, we were totally abandoned. England had closed the gates of Palestine, and America turned back ships loaded with Jewish refugees. The infamous treatment of the *Saint Louis* was not forgotten. It was as if all mankind conspired against us.

One Sunday in August, there was an emergency assembling. Three pound notes were missing, and all of us had to be searched. No bills were found. The bookkeeping was checked again, with the same result—three bills were missing.

Werner and Beckman assured us that the situation was very serious, and we all knew we were in trouble.

We were made to stand there for hours, until finally Piepel was arrested. Angered that he had been demoted from *Stubenalteste*, he had burned the three notes the night before, and traces were found in the ashes. After a hearing, Piepel was executed. His earlier words still rang in my ears. He had been sure that he alone would survive, but things had not turned out exactly as he had envisioned them.

CHAPTER 27

The Lookout

THE LIFE OF A JEW IS REGULATED BY THE *LUACH*, THE Jewish calendar. It is the *luach* which tells us when *Rosh Chodesh*, the new month, occurs; when to celebrate a *Yom Tov*; when to count *Sefirah*; and when to observe a *taanis*, a fast. To live without a *luach* is to live aimlessly, adrift on the sea of time, unable to fulfill most of the *mitzvos* properly. This was the way I felt after I was forced to hand over my *luach* to the Gestapo in Auschwitz.

Throughout my wanderings, from the Shrodula ghetto to Auschwitz and to Sachsenhausen, I was able to calculate the dates of *Rosh Chodesh* and the various *Yamim Tovim*, and I observed those days as best I could. I had studied the calendar rules and could determine the exact days on which the important festivals and my father's *yahrzeit* occurred.

Kiddush Levanah, the Sanctification of the Moon, was especially dear to my heart, and I made every effort to recite that *berachah* within the prescribed time span, during the first fourteen days after the appearance of a clearly visible new moon. Often this was very difficult, particularly during the winter months, when overcast skies obscured the moon. But, *baruch Hashem*, I never failed to fulfill this *mitzvah*.

Only once, during the last winter of the war, did I nearly fail. It was a particularly long period of cloudy nights. But on the fourteenth night, I forced myself to stay awake until one o'clock in the morning when the shifts changed. Just as I sneaked into the yard, the moon emerged from a heavy cover. Wearing nothing but a pair of pajamas, I happily said the *Kiddush Levanah*.

Meanwhile, as the last summer of the war was drawing to a close, the month of *Elul* had arrived, and *Rosh Hashanah* was rapidly approaching.

"We've got to do something," said Reb Avigdor one night. "Two weeks from Tuesday is *Rosh Hashanah*, and we have to try to organize a *minyan*."

I was taken aback. "Excuse me, Reb Avigdor," I said respectfully. "But the way I figured it out, the first day of *Rosh Hashanah* falls on Monday, not on Tuesday, as you say. I'm absolutely sure of it."

Whenever we had a dispute in matters of *Halachah*, I always bowed to his superior knowledge, but this time I was positive that I was right. *Rosh Hashanah* was going to fall on Monday and Tuesday. I explained to him the basis of my computation, but Reb Avigdor did not budge.

"*Rosh Hashanah* falls on Tuesday and Wednesday, Avrum," he said firmly. "Take my word for it."

"Please, Reb Avigdor," I countered passionately. "Can't

you see that I'm right? I've reviewed my calculations dozens of times. Here it is on black and white. You have to admit that *Rosh Hashanah* falls on Monday."

He saw that I was close to tears and finally relented. "Since you seem to be so firmly convinced, I'll accept your date as the correct one. We'll inform the others tomorrow and prepare for *Yom Tov*."

The thought of spending the *Yamim Noraim* in this cesspool depressed me greatly. But *baruch Hashem*, I was still alive, and there were things to be done, a *minyan* to be organized. There were fifteen of us who were anxious to *daven betzibbur*, though this entailed a grave risk. If the Germans were to get wind of it, we would be in deep trouble.

I approached Atze tentatively. "Next Monday and Tuesday is *Rosh Hashanah*," I said. "Would you allow the fifteen of us to *daven* in the barracks?"

He hesitated for only one minute. "It's *Rosh Hashanah*, so go ahead. But be careful. If the SS find out, they'll hold me responsible."

Fifteen of us sat down together that evening, trying to recall the *tefillos*, the special *Shemoneh Esrei*, the *Unesaneh Tokef*, *Vechol Maaminim*, the *Malchuyos*, *Zichronos* and *Shofaros* in *Mussaf*. With the help of Reb Avigdor's photographic memory, we wrote down the most important sections. Now we were ready to receive the *Yom Tov*.

There remained only one serious obstacle: someone had to stand guard to warn us of approaching SS men. Without a lookout, we would not dare conduct our *minyan*. But who would be willing to stand outside in the cold for two or three hours?

Oskar Stein, sitting alone in his customary corner, intently followed the lively discussion at our table. Our first game

of chess had developed into a nightly routine, and as time went by, he sensed that he had found a friend in me. He often discussed with me personal problems, inquired about Jewish law, and debated various topics, such as *Shabbos*, *Yom Tov*, faith, reward and punishment and the Jewish concept of the after-life, *Olam Haba*. Something had stirred his soul. Perhaps our conversations reminded him of a long-forgotten past. Who knows what can ignite the spark of *kedushah* that is present in every Jewish soul? Whatever the cause, he had mellowed over the months and was no longer so rabid in his apostasy.

Now, I went over to him and said casually, "We need a lookout for our New Year's Day services tomorrow. Would you mind doing it?"

Amazingly, he agreed.

Thus, on *Rosh Hashanah*, 5705/1944, in Sachsenhausen, Oskar Stein, a Jew who had turned his back on Judaism, who had converted and married a Catholic, risked his life to stand guard in order to enable fifteen, broken-hearted *frum* Jews to *daven* and pour out their hearts to Hashem. For over an hour, this man who never covered his head, wore a cap, out of respect for our *davening* and stood guard in dreary, chilly weather—for two days in a row.

"How true are the words of our Sages," I said to Reb Avigdor. "'Even the most estranged ones among the Jewish people are as full of good deeds as pomegranates are full of seeds.'" (*Berachos* 57a)

When we finished *davening*, I went over to Oskar. "Thank you very much, Oskar," I said. "Our Sages say, '*Yesh koneh olamo beshaah achas.* Some people acquire a share in the World-to-Come in one hour.' (*Avodah Zarah* 10b) I'm sure you just did."

Oskar shook hands with me and shamelessly wiped his eyes.

In October, a transport of fifteen Hungarian Jews arrived and were assigned to our barracks, so that now there were one hundred and forty-one of us. The newcomers were besieged with questions; everyone wanted to hear the latest reports from the outside world, hoping to receive good tidings about relatives and friends. Among the new arrivals were the three Rubinstein brothers from Grossverdan, *chassidic* young men who remembered Reb Avigdor from the old days. One of them was a specialist in figuring the Jewish calendar.

"Do you remember what days of the week were *Rosh Hashanah* this year?" I asked him, hoping to receive confirmation for my calculation.

"Yes, of course I remember," he replied. "It came out on Monday and Tuesday."

I was vindicated, and I must say, it felt good inside.

CHAPTER 28

Rascals and Scoundrels

SEVERAL DAYS LATER, A TRANSPORT CONSISTING OF ONE lone prisoner arrived. He was a short, gaunt man whose eyes never seemed to stop on any object or person. He moved quickly and gracefully, but there was something unsavory about him, something dangerous. He was a mystery to us. His name was Smolianoff; no one knew his first name—he was just Smolianoff. We were having our meal when the *Scharfuehrer* ushered him into our barracks, and Smolianoff immediately became the butt of endless jokes. Felix Tragholz, our comedian in residence, introduced himself as the barracks chief, ordered him to take off his clothes, covered him with soot from the stove and made him stand at attention.

Although we laughed at first, we soon felt sorry for the

odd-looking little man and implored Felix to stop. Smolianoff impassively suffered through all the indignities; in fact, he hardly spoke at all.

"Where do you come from?" we asked.

"Mauthausen," he replied laconically.

The name Mauthausen sent shivers down our spine. We knew that it was one of the most barbaric concentration camps, an extermination camp where prisoners were forced to carry heavy chunks of granite from a stone quarry up one hundred and eighty-six narrow and slippery steps at double-time. Whoever survived that hell had our respect.

"Did you work in the quarry?"

"Yes."

"How was it?"

"Rough."

The next morning, Krueger appeared and asked to see Smolianoff. To our surprise, he amiably patted Smolianoff on the shoulder and took him into his office, where the two conferred for several hours. It all seemed very enigmatic to us. Why was Krueger lavishing all this attention on this strange little man?

We soon discovered that Smolianoff, a Bulgarian Jew, had been a counterfeiter in Berlin before the war. He and his partner, a Catholic priest, had forged British pound notes, meticulously engraving the steel plates by hand, producing currency of superb quality. He had been brought to Sachsenhausen to improve the quality of the American dollars produced in Barracks 19.

Until Smolianoff's arrival, all dollar bills in our shop had been manufactured by Norbert Levi and two assistants, but the finished product had been mediocre. Now, under the expert guidance of Smolianoff, they were going to produce

large quantities of first-rate counterfeit greenbacks.

His Jewish name notwithstanding, Norbert Levi was actually a full-fledged German. In fact, the lanky, blond, blue-eyed fellow had been a soldier in the Wehrmacht. In his spare time, Levi and some of his accomplices manufactured counterfeit food ration coupons. Before long, the police discovered the clandestine operation and put the culprits in jail. Because Levi was an expert printer, he had been sent to Sachsenhausen to be part of our counterfeiting ring and had arrived here at about the same time my group did.

In October, his case came up for trial, and he was called to testify as a witness. Before his departure, he received a brand-new suit of clothes and was taken to Berlin under the watchful eye of an SS guard. He returned later that same day.

He was a well-liked, pleasant chap with a happy-go-lucky outlook on life, and we were all concerned about the outcome of the trial. "Well, Norbert, how did it go? How did you make out?" we asked.

"My buddies all got the death sentence," he said. "I got a death sentence also, but it was deferred because of the work I'm doing here. As long as I'm turning out dollars, I'm safe; the minute the operation stops, I go to the gallows. I guess the same goes for you fellows."

The next day, his department was placed under the supervision of a young German lieutenant in the Wehrmacht. Rumor had it that the new member was Krueger's nephew and that Krueger had wangled this job for him to save him from being sent to the Russian front.

Levi, Smolianoff and Krueger's nephew, each for his own good reason, did their best to slow the dollar operation. It was difficult for them to play for time, because unlike British pounds, dollars were produced by means of lithography.

While British pounds were printed in a slow and tedious process that resulted in many misprints, the lithography process made it possible to run off an unlimited number of dollar bills, all in mint condition. All that was needed was a series of perfect dollar plates. The longer it took them to produce these plates, the longer they would be protected; and they took their time, tinkering away and trying to look busy.

Smolianoff kept very much to himself. He was withdrawn and secretive and did not associate with any of us. Rather suddenly, he formed an unlikely friendship with a fellow named Yaakov Lasker. The two of them looked odd together. Lasker was a giant of a man, and Smolianoff barely cleared five feet. Invariably, they would huddle in some corner or sit for hours at an unoccupied table, pencils in hand, writing as they talked.

"Counterfeiting makes for strange bedfellows," I said to Oskar during our nightly chess match.

I asked Smolianoff about his cryptic writings. He responded by ignoring me, and when I persisted, he merely looked at me contemptuously. Lasker, however, a member of a prominent and wealthy family from back home, was less than shy.

"What are you two cooking up?" I inquired. "Devising a secret code?"

"You won't believe this," he said happily. "We're trying to figure out a mathematical system to break the bank in Monte Carlo. I've played roulette there a few times without any luck. But I'm convinced that it's possible to break the bank, and if anyone can do it, it's got to be Smolianoff. That man's an absolute genius."

But no matter how hard they tried, neither Smolianoff

nor Lasker ever discovered the perfect formula for beating the odds at the gambling wheel in Monte Carlo. However, their tenacious attempts did provide us with some amusement. In a curious way, they also taught me a lesson in *bitachon*. These two men did not have the fortifying strength of the Torah to sustain them, yet they did not despair and were making concrete plans for the future. Then surely I, a *chassid* and a *ben Torah*, should firmly believe that "soon [Hashem's] salvation shall come, and [His] favor be revealed." (*Yeshayahu* 56:1)

CHAPTER 29

Humanity Amidst Inhumanity

AMONG THE INMATES OF BARRACKS 18 IN SACHSENHAUSEN, the largest single contingent were the men from Bialystok, a city in eastern Poland. We respected these men because of their loyalty to one another. The SS not only respected the sincere fellowship of those men but also their expert workmanship; the Bialystokers were mostly printers by trade.

Most notable were Platz, the oldest inmate of the barracks, the brothers Hershel and Moishe Kosak, Raphael Reisner and Nachum Zakrzewski. But of all the Bialystokers, I was most fond of Izak Sukenik.

Izak was a schoolteacher, and one of the most soft-spoken and intelligent men I have met. He had an ethereal quality and a gentleness that seemed totally out of place in a

concentration camp. He smiled readily and spoke kindly to everyone. It was hard not to like him. Unfortunately, he was frail and sickly from tuberculosis. At twenty-three years of age, this tall, dark scholar had been married two weeks before his deportation, and now he spent many hours yearning for and wondering about the fate of the young wife he barely knew.

Although Izak and I were far apart ideologically, we had many interesting discussions. We spoke of life, religion, politics and the future.

Izak came from a religious background, but his suffering had destroyed his faith. "I envy your simple faith," he said one evening. "It gives you strength, but I have nothing to lean on."

He soon caught a cold and his condition deteriorated noticeably. His hacking cough became more persistent, but he did not dare stay in bed because he could not risk being sent to the clinic for a lung x-ray. Were that to happen, he would be killed immediately.

Now the solidarity of the Bialystokers really manifested itself. They lavished care on Izak as if he were their child, bringing him extra rations in the hope of improving his health. But his deathly pallor and continuous coughing aroused the suspicion of the SS, and the *Oberscharfuehrer* demanded that a specimen of his saliva be sent to the laboratory. Hershel Kosak was chosen to deliver the sample, and he risked his life to help his friend by substituting his own saliva for Izak's.

A few days later, Atze came back and announced, "I have good news. Sukenik got a clean bill of health. He can continue to work in the shop!"

We were elated; thanks to Hershel's quick thinking Izak had gained a temporary reprieve.

But one cold day in October, disaster struck. As we were marching to the showers, *Oberscharfuehrer* Heitzmann gave a bizarre order. "*Ein Lied!*" he bellowed. "Sing a song!"

We looked at each other in confusion. What did he want us to sing?

"All right. If you won't sing, you'll all do one hundred push-ups. Hup, two, three, four! Hup, two three, four!"

We struggled with the push-ups. To us, the exercise was sheer torture, but for Izak it was too much. After five push-ups he remained flat on the ground, coughing up blood.

"Take him to the clinic," the SS man ordered.

"It's nothing, Herr *Oberscharfuehrer*," Raphael Reisner argued. "He fell on his face and bloodied his nose. Don't send him to the clinic for that. It's nothing, just a scratch, really!"

"To the clinic!" was the gruff reply.

An hour later, Izak came back. "They're sending my x-rays to Berlin for evaluation," he said, his face betraying hopelessness. "I know the outcome already."

A few days later, Izak was summoned to the clinic. He knew that his hours were numbered, and he began to say good-bye to his friends.

"Promise," he said to Hershel Kosak. "Promise that you'll do something for me if you survive the war."

"Anything, Izak."

"After the war, please find my wife and tell her how much I loved her."

Hershel could do no more than nod.

"There's one more thing," Izak continued. "I have a grandfather who lives in New York. Look him up. Tell him to avenge my blood."

Then, Izak calmly shook hands with all his Bialystoker friends. Finally he turned to the barracks chief. "Atze, my

time has come. You've been good to me. Thanks."

Heitzmann led him to the wagon that was to take him to the clinic. On the way, Izak passed my workbench. "Goodbye, Avrum!" was all he could say.

I was so overcome, I could barely respond.

A few minutes later, Heitzmann came back, and with a slashing motion across his neck, he indicated that Sukenik had been murdered. Later, he confided to Krebs that he had cut Izak down with two bullets into the back of the head.

The human mind is incapable of grasping the catastrophe of the massacre of millions, and numbers become staggering statistics that cannot evoke a tear. But the senseless murder of this single innocent soul brought home to me the tragedy that had befallen our people.

I will not forget Izak Sukenik.

Shortly after Sukenik died, Hershel Kosak became seriously ill to the point that we feared for his life. His brother Moishe and some of the other Bialystokers kept him alive with superhuman effort, and gradually, he began to improve. During his convalescence, the SS sent him food, but he wouldn't eat. He said that he "didn't want them to get a *mitzvah* through him." Hershel eventually recovered completely, and I am convinced that the *zchus* of his efforts for Izak Sukenik played no small part in his recovery.

Izak's wife survived the holocaust. After the war, the Kosak brothers met her in Paris and reported to her the murder of her husband. Hershel Kosak tried to locate Sukenik's grandfather in the Bronx but found that he had passed away. Both Hershel and Moishe Kosak reside in New York and worked as typesetters for *The Forward*, a Yiddish newspaper, until their retirement.

CHAPTER 30

A Candle in Sachsenhausen

THE WINTER OF 1944 GRIPPED US IN ALL ITS FEROCITY. Huddled around the stove in our barracks, we speculated on our chances of survival. The Russians had broken through the German defenses around Warsaw and had penetrated onto German soil. The Americans had crossed the Rhine and were advancing into the German heartland.

General Eisenhower demanded unconditional surrender. Hitler, disregarding his own burning cities and decimated armies, responded by shouting insanely, "*Wir werden nie kapitulieren!* We'll never surrender."

Our uppermost concern was what the Germans were going to do to us. We were, after all, privy to the details of the counterfeiting operation.

Now that the Germans were going down in defeat, they would surely kill us to protect their hideous secrets. But they were not quite finished with us, and we continued turning out British money at a feverish pace. Levi, Smolianoff and Krueger's nephew, however, continued to stall the dollar operation.

"Perfecting the dollar plates is a very tricky job," Levi told the *Oberscharfuehrer* who was beginning to lose patience. "And it's not only the plates that are holding up the works. We also need a chemical called *heavy water*. We can't get that here, and we have to find a substitute. Give us another week or two."

The weeks went by, and soon it would be *Chanukah*, the Festival of Lights. The mere mention of the name *Chanukah* evoked cherished memories of lighting the *menorah*, the *berachos*, the songs, the delicacies associated with the *Yom Tov*. Above all, we yearned for the warm feeling of joy and unity *Chanukah* generates. If only we could capture a little of the spirit expressed by the *Chanukah* lights.

This yearning for the *mitzvah* of kindling the *Chanukah* lights sparked a painful *halachic* dispute among the *frum* inmates of Barracks 18. Should we light the *menorah*? If the Germans would discover that we lit *Chanukah* candles, the entire barracks would unquestionably be severely punished.

Mendel Markus was adamant. "I stole wax from the shop, and I made candles. We're going to light them, and we'll do it in the sleeping quarters. Do you want to join us?"

"You know we're not allowed to be in the sleeping quarters except to sleep," Reb Avigdor said. "Besides, if the Germans discover the *Chanukah* lights, the entire barracks will have to pay for it."

"We are not obligated to expose the entire barracks to

mortal danger for the sake of lighting *Chanukah* candles," I added. "After all, the *mitzvah* is of *rabbinic* origin."

"Please, Mendel," Reb Avigdor said. "I think it's highly commendable for you to want to celebrate *Chanukah*, but we're living under the most precarious circumstances. The *Scharfuehrers* are just waiting to make us do those murderous push-ups. All they need is to find us lighting *Chanukah* candles."

Mendel was stone-faced.

"Look," Reb Avigdor said, "we can say the *Al Hanissim* and *Maoz Tzur*. But lighting candles is not a *mitzvah* for which we have to jeopardize our lives."

Mendel would not hear of it. "The *Chashmonaim* did not cringe in the face of the Hellenist enemy," he said heatedly. "And neither should we."

"But in those days, the Jews were compelled to bow down to Greek idols," I said. "Idol worship is a sin for which we must sacrifice our lives, but lighting *Chanukah* candles is not in that category."

Despite our warnings, on the first night of *Chanukah*, Mendel lit the first candle in the dormitory. Drawn by an irresistible force, I joined him in the sleeping quarters even though I thought he was foolhardy. Together we sang softly, and tears welled up in our eyes when we chanted the age-old words of *Maoz Tzur*.

Avenge the vengeance of Your servants' blood
from the wicked nation.
For the triumph is too long delayed for us
and there is no end to days of evil.

When we finished singing, I said, "You've got audacity,

Mendel. But now, let's blow out the candle and go back to the mess hall."

He took my advice, and the flame on the candle was extinguished. But the flame of hope burned brightly.

Meanwhile, the Russians pushed forward relentlessly. The Red Army stood before Kuestrin on the Oder River, within forty-five miles of our concentration camp. The American and British Air Forces intensified their air raids, dropping bombs on Berlin around the clock. But to the SS in Sachsenhausen it was "business as usual." They would not relinquish Hitler's dream of the *Tausendjaehrige Reich*, the Thousand-Year Reich. They still believed that Hitler would pull off the magic trick.

After a heavy bombardment, Krueger arrived and took Leo Krebs and several printers along with him to Berlin to bring a numbering machine to the camp. The machine was a huge monstrosity, and it took the men all day to pull it out of a bombed-out print shop and move it to Sachsenhausen. For days, a number of us were busy mounting the behemoth onto a concrete slab. But in the end, the machine turned out to be a total white elephant. It produced absolutely nothing.

A few weeks later, we heard that Kaltenbrunner, the chief of the German Intelligence Agency, might be coming to inspect our installation. As always, speculation was running in high gear.

"They're going to finish us off."

"Oh, no, we're too valuable to them. They're going to ship us someplace deeper into the interior to make more bank notes."

"No," said Kosak. "They know the end is near, and we know too much."

On the appointed day, there was a general house cleaning

and new clothes from the post exchange. At ten in the morning, Krueger appeared with his guest, a tall, broad-shouldered, five-star SS general. To see the two men together was a comical sight; next to the robust general, the diminutive Krueger looked like a midget. What was particularly comical was seeing Krueger trying to hurry the large man along.

"These are top experts in the field," Krueger told him, gesturing in our direction. "Let me show you how they work."

Kaltenbrunner watched us at our work silently. Krueger kept showing off all the paraphernalia, chattering away, never giving his visitor a chance to question us. We had the distinct impression that Krueger was pulling the wool over the general's eyes. And when he showed off the mammoth machine, boasting how efficiently it numbered British pounds, we could hardly suppress our laughter. The machine never had been nor would be made operational.

We did not know if Krueger intended to save us out of the goodness of his heart, or if he was trying to save his own neck. More than likely, he was trying to prepare a case for himself for after the war now that the Russians were closing in on Germany. Perhaps he planned to tell Allied prosecutors that he had saved hundreds of lives. We knew him as a shrewd schemer, but his true motives remained concealed in his heart. I, however, saw him as an instrument in Hashem's Hand, a *shaliach* to do His work.

CHAPTER 31

Closing Shop

IN MID-FEBRUARY, WE RECEIVED ORDERS THAT OUR ENTIRE operation was to be evacuated. Naturally, we wondered if we were part of a general evacuation of all of Sachsenhausen's one hundred thousand inmates. Since we were completely cut off from the rest of the camp population, we had no way of finding out.

"What are they going to do with us?"

"If they are going to spare our lives, where are they taking us?"

These were the two questions on everyone's mind.

Within a day or so, *Sturmbannfuehrer* Krueger arrived and held a speech informing us that we were being evacuated to Mauthausen. Although he had treated us well, we were suspicious of him and did not know if he was trying to lull us

into submission with his nice words before leading us to slaughter.

In any case, Mauthausen was not the ideal place for "evacuation." It was synonymous with ruthless brutality, starvation and slow, agonizing death. We shuddered thinking of the horrors that awaited us there.

All the machinery was dismantled and carefully packed up along with the special paper, the chemicals and our light boxes. It was back-breaking work, lifting and carrying heavy boxes, day after day, from six o'clock in the morning until midnight. I imagined that the Germans did not want to leave anything behind for the Russians to discern, for even the monstrous numbering machine had to be dismantled and crated.

The evacuation took place on the day after *Purim*. On the day of *Purim* itself, the packing was almost completed, so that we felt we could take a chance at reading *Megillas Esther,* which we had pieced together from memory. As we read about the miracle of *Purim* and how Hashem transformed a tragedy into a day of great joy, we prayed that He save us from the clutches of the modern-day Haman who sought to wipe all the Jews off the face of the earth.

We had been issued clean outfits a few days before our scheduled departure, and as I put on my "new" shoes, I had a delightful surprise. Hidden inside a shoe was a pair of *tefillin* that someone must have slipped in when he was forced to undress upon entering Auschwitz. To me, it was a priceless treasure, truly a sign from Heaven.

Our transport was placed under the command of SS *Untersturmfuehrer* Hansch, a surprisingly robust fellow who warned us, "If anyone asks you what you're doing, even if it's a general, you tell him it's none of his damn business."

We were loaded onto a freight train which was made up of fifty boxcars, twenty prisoners to a car, and several SS guards. The remaining forty-five cars were being filled with intelligence material from Friedenthal. Evidently, we were being used as a decoy.

The trip was supposed to last three days, and we were given sufficient food for that length of time, but it took us seven days to reach our destination.

When the train pulled into Dresden, we were greeted by an awesome sight. The vast metropolis lay in ruins; the city was a huge pile of smoldering debris. Only a few days earlier, Dresden had been subjected to one of the most intense bombing raids of World War II, and as far as the eye could see, there was nothing around but devastation. Here and there, a wall jutted from beneath the rubble, a silent reminder of the building that had once stood there. No sign of life could be detected; it was as though the Angel of Death had passed through Dresden and struck down every living being, both man and beast. Nothing had survived the avenging firestorm.

Our SS guards viewed the destruction with open-mouthed horror. It finally dawned on them that the Thousand-Year Reich was in the throes of death. They were speechless. Their house of cards had caved in, their ideology turned to ash, their dreams evaporated. We did not dare show any outward emotion, but in our hearts we rejoiced as we gazed at the ravaged city. We thought we were witnessing the destruction of Sedom and Amorah, the cities that Hashem overturned in His anger and rage.

Our stop in Dresden was too brief to allow me to savor to the fullest the downfall of the enemy, for the train proceeded into the territory of occupied Czechoslovakia, moving in a

southerly direction toward Austria. So it was to be Mauthausen after all.

Two hours later, the train came to a sudden halt. It was an air raid alarm.

CHAPTER 32

Eighteen-Minute Matzos

AS WE WAITED FOR THE RAID ALERT TO PASS, WE SAW ON the tracks next to ours an ordinary boxcar—loaded with grain. With our food supply depleted and two more days of travel remaining, it was like manna from heaven. We asked permission to gather some of the wheat and filled two buckets. Then we scooped up handfuls of the precious kernels, stuffing them into our pockets.

I had already popped one of the kernels into my mouth when it occurred to me that the grain might be put to better use.

"It's exactly thirty days to *Pesach*," I said to Reb Avigdor. "We ought to save these kernels. Who knows? Maybe we'll be liberated by then, and we'll use these for *matzos*."

The mere mention of liberation and the festival of free-

dom was heady stuff, and none of the religious members of our group chewed any more of the kernels.

This restraint was an extraordinary feat, for we were on the brink of starvation again. For starving people, the greed for food is nearly insurmountable. In Auschwitz, I had even seen men line up for supper minutes after they had been condemned to death.

Now, as in Auschwitz, we could think of little else than food, yet we did not give in to the urge, saving our wheat for *Pesach matzah.*

It was Friday night when we finally arrived at the Mauthausen depot. We marched three miles to the camp; as soon as we arrived, we were struck with a repulsive smell, the same reek of burning flesh that had permeated Auschwitz. We stared at the large crematorium in the center of the camp, its stack spewing enormous clouds of fiery smoke.

"Mordhausen," someone muttered. "Murder House."

We were disinfected and led to Block 20. As soon as the dingy sign "Block 20" became visible, some of the men who had been in Mauthausen let out loud cries. Block 20, they explained, was the waiting station for men who had been condemned to death for some crime. We stared at the walls of the building; they were splattered with fresh blood.

Block 20 consisted of one large room filled with three-tiered bunk beds. Inside, too, the walls were splattered with blood, but in spite of obvious attempts at scrubbing, the stains were still clearly visible. We did not have to guess at the atrocities that had occurred in the barracks; the graduates of Mauthausen told us what they had lived through.

Minutes later, Hansch appeared. With him was Werner, who loudly ordered us to line up in fours. "You'll remain here in quarantine for a couple of days," he announced.

"Sturmbannfuehrer Krueger will arrive in a couple of days and make further arrangements."

In spite of the daily bombings of the surrounding towns, we were ordered to unload the counterfeiting material in the boxcars at the depot. The large machinery was moved into a shed next to the depot, but the cases with the British pounds and the printing equipment had to be stored in our barracks. It was a grueling job, especially because our bread ration was reduced by half. We were also hampered by the primitive unloading equipment. Mostly, we hand-carried our clumsy burdens, going back and forth between the train depot and the barracks, driven by SS men who shouted, "*Schneller, schneller!* Hurry up, faster!"

Although carrying heavy crates on an empty stomach taxed our strength to the limit, our overriding fear was dropping and cracking a crate, thereby exposing its contents. If that were to happen, we were afraid that the Germans would finish us off on the spot.

Suddenly, I heard a crash, and I spun around. Felix Tragholz had dropped a small crate he was carrying, and it lay shattered on the ground, its contents spilling out.

Felix stared in amazement at a seal that he saw among the scattered materials. It had Hebrew lettering on it. Glancing about furtively, he quickly reached down and picked up the seal. He exhaled hard on it and pressed it on his forearm, revealing a perfect imprint. It was a perfect facsimile of the seal of the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, Rabbi J. H. Hertz!

Felix dropped the seal, like a hot potato, back into the jumble on the ground, and feigning innocence, he busied himself reassembling the crate. Fortunately, this little incident passed without mishap. But we still had plenty to worry about.

We worked with fighters flying so low, it seemed as if we could almost touch them. Wave after wave of bombers came flying across the skies over us, unmolested. Not a single German fighter rose to challenge them; the big anti-aircraft guns remained silent. Though the bombers were a comforting sight, I could not help but feel uneasy.

"American intelligence surely knows the exact location of Mauthausen," I said to Reb Avigdor. "Why don't they bomb the rail lines and put a stop to the transports to this death camp? One or two bombs could save thousands of lives."

"They knew the exact location of Auschwitz also," said Reb Avigdor. "They didn't bomb the access routes to those gas chambers either. A few bombs in the right places could have saved hundreds of thousands of lives."

We felt bitter, alone, abandoned by the whole world. And so we labored like our ancestors did in Egypt and placed our trust in Hashem.

All former distinctions between old-timers and newcomers were erased in Mauthausen. Here, there were no privileges, no packages from Aryan wives. Here we were all equal, all equally famished, obsessed with only one thought: food. In Auschwitz, I had managed to eat everything; but the Mauthausen slop was not fit for human consumption, and I vomited incessantly. However hungry we were, not one of us could bring himself to consume the turnip soup. The only thing between us and starvation was a loaf of bread shared by eight ravenous men.

In spite of constant, gnawing hunger, I still held back from eating the wheat kernels I had scooped up during our train ride to Mauthausen. Longingly, I ran my fingers over the nourishing, life-giving kernels, torn between satisfying my overpowering hunger and my idealistic vision of the

mitzvah of *matzah*. I was weakening, about to put one of the kernels into my mouth when Mendel and the Rubinstein brothers approached me.

"*Pesach* is only two weeks away," Mendel said. "How about asking your friend Atze for permission to bake matzos? We'll pound the kernels into flour in the washroom at night. The only problem will be to heat the stove sufficiently, so the baking can be done quickly."

I could not share their excitement. We were isolated slave laborers in a prison camp surrounded by SS on all sides. Our only value to our masters was our skills in handling counterfeit money, not as human beings. I could not see risking our lives further to bake *matzos*.

"I'll ask Reb Avigdor," I said to Mendel. "But you have to accept his decision."

Reb Avigdor agreed with me. "*Halachah* does not obligate us to risk our lives in order to bake *matzos*."

When I brought Reb Avigdor's opinion, Mendel angrily spat, "So now you'll have your way, and we won't have *matzos*. Don't you realize that this is probably the last *Pesach* of our lives? It wasn't just a coincidence that we found the wheat a month before *Pesach*. You'll have some explaining to do in the next world."

His words hurt, and I had to struggle with myself not to punch him. "You're a scoundrel for rubbing salt in our wounds," I shot back at him. "Why don't *you* ask Atze for permission to bake *matzos*?"

I wanted to vent my frustration further, but I remembered the *pasuk*: "A gentle response allays wrath." (*Mishlei* 15:1)

I tried to prove my point rationally. I quoted the *Gemara* in *Pesachim* (43b, 91b) that draws a parallel between the

obligation to eat *matzos* on *Pesach* and the prohibition against eating *chametz*. Anyone prohibited to eat *chametz* must eat *matzos*. "Could that apply to us?" I argued heatedly. "We couldn't live eight days without eating *chametz*. We'd starve. So we're not expected to eat *matzos* either."

I realized that the argument was flawed, so I added a parting comment.

"Remember *Chanukah*? I didn't want to take chances then, either. So you lit candles on your own. Who's to stop you from baking *matzos* now?"

My answer to him was no response to myself. I sought comfort from the Rubinsteins and Reb Avigdor. They were quick to agree with me that Mendel was cruel; I should ignore his taunts. Yet they voiced reservations.

"But still—"

"Maybe we could still manage—"

"After all, the grain—isn't it a sign from Heaven that Hashem wants us to go ahead and bake *matzos*?"

"Look here," I insisted, "no one ever *thought* of baking *matzos* until I suggested it in that boxcar from Sachsenhausen. It was my idea, and now I say let's forget about it. And if Hashem wants us to have *matzos*, '*Yeshuas Hashem keheref ayin*. His help can come in a flash.' He'll surely think of a way to help us. Let's just leave it up to Him."

My retort quieted them—but not the restless thoughts. That night, two nights before *Pesach*, I slept fitfully. In my dream, my father and I were visiting the Radomsker Rebbe. We stood at his table where he usually sat. Next to him stood his son-in-law, Reb Moishele. The Rebbe asked me, "What are you doing about *davening* with a *minyan*? It is written, '*Davar velo chatzi davar*. A whole thing, not halfway.'"

"If it is at all possible," I answered, "we see to it that when

someone has to say *Kaddish* on a *yahrzeit* then we get ten people together. We also manage an occasional *Kedushah* and *Barchu*."

Suddenly, my father was not there any more. I realized while dreaming that my father was no longer of this world, and I began begging the Rebbe to look into our situation and to pray to Hashem to help us. "Please, Rebbe, be a *meilitz yosher* for Klal Yisrael. Implore the *Ribono Shel Olam* to have compassion on the remnant of Yisrael and save us from our oppressors."

Then I told the Rebbe the story of the grain and how Mendel had chastised me, insisting that we bake *matzos*. I told him about my answer—the *Gemara* I quoted, my argument. I asked the Rebbe what he thought about the matter.

"I shall tell you," he answered. "As a matter of principle you are right, but you will remember how your dear father labored to bake *matzos*. And it is written, '*Vechein taasu ledoros*. And thus you shall do for all your generations.'" (*Shemos* 25:9)

With that, the dream was over.

The next morning I awoke full of hope that we would be freed. The Rebbe's words echoed in my ears: "Thus you shall do for all your generations . . . all your generations!" There would be more generations!

I could not wait for the SS to call, "Everybody out of bed."

I ran directly to Reb Avigdor and all but shouted, "We're going to bake *matzos*!"

He stared at me and asked, "What happened all of a sudden? Have you lost your mind?"

"We're baking *matzos*," I repeated. "And Heaven will help us."

I told him the entire dream and the impression it had made on me.

"If that is the case, I have no counsel to offer, and I am in agreement. As the Rambam says, 'The source of your greatest joy is when your doubts have been resolved.'"

I went to Mendel Markus and the Rubinsteins and told them the story and that we would indeed bake *matzos*. I was so sure that our liberation was at hand that nothing could scare me.

Reb Avigdor, one of the Rubinsteins and I approached Atze for permission to bake the *matzos* in the evening.

"Where do you expect to do all that?" he asked.

We told him that the preparation would be done in the washroom, but we would like to have the stove in the room well-heated, so the baking could be handled with speed. We assured him that the whole operation, from beginning to end, would take only fifteen minutes.

"Let's see what Ernst Gottlieb says," said Atze.

He came with us to Gottlieb. Both realized we were serious. They consented and added, "Think of us, too." They wanted to have a share in the *mitzvah* of baking *matzos* in Mauthausen.

We quickly began the detailed planning on how to accomplish our task. We washed four towels and hung them to dry on the wall surrounding the courtyard. After they had dried, we wrapped the kernels in them and took four hammers and beat the grain until late in the afternoon. We did this out in the yard. The guards, looking down at us from the watchtowers, were puzzled by our actions, but they were not permitted to talk to us, nor we to them. But we could hear them asking each other, "What are they doing there?" As the grain became pulverized, we poured it into a piece of paper. After several hours of arm-breaking work, we had collected about 250-300 grams of flour.

Earlier that day, I had looked around for a *blech* upon which we were to place the dough. We could not bake the *matzos* without it. I despaired of finding one in Mauthausen and thought the whole *matzah* business was an impossible dream. I was just about to return to the barracks in defeat, when I saw something that could serve as a *blech.* I ran back with the metal sheet to see if it would fit our oven. It did! I had only one explanation for its appearance. It was placed there by *Hashgachah,* one more miracle to tell us we were doing the right thing.

We heated the *blech* to make it kosher for *Pesach* use. By bed time, the stove was piping hot. When the lights were turned off, some of the inmates, represented by Nieft, started complaining that it was too hot. Gottlieb answered Nieft sharply, "Krakowski is not to be disturbed in his work. You leave him alone. And keep quiet!"

We quickly went into the washroom. We prepared the dough in a bowl we had previously cleaned and heated, and, whispering, with tears on our cheeks, we said, "*Leshem matzos mitzvah,*" following the old *chassidic* tradition. Then we sang snatches from *Hallel.*

The kneading and rolling took ten minutes. We had a board for rolling out the dough, but we had to use an empty bottle as a rolling pin. I then stationed myself at the stove, and every minute or so, one of my co-workers brought me a *matzah* from the washroom. The stove was so hot that it took barely one minute for the *matzos* to be done. I would slide one *matzah* on and take another off.

We stuck to our schedule, and the entire work was finished in less than eighteen minutes, "the time it takes to walk a mile," exactly as prescribed. (*Shulchan Aruch* 459:2)

Two ovens burned that night in Mauthausen—the huge,

blazing furnace of death, the symbol of the *tumah* and depravity of our oppressors, the German Molech—the other, a little stove in Block 20, aglow with the fire of *kedushah*, turning out the *lechem oni*, the bread of affliction, the token of freedom and *mesiras nefesh* of the entire Jewish people. We had baked sixteen *matzos*—each about the size of the palm of my hand. For the first time in many years, we went to bed happy.

The next morning, we began writing down the *Haggadah*, the ancient text recounting the Exodus from Egypt, piecing it together from memory.

In the evening, our *Seder* began. Again, we slipped into the washroom. The previous evening, there were six of us. Tonight there were fifteen. There were more who wanted to join us, but there was not enough room, and we were afraid that the SS might hear us. We started reciting the *Haggadah* very quietly. Some of us could not contain ourselves and broke into sobs. As for me, I could not utter a single word for weeping.

When I had quieted down a little, I reminded the others not to forget where we were and to try to be quick. After recounting the Exodus from Egypt, we washed our hands and ate a piece of *matzah*. I permitted myself to save a piece, the size of a finger nail, as the *afikoman*, the Jewish talisman throughout our history.

At the conclusion of our *Seder*, after the traditional "Next year in Yerushalayim," we said in one voice, as if it were part of the text: "If Hashem will only free us now, we will have to make an even greater *Haggadah*."

I sat in the washroom a while longer and recited *Shir Hashirim*, the *Song of Songs*, as my father had always done after the *Seder*. "*Mashcheini acharecha narutza*. O draw me; we will

run after You." (*Shir Hashirim* 1:4) In *Tiferes Shlomo*, the Radomsker Rebbe comments on this line with the analogy of a shepherd who uses two methods to draw his sheep to him. He either calls them and they come, or he drives them with his staff. Often Hashem merely called *Bnei Yisrael* and we followed, but there were times when He was forced to use the rod. In that *pasuk*, we pray that after this bitter *galus*, Hashem should draw us to Him by calling us, and we promise to run after Him (on *Vayechi*, *Bereishis* 49:1).

Ribono Shel Olam, I prayed. Look down from Heaven and see what a wonderful nation You have. Even here in this *beer shachas*, this nethermost pit, we listen to Your call. We joyfully risk our lives to fulfill Your *mitzvos*. Have pity on us. *Mashcheini acharecha narutza*. Draw us near; send us the salvation, and we will run after You.

CHAPTER 33

Destination: Redl-Zipf

TWO DAYS AFTER OUR *SEDER*, WE RECEIVED ORDERS from Berlin to move to a new destination, a concentration camp in Redl-Zipf, a small brewery town in Austria. We were also told that *Sturmbannfuehrer* Krueger would be joining us, but days went by with no sign of the man. Meanwhile, the bank notes, the machinery and printing paraphernalia all had to be loaded on the train again. Although we were weak with hunger, we labored with superhuman strength, eager to leave the death trap of Mauthausen. When the loading was finally completed, we left our Block 20, marched to the railroad platform and pushed into a convoy of open freight cars. A prolonged whistle split the air. The wheels began to grind, and we were on our way. It was again a Friday afternoon.

As soon as the train started to move, I began to say *Kabbalas Shabbos*. Moving into the night, the words, "shelter us in the shadow of Your wings, for You are G-d Who protects us and shelters us," took on special significance.

All day on *Shabbos*, I stared hungrily at my ration of one slice of bread. I could not eat it; on this freight train there simply was no water for *netilas yadayim*. By late *Shabbos* afternoon I was in a quandary. I did not want to eat bread without washing, but I was aware that it is forbidden to fast on *Shabbos*. I kept hoping the train would stop somewhere, so that I could obtain some water, but it kept rolling along.

"What shall I do?" I asked Reb Avigdor.

"Don't worry, Avrum," Reb Avigdor replied. "Go ahead and eat. You know that you are not allowed to fast on *Shabbos*. Don't wait any longer. I'll take the responsibility."

But I waited, hoping that somehow water would appear. The darkening sky would soon signal the end of *Shabbos*, and I still had no water. I had just about given up all hope, when one of my companions took a bottle out of his bundle to have a drink of water.

"Would you please let me have a few drops to wash my hands?" I asked, explaining my predicament.

"Certainly," he replied generously, handing me the bottle. "Help yourself."

Quickly, I washed and ate the slice of bread, watching the sun sink below the horizon. *Baruch Hashem*, I did not fast on that *Shabbos*.

The distance from Mauthausen to Redl-Zipf is approximately seventy miles, but it took us from Friday evening until Sunday to arrive at our destination. When at last we arrived at Redl-Zipf, it was five o'clock in the morning. The camp was very lightly guarded with only two languid SS men at the gate.

This was indeed better than Mauthausen. The camp consisted of two barracks, one occupied by French prisoners, the other empty, into which we were herded.

From our barracks, we had a full view of the local streets that were swarming with ordinary people leading ordinary lives. We watched them in wide-eyed wonderment, surprised to see that such a world still existed. I did not resent the civilians of Redl-Zipf as much as I had the Berliners, for freedom was in the air. I could almost touch it.

Exhausted from the arduous journey, we collapsed into bed and fell into a deep sleep, only to be thrown out of our beds, sometime later, by the impact of loud explosions. Bombs were falling on Redl-Zipf, and thick columns of grey smoke dimmed the setting sun. Although we were initially surprised that the little town was bombarded, we eventually concluded that the Allies had discovered and were intent on the intelligence material from Friedenthal, rather than on bombing Redl-Zipf itself.

After hours of bombardment, the all-clear was sounded, and we went back to sleep. A few hours later, the aroma of our first meal awakened us. After Mauthausen, the bowl of tasty, thick soup and a slice of freshly-baked, country bread was a heavenly meal. I suddenly felt energized, buoyed with hope, confident that help from Hashem would be here in a wink.

I wondered what the future held. Little did I know that I was about to be introduced to a world so bizarre, that I could not have conceived of it in my wildest imagination.

Deep within the lovely sloping Alps that ringed Redl-Zipf was an immense system of caves and connecting tunnels. The tunnels had been excavated by the Germans as a bomb-proof fortress, where the Third Reich would make its final stand against the encroaching Allies. Not far from there, high in the

Alps, sat Eagle's Nest, Hitler's castle in which he hoped to survive.

It was into those underground caverns that we were ordered to transport the counterfeit machinery that was still waiting in the wagons at the station. It was there that we had to deposit the vast hoard of counterfeit bank notes.

We entered the tunnel through an ingeniously camouflaged steel doorway. As we moved the wooden crates through dimly-lit tunnels, we encountered hundreds of laborers, speaking assorted languages, none of which we could understand.

After we had unloaded all the machinery in one of the caves, an *Oberscharfuehrer* informed us that, though we would be quartered in the barracks, we would work underground.

When that heavy door clanged shut, I was overcome with claustrophobia. Beads of perspiration ran down my forehead, and I became short of breath. How easy it would be for them to finish us off here! They could shoot us, and no one would hear it; no one would ever find out about it. They would not even have to shoot us; they could simply lock the doors and leave us, buried alive, beneath the mountain. Fear gripped me.

For the next two weeks, we were busy installing the printing machinery and setting up the sorting benches. Once that was done, we went back to work at our old Sachsenhausen jobs.

At the end of April, Krueger suddenly appeared. He seemed in exceptionally good humor. After a brief conference with the SS, he had us lined up and made a short speech.

"Enough of this sitting around and enjoying the sun," he said. "The work will have to go on as before—in hiding."

It seemed to me that he was winking to us as he spoke

these words. Others thought so as well.

Later, he spoke confidentially to Fritz Schnapper, a printer, and some of the other old-timers. "You fellows are really a lot better off than I am," Krueger said. " Today I am still wearing my uniform. Who knows what will happen in the next few days?"

He smiled and waved good-bye. It was the last time that we saw him.

Rumors of our imminent liberation were circulating. The war would be over in just a matter of days. The Americans were on the way. But we knew better than to rejoice. We were privy to highly sensitive information, and it seemed unlikely that the SS would allow us to live and divulge their secret to the world.

CHAPTER 34

Germany's Last Gasp

ON MAY 1, RUMORS STARTED BY OUTSIDE CARPENTERS and locksmiths spread like wildfire. We were told that Berlin had capitulated. We were told that as the Russian troops made their final approach on the center of Berlin, Hitler, who had been hiding in a bunker near the Brandenburg Gate, took a vial of cyanide. His carcass was discovered and burned. The rumors must have been true, for immediately, we received orders to burn the Class D notes, those that were supposed to have been dropped over England.

We burned pound notes around the clock. Contrary to popular belief, money does not burn easily, and we had huge quantities to dispose of. When the job was done, we were ordered to place the wooden cases containing the high-grade

bills into specially prepared aluminum outer casings, seal them and fasten them with heavy metal straps. These reinforced cases were then loaded on several trucks and taken to an unknown destination.

The last of the cases of counterfeit pounds had been sent off, and our work was done, but what was to become of us? Ordinarily, after a full day's work I would have fallen off into a deep sleep, but I was worried and slept intermittently.

At five o'clock in the morning, we were ordered to line up outside. As we stumbled through the barracks door, we saw a sight that made our hearts jump with joy. The abhorrent German swastika flag flew at half-mast. It was true! Hitler had committed suicide! It was nearly impossible to disguise our jubilation.

Our SS guard was shouting, "*Anstellen! Wir fahren nach Ebensee!* We are leaving for Ebensee!"

"What about the machines? What will happen to us there?"

"Never mind. You'll find out when you get there."

For well over four hours, we stood waiting for our transportation to arrive. There was not enough room for all of us, and only half of our men, about seventy, were to be sent on the first transport.

"You will have to leave your baggage behind," said the *Scharfuehrer*. "It will be sent along with the next transport."

Things looked suspicious. What was going to happen to the men of the first transport? What would be our fate?

At two o'clock, another truck pulled up, and after a long discussion between the driver and the *Scharfuehrer*, thirty-five men got into the truck bound for Ebensee. The second transport also carried the baggage of the first.

Meanwhile, rumor had it that the American troops were

rapidly approaching and might reach Redl-Zipf at any moment.

As my name was called, I followed the others into the truck, and we left Redl-Zipf behind. The secrets we had carried to Redl-Zipf from Sachsenhausen also remained behind, but they would not remain buried for long.

After the war, American investigators discovered that the Germans had sunk hundreds of waterproof cases in a lake high in the Alps. U.S. Army divers combed the bottom of the lake and brought the cases to the surface intact. The entire trove of counterfeit money was incinerated.

BOOK FIVE

Rebuilding Lives

CHAPTER 35

Death Camp Ebensee

THE TRUCK MADE ITS WAY THROUGH SNOW-CAPPED peaks and jagged cliffs. Thundering waterfalls plunged from ledge to ledge to end in a wide blue ribbon of a lake far below. Gazing up at the mountains, I reflected on the perverse paradox this land presented, graced by a sublime beauty yet inhabited by the most depraved nation in the world.

It was in this very region of Austria, in the small town of Braunau, that Hitler was spawned. He emerged from this place of beauty to enslave, to murder, to ravage the earth. And now, Hitler had disappeared in a column of fire, evaporated in a cloud of smoke, vanished as mysteriously as he had burst on the scene. It did not seem possible that he had been human.

The bus was winding around the mountain, the German driver muttering that the Americans would catch up with us on our way to Ebensee. The Americans did not show up; instead, we ran into Werner, returning from Ebensee. He stopped to allay our lingering doubts.

"Your friends in Ebensee are doing fine," he reassured us. "I'm on my way to Redl-Zipf to pick up the last group of thirty-five men."

There was little reason to trust him. He could well have been leading us into a trap.

"Heaven help us," I said to Hershel Saltzer, a friendly *chassidic* young man.

"My grandfather once told me a surefire *segulah*," Hershel Saltzer replied. "When you're in trouble you should recite '*Yosheiv beseiser elyon*,' the ninety-first Psalm ninety-one times."

I started immediately reciting the psalm, and although I had said this *mizmor* every night in *Shema al Hamitah*, this was the first time I felt the full impact of its words.

A thousand may fall at your left side,
ten thousand on your right,
but it shall not reach you.
You will see with your eyes,
you will witness the punishment of the wicked.
No harm will befall you,
no disease touch your tent.
For He will order His angels
to guard you wherever you go.
They will carry you in their hands
lest you hurt your foot on a stone.
I will let him live to a ripe old age,
and show him My salvation.

Ninety-one times I recited this *mizmor*, and ninety-one times I felt uplifted and comforted by its inspiring message.

As we descended into the valley, we could see the barracks of the Ebensee death camp laid out in parallel rows. To the right of the road was the camp, to the left the barracks of the SS. To our dismay, our truck pulled into the SS barracks.

"This looks bad. This means trouble; big trouble," we said quietly, for why else, other than to kill us, would they separate us from all of the other inmates. Our initial anxiety, however, was quickly dispelled when we found that our friends from the first transport were sitting calmly in a small vestibule of the SS bathhouse. We told them about meeting Werner en route, and that the third transport would be arriving shortly. By now, it was four o'clock on Thursday afternoon.

Our SS guard consisted of three men: a *Scharfuehrer*; *Rottenfuehrer* Ruckel, an Austrian disabled SS veteran who could not have been more than twenty-one years old; and a one-armed *Oberscharfuehrer*, the same one who had been unable to decipher the cryptic *G.s.D* in my letter to Pola. In addition, a platoon of Hungarian SS men circled the bathhouse.

Night fell, and the third transport had not yet arrived. All afternoon, we had walked back and forth from the bathhouse through the open door, hoping to catch a glimpse of the truck. We would, in any case, have left the door ajar, for one hundred and five men were crowded into the little area, and we were drenched with sweat in the clammy atmosphere.

At half past eight, the *Oberscharfuehrer* burst into our room, brandishing a gun, shouting angrily, "From now on, this door remains shut, you hear! No one is to leave this room without permission."

We were bewildered and protested bitterly. We had no

intention of escaping; we merely wanted the relief of some fresh air.

The *Oberscharfuehrer* responded with another barrage of shouting. "It's out of the question. You're not to be trusted. We have just received word from Werner that two of your buddies have escaped from Redl-Zipf. I'm sure you know what that means. One for all, and all for one! Just hope we catch those birds."

It was quite obvious that he was lying. All lines of communication had been interrupted for days, and it was not possible for him to have gotten through to Redl-Zipf. More than likely, he concocted the whole story as an excuse to do away with us once and for all. His phrase "all for one" had an ominous ring, and we were embittered that as near to freedom as we finally were, there was time enough for us to die.

It was close to eleven o'clock, and there was still no sign of the third transport. We began to doubt that they were still alive. Friday morning arrived, yet no sign of the men.

We received no food or drink, and the heat from so many men confined to such close quarters was stifling. We asked for permission to relieve ourselves and to keep the door open.

"Permission granted," a guard replied.

Through the opened doors, we saw a great flurry of activity. The SS men lugged desks, filing cabinets and boxes and boxes of documents, stacking them outside the barracks. They worked all Friday, and by the time they had emptied the barracks, an enormous pile had formed. They drenched the entire mound with gasoline and set fire to it, burning everything in the huge bonfire. It was a sure sign that the Americans were rapidly approaching. Even more encouraging,

many of the SS men abandoned the buildings and took off into the hills.

We were not, however, out of danger. The Hungarian platoon of SS remained at their post, acting more nervous by the minute, and there was no telling when those trigger-happy killers might shoot.

When we *davened* that Friday night, all the members of our group took part in the *minyan*. Even the non-religious ones joined us in praying for rescue from the sword hanging over our heads.

"They're not going to kill us now," people were telling each other. "They're not going to risk a massacre now. They'd be caught red-handed, and they know that they'd hang for that. They're not going to stick their necks out for the *Vaterland*."

"Makes sense," they replied. "Let's hope you're right."

The third transport still had not arrived, and we were deeply concerned about the fate of the men. Eventually, we asked one of the remaining *Oberscharfuehrers* if he knew what had happened to the others and whether he had received word from Werner.

"*Keine Ahnung*," he replied candidly. "I've no idea. All long-distance telephone lines are dead."

But there was no way to tell whether he was telling us the truth.

Early *Shabbos* morning, when the SS removed the black-out shades from the windows, we saw that in the camp across the road all inmates were lined up in the central square. What happened then left us in stunned silence.

Slowly, a flag was raised. Not the blood-red flag with the swastika. A white flag, with the Red Cross insignia, blowing in the wind. The death camp of Ebensee was free. From a

distance, one of the Hungarian SS guards shouted in perfect Yiddish, "*Haynt iz Shabbos, hostu mazel!* Today is *Shabbos*; today's your lucky day!"

Lucky, I said to myself. Those fellows across the road are already free, but we are still surrounded by SS.

We organized a *minyan* for *Shacharis* and *davened* loudly, without restraint. We just did not care any more. At about ten o'clock, the *Oberscharfuehrer* closed the door and windows of our room again.

We wondered apprehensively about his action. In a radio address early that morning, the Gauleiter of Upper Austria had said that while the Russians should be opposed, no resistance should be offered to the Americans. Why would the *Oberscharfuehrer* not release us? And where was the third transport? We were close to despair.

The recurring swings from heights of euphoria to depths of hopelessness were wearing us down, and our nerves were at the breaking point.

Half an hour later, *Rottenfuehrer* Ruckel suddenly opened the window and threw in several cartons of soap. We were puzzled by his gesture. At that moment, soap did not rank very high on our list of priorities. Was it a peace offering? Did he want to gain our good graces?

Gottlieb, taking advantage of the overture, started to talk to him.

"The *Oberscharfuehrer* is conferring about your fate with the commandant of SS troops," Ruckel said. "But don't worry. If the *Oberscharfuehrer* has orders to finish you off, I'm going to put a bullet through his head before he can hurt you fellows. That's a promise. I'm on your side. You'll all be free very soon. Just be on your guard."

When the *Oberscharfuehrer* returned to our room at noon,

we could tell by his expression that it was good tidings.

He made a brief announcement.

"Listen carefully. I'm taking you across the road into the Ebensee camp," he said quite cheerfully. "But you must not breathe a word to anyone about the nature of the work you've been doing. If you do, we will all pay for it with our lives."

So, he was going to take us to the camp over which the lovely Red Cross flag flew! My spirits soared, but I still felt an undercurrent of apprehension. Was he playing a trick on us? Would there be an eleventh-hour massacre? The Germans were capable of anything.

But as we lined up for the march, one of the Hungarian SS men who would escort us the short distance into the camp across the road said, "Boy, you fellows sure are lucky. Did you ever think you'd get out of here alive?" His remark convinced me that we were marching toward freedom.

At the gate, we had another interminable wait while the Red Cross official and the *Oberscharfuehrer* disentangled some bureaucratic confusion. By now, our anxiety and tension had reached such a pitch that most of us broke down and sobbed in fear and frustration.

Finally, we were admitted.

As we marched through that gate, it hit us.

"Free! Free at last!" we shouted as we ecstatically embraced, laughing and crying at the same time.

"*Baruch Hashem, geloibt der Aibeshter!*" I shouted. "Praise to Hashem!" I hugged Reb Avigdor in an emotional embrace. "*Baruch shehecheyanu vekiyemanu vehigiyanu lazeman hazeh!* Blessed is He Who has kept us alive, sustained us and brought us to this moment. *Baruch hatov vehameitiv.* Blessed is He Who is good and does good."

Was it really happening? Perhaps what seemed to me the

realization of a dream was itself a dream. But unless all the frightful events of the last six years were a dream as well, what I was now witnessing now was no dream either. No. This was no dream. This was real.

The Red Cross administrator of the camp assigned us to a barracks where we settled down. From the inmates, we learned that the Ebensee death camp was one of the most dreadful camps in Germany. Beatings, starvation and death were the order of the day. All of the inmates could be described as *Musselmenner*, little more than skin and bones. I was horrified to hear that the hapless prisoners did not shrink from practicing cannibalism, cutting off whatever flesh remained on the corpses and eating it. We, who had not had a decent meal since Sachsenhausen, felt like round-faced, fat men compared to them.

Our first meal in freedom was a bowl of soup, and although I had not eaten for two days, I gave my portion to one of the prisoners who was standing around, hungrily waiting for any scraps. As I explored the camp grounds, talking to inmates and answering their curious inquiries, I thought that I heard someone calling my name.

"Krakowski," the voice was barely audible.

I looked around and saw a hollow-eyed creature. He looked like an old man, and on his forehead was tattooed an X. I stared at him, trying to figure out who he might be.

"Krakowski, don't you recognize me?" he croaked. "I'm Chaskel Wolf from Bielitz."

I threw up my hands in stunned disbelief. I had known him since childhood. He was now about thirty-five years old, but he looked more like a man in his seventies, and he could barely speak.

"What's going to happen to me?" he quavered, terror

etched in his face. "You see I have the cross branded on my forehead; that means I'm slated for liquidation."

"Chaskel, listen to me," I said, gently stroking his bony, bloodless hand. "We are free. Free, you hear?"

He stared at me with a dazed look in his eyes, as if he had lost his mind. He simply refused to believe what he was hearing.

"Believe me, Chaskel, it's true. We are free. Go lie down and take it easy. It's over. Everything is over. Just see that you get your strength back."

It was too much for the poor fellow. He sat there with his mouth wide open, unable to say a word. (After the initial shock, he made a gradual recovery, and when I met him again a year later, he had regained his strength and youthful appearance.)

CHAPTER 36

Day of Retribution

LATE AFTERNOON, WE WENT OUT TO THE *APPELLPLATZ*, the central square of the camp. In this same square, only yesterday, the haggard, worn inmates had been forced to stand at attention for long hours during the interminable roll call. Now, the Czechs had taken control of the camp, and various groups had formed, doling out rewards and punishments.

In the corner of the *Appellplatz*, an SS man was being cheered and applauded as a hero by a group of inmates.

"This fellow was a decent human being," an Ebensee inmate explained. "He defended us against the *kapos* and SS. He saved many lives. He has earned our gratitude and respect, and we will report his heroism to Allied investigators."

I later learned that in another area of the square an impromptu tribunal, consisting of three Czech inmates, former attorneys, was in session. A group of SS guards and *kapos* were put on trial. An inmate acting as prosecutor read the charges. Several witnesses were called who related horror stories of merciless brutality and cruelty.

After a brief conference, the court brought in a verdict and passed sentence. "Guilty as charged. You are all condemned to death by hanging."

The judge handed each a piece of rope and said, "You can carry out your sentence by yourself, and one of us will be happy to assist you. But remember, you're not going to get out of here alive."

"Mercy, please have mercy," the big brutes begged. "We were only following orders."

"Following orders?" the judge said contemptuously. "*I* was here. You *relished* committing atrocities. Your greatest thrill was torturing your victims. Your ultimate pleasure was wallowing in their blood. A thousand death sentences cannot avenge the outrages you committed."

A short while later, ten lifeless bodies swung slowly from the rafters in the barracks.

There was one scene I shall never forget. A *kapo*, fleeing for safety, was being chased by a group of rock-throwing inmates. He fell to the floor, blood running from his nose and ears. Tottering *Musselmenner*, barely able to stand on their feet, stomped on the fiend, crying as they vented their pent-up anger. The *kapo* staggered to his feet. The inmates surrounded him and began edging him toward a ditch filled with water. When they reached the ditch, they pushed the *kapo* over the edge and converged on him, pushing him under the water. Each time the *kapo* tried to scramble out, he

was pushed back in amid jeers and taunts. Whenever his head bobbed up, it was thrust under. This went on until he drowned.

When things had quieted down, we began to worry once again about the fate of the thirty-five men who had remained behind in Redl-Zipf. How we wished to share our new freedom with them. Happily, at seven that evening, the entire group came marching in and soon told us about their harrowing trip.

Two hours after the second transport had departed, Werner had come back with the truck, but the driver, fearful of making another trip across the mountains to Ebensee, had said that he could not get the engine started. Evidently, he had poured motor oil into the gas tank and gummed up the carburetor because the engine had not turned over. While Werner had gone in search of another truck, Norbert Levi and a Croat named Beer escaped. Werner had come back in a rage; he had not been able to obtain another vehicle. Then he discovered that the two men had escaped.

"All right," he had barked. "We'll *march* to Ebensee on foot."

After marching uphill for a while, the men simply had sat down on the road, telling Werner and the SS guards, "That's it. We won't go any further. You've killed the others; so if you want to kill us too, go ahead and kill us right here. Then the whole world is going to find out."

Werner had assured them we were alive and well and convinced them to go on. The men had marched for two days across the mountains, sleeping by the roadside, shivering in the icy Alpine winds. When they had arrived at Ebensee, they refused to enter the camp because they feared they would be gassed. The guard at the gate had assured them that the camp

had been taken over by the Red Cross and that we all were alive. Most convincing of all had been the guard's statement that we were free. Then they had entered the camp.

On Sunday, around two o'clock we heard a rumbling noise in the distance.

"The Americans are coming! The Americans are coming!" The camp thundered with shouting. In the distance, two tanks were approaching. Those still able, ran or walked onto the road to cheer the long-awaited liberators. As the lead tank rode through the main gate, an ecstatic "Hurrah" rose from thousands of throats.

Our liberators were units of the 21st Armored Infantry Battalion and Combat Command B of the 11th Armored Division of the Third Army.

The crews jumped down from their tanks, and we crowded around the young men in their unfamiliar olive-drab uniforms. The soldiers were visibly shaken by the sight of the living dead who surrounded them.

"We've heard a lot about German atrocities," the commanding officer said with tears in his eyes. "But I would never have believed that the Germans would be capable of this. Those dirty animals. Listen, folks! Your suffering is over. You are free now."

What impressed me about these fighting men was their camaraderie and their easygoing informality. They had none of the militaristic rigidity of the Germans. They cried like real human beings and comforted us gently. Then, grinning broadly, they began distributing American chocolate and candy—morsels of sweetness symbolizing our first real taste of freedom.

CHAPTER 37

Picking Up the Pieces

ALMOST TWO WEEKS PASSED SINCE OUR LIBERATION ON May 6. Most of the men had already left the camp and dispersed to various localities. Some had elected to settle in Ebensee; those were probably the half-Jews or quarter-Jews, since I cannot imagine how any Jew could put down roots in the blood-soaked earth of Germany, where his next-door neighbor might have participated in the murder of his parents and closest relatives.

In the meantime, Reb Avigdor Glanzer set out to look for his family. He went to France, and from there to the large DP camp in Bari, Italy. He stayed in Bari for several months, saying a regular *shiur* for the refugees. Then he became very ill, and sadly, he passed away.

I remained in the Ebensee camp, unable to make the

sudden transition to normal life. A strange feeling of lethargy had come over me, and although I felt quite well physically, I had lost my capacity for action. I had written two letters through the Red Cross requesting information about my family and about Pola, and that seemed to have sapped the little energy left in me. I could not shake the effects of living for years on the verge of death; and for the next twelve days, I lay in my bunk for most of the day, staring blankly at the ceiling, trying to collect my thoughts and to pick up the pieces of my life.

Ten days later, we were assigned to special camps according to our nationalities. Since I was a Polish citizen, I was sent to the Polish camp in Steinkogel, a section of Ebensee. All in all, there were about five hundred Jews out of five thousand Poles. Sadly enough, rather than bask in the joy of liberation, the Poles were intent on venting their hatred of Jews, which perhaps was more virulent than ever. I realized that Hitler's extermination of six million Jews was to a large degree made possible by the enthusiastic acquiescence of the Poles. Although it is true that no country came to our aid, that no country felt it their moral imperative to take action, none would have agreed to house extermination camps on their soil. The Poles, however, not only welcomed the death camps, they also helped build them. They not only helped build them, but they also helped to supply them, ferreting us out of our homes, our ghettos, our hiding places.

It was an unspeakable horror for us Jews to be together with the anti-Semitic Poles, and we asked to be transferred. Unfortunately, certain technicalities made this impossible.

One day, we had a surprise visit by Rabbi David Eichhorn, an American Jewish army chaplain from Philadelphia. He was a pleasant young rabbi and showed deep concern for our

problems and a willingness to help. He began by organizing a *hazkarah*, a memorial service, and asked me to open the service with a short address in which I was to introduce him. I delivered my speech in Yiddish, and my friend, Shlamek Lefkowitz, spoke in Polish.

Our wounds had not yet begun to heal, and any mention of the dreadful loss of our loved ones triggered a release of emotions and a flow of tears. We were all *aveilim*, mourners, and words of solace were balm to our grieving souls.

After reciting the *Yizkor* and several chapters of *Tehillim*, Rabbi Eichhorn mounted the podium. He began with a few moving words about the *kedoshim* who gave their lives *al kiddush Hashem*.

"I am speaking to you on behalf of the Jews of America," he continued. "We have just now learned of the dreadful events that happened here, and the indescribable horrors that you had to endure. We are unable to fathom the depth of the tragedy. '*Ki gadol kayam shivreich*. For your ruin is as vast as the sea; who can heal you?' (*Eichah* 2:13) Our hearts are bleeding for you, and we want to do everything in our power to soothe your anguish."

He concluded his sermon on a more concrete note. "I am gratified to announce to you," he said, "that I am empowered to turn over to you several tons of sugar, cocoa, chocolate and other necessities." To the best of my recollection, this was a gift of the UNRRA, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency.

Until Rabbi Eichhorn's visit, we felt like people stranded on an inhabited island, forlorn, cut off from and forgotten by the Jews of the rest of the world. Our families and friends had perished in the holocaust, and we were the lone and lonely survivors, rootless in a strange and hated country. Did

anyone know we existed, and did anyone care? Rabbi Eichhorn inspired us with hope and with the knowledge that we were not abandoned, that *Klal Yisrael* was concerned about our fate and commiserated with us. Hashem had not forsaken us, and neither had our brothers and sisters around the world.

Several days later, the camp was abuzz with the arrival of two Jewish girls. They were besieged with questions, everyone asking who they were and from which camp they had arrived.

The girls had been evacuated from Auschwitz on January 18, 1945, when the camp was being liquidated in anticipation of the imminent arrival of the Russian troops. They spent the remainder of their incarceration in Mauthausen until the liberation and had come to Ebensee to search for relatives and friends.

The girls were inundated with the names of our relatives who had been at both places, everyone shouting at the same time. When I called out the names of Pola and her sister Sala, I detected a glimmer of recognition in the girls' faces.

"Yes, I think I remember the sisters," one of the girls said. "Isn't she the girl that got the letter? What a sensation that was! We were together in Auschwitz."

So Pola and her sister might still be alive! Encouraged by her reply, I pressed further. "Do you know anything about a letter she may have received? It means a great deal to me. You see, we are engaged to be married, and I am desperate to find her."

"So it was you who wrote that famous letter! All Auschwitz was talking about it. This was the only case of a Jewish girl receiving a letter. She carried it with her wherever she went and read it constantly."

My heart skipped a beat, and I shot another question at

the girls. "Do you know what happened to the two sisters?"

"I know for a fact that they worked in the Union munitions factory until January 18 of this year," one of the girls replied. "I don't know what happened to them afterwards, because during the evacuation many people died or were killed. It was terrible."

She shuddered as she recalled that day of death and terror and stared ahead, lost in thought.

"Let's hope that she made it through," she said at last.

"We're very tired from our trip," the younger of the two said. "Could we trouble you for a place where we might be able to sleep?"

They looked exhausted from their arduous journey, and I could sense their disappointment. While they had brought new hope to many of us, they themselves had not found a trace of the relatives they were seeking. My roommates and I gave up our apartment, and the next morning, the two girls left to continue their search.

Gradually, we settled into a routine at the camp. The food was adequate, and our camp-induced, obsessive fear of starvation began to wane. Each day, we pored over the camp news bulletin that kept us abreast of all the goings-on that were of interest to us.

One day, I saw a news item that shook me to the core. The article began by reporting the story of the liberation of Mauthausen on May 6, 1945. The camp commander, *Sturmbannfuehrer* Franz Ziereis, made a full confession of all his crimes. During interrogation, he stated that in the final days before the liberation, a special commando from Sachsenhausen, working under the direct supervision of the Reich's Security Service, had been brought to Mauthausen. When the Americans approached Mauthausen, Ziereis gave

orders to have this entire commando executed. The article concluded with his quote, "I assume my order was carried out."

Here we had it in black and white. Our death sentence had been ordered by Ziereis, and only *bechasdei Hashem* had it not been carried out.

CHAPTER 38

Visitors from Eretz Yisrael

AS TIME WENT BY, I BECAME KNOWN IN THE CAMP AS THE spokesman for the Jews, and all matters of concern to the Jewish inmates were addressed to me.

Late one *Motzei Shabbos*, my two roommates and I were awakened by the sound of two cars that came to a stop in front of our house. I could hear voices through the thin walls, and from the bits of conversation, I could make out Hebrew. Hebrew in Ebensee! The sound was music to my ears. I heard my name called and hurried downstairs. To my surprise, I was greeted by three men in British army uniforms.

"Shalom!" the spokesman exclaimed heartily, smiling broadly.

"Happy to see you," I replied, shaking hands with him. "Please come in."

Thrilled to meet Jews from Eretz Yisrael, I could hardly wait to hear what they had to say, and to learn about life in the Holy Land.

"Let us introduce ourselves," one of the men said in a businesslike manner. "We are soldiers in the Jewish Brigade, and we fought in the British army. I am Sergeant Benzion d'Israeli; this is Corporal Shmuel Efrat. We are here on an important mission, and we would like to talk to you in private."

I showed the visitors into the living room and carefully closed the door. "Gentlemen, make yourselves at home," I said with mounting excitement.

"By now you must be very curious about our mission," Efrat said. He was the youngest of the three, a tall, vigorous young man, only slightly older than I. He later told me that his Polish name had been Wloszczowski. "We are stationed on a British army base at Villach on the Austro-Italian border."

"And what brings you here?" I asked.

"We are here to help all of you. We would like all of our fellow Jews in this camp to settle in Eretz Yisrael. And that's where you come in." He looked me straight in the eye.

Now d'Israeli took over. He was an amiable older gentleman, one of the first ones to settle Kibbutz Degania, one of the oldest *kibbutzim* on Yam Kinneret. His rugged complexion and steely blue eyes told me that he was a farmer and a fighter.

"My friend, you can make a tremendous difference in these people's lives. We know your opinion carries weight in this camp; you are the Herr Rabbiner. You are religious and well-liked by everyone here. In fact, we've been told that you are a spokesman of sorts for these people."

Evidently, they had interviewed some of the men and now seemed intent on flattering me.

D'Israeli leaned back in his chair and went on. "We want you to persuade these people to leave the accursed earth of Germany and Poland and start life in Eretz Yisrael. At the same time, you must explain to them that the road to Eretz Yisrael is a difficult one, fraught with danger. We don't want to mislead anyone into thinking that making *aliyah* will be easy. They may have to remain in transit camps, run the British blockade and endure many hardships before they reach Eretz Yisrael. But the goal will be well worth the trials and exertion."

D'Israeli had put his heart into his presentation. He had stated his case eloquently, and now he paused to gauge my reaction.

"Well, Krakowski, what do you say? Can we count on you?"

I weighed his proposal carefully before answering. I was torn between the cold facts of reality and a vision of the future. It was a conflict between the intellect and the heart. My heart drew me toward Eretz Yisrael, but reality dictated that we were not ready to plunge into a struggle once again.

My reply was not what the soldiers wanted to hear. "I'm very sorry, but I cannot go along with what you are asking. How can I tell these people who have been through hell to risk their lives once again? Look at them. They are mere shadows. They can't even walk. How can you expect me to urge them to face hard times again?"

D'Israeli was not going to take no for an answer. "I understand your concerns very well, young man," he argued. "Look at me; I'm no youngster. I am sixty years old, and I certainly didn't have to become a soldier in my old age. But

I volunteered because I love Eretz Yisrael; and you, as an observant Jew, will certainly feel that way, too. All I ask you is that you think it over and give us your answer in the morning."

I had not changed my mind in the morning. I did, however, offer to help them by drawing up a list of names of all the Jews in Ebensee. Shmuel Efrat would approach them individually and explain the plan to them. I took it upon myself to approach the UNRRA in order to obtain an adequate supply of food for all those who chose to join a second transport, the Aliyah Bet, to Eretz Yisrael.

Efrat went about his task with great enthusiasm and efficiency. Almost twenty-five percent of the Jews in Ebensee, those whose physical condition permitted it, made the decision to join him. The UNRRA provided them with food for the journey, and full of hope, they headed south in the direction of Italy. A few weeks later, I heard that all of them had reached Eretz Yisrael safely. Those of us who had stayed in Ebensee were delighted for them. In my heart of hearts, I wished that I had joined them.

But I had no time for wishful thinking. By now I had recovered sufficiently, and the time had come for me to try to find Pola and any of my brothers, sisters and relatives who had survived. I started out by visiting all the camps throughout Upper Austria, but I found no one. In Wels, I received one piece of encouraging news. A cousin of mine had survived the holocaust and had left for Eretz Yisrael on Aliyah Bet. Aside from this cousin, I did not find a trace of either Pola nor any of my relatives. I returned to Ebensee heartbroken, and I lapsed into a deep depression.

CHAPTER 39

Reunion with Pola

THE DAYS WERE BALMY THAT SUMMER, BUT I SPENT MOST of my time on my bed, looking out at the snow-covered peaks glistening against the azure sky, listening to the rush of mountain streams and watching the wind stir the grass in the Ebensee valley.

I had not received a reply to either of the letters I had sent to the municipal governments of Katowice and Sosnowice, and I could not stir myself to further action. I was still as apathetic as ever, either daydreaming about my happy youth that seemed a million years away or wondering bitterly whether any of my brothers and sisters had survived. It never occurred to me that Pola might not have survived. But where was she, and how on earth would I ever find her?

One *Shabbos* in July, I was thus absorbed in thought, when

the door of my room swung open, and a young man barged into my room. "Avraham Krakowski?" he asked, out of breath.

"That's me."

"Someone's here to see you."

Someone to see me. I dared not hope.

"It's your fiancee," the boy blurted out with an embarrassed smile. "She's waiting downstairs. I brought her here myself all the way from the camp office."

Who cared how she got here! I raced down the stairs, taking four steps at a time, afraid that I would awaken from the dream.

Pola stood at the foot of the steps, tears streaming down her face.

"I knew you would come," I whispered. "I just didn't know when."

"How could you be so sure?" she asked.

"Don't you remember the promise—"

Pola smiled, and then together we said, "*Mir velen zei iberleben.*"

It was one chance in a million that she had survived. How many stories had I heard, yet none such as ours. I clutched the bannister for support and wept out loud, saying over and over, "*Mah ashiv Lashem kol tagmulohi alai*? How can I repay Hashem for all His kindness to me?" (*Tehillim* 116:12)

Word of Pola's arrival spread like wildfire, and it seemed as if the whole camp population surrounded us. Everyone wanted to see the couple, the "lucky ones," who had been reunited. Everyone had a thousand questions for Pola. Did she know their relatives? Was he alive? Was she? The questions were no different from those I had asked many times before whenever someone had come from another camp.

Not until late that evening were Pola and I finally able to talk to each other. Spellbound, I listened as she told of her experiences.

"I received one letter from you, in July of 1944. Everyone knew about it, because I was the only Jewish girl who had ever received a letter. 'She's the one with the letter,' they used to say."

"Who's alive?" I asked quietly.

"Your brother Moshe's wife. She's in Katowice with her two children. They've been in hiding since November of 1943, and they suffered a great deal. So far, they're the only ones that have returned; I've had no word from any other member of your family. And my sisters; they're alive. We all went back to Sosnowice."

"Who told you I was alive? How did you know to find me here?"

"The Hollander brothers told me that you were in Ebensee," she replied. "I went with them to Prague and then went on to Ebensee."

"But the railroads aren't even operating yet. How on earth did you get here?"

"I hitchhiked. And I walked."

Ebensee is approximately two hundred miles from Prague.

CHAPTER 40

Pola's Story

WE TALKED UNTIL THE WEE HOURS OF THE MORNING. All the pain, the anguish and the fears we had suffered gushed forth in an emotional release, as if the telling of our stories could heal us. The common denominator in both our accounts was the abiding faith that sustained us. Time and again, we had witnessed *nissim geluyim*, open miracles, and we recognized that only by dint of these miracles were we able to survive the crucible of death and be reunited.

We would have to tell the world about it—to shout from the rooftops, "*Imo Anochi betzarah.* Hashem was with us in our darkest distress." *(Tehillim* 91:15) It was He Who rescued us!

Leaning forward, Pola drew a deep breath as she began to tell her story.

"You already know that as soon as we arrived in Auschwitz, my parents and my little brother Fromush were put on the truck to be taken to the gas chambers. You know what hurts me most? Thinking of little Fromush. He was so frightened."

She let a moment pass. "Mendel was sent to Buna, and his wife got typhus soon after. I tried to tell her to fight it off because they would take her to the clinic, but I think she lost the will to live. She said she didn't believe Mendel would survive, and without him, there was no reason to go on. And then, you know what she said? She said, 'Pola, you will make it, and so will your *chassan*. Mark my words.'"

I asked Pola if she wanted something to drink, but she just went on with her story.

A week after Mendel's wife died, Sala became ill with typhus. She was unable to eat solid food, but she craved liquids. She was near death, burning with fever and dehydrated. To give her polluted water would only make her go from bad to worse. In an attempt to save her sister's life, Pola sneaked into the neighboring camp for Russian women prisoners where she exchanged her daily bread ration for a cup of brewed coffee with sugar. Cradling in her hands the cup filled with the precious beverage, she tried to steal her way back into the barracks. On her way, a female *Stubendienst* spotted her and promptly reported her to the barracks' chief.

The entire barracks was summoned to the *Appellplatz*, and in full view of all the girls, Pola received twenty-five lashes on her back.

She remained conscious for five of them. When she came to, she was in her bunk bed in excruciating pain. For several days, she was unable to lie on her back, and the marks on her back were visible for weeks.

It was truly a miracle that during the selection Mengele did not notice the marks on her back. Had he seen them, he would have sent her to the gas chambers immediately.

Pola fell ill with typhus shortly after Sala recovered from her own bout. With her last ounce of strength, she dragged herself outside and traded the ring and the watch chain I had given her on the train to Auschwitz for four carrots and some cigarettes. She swapped the cigarettes for a ration of bread. As a result of the typhus, she lost her hearing, a disability she suffers from to this day.

Soon after that, she was assigned to work at the Union munitions factory. She was still weak and extremely lethargic and could not keep herself from dozing off at her work station. The female *kapo* poked her roughly in the ribs on several occasions to awaken her, letting loose a string of curses. This happened repeatedly, and one night, the kapo shouted, "I've had it with you. Tomorrow morning you go to the *Strafkommando*."

Pola knew that she was in deep trouble. No one had ever come back alive from the punitive labor gang. However, miraculously, that same night, the *kapo* was caught drinking whiskey, and *she* was sent to the *Strafkommando* and removed from her post.

For a while, Pola continued working at the Union munitions plant and lived in the Union houses, and for once, conditions were not too bad. *Lagerfuehrer* Hessler, the commandant of the Union workers, prided himself on taking care of the laborers under his command.

In November of 1944, a crematorium was blown up. The SS suspected sabotage and launched an investigation. They discovered that the explosives had come from the Union plant, and many of Pola's co-workers were interrogated.

Ultimately, three of the girls were publicly hanged for the crime; even so, no one was above suspicion.

Pola's name was called one morning during *Appell*, and she was summoned to the department in charge of investigating the explosion. Sala started sobbing uncontrollably, and Pola herself, believing the summons was an implication of her part in the sabotage, did not expect to return from the Political Department.

Her heart stood still as the SS interrogator looked at her with probing eyes. "Do you know anyone by the name of Krakowski?" he asked.

Pola hesitated, not knowing what to answer. Which one of us would die were she to acknowledge me? She decided, however, to tell the truth.

"Krakowski? Yes, I know him. He is an acquaintance of mine."

The SS man smiled cynically. "An acquaintance, eh? Well, you must have made quite an impression on him. He begins his letter with 'My dear Pola.'"

With that, he proceeded to read the entire letter to Pola.

She was overjoyed to hear from me and fearlessly asked the SS man for the letter. "Please," she implored. "It means the world to me."

"Why does the letter mean so much to you if it's only from an acquaintance?" he teased her. But the next moment, he handed her the letter without saying another word.

Pola was flabbergasted. Never before had anyone in the camp received a letter from a loved one.

There was great commotion in the camp when Pola returned, not only intact, but also holding a letter from her fiance. Sala was beside herself with joy; she had been sure that Pola had been carted off to the gas chambers. Everyone

wanted to read the letter; it was handled by so many inmates that it soon became black.

I listened with rapture to every word that Pola uttered. As she spoke, she clutched her tattered little handbag, but I knew the letter was not in there, that it had been long lost.

"It's not important, Pola," I said gently. "We're together again, and that's all that matters. Just tell me the rest."

Pola developed a high fever while working at the munitions factory. Knowing that her life depended on her usefulness, she persevered and reported for work every day. The acid and the chemicals she had to handle day after day at the plant infected her hand, and as a result, she lost part of her right thumb.

The worst part was the evacuation of Auschwitz. The Russian army was approaching, but the Germans would not release them and clung to their prey like so many hungry vultures. On January 18, 1945, they were ordered to march, a journey that lasted for two long, perilous weeks. They walked most of the time; intermittently, they were loaded on open cattle wagons. They were so thin, that the SS easily pushed a hundred women into one wagon.

Though they were pressed against each other, they were no more than frozen bodies against the bitter cold, traveling fourteen days and fourteen nights without food or water. They lived on snow; it took the place of bread. On rare occasions, the SS threw some raw potatoes into the wagons. There was a stampede. Dozens of starving women fought each other to death for a raw potato. Obsessed with an overpowering urge of self-preservation, they had lost all moral restraints.

Every so often, the train had stopped, and the SS soldiers went by, shouting, "Throw out all the dead!"

Corpses were flung out of the wagons like sacks of flour. Most of the living could not suppress a feeling of relief. There would be more room now. When they finally arrived in Ravensbruck, there were two hundred left of their group of one thousand. Eight hundred had perished and were left in the snow alongside the tracks, without burial, without *Kaddish.*

Ten days later, they were shipped to Malchow, where they stayed for six weeks under conditions that defy description. From Malchow, they were moved to Leipzig, where they were put to work in a munitions factory. There they were treated better, and the food was tolerable. But barely two weeks later, they were evacuated once more. This time, they were forced to march for two weeks along the banks of the Elbe River. All that time, they were left without food.

To the east, the Russians were closing in, while the Americans were approaching from the west. The Germans were willing to relinquish everything, their armies, their cities, their population, their land, everything—except their prey. They held on as if to their greatest treasure. The women spent the nights out in the forests, sleeping on the snow-covered earth. Many went insane with hunger. They had only one desire: to eat. Pola would dream of soup, just a drop of soup. In the morning, many did not get up; they had died during the night.

Without the strength to stand up, they were barely able to walk. Some girls tore dried blades of grass thrusting through the snow for something to eat, but they were shot on the spot for their efforts. A young girl bent down to pluck a blade of grass; a shot rang out, and she fell lifeless to the ground.

The women walked on and on in the bitter cold, fearful that each step would be their last, their threadbare uniforms

and tattered blankets offering meager protection.

By now, Pola and Sala were joined by Regina Lemel, a friend, and the three of them, on the verge of collapse, could barely push themselves forward.

Presently, they passed a small village on the banks of the Elbe River.

"See that barn over there?" Pola said to the girls. "The SS guard isn't watching. This is our chance. Let's sneak in there. Right now!"

Quietly, they slipped away from the column into the barn and covered themselves with the blankets so that no one would discover them in the striped camp smocks.

"Let's hope that either the Americans or the Russians will get here before the Germans find us," Pola said.

Completely exhausted and worn out, they fell asleep. They must have slept for several hours, when they were awakened by a man in the uniform of the German National Guard.

"Who are you?" he barked, as he inched his way toward the girls who lay trembling underneath the blanket. "What are you doing here?"

Pola was convinced that she was staring death straight in the eye. Undaunted, she boldly said, "We are Poles. We've been working in Germany. We've been walking all day, and we were exhausted. That's why we spent the night here. We'll be gone by morning."

The man studied her face for a moment. He was confused by the authority with which she had spoken. "I don't know," he said skeptically. "I'm not sure you're not Jews."

By now the other two girls had mustered sufficient courage to play along with Pola's little charade.

"Jews? We? What do you take us for?"

The man retreated with a threat. "If I find out that you are Jews, you'll pay with your lives."

The next day, the girls heard noises outside the barn and feared that the *Volkssturm* visitor had come back. They peered through a crack in the wall and screamed in joy. The Russian troops had finally arrived! The girls ventured out, and one of the Russian soldiers told them that they were all liberated. He also suggested they find an empty house and take anything they wanted.

The girls went into the farm house adjacent to the barn. It was empty; all the occupants had fled. The pantry was well-stocked with nourishing staples. There was even a bath of which they made good use. Finally, they went to sleep, each in a bed of her own, coddled by a lavish goose-down comforter. For a brief moment, their troubles seemed to evaporate as they drifted off into a deep, restful sleep.

They were awakened after several hours by a group of raucous, drunk Russians, holding bottles of vodka. They invited the girls to have a drink, and the girls fled, jumping out of a first-story window.

Pola, Sala and Regina headed for Sosnowice, alternately walking and hitchhiking. They arrived a few days later, and approached their old home with mixed feelings. What would they find behind that door? How would they feel, being in their childhood home, with their parents and brothers gone? But a wonderful surprise awaited them inside: their sister Regina had returned from the Gruenberg Labor Camp in Germany. The sisters' joy was tinged with sorrow when they realized that they were the only ones to survive from the entire family.

In the ensuing weeks, many Sosnowice residents who had survived the holocaust returned to their hometown, includ-

ing the Hollander brothers who arrived by the middle of June. They told Pola that they had been together with me in Sachsenhausen and that we had been liberated together in Ebensee. They also told her that I was searching for her and my relatives. That was all she needed to hear to convince her to make her way to Ebensee.

CHAPTER 41

Building a New Life

MY DEPRESSION VANISHED WITH MY FIRST VIEW OF Pola, and now a young eagerness coursed through me to start building a new life with her. It seemed natural enough for us to go back to Katowice and Sosnowice; our surviving relatives, my brother's wife and two children were there as were our roots.

The fragile hope of Ebensee, however, dissipated when we arrived in Katowice. That had once been my town, the town of my birth, the place of my childhood upbringing, but it was not mine any more. The houses were still there, the corner grocery store and the bakery had not changed, but everything else was gone. The people, the synagogue, the assembly halls, the Radomsker *shtiebel*, the *lomdim*, the *rabbanim*, the merchants, the *kibbitzers* and the beggars—they

all had disappeared in coils of black smoke unfurling in the sky.

Living in Katowice was like living in a vast cemetery; every cobblestone in the streets brought back painful memories of my murdered family. But Pola was fiercely determined that we not allow the dreadful past to ruin our lives.

"By being sad and depressed, we are playing into Hitler's hand," she said wisely. "That's exactly what he intended for us. We must force ourselves to be *besimchah*, happy and joyous."

Her words lifted me out of my melancholy mood, and three weeks after our arrival in Katowice we were married, *beshaah tova umutzlachas*. A wedding so soon after the war was a strange phenomenon in Sosnowice, and only sixteen people attended the modest affair: fifteen friends and Rabbi Avraham Yissachar Englard, the *Rav* of Sosnowice, who officiated as *mesader kiddushin*. The atmosphere at the wedding lacked the typically festive quality; we either cried aloud or attempted to restrain our tears.

Nevertheless, after the wedding, Pola and I established a *bayis ne'eman b'Yisrael*, following in the traditions we inherited from our parents and *rebbeim*.

Housing was scarce in Katowice, and we were forced to share an apartment with an unlikely Communist couple and their son. Initially, Pola and I were concerned about the living arrangements. How could we possibly keep *Shabbos* and kosher while sharing our home with professed atheists? Fortunately, Mrs. Gerber respected our religious practices and kept all her cooking utensils separate from ours. In deference to us, she abstained from bringing non-kosher meat into our shared kitchen and from desecrating the *Shabbos* in our presence.

Her husband, an avowed Communist who was a descendant of Gerer *chassidim*, was less cooperative, yet I often overheard him singing the lyrics under his breath during my Friday night *zemiros*. I believe that the stirring *chassidic niggunim* aroused the Jewish spark in this avowed Communist.

When our first child was born, Mrs. Gerber proved to be a true friend. Pola went into labor on *Rosh Hashanah*, and I couldn't accompany her because I was the *baal tefillah*. Mrs. Gerber went with Pola to the hospital in Beuten and stayed with her throughout the labor.

The birth of our daughter on *Tzom Gedaliah* (also my birthday) was the single most wonderful event I had ever experienced. Out of the ashes of despair, a new and precious life had arisen. Little Chaya Dinah Rivkah, named after mine and Pola's unforgettable mothers, was our link to the past and hope for the future. Now, finally, their names would be perpetuated through this precious little child. (At the suggestion of Rabbi Englard, we added the Chesed l'Avraham's *rebbetzin's* name, Rivkah, to our Chaya Dinah.)

Within a short time, Jewish life in Katowice began to revive. Survivors from Poland and Russia arrived in large numbers to begin their lives anew. Fortunately, I was able to lay claim to the real estate that had originally belonged to my parents; thus, I was able to support my wife and baby daughter with the basic necessities during those difficult times.

The apartment house I had inherited consisted of thirty-three apartments, most of which were inhabited by recent immigrants. The Vaad Hatzalah (Rescue Committee) worked with great dedication to ease the plight of the returnees and refugees. These helpless newcomers received financial aid and spiritual support. They were provided with *talleisim*,

tefillin, *siddurim* and *sefarim*. The Vaad also helped them move from Communist Poland to Eretz Yisrael, France and other destinations. Under the auspices of Rabbi Levi Bielitzky and Mrs. Recha Sternbuch, an office was established in Katowice; it was located in my building. As part of the Vaad's activities, a community kitchen was situated in my building as well. It was gratifying to see such selflessness and commitment to fellow Jews carried on within the building that had belonged to my parents.

One of the most prominent tenants of my building was Rabbi Gabel, a distinguished rabbi and a great Torah scholar. Rabbi Gabel had lost his family during the holocaust and had come to Katowice. As one of the founders of the congregation, I offered him the position of Rabbi in Katowice, and to my delight, he accepted.

Among the residents in my building there was a young lady named Dina Shapiro from Lida and her mother whose kindness had greatly impressed Pola. Someone suggested the young lady to Rabbi Gabel as a suitable match, and shortly afterward, Rabbi Gabel took her as his bride. The newlyweds spent a great deal of time with Pola and me, and we established a friendship that continues until today. Eventually, Mrs. Dina Gabel would come to write her own memoirs in a book entitled *Behind the Ice Curtain.*

The Polish people certainly did not help ease our adjustment. Many had moved into the homes of deported Jews and taken over their businesses. They did not relish the prospect of having to return the stolen properties and nastily asked those returning from concentration camps, "Why did *you* have to come back? All our neighbors can keep the things they took from the Jews, why can't *we*? Too bad Hitler did not finish you off, too."

Although we expected nothing more from the Poles, we were seared by their cruelty.

I returned to the site of the Radomsker *shul* that my sainted father had built. An old peasant lady lived in the men's *shul*, and she moved out immediately. Thus we had a *minyan* right away. We even had a *shofar*, for one lady returned the one that had belonged to my father who had been a *baal tokeia*. To my dismay, however, the women's *shul* was occupied by a family of coarse Polish peasants—an elderly woman, her slovenly daughter and the latter's anti-Semitic husband, a brute who was drunk most of the time. It was obvious that this family had no intention of vacating the premises voluntarily. We needed the women's *shul* for the Jews returning from Russia. Rav Benzion Rosenthal; Rav Shmuel Orenstein and Rav Chomsky, both sons-in-law of Rabbi Levi Bielitzky; and Rav Hershel Tennenbaum, the Kobriner Rav, and many others needed a place to study and to establish a *yeshivah*.

I had hoped to restore the Radomsker *beis midrash* one day, but when I approached the old woman about the matter, she became extremely abusive and disgorged a stream of choice Polish invective. In the light of her hostile attitude, I saw no way of reclaiming the building.

Several days later, however, I heard that the old peasant woman had died of a massive heart attack. Divine justice, I thought. The young, Jew-hating couple were expecting their first child within the month, and when I politely suggested to them that they move out within a reasonable time, I was almost bodily thrown out of the house.

Two weeks later, I learned that the old woman's daughter had suddenly died in childbirth. At that point, the son-in-law became convinced that the house was jinxed and that, unless

he moved out immediately, he would also meet an unfortunate end.

Within two days, the house was vacant. Undoubtedly, this manifest miracle had been performed in the *zchus* of the holy *tzaddikim* who had perished to sanctify the Name of Heaven.

CHAPTER 42

Restoring Radomsk

GRADUALLY LIFE IN KATOWICE BEGAN TO BLOSSOM. Daily services were held; classes in *Chumash, Mishnayos* and *Gemara* were instituted; and we established the rudimentary institutions of a *kehillah*, such as a *mikveh* and *shechitah,* for the *sheiris hapeleitah*, the remnant that escaped. Tragically, all the Jewish children of Katowice had been murdered by the Germans, but the newcomers, the Polish Jews who had been banished to Siberia by the Communists, returned with their families intact.

Thus, it was truly heartening to see Jewish children who were thirsty to learn Torah. We established a small *yeshivah* where the *Kol Torah* resounded from early morning until late at night. Old and young learned with the fervor and diligence reminiscent of the *yeshivos* of the past. It was as if the students

wanted to make up for all the years they had lost.

Yet I felt a terrible void. Without the Radomsker Rebbe, I felt adrift on a stormy sea. I missed the Rebbe's wisdom, his inspiration, his fatherly advice and, most of all, his ardent love. I was fortunate to obtain an old, yellowed copy of the *Tiferes Shlomo*, and I tried to recall as many as I could of the thousands of brilliant Torah insights by my mentor, the last Radomsker Rebbe, Rabbi Shlomo Chanoch Hakohen Rabinowitz.

I cringed whenever I passed the empty and desolate former Radomsker *shtiebel*. I recalled the love with which my father had built that *beis midrash* and the work he had invested in making it a reality. I recalled the *kavanah* and the copious tears during the *Yamim Noraim*; the excitement of *Simchas Torah* as we danced into the night; and the joy of *Purim* when the *shtiebel* rang with laughter and noise of little children each time the name of Haman was read in the *Megillah*. More than anything, I wanted to restore that joy and that grandeur.

It was around that time that a monument had been erected on the site of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp to commemorate the millions of *kedoshim* who had perished there. As one of the leaders of the Katowice *kehillah* and a veteran of the camps, I was invited to recite the *Keil Malei Rachamim* at the dedication ceremony in Birkenau in 1946.

Returning to the valley of death was an emotion-charged experience. Memories of my martyred parents and relatives overwhelmed me. Images of death and violence flashed through my mind. The stomach-churning fear, the gnawing hunger and stabbing pain became real once again. Most of all, I burned with hatred for the accursed that had inflicted this unspeakable tragedy. Silently I prayed, "*Avinu Malkeinu*, avenge before our eyes the spilled blood of Your servants."

Our revenge would be in the rebuilding of *Klal Yisrael*, the *shuls* and the *yeshivos*, our triumph in the revival of *chassidus* and its *shtieblach*. Standing in that place of horror, I pledged to dedicate myself to that task.

With the help of devoted friends, I succeeded in reopening the Radomsker *shtiebel* of Katowice after having acquired the house through such miraculous circumstances. We ran into a multitude of problems, but each time, we overcame the obstacles as if through the Rebbe's *zchus* and his *berachah*. We were able to retrieve several *Sifrei Torah* which had been hidden; in addition, I bought a *Sefer Torah* and dedicated it to the memory of my martyred parents and relatives.

The new immigrants, who sensed the warmth, the fellowship and the *chassidic* fervor that the *shtiebel* evoked, flocked to it in droves. Before long, the *shtiebel* hummed with *davening* and learning, just as my father had envisaged it. The phenomenal growth of the *shtiebel* exceeded our wildest expectations, but an even greater surprise was in store for me.

My father's pride and joy had been his library, a rich collection of *Shas*, *Poskim*, *Rishonim*, *Acharonim*, works of early and later authorities, *sefarim* of all the great *chassidic* masters and the foremost responsa works. The pre-war Radomsker *shtiebel* had also boasted an extensive library of all the great Torah commentators. The absence of these *sifrei kodesh* from the *shtiebel* pained me deeply, and I longed also for the day when I would own once again a well-stocked *sefarim shrank*.

Thus whenever I had the opportunity, I went in search of *sefarim*, following every trail, tracing every rumor. One day, I was told that in the neighboring town of Bendin lived a *rav* who had assembled a large selection of old and new *sefarim*. In response to the modest amount of money he offered,

people would bring him *sefarim* for which they had no use. Often Poles who had usurped Jewish homes during the German occupation brought him the *sefarim.*

Without wasting time, I went to Bendin and climbed up the steps of an old house into a tiny shop. The musty smell that greeted me reminded me of an ancient *beis midrash.*

"Can I show you something?" the bookseller asked solicitously.

"Thanks, I'm just looking."

"Take your time. If you find anything that interests you, just call me. I'm working in the next room."

I browsed through old and new *sefarim.* I glanced at titles and flipped pages, but nothing caught my fancy. Picking my way through a pile of old *sefarim,* I came upon a decrepit, old volume that, for no particular reason, aroused my curiosity. It was a very old *siddur.* Judging by the publication date on the title page, it was more than two hundred years old, and the *tefillah,* "*Hanosein teshuah lamelachim,*" the special prayer for the well-being of the ruling monarch, had the name of the Czarina Catherine the Great inserted in it. How many countless *tefillos* had been *davened* in this *siddur*! If only it could speak, it would have quite a story to tell.

Turning its pages, I noted that the *siddur* even contained all the *piyutim* of the special *Shabbosim.* These are not said in most *chassidic shtieblach,* but I recalled how my grandfather, Reb Yitzchak from Kshanov would faithfully recite them after *davening* whenever he visited with us on such *Shabbosim.* My grandfather Reb Yaakov Meir also had a *siddur* such as this. One day, Rav Shiyele Glickman had sent his son to borrow the *siddur,* and I could not resist buying this *siddur* and adding it to my small personal library.

I had just about given up on finding anything else of

interest, when I spotted in a corner, stuffed between two large bookcases, five, dusty bundles of periodicals, neatly packaged and tied. My curiosity was aroused. Probably some *Haskalah* or Yiddishist sheets, I thought, which were swamping the market in pre-war Poland.

Wiping away a heavy layer of dust, I was overwhelmed by what I saw. I saw the familiar words "*Kesser Torah,*" and I knew I was looking at copies of the monthly Torah journal published by the Radomsker Yeshivah, the *yeshivah* I had attended. I picked up a bundle and embraced it, holding it close to my heart. How well I remembered those journals. In my *yeshivah* days, while learning in the highest *shiur*, I would eagerly await each new issue and study it from cover to cover. And here in front of me, I had found a collection of all the issues , starting with the first issue of *Iyar* 1930 until the last one of *Shevat*, 1939. The journals contained Talmudic discourses by the *roshei yeshivah* of the various branches of the *yeshivah*. There were also sections in which the students contributed their own *chiddushei Torah*.

For a moment, I stood transfixed; a treasure chest of jewels more precious than pearls and rubies was gathering dust in that corner. I quickly called the bookseller.

"I'd like to buy those journals," I said anxiously.

The bookseller looked at me oddly as if to ask who would want to buy these stale, outdated copies. "Oh, those aren't for sale. I meant to bury them with the *sheimos*, the tattered sacred writings that must be buried, and I simply didn't get around to it. Of course, if you want them, go right ahead and help yourself. They're all yours."

I insisted on a token payment, since I didn't want to humiliate the precious Torah journals by taking them as a gift.

I took the cherished writings home with me and stayed up

all night studying their pages. The Radomsker Rebbe, his son-in-law Reb Moishele and all my *chaveirim* came to life. The contributors to the journals included such luminaries as Rabbi Meir Arik of Tarnow, Rabbi Yosef Lasser, *rosh yeshivah* of Kibbutz Govoha, the Tchebiner Rav, Reb Dov Berish Weidenfeld and many others. Their brilliant discourses transported me back to my *yeshivah* days. Tears blurred my eyes as I read the pieces my *chaveirim* had written. As I perused their comments, I could hear them arguing, see them gesticulating wildly as they tried to make a point and convince their study partners of the cogency of their logic. Suddenly, I felt like a *yeshivah bachur* again, discussing *sugyos*, suggesting ingenious answers, refuting proofs, raising objections and citing precedents. Among the papers, I also saw one of my own *chiddushim* and a *birchas tanchumim* written on the occasion of my father's passing before the War.

That night, I pledged that if Hashem would make it possible, I would publish the *Kesser Torah* journals I had rescued from destruction. The *Yerushalmi*, *(Shekalim* 20b) states, "We do not build monuments to memorialize *tzaddikim*. They are remembered through their words."

It was my hope that through such a *sefer,* the Rebbe's words would live on to inspire the coming generations and illuminate the world with the light of his Torah wisdom. Throughout the bitter years in the "the valley of the shadow of death," I always sensed the Rebbe by my side. His *zchus* and his *berachos* shielded me from the sword, famine and plague of the German oppressors.

"*Zchuso yagein aleinu ve'al kol Yisrael, Amen*. May his merit shield us and all of Yisrael, Amen."

CHAPTER 43

A New Beginning

THE RADOMSK *BEIS MIDRASH* HAD BEEN RESTORED AND the Katowice *kehillah* attained a semblance of normalcy, but it was becoming impossible to live and make a living under the Communist regime. But the Communists also made it nearly impossible to leave Poland. Pola and I longed to go to Eretz Yisrael, but a new decree had been issued at the end of 1949 whereby any Jew wishing to emigrate would have to pay the government sixty times the amount of the mortgage on his property. Since there was a mortgage on the apartment house I had inherited from my parents, I would have to pay an astronomical amount of money to obtain an exit visa.

I made an appointment with the legal advisor to the Ministry of Finance in Warsaw who apparently recognized

me. He held out very little hope.

"I remember you from Katowice," he said. "And I knew your father quite well. A fine gentleman he was. But as to your problem, let me tell you that I am the author of this bill. To be perfectly frank, the decree is illegal. It has no juridical basis. It was simply designed to prevent Jews from emigrating. My advice is to get yourself a good lawyer and have him draw up a petition to the President. If he exempts you from the exit tax, I'll be able to help you."

My attorney filled out an application and sent it along with a convincing letter, explaining that I was the sole survivor of my family and longed to be with relatives in Israel. He warned me, however, that, "It is one in a million that such a letter will be accepted."

I found myself in a real bind. I had applied for a passport which had to be picked up within a specified number of days, otherwise it would be voided. At the same time, I would have to present an exit visa in order to claim the passport. If I did not have an exit visa before the end of the ten-day deadline, I could never again apply for a passport. My nerves were on edge, and I wondered whether the exemption would be granted and whether it would arrive in time.

Perhaps two months had elapsed, and I began thinking of going to Warsaw to follow up on the letter. During those tense weeks of fitful sleep, I dreamed I was standing in front of a glass partition behind which sat the secretary. Through the glass partition, I was able to see the closed door of the President's office. As I watched from my vantage point, the door opened and two rabbis walked out. I recognized them immediately as my Rebbe, the Radomsker Rebbe walking with the Gerer Rebbe, the Imrei Emes. In my dream, my Rebbe was astoundingly real as he looked at me with his

compassionate eyes. I ran over to him in excitement and told him why I was in the President's office.

The Radomsker Rebbe exclaimed, "The Gerer Rebbe and I were just now speaking to the President about your case! He said he sees that you are right, but he cannot make *davarav keflaster*; he cannot nullify his words. Go to the secretary. He will take care of the matter."

I woke up thunderstruck. That morning, when I came home from *Shacharis*, a postcard arrived from the President's office, stating that my case had been sent to the Ministry of Finance for final resolution.

The following night, I went to Warsaw to the Minister of Finance advisor's home with the postcard. The advisor informed me that the card was valid, but that Mr. Lipinski, the Director of the Department, was on vacation. I was to take my letter to the vice director. Lipinski's stand-in, a red-faced man, looked at my letter and retrieved my file. He perused it for some minutes and told me that I had to wait for Lipinski. I explained that I did not have the time to wait, since I had to pick up my passport before it was voided.

With that, he said, "I can't help you. The only thing you can do is to offer your properties as a gift to Poland."

"Fine. I'll offer it," I said.

The man's red face got redder at my agreement; he never expected me to give up a fortune.

The ensuing days were harrowing in their mindless bureaucracy. My case went from the federal to the state to the local offices and back again to the federal. Eventually, I received a letter of instruction from Warsaw for filing the appropriate title transfer documents.

I thought the matter was resolved, but a new problem arose. A department in Katowice sent a letter inquiring who

would pay the gift tax. I immediately responded that Katowice ought to pay the gift tax. Katowice informed me that they had no authority to pay the gift tax. Tired of the ordeal, I agreed to pay the gift tax on the properties I gave to Katowice. This was not satisfactory either, for how could I gift my property and at the same time pay the gift tax? Finally, Mr. Czub, the President of the Notary of Upper Silesia, an elderly, decent man, accompanied me to the Revenue Department where he officially authorized me to pay the gift tax.

In order to raise money for the gift tax, we sold Pola's houses, but we were not dismayed at having to relinquish all our properties. A bright future beckoned, and with *bitachon* in Hashem we embarked on our journey to Eretz Yisrael, arriving there on *Simchas Torah.*

"That's a good omen," I said. "From now on, our life will be filled with *simchah.*"

And *baruch Hashem*, it was.

My first steps in Eretz Yisrael took me to the Belzer Rebbe from whom I hoped to receive a *berachah.* The anteroom was practically empty, but the *shammash*, Reb Shalom Vogel, met my request with a polite but firm, "Sorry. I can't let you in. The Rebbe can't see anyone until after *Maariv.*"

"Maybe you heard about the story of the little boy in Katowice to whom the Rebbe spoke?" I asked. "He said to me, 'Who are you, little boy?' Well, I am that little boy."

He knew the story and ran into the Rebbe's office. A few minutes later, he came out and asked if I had a *kvittel.* I handed him the little slip of paper with my petition, and he disappeared again behind a door. This time, he emerged from the Rebbe's chambers and, smiling broadly, he said, "Come with me, Reb Avrum, I'll show you in."

The Belzer Rebbe stood behind his desk when I walked in.

"*Shalom aleichem*, Avraham Yissachar ben Dinah. *Shalom aleichem*, Avraham Yissachar ben Dinah," the Rebbe greeted me with a pensive expression, repeating the phrase perhaps ten times. To this day, the Rebbe's manifold repetition of my name has remained a mystery to me, but I am sure that the Rebbe had a profound *kavanah*.

He shook my hand, and we talked for a few minutes. Before I departed, he said, "*Zolst haben a giten yishuv. Zolst zehn tzi voinen tzvishen Yiddishe Yidden.* May you have an easy adjustment to life in Eretz Yisrael. Do your best to live among observant Jews."

After living in Eretz Yisrael for several years, we moved to the United States. Soon after our arrival, I had the honor of visiting the Bobover Rebbe in Crown Heights. During my conversation with the Rebbe, I asked if he recalled how his father had set the *becher* in front of me at his *tish* in Krenice. The Rebbe said, "*Ich gedenk es noch vie nechten.* I remember it as if it had happened yesterday."

I made it a point also immediately to look up Reb Shiyele's son, Reb Yosef Baruch Glickman, who not only had survived Ludwigsdorf Labor Camp, but also Auschwitz. Yossele told me an amazing story.

While he was in Ludwigsdorf, a Labor Camp which manufactured gunpowder for the Germans, he was "hired" by a Nazi as a night-watchman. Reb Yossele was naturally happy to be thus employed, for he not only avoided exposure to the volatile material, but he also worked under a rather benevolent SS man. That is how he came to receive the package of *matzah* that his father Reb Shiyele sent from Shrodula. Over the months, as he sat guard, the SS man would frequently come outside his quarters to engage him in conversation. They talked on a philosophical level, and one

night, the conversation turned to the issue of moral culpability.

"Do you think you won't pay for this?" Reb Yossele asked.

From that point on, the SS man began telling Reb Yossele that it was only a question of time before the Nazis would conduct an *Aussiedlung* and cart off all the Jews in the camp to Auschwitz. "Death awaits you there," he said. "Terrible death. It's far better that you take your own life than die in Auschwitz."

Reb Yossele rejected his advice, but the SS man was adamant, encouraging him nightly to commit suicide.

One night, he said, "Look, I don't want you to suffer. I've brought you the equipment." He held out a coil of rope. "I'll let you have privacy. Go ahead and do it."

"The Torah prohibits us from taking our own lives," Reb Yossele told him.

"You stupid Jew," was the SS man's response.

Several weeks later, a contingent came to liquidate the entire work camp.

"See! I told you!" the SS man said angrily. "I told you! Now you'll suffer, you stupid idiot."

Everyone who had been shoved into the cattle cars was praying or crying, since all knew what awaited them. The exception was a Professor Orenstein, who argued for the duration of the trip that no one was going to be gassed. Upon arriving at Auschwitz, he seemed to have been right. The doors to the cattle cars opened slowly, and prisoners came in with pronounced quiet and calm. There was none of the shouting and cursing that I had encountered. It was an almost idyllic scene. Inmates quietly coaxed, "If you're ailing, tired or unable to work, please get on those trucks. You will be treated and allowed to rest."

Mengele came along in due time to continue the process of selection. Professor Orenstein, fully believing he was going off for some rest and recreation, said smugly, "See, you stupid Polish Jews. You talked yourselves into the worst scenario, and look. We'll be well cared for now."

In contrast, the *tzaddik* Reb Kalman Tishman, having been slated for death after falling seriously ill, said to Reb Yossele, "I hope you will live through this. Don't forget to tell my wife what happened, so that she won't be an *agunah*, so she will be permitted to remarry."

Surrounded by a circle of loving family members and friends, we were able to adjust rapidly to life in the New World. My good friends the Hollander brothers wasted no time in getting me started in the diamond business.

Hashem has blessed Pola and me with a beautiful family, three lovely daughters: Dinah, Esther and Rinah. Two of our children are married, and our sons-in-law are all that we have dreamed of, fine *bnei Torah* who are the pillars of the community. Dinah's husband, Menachem Gurman, is a lawyer, a fine gentleman and a *talmid chacham.* Esther's husband, Dr. Benzion Jacob, is not only a well-known urologist, but also a recipient of a special *semichah* from Yeshivah Torah Vadaas.

And there are dividends as well: our precious grandchildren who bear the names of their illustrious ancestors. These beloved children carry on our legacy of the past, and through them, our sainted parents and family will live on forever.

In 1978, with the help of the *Ribono Shel Olam*, I redeemed the pledge I had made in Katowice after leaving the little book store. I published a six hundred and fifty-page *sefer* entitled *Birkas Shlomo*. The volume contains a biography of the Radomsker Rebbe; a compilation of his responsa and insights on the weekly *parshiyos*; novellae by Rabbi David

Moshe Rabinowitz, the Rebbe's son-in-law; and the *Kesser Torah* journals that I had found miraculously that day in Bendin.

The publication of this *sefer* marked one of the exalted moments in my life. I dedicated it as an everlasting memorial to my unforgettable parents, my father Reb Shimon Yehudah Krakowski and my mother Moras Dinah.

Although many years have passed, I still wonder about the holocaust—Hashem's inexplicable design. I return then to the words of the Tiferes Shlomo. One exegesis is particularly meaningful to me: "In *Birkas Hashachar* we say, *'Hagomeil chassadim tovim le'amo Yisrael.* Blessed are You Hashem, Who bestows beneficent kindness upon His people Yisrael.' Isn't it redundant to say, 'beneficent kindness'? Is there kindness that is not beneficent?

There are times when Hashėm sends sorrow, grief or exile on a person in order to bestow on him later sevenfold bounty and prosperity. The sorrow and grief he experiences are in fact kindnesses in disguise, for ultimately they lead to happiness. But people do not recognize them as such. They only see the suffering. We therefore pray that Hashem shower us with kindness that is beneficent, benevolence that is not veiled under a cover of suffering but that can be recognized by everyone.

EPILOGUE

IN 1950, ISRAEL AND GERMANY BEGAN DISCUSSING THE responsibility of the German government to institute a program of reparations for survivors of the holocaust. Soon thereafter, an article in the Israeli newspaper *Maariv* headlined the question: "Who is for or against compensation from Germany?" I immediately sent in my vote of *against.*

After two years, Germany agreed to reparations and began negotiating the monetary value of its liability. During the negotiations, my friends, who had been apprised of my decision, began their own campaign to change my mind, putting forth various arguments, convincing me finally with the *pasuk, "Haratzachta vegam yarashta?* Have you murdered and also inherited?"(*Melachim II* 21:19) The Germans murdered our people; would I now let them profit from it well?"

I decided they were right and filed applications for Pola and myself.

Two years elapsed, and we heard nothing. Pola and I decided to follow through, and we went to Germany, where we hired an attorney named Gunther Hoenig to handle the case. He informed us that we would probably have to endure a wait before our application for reparations was granted.

It was difficult to endure Germany. Every day seemed a year, and though I worked as a *mashgiach*, there were too many empty hours to wile away in that accursed country. I had described some of my experiences to Gunther Hoenig. He had heard thousands of tales, he told me, but in his view, mine were so extraordinary, that he urged me to write it down.

During my spare time, I began to write about my experiences. Periodically, Gunther would ask about my progress, and eventually, I let him read my manuscript that had grown into a hundred-page document. He suggested I publish the manuscript, offering to provide me with an editor, a publisher, a typist and whatever else I might possibly require. He put me in touch with Muller Ruzika, a writer who would work on the first draft.

Muller had barely begun when I was informed that my application for reparation would be honored. My presence in Germany was no longer necessary, so Pola and I made plans to leave immediately.

Gunther kept up a steady stream of letters to me in the United States. He had found a publisher who wanted to go forward with my book and sent along a favorable contract. However, as I was about to sign the contract, I had misgivings. How could I publish my bitter memories in the country that was responsible for all my suffering?

I wrote Gunther telling him that I had found "better conditions to publish in the United States." Gunther responded by writing back, "It's a bluff. Conditions in America cannot be better than in Germany for the publication of such a manuscript." Nevertheless, I sent a final letter asking him to send me my manuscript and Muller's revisions.

Over the years, I have added to the manuscript, which has several times been on the verge of being edited and published. Now, with the help of C.I.S. Publishers, after nearly half a century, I can tell my story to the world.

Those of us who survived had lived in a world of respect and truth. Those virtues seem to belong to the past. I recall talking with the Amshenovor Rebbe, Reb Yitzchak Kalish *zatzal*, about the condition of the present world. He said, *"Das is a velt? A velt is amahl gevezen.* This is a world? A world is what existed in the past." The young of the present generation learn in *yeshivos*, but they do not know about the lost world of holy *rebbeim* and of flawless ethics and honesty. Perhaps this memoir about what we had and what we lost will give them a brief glimpse into that world.

The Chentchiner Rebbe said in the name of Reb Duvid Lelover that when Mashiach comes they will read a *megillah* about all the sufferings of the Jewish people in their exile. "The suffering that our people are going through now," the Chentchiner Rebbe concluded, "that, too, will be part of the *megillah*."

GLOSSARY

afikoman: final portion of *matzah* at the *Pesach seder*
agunah: woman unable to obtain a *get*
Aktion: round up [German]
al kiddush Hashem: to sanctify the Name
Appellplatz: place of roll call
Aussiedlung: round-up
baal tefillah: one who leads the prayers
baal teshuvah: penitent
baal tokeia: one who sounds the *shofar*
becher: goblet
Beis Hamikdash: Holy Temple in Jerusalem
beis midrash: study hall
beis olam: cemetery
bentch: to bless
berachah: blessing
besamim: spices
bikur cholim: visiting the sick
Birchas Hamazon: Grace after Meals
bitachon: trust
bris: covenant
chametz: leaven
Chanukah: Festival of Lights
chassan: groom
chassid: adherent to *chassidus*
chessed: kindness
chevrah kadisha: burial society
daven: to pray
dayan: judge
dvar Torah: Torah discussion
eishes chayil: woman of valor
emunah: faith
frum: observant
galus: exile
gaon: Talmudic genius
gartel: prayer sash
goy: gentile
Havdalah: concluding ritual of *Shabbos*
hefker: ownerless
hesped: eulogy
Judenrein: free of Jews [Ger.]
Judenstern: Jewish star [Ger.]
Kaddish: mourner's prayer
kallah: bride
kapitlach Tehillim: chapters of *Tehillim*

kedushah: holiness
kehillah: community
kever: grave
kevurah: burial
kezayis: the size of an olive
Kiddush Levanah: prayer sanctifying the new moon
kohein: hereditary priest
kugel: *Shabbos* dish
kvittel: supplication
leichters: candlesticks
levayah: funeral
luach: calender
malach: angel
maror: bitter herbs
Megillas Esther: the Book of Esther
melaveh malkah: post-*Shabbos* meal
mesader kiddushin: wedding officiator
mesechte: tractate
mesiras nefesh: complete dedication
mikveh: ritual bath
minyan: quorum of ten
mitzvah: Torah commandment
moreh horaah: judge
Motzei Shabbos: night after the *Shabbos*
neshamah: soul
netilas yadayim: washing of the hands
nevuah: prophecy
nichum aveilim: consolation of the deceased
niftar: deceased
niggun: tune
Olam Haba: the World to Come
pasuk: verse
pidyon haben: redemption of the oldest son
pikuach nefesh: a matter of life and death
refuah sheleimah: a full recovery
rosh yeshivah: dean
sandek: one who holds the infant during circumcision
sefer: book
sefirah: counting
segulah: omen
semichah: ordination
seudah: feast
shalosh seudos: third *Shabbos* meal
shammash: beadle
sheitel: wig
sheliach tzibbur: the representative of the congregation
Sheva Berachos: the Seven Nuptial Blessings
shidduch: match
shiur: lecture
shofar: ram's horn
shtetl: village
shtiebel: *chassidic* synagogue
shtreimel: *chassidic* headdress
Shulchan Aruch: Code of Jewish Law
siddur: prayerbook
Simchas Torah: Festival of the Torah

siyum: conclusion
taanis: fast day
talmid chacham: Torah scholar
tefillin: phylacteries
Tehillim: Book of Psalms
teshuvah: repentance
Tishah b'Av: the Ninth of *Av*, a fast day
tzeddakah: charity
Tzom Gedaliah: the Fast of Gedaliah
yahrtzeit: commemorative day
Yamim Noraim: Days of Awe
Yiddishkeit: Jewishness
Yizkor: memorial prayer
Yom Tov: holiday
zchus: merit
zemiros: songs

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