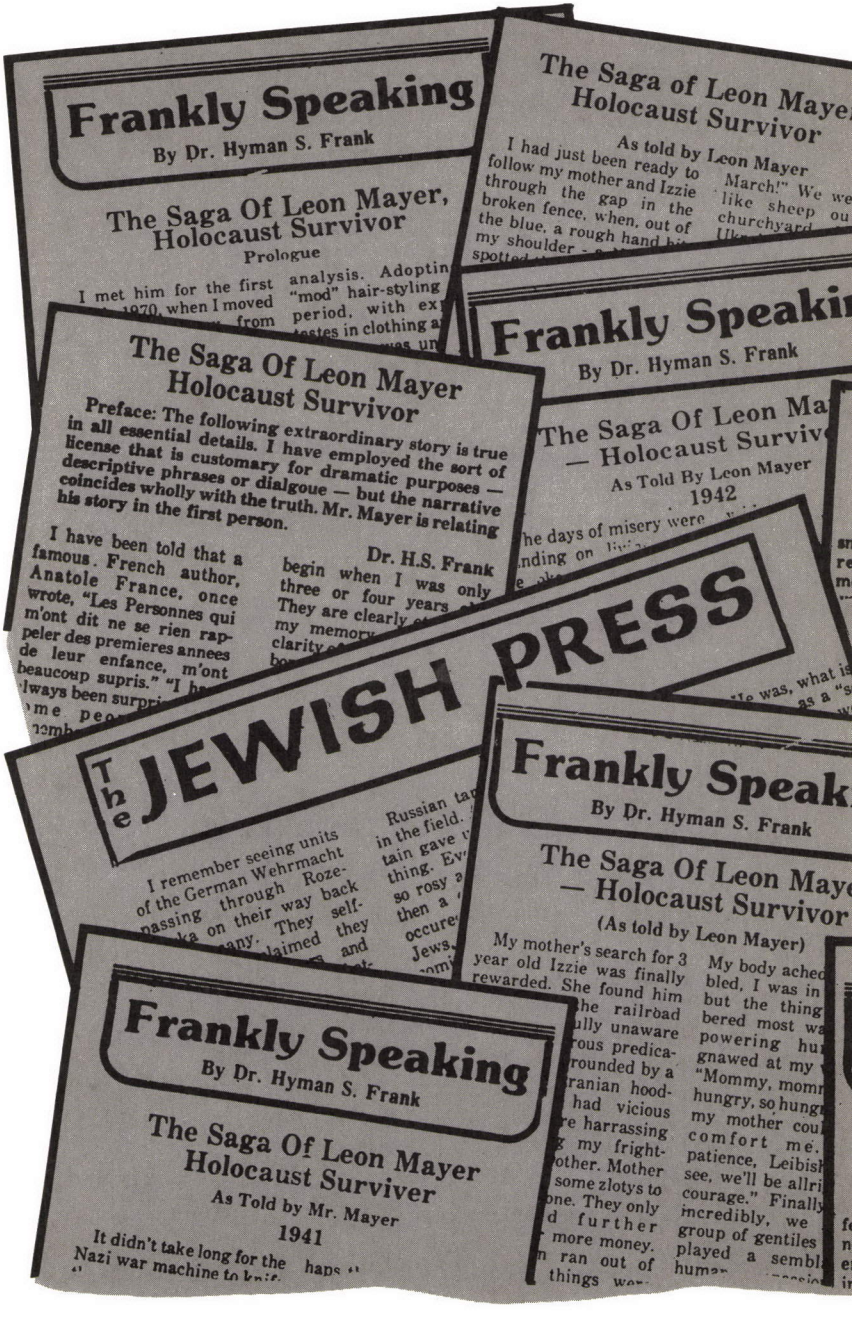
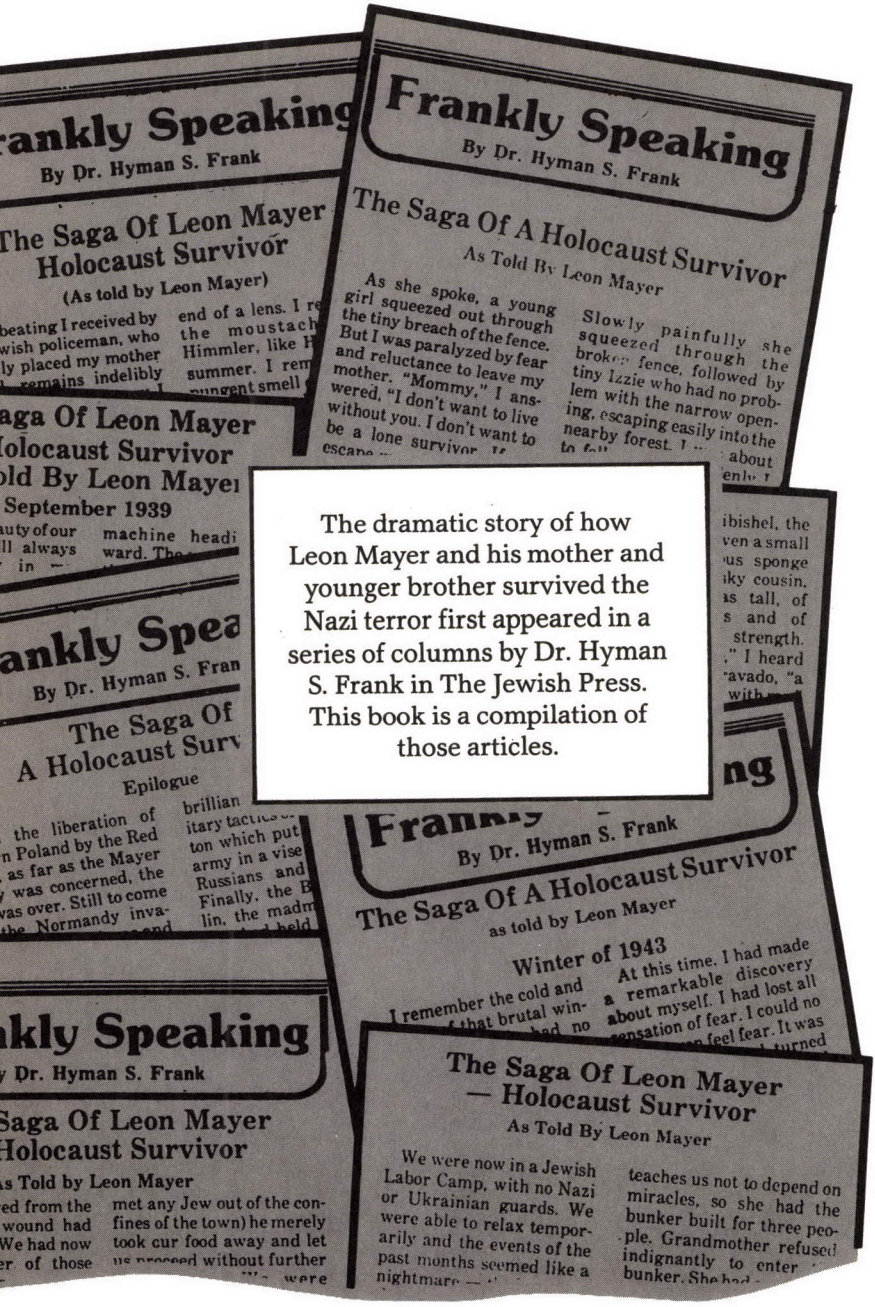
The Saga of Leon Mayer, Holocaust Survivor

As told by Leon Mayer
to Dr. Hyman S. Frank

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2024


Frankly Speaking
By Dr. Hyman S. Frank
The Saga Of Leon Mayer, Holocaust Survivor
Prologue
I met him for the first
analysis. Adoptin
"mod" hair-styling
period, with ex
from
The Saga of Leon Maye
Holocaust Survivor
As told by Leon Mayer
I had just been ready to
follow my mother and Izzie
through the gap in the
broken fence, when, out of
the blue, a rough hand
my shoulder
March!" We we
like sheep ou
churchyard
Frankly Speaki
By Dr. Hyman S. Frank
The Saga Of Leon Ma
— Holocaust Survivo
As Told By Leon Mayer
1942
The Saga Of Leon Mayer
Holocaust Survivor
Preface: The following extraordinary story is true in all essential details. I have employed the sort of license that is customary for dramatic purposes — descriptive phrases or dialgoue — but the narrative coincides wholly with the truth. Mr. Mayer is relating his story in the first person.
I have been told that a famous French author, Anatole France, once wrote, "Les Personnes qui m'ont dit ne se rien rappeler des premieres annees de leur enfance, m'ont beaucoup supris." "I
always been surpri
Dr. H.S. Frank
begin when I was only
three or four years
They are clearly
my memory
clarity
The JEWISH PRESS
I remember seeing units
of the German Wehrmacht
passing through Roze-
on their way back
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Frankly Speak
By Dr. Hyman S. Frank
The Saga Of Leon Maye
— Holocaust Survivor
(As told by Leon Mayer)
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Frankly Speaking
By Dr. Hyman S. Frank
The Saga Of Leon Mayer
Holocaust Surviver
As Told by Mr. Mayer
1941
It didn't take long for the
Nazi war machine to


Frankly Speaking
By Dr. Hyman S. Frank
The Saga Of A Holocaust Survivor
As Told By Leon Mayer
Slowly painfully she squeezed through the
tiny Izzie who had no prob-
lem with the narrow open-
ing, escaping easily into the
nearby forest.
The dramatic story of how Leon Mayer and his mother and younger brother survived the Nazi terror first appeared in a series of columns by Dr. Hyman S. Frank in The Jewish Press. This book is a compilation of those articles.
By Dr. Hyman S. Frank
The Saga Of A Holocaust Survivor
as told by Leon Mayer
Winter of 1943
At this time. I had made
a remarkable discovery
about myself. I had lost all
The Saga Of Leon Mayer
— Holocaust Survivor
As Told By Leon Mayer
We were now in a Jewish
Labor Camp, with no Nazi
or Ukrainian guards. We
were able to relax tempor-
arily and the events of the
past months seemed like a
teaches us not to depend on
miracles, so she had the
bunker built for three peo-
ple. Grandmother refused
indignantly to enter
bunker.

I wish to express my deep appreciation to Dr. Hyman S. Frank for the devotion and skill he brought to this project. My thanks also go to Seymour Baskowitz for his work in editing the original manuscript, and to Anita Baskowitz, who typed it.

Survival, for me, has meant not only a continuation of life but a life filled with love and joy. It has been blessed beyond measure by my wife, Sarah; my son, Shlomo, his wife, Naomi, and their daughter, Elana; my daughter, Hindi, and her husband, Mark; my son, Bezalel, and my daughter, Racheli. To all, my love.

Leon Mayer



The year, 1947: Leon Mayer, left, with his mother and brother, Izzy.

This book is dedicated to the memory
of an extraordinary woman,
Rose Mayer Tenenbaum,
for reasons made abundantly clear
in the story that follows.



The holocaust memorial "Counteract," by the sculptor Louis Fruchter, was commissioned for the Hebrew Academy of the Five Towns and Rockaway by Sarah and Leon Mayer in memory of Leon's parents, Solomon and Rose Mayer.

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Introduction

DR. HYMAN S. FRANK

I met him for the first time in 1970, when I moved to Far Rockaway from Crown Heights. My daughters, Gloria and Anita, lived in this area with their husbands and children. Worshipping at the Kehillas Jacob *shtiebel* of Rabbi S. Rubin, I became acquainted with Leon, who was one of the most active members of the congregation. His slightly accented speech betrayed his foreign birth. Flamboyant and spirited by nature, he was a dominant and charismatic personality in local community circles. He had clearly-defined features with piercing eyes that indicated intelligent assessments and shrewd analysis. Adopting the "mod" hairstyling of that period, with expensive tastes in clothing and ornaments, he was universally popular among the "young marrieds" of Far Rockaway. Despite a propensity for portliness, he presented a handsome profile, with an almost leonine blondness and a drooping Fu-Manchu type of moustache. Possessing no Semitic features, he could easily be taken for an "Aryan" ethnic of

Germanic or Slavic origin. (These facial characteristics proved to be of critical significance in his history of survival during the Nazi era.)

He had had practically no chance for a formal education in Europe having been a child of the Holocaust period. Despite the difficulties in mastering English, he later attained academic degrees in America. Soft-spoken, almost deliberate in speech, with a sentimentality he had acquired from his father, he was nevertheless aggressive and impulsive in the field of finance and brokerage. In Wall Street he was recognized as a force to be reckoned with. At all fund appeals, his donation was the first to be heard. He gave generously to various Yeshivot and other charitable causes. His lawn was the scene of elaborate "kiddush" spreads at various occasions. Despite his tendency to be heavy-set and stolid, he was surprisingly agile and energetic in the "Simchat Torah" dancing, displaying a grace and energy that exceeded that of the more youthful participants.

I was not aware of the details of his life in the world of finance, but I had heard that he had a seat on the Stock Exchange and was a leading officer in a brokerage firm. His philanthropy and life-style were bolstered by the image of affluence. He had made his mark despite his foreign birth.

One of his ventures was a fast-food enterprise called Kosher Chef and he was rumored to have an interest in greeting card stores. Although we were friends, I had

no knowledge of his war experiences or family background. In 1970, the war, the atrocities, the ugly face of Nazism had paled. People were busy building their future, raising families and engaging in the social and cultural life of the present. The Holocaust seemed like a distant nightmare, etched only in the memories of the survivors who quietly nursed the mourning of lost beloved ones.

And then, Leon Mayer had a letter published in a Jewish periodical. There had been news items about an ecumenical joining of forces between Jewish groups and an American-Ukrainian society against Russian tyranny. Having suffered under the terror of Ukrainian police, he wrote with fiery indignation, denouncing a "brotherly" association with an ethnic group that had "out-Nazi-ed" the Germans in hate and terror during the War. The letter was so intense and betrayed such emotional outrage in a man who was normally so mild-mannered and placid, that it caught my attention and I sought further information as to what had triggered this volcanic outburst.

Leon Mayer then revealed that he had taped his memories of the war years. Like all gifted people, he wanted to preserve the Holocaust experiences, to immortalize the agony and anguish of his generation under the Nazis. These autobiographical tapes may eventually become a book. For the present, however, Mr. Mayer has allowed me to present them in my

column, in a series of weekly installments.

I have met many survivors in the past. I have heard their stories of the ghettos and concentration camps, the orders to bring suitcases to the "Umschlagstelle," the cattle cars, the railroad sidings, the selections at Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, the hunger and crematoriums. I have seen the tattooed numbers and have wondered at the innate survivor-instinct that human beings possess that enabled at least a fraction of European Jewry to live to tell their tale. The story of Leon Mayer, however, has a different dimension. He was not in a concentration camp, he has no tattoo marks and he never endured the selection process. His story is unique in its dramatic suspense, in its depiction of the horrors of Nazi occupation in the rural, rather than urban, areas. And above all, in the graphic odyssey of a courageous mother and two small children in the fiery cauldron of Nazi terror.

*

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The Ordeal

LEON MAYER

Chapter One

I have been told that the French author, Anatole France, once wrote, "Les Personnes qui m'ont dit ne se rien rappeler des premieres annees de leur enfance, m'ont beaucoup surpris." ("I have always been surprised that some people don't remember the very early years of their life.") Speaking for myself, the earliest recollections of my youth begin when I was only three or four years old. They are clearly etched in my memory – with the clarity of the present.

I was born in 1933, the same year the monster madman, Hitler, *yemach shmo vezichro* (may his name be blotted from memory) came to power in Berlin. We lived in a small town with the unpronounceable name of Zaliszcyké (phonetically – zale-shitz-kee) in a province of Poland called Galicia. We are all familiar with the term "Galitzianer," sometimes applied perjoratively, but most people are unaware that originally Galicia was a province in Spain. The Hapsburgs of the Austro-Hungarian Empire had acquired this province at the

Congress of Vienna when Poland was partitioned by Russia, Austria and Germany. Since the monarchies of Spain and Austria were interrelated by marriage, this particular corner of Poland was given the twin-name of the Spanish province.

Most of the population of the town consisted of Jews, whereas the rural areas and farms were populated by Poles or Ukrainians. The peasants would bring their farm products into the marketplace and barter them for textiles, shawls, boots, stockings, suits, caps and other products which the Jewish merchants brought from the big-city factories. Although there was always an undercurrent of Jew-hatred among the gentiles (probably a product of the incitement of the local priests in their Sunday sermons, as well as the envy of the marginal-income peasantry compared to the middle-class affluence of the merchant-Jews), the three ethnic groups managed to co-exist. Occasionally there would be an outburst of violence, a sort of mini-pogrom, by a few drunken hooligans, but as a whole, life continued on a placid level.

I was more familiar with my mother's family than with my father's. I always felt a deep attachment to my mother, who was warm and protective. And that is one of the reasons I want my story told. During the harrowing years that were to come after the outbreak of the war, her courage, her tenacity, her protective instincts and her indomitable optimism, served as an inspiration

to her children and grandchildren. This memorial to our family life is the only absolute constant of our heritage.

My mother was born in a small village called Rozenuvka. My mother's father was a Chasidic, pious Jew. When the banks of Austria collapsed during the post-war financial scandals of 1920, my grandfather returned to Poland and opened a small grocery store. My father had a successful business consisting of a brick factory. So that, all in all, as Jews of Galicia, we were considered to be in fairly comfortable circumstances.

Then, suddenly, the first tragedy of my young life struck. Grandfather became critically ill. The local physician, who probably had primitive medical skills and even fewer pharmaceutical resources to cope with serious illness, managed to prolong life for three days, but my mother would often mention that, although from a religious standpoint one should utilize all means to prolong life, the hopeless agony and anguish seemed disproportionate to the few hours of sustained life process. Years later, her comments would return to haunt me, very poignantly, when she herself became seriously ill.

As a small boy, I was given to mischievous pranks and wild misdeeds. Bursting with the energy of frivolous youth, I was guilty of countless misbehaviors, climbing trees, getting hurt, but secure in the knowledge that punishment, if ever, would be mild and reluc-



"...a small town with the unpronounceable name of Zaliszcyke..."

tantly administered. For with the prescience of a perceptive child, I had very early measured my father's response to my wildness. He was what is commonly known as a "softie," emotional and overly sentimental when it came to his beloved "Leibishel." He could not stand the sight of a crying child and when, finally, in exasperation, he did administer punishment, his eyes would go opaque and mist with tears. My mother, however, was made of sterner stuff and was the disciplinarian of the household.

Coming home from Shul on the day before Shemini Atzeret, the very day of Hoshana Raba, when the final sentence of justice is delivered from Heaven, I found, to my childish surprise, that an addition had been made to our family. My mother had delivered a little brother, Izzy, who lay crying in a small crib, his birthday being on a very solemn day of Judaic tradition.

My father was a very political person. He often was glued to the small radio, listening to the news broadcasts and the political analysts. Occasionally, the radio hook-up would bring us the feverish turmoil of Nazi rallies in Vienna and Berlin, the shrieks of hysterical "sieg heils," the raucous harshness of the "Fuehrer's" voice, threatening the world with the violence of war if not given his demands. But I was only a child. What did I know of poised tanks and airplane bombers, men in uniform with bayonets and handgrenades, steel helmeted divisions goose-stepping in precision on a crusade of murder and bloodshed? I was soon to learn.

Chapter Two

The natural beauty of our small village will always remain vividly in my memory. I remember the warm sun on my skin. I remember the slow, lazy, blissful dreamy days of summer. I remember the pungent smell of grass and flowers. Our little family lived in those long-ago days never thinking beyond the moment – rising in the morning to the sunshine and going to bed at night deliciously tired out after days of adventurous and pleasant activities. Those were the happy days, nestling in the warmth of our family, and it never occurred to me that they could change.

Then came one particular day I remember very well. It was towards the end of the summer. Suddenly, there was excitement in the air. My father, always attentive to the news on the radio, was excitedly relating the almost incredible news – the two arch-enemies, Fascism and Nazism on the one hand and atheistic Bolshevistic Communism on the other hand – had concluded a pact of friendship. Hitler and Stalin in a peace pact? It could mean only one thing – the two repressive regimes had united for the purpose of war! In a previously certain world, everything was now uncertain. Everyone seemed afraid and apprehensive of what the future would bring, everyone was asking everyone else to explain what this would mean to us on a personal level. Yet, in the balmy afternoons before the armies of Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany were unleashed, people still sat over a glass of lemonade or tea,

talking of trivial things while thinking of the ominous future.

And then the dam burst. Stalin marched into Poland from one side and Hitler marched into Poland from the other side. And we were in the middle of the two evils. Of course, the Russians were preferable since they did not come into Poland to kill Jews. But, as an occupying power, the Russians were still a force for evil.

Our family had two strikes against us. We were religious and my father, a capitalist, owned a brick factory. That made us automatically enemies of the state, subject to deportation to Siberia. But for the moment, at least, we were allowed to live a tolerable existence, adjusting to our new overlords. The factory was confiscated and my father given a job as an ordinary worker. I was only six years old at the time, and my main preoccupation was not international politics, but rather climbing trees to the very top, going to *cheder,* and being a wild kid. I rode horses, pretended to be a stranger in grandmother's grocery store (and being given chocolate on these visits), and roaming far and wide in the countryside.

I luxuriated in nature's surroundings. I remember seas of solid tree tops, broken only by some gash, where deep beneath the foliage some stream made its way. The gold of September had replaced the green of summer. Already, the lowering sun slanted melancholy rays over the fields. As the sun sank, the shadows of

distant hills reached out with long fingers. I remember meadows and fields of corn smelling sweet in the sun. The pleasing smell filled my nostrils. I remember tramping through the fresh meadows of low ferns that brushed soft as lace against my feet.

One morning, I remember a blinding sunlight that turned the banks of a stream to a golden, tender green and made the water sparkle with silver. I looked up into the blue sky with peaceful white clouds and suddenly spotted planes dropping out of the clouds. I saw black crosses on pale green gull wings. I didn't know it then but I soon learned what these black crosses on green wings signified – these were Stuka Nazi bombers. They put their noses down and plunged towards the earth, and then screaming wickedly, shot past homes and factories, diving again and again. The bursting crumps of explosions followed in rapid-fire sequence, indicating where the bombs were wreaking death and destruction. Hitler had double-crossed Stalin, torn up the "non-aggression" pact and was invading Eastern Poland on his way into Russia.

I saw the planes pull up and drop their bombs, the engines now dropping to a strange growl, the bombs detaching themselves gracefully, describing short arcs, disappearing beyond the trees and bursting in great smashing thuds of sound. Again and again, seemingly endlessly, planes roared overhead and I heard the hazy dull crumps of the bombs, explosions near enough to



"...planes roared overhead and I heard the hazy dull crumps of the bombs..."

make the ground shiver and tremble underfoot. The pounding vibrations went on endlessly, the tremors were getting stronger. The bombs were coming nearer.

I rushed home breathlessly to hear the news that the German Reichswehr was advancing rapidly deep into Eastern Europe. The blitzkrieg had begun.

The village was in an uproar. Some people were undecided as to what to do. Fear of Nazism drove others to decide to flee eastward with the retreating Russians. The Russian Army, having trusted in Hitler's peace promises, was now in wild disarray. Jews and non-Jews were hurriedly mobilized into Red Army Units. The most unlikely warrior imaginable, my dear gentle father, who cried when he had to chastise a child, was dressed in the Red Army uniform, a rifle on his back, ready to leave his family to go with the Russians towards a flaming front. My mother had decided that we would not flee. My grandmother, my mother and Izzy and myself would remain, hoping for the best. Precisely at this moment, I decided to come down with the measles and couldn't even bid my father goodbye. He stood at the railroad station, my mother told me, with tears streaming down his cheeks, as he kissed her farewell. We were never to see him again. Ten days later, the Germans arrived.

Chapter Three

It didn't take long for the Nazi war machine to knife through Eastern Poland and plunge into Russia proper. I heard the squeaking clatter, the gnashing of metal against earth as German armor entered our village. The officers stood in the open turrets of their giant Panzer machines, disdainful of any enemy resistance. Oh, they looked so arrogant, these young lions of Nordic Germany, these blue-eyed, blond conquerors of the Slavs and Jews. And they brought with them their lackeys, who were to outdo themselves in killing Jews.

The first casualty was a Jew, an innocent son of Abraham, maliciously and falsely branded as a red communist. The first Kaddish for the first Jewish martyr was chanted by his two sons. The Schutzstaffel, the dreaded SS, with their lightning-flash insignia and death's-head symbol on their caps, carefully and meticulously, with typical Teutonic efficiency, took complete charge of the entire area. For a few weeks, there was a quiet interlude. We began to breathe a little easier. Perhaps the Germans weren't such monsters after all. The race that bred a Goethe, a Beethoven, a Mozart and a Schubert was, after all, a race of culture – music, art and poetry.

Slowly, a few gentiles who had been drafted into the Red Army straggled home. Their units had been defeated by the Germans, and now, having no great love for the Red Army in the first place, they had come home to their families. We anxiously awaited the return

of my father, but gradually accepted the tragic fact that he would never come home. After the war we learned that he had been captured by the Nazis and shot.

The Germans organized a Judenrat (Jewish Council) of various Jewish personalities, communal leaders. This was a diabolical maneuver on the part of the Nazi conquerors, for the Judenrat would do all their dirty work for them, saving the German officers for more important causes. Thus they harnessed Jewish brains and muscle to destroy Jews. The next step was the formation of Ordnungsdiener, or Jewish police, who wore specific caps and armbands, a sort of sub-uniform for the so-called sub-humans. With German efficiency, an order was issued for the Jews to produce all their valuables for inspection and confiscation by the Germans. Jews were ordered to collect every possible thing of value – jewels, gold, currency, fur coats – all to be delivered to the Nazis under pain of the death penalty. Many Jews defied this order as a gesture of survival, burying their valuables in various ostensibly "safe" places, such as the back yards of homes. The Judenrat and Jewish police went from house to house doing the Nazis' bidding. In one aspect of the principle of survival, one could forgive their actions; they thought they could ameliorate the bitter conditions of Nazi occupation by serving as a buffer between the Nazis and their blood brothers. Some were actually very decent in their relations to the civilian populace. (The head of the Judenrat

in Warsaw, unable to cope with the stress of his job, committed suicide.) Others, however, tried to ingratiate themselves with the Nazi overlords and proceeded ruthlessly and with brutality in harassing their Jewish neighbors.

The Ordnungsdiener, the Jewish police, were recruited from the lowest strata of Jewish society. Arrogantly, brutally, viciously they strutted in their comic-opera hats and armbands and treated their co-religionists in true Nazi fashion. Most of them were underworld characters, former thieves and fences, who acted as vicious animals in enforcing Nazi orders. Most of the Jews feared the Jewish police as much as they did the Nazis. I remember my mother saying, "To destroy Jews, they need Jews."

One day, a new order was issued to the now totally subdued and cowed Jewish population. "All able-bodied Jews must report to army camps in the field, equipped with shovels, for labor duty for the Nazis." My mother was exempted because she had small children. A wave of fear swept through the Jewish community. Was it really for labor or was it a ruse for the murder of Jews? Some fled to nearby farms to hide, returning home only at night. Some who reported for work were shot in the field camps.

My mother had a brother named Jacob. He was able-bodied and was sent to the work camps. But a new industry had sprung up in the midst of this terror-ridden

environment. Brokers acted as middlemen, recruiting able-bodied Jews (for a fee!) to substitute for those Jews willing to pay the price. Our grandmother had no funds to save her son Jacob, but my mother made a contact with one of the "brokers." Somehow (I was never able to fathom how mother always managed to supply funds at times of emergency) she was able to pay for a substitute worker for Jacob. Uncle Jacob returned safe and sound to the village of Tlusta where we now all lived.

This village of Tlusta had become a haven for many Jews from surrounding areas. Many cities had been declared "Judenfrei" (cleansed of Jewry in Nazi parlance), leading to overcrowding in our small village, which had been spared up to now. Suddenly we were informed that the substitute laborer for Uncle Jacob had escaped from the camp. The escape infuriated one of the Judenrat's most ambitious members, a sadistic brute named Schechter, who was overanxious to impress the Nazis with his devotion to their directives. He instituted a search for Uncle Jacob, for whom he had an unusual and inexplicable hatred. My uncle surreptitiously made his way out of Tlusta in a daring escape engineered by my mother.

Schechter, frustrated, first by my mother being instrumental in arranging the substitute laborer and now outraged by Uncle Jacob's escape, for which again he blamed her, placed my mother under arrest. It was the day before Yom Kippur. He planned to deliver her the

next day to the Nazis, which meant almost certain death. The sympathies of the entire Jewish community were expressed in the small synagogue by fervent prayers for her release. Nazi guards surrounded the synagogue on Yom Kippur, leaving the room where my mother was incarcerated without any security guards. Noting that a window was left open, my mother daringly jumped out and hid in a pile of straw. The Nazis made an intensive search for her for hours but were unable to find her. As night fell, mother cautiously crawled out from her straw hideout and ran for the open fields. There, alone in the moonlight, she broke her Yom Kippur fast. For fourteen days, she traveled on foot, only at night, until exhausted and debilitated, she furtively sneaked into another uncle's home, that of Uncle Mordechai in Tlusta. Our beloved grandmother brought my brother and me to the house to greet our mother for a joyous reunion. We were unaware of what happened to Uncle Jacob until we later discovered that he had been hunted down by the Ukrainian police and killed. The Ukrainians exhibited a bestial hatred for everything Jewish, torturing and murdering with wild abandon, not because of ideology or racial philosophy, but purely for animalistic, sadistic, orgiastic brutality.

Chapter Four

Living under the yoke of Nazi occupation and Ukrainian terror, the days of misery were grinding on. We had no way of knowing how the war was going, which side was winning, when the black nightmare of killings, torture and violence would end. We knew that the Nazis were not losing the war because of the endless procession of the war machine heading eastward. The pounding vibrations went on, day and night, as tanks and armor drove relentlessly by. We heard the squeaking, clattering gnash of tanks as they thundered past. During the day, we would watch the steel treads clanking and grinding the earth remorselessly, the turrets open, the arrogant commanders contemptuously surveying the conquered and cowed civilians. They were enjoying the sunshine bright and clear. They wore such beautiful caps and goggles and wide-shouldered grey Panzer uniforms; neatly fitted and immaculately, Teutonically clean. The procession continued without end, to our great dismay.

We desperately hoped that these forces of evil incarnate would be driven back to their own borders in wild retreat, beaten and discouraged, even as the armies of Napoleon were once driven out of Russia. But the Russian winter had not yet beaten the Nazi army. The earth was still hard for the open half-tracks, their tripod-mounted machine guns always ready to spew forth death; troop lorries thundered past, their canvass pinned up neatly. The olive squads of the Wehrmacht

seemed invincible – just as once the Roman legions trod the earth, crushing all opposition.

A decision was made: We would leave Tlusta. During the night, we loaded a hired horse and buggy and headed for a town called Beczucz. The reason? Rumors had spread of an impending *Aktzia*. This dreaded Nazi action consisted of a sudden raid in which Nazis and their Ukrainian lackeys would swoop down on the Jewish community with deadly intent, shooting Jews indiscriminately on the spot, or if they were so inclined (and in 1942, in order not to create a panic among the Jews, they were more moderate than later) just gathered in all the captured Jews in a giant dragnet, herded them to the railroad sidings, loaded them into cattle trains and shipped them to the death camps where the furnace burned day and night. The black smoke rising from the chimneys of Birkenau was grim evidence of the snuffing out of human lives, the last vestige of what were once living and breathing men and women, people of thoughts, emotions, intellect and culture.

So, in order to avoid the *Aktzia*, we found ourselves in a strange city, with no friends or relatives, looking for a place to hide from the beasts in human form. A friendly Rebbitzin, who had been hiding every night in a cellar with some forty-odd Jews, invited us to join them in this hideout.

During the night we slept only fitfully, always conscious of any noise that would indicate the Nazis knew

of our presence in the cellar. In the early gray of dawn, we listened, with bated breath, for any sign of another *Aktzia*. If the Nazis didn't begin their raids early in the morning, we knew that there would be no *Aktzia* that day. The Nazis, ever reliant on German efficiency, would not waste their energies during the course of the afternoon to net only a few straggling Jews. If they were going to have a round-up, they would begin in the early morning hours when they would be sure to bag a goodly number of crematoria-fodder.

One Monday morning, we knew we were in the midst of a frantic *Aktzia*. We heard hoarse shouts, the savagery of a hunt where humans were the quarry; the blood-lust of the Nazis and Ukrainians was now fully in climax. We heard shots, moans of agony among the wounded, the gruff orders of German guards, the wild shreiking of children. The *Aktzia* was in full swing. At about noon-time, our cellar door was opened. The sun blinded the huddled masses. Hoarse shouts were heard. "Juden raus!" Clubs and dogs drove us into the open daylight. Brutal guards herded us roughly, like cattle, into a large churchyard.

(How ironic! The Christian religion of gentleness and "turning the other cheek" and peace and forgiveness – the Christian philosophy of loving thy neighbor – now found its expression in murder and blood in the yard of a Christian Church.)

The massed crowd of Jews huddled on the ground.

There was no water, no food, no hygienic facilities; we lay, one on top of the other, with barely enough air to breathe, awaiting the inevitable death by the Nazi murderers. We were about two thousand people crowded into a single churchyard, cursed and beaten by the Ukrainian police, who seemed to be more vicious than the German Nazis. My mother, my brother Izzy and I happened to be pushed towards an iron fence that ringed the churchyard. My mother, ever alert and observant, spied a broken spike in the fence.

She whispered to me (she always had a premonition of disaster), "Leibishel, we are all going to be killed. Don't believe these wishful-thinking optimists who prattle about the Germans wanting us for slave labor. They are aiming at extermination. If we stay here we will all be wiped out without a memory of what happened to Polish Jewry. There will be no witnesses to write our story. We will all just disappear; Leibishel, listen to me. Get out through that broken fence. When father comes home with the Russian Red Army [she always held this slim wisp of hope that father was still alive and that the Russians would eventually vanquish the Germans] at least let him find one of our family alive. Leibishel, please get out and save yourself."

As she spoke, a young girl squeezed out through the tiny breach in the fence. But I was paralyzed by fear and unable to leave my mother. "Mommy," I answered, "I don't want to live without you. I don't want to be a

lone survivor. If we escape, we all go together." My mother set her lips firmly and nodded quietly. Slowly, painfully, she squeezed through the broken fence, followed by tiny Izzy, who had no problem with the narrow opening, escaping easily into the nearby forest. I was about to follow when suddenly I felt the heavy hand of a Nazi guard on my back. He had spotted the broken fence and blocked my escape. I was now alone, without Mother and my brother. Fate had decided that they be free, but I was imprisoned.

Chapter Five

Prevented from following my mother and brother through the fence of the crowded churchyard, I was overcome with despair, loneliness and the fear of imminent death.

Suddenly, there was a coarse shout. "Jews! Get up! March!" We were herded like sheep out of the churchyard and as we plodded along a dusty road, Nazi and Ukrainian police guarded us on all sides. There was no way of escape. Those few desperate souls who attempted to flee were shot on the spot. On horseback, along the route, Nazi officers resplendent in their immaculate SS uniforms rode with the casualness of experienced cavalry officers. I couldn't help thinking: The German Army is involved in a gigantic test of strength with the entire world – Russia, France, America. Their manpower must be stretched across the entire European continent – yet here they were, using trained officers just to herd a few thousand Jews to their death! Was the extermination of Jews more important in their system of priorities than winning the war?

I decided to try a little strategy that might be effective if it succeeded. I began to walk slower and slower, so that I gradually moved toward the back of the column. Gradually, slower and slower, I became part of the last group of stragglers along the march route. An elderly Jew, exhausted by the long march, stumbled and fell. A Nazi struck his head with the butt of his rifle and then nonchalantly shot him, cold-bloodedly, through the

brain. He stepped over the bearded old Jew and walked on as though he were on a stroll in the park. My heart boiled in anger at the barbarism of these accursed Germans. I thought to myself, My father was such a gentle person he couldn't bring himself to step on a bug – and here the Nazis were snuffing out Jewish lives as if they were worse than vermin! That was the German mentality. Suddenly, breaking into my thoughts, I received a violent shove by one of the Ukrainian police, "Dirty pig Jew," he shouted, "why are you walking so slow? Move!" I increased my pace, fearful of sharing the fate of the old Jew. After a while, noting the preoccupation of the guards with other Jews, I slackened my pace again, falling back towards the end of the line. I had made up my mind; I was only 8½ years old, but I knew that survival was out of the question. We were being marched to a violent death; I had to take a chance and run. I was at the end of the column and about to flee – when I spotted my dear mother, with Izzy on her shoulder. She had been caught by the Nazis and was now part of the column. I immediately abandoned all thoughts of escape and joined them. At least we were together again.

My mother's face was covered by blood, the result of being beaten by Nazi rifle butts. Blood gushed freely from her scalp. I seethed with anger, but was helpless to do much about the situation. Finally, the column reached a railroad siding. It all looked so familiar.

We had heard about these railroad sidings, the loading into cattle cars and the final destination, a Nazi extermination camp. We were shoved roughly into the cars. I remember a beautiful lady with aristocratic features and soft, delicate hands, still dressed in fashionable clothes. She was pushed in with all the others. Softly, almost to herself, she murmured, "Can no one save me? Can't you help me?" It sounded so incongruous in the midst of the shoving and turmoil as we were packed into the cars. A young blond Nazi hesitated for a moment, as if a compassionate thought had entered his Aryan brain; then, almost brutally, as if banishing the humanity of the heretical thought, pushed her forward with his rifle butt. There were about 20 cattle cars and all were stuffed to capacity. One pail of water was placed into our car and then, with ominous finality, the door was clanged shut.

There was an almost animalistic rush towards the pail of water, as the suffocating mob gave way to survival instincts. Within minutes, the water was filthy and undrinkable. There was no food. One woman had a small piece of bread. Hunger was gnawing at my stomach and I felt dizzy with exhaustion. I begged the woman to share her bread with me. She refused, clutching the bread tightly in her pale fingers. She had decided that she would live, and this piece of bread was her lifeline. The train shuddered and began to move. Momma pushed herself towards the wall of the car. I couldn't

understand her energy. Some reserve of adrenalin, fueled by the urgency of our desperate situation, gave her the strength from some hidden last-effort dynamo. She yanked a loose piece of wood-planking from the wall of the car with a sudden burst of incredible strength. The cool air of the on-rushing country-side surged into the car.

Suddenly, my mother screamed, almost hysterically. "We are all headed for slaughter! I've got to get out and save my children. I have nothing to lose." The reaction from the others was instantaneous. There were shouts of "Lady, don't do it!" "We will all be killed because of you." "She is a madwoman!" "Stop her before she puts us all in danger!" She had unleashed pandemonium. But Momma was undaunted, her lips tightly compressed, as she faced the shouting crowd. "You will all die," she screamed, "if you remain on this train." The young beautiful lady who had daintily entered the car unexpectedly found an inner strength and became my mother's only ally. Together, they began ripping planks from the wall. Then, amid shouts of "You are both crazy!" the young woman leaped wildly from the fast-moving train. Moments later, Mother threw Izzy and me through the opening, and jumped after us. As we went crashing to the ground, I could hear the angry shouts of Nazi guards whizzing past us on the train. Some of them began firing at us. I felt a sudden searing pain in my stomach. I was shot.



"...Mother threw Izzy and me through the opening...."

Screaming in agony, I stumbled into a grassy field and fell. Momma, who was frantically searching for 3-year old Izzy, was unaware that I had been hit. I lay in the field, writhing in pain, with blood oozing from my stomach. I was seized with a terrible fear that I would die before my mother could find me.

Chapter Six

My mother's search for my baby brother was finally rewarded. She found him – frightened and helpless – sitting on the railroad tracks, surrounded by a taunting group of Ukrainian hoodlums with vicious looking dogs. It was clear the Ukrainians were in a mood for trouble – even a 3-year-old child could stir their malice. Mother offered them some zlotys to keep their dogs away, but that only produced demands for more money. In the end, she gave them all the money she had, but even as she gathered Izzy into her arms and walked away from them, they shouted insults and threw stones and sticks at her.

Mother found me in the field, still bleeding and barely able to walk. It seemed like an eternity as we made our way stumbling through the field. Despite my abdominal wound, I was beset by an enormous hunger for food. My wound bled, I was in great pain, but most overpowering of all was my hunger. "Mommy, Mommy, I am so hungry, so hungry!" But all my mother could do was comfort me. "Have patience, Leibishel, you'll see, we'll be all right, have courage." Finally, almost incredibly, we found a group of gentiles who displayed a semblance of human compassion. They gave us some food, but mother (I don't know where she got this medical knowledge) allowed me to drink only a little milk, due to my gaping wound. She was worried about fever and infectious complications. She ripped up



"...we made our way stumbling through the field..."

a shirt to bandage the wound. We slept in the fields, every night a nightmare of fear of being discovered. One morning we approached a Jewish labor camp (the gentiles had told us that there was one nearby). It seemed they were expecting us. The word of our escape from a cattle car destined for an extermination camp had spread throughout the area. We were hailed for our bravery.

Fortunately, there was a doctor in the camp, but he shook his head ominously as he examined my infected abdominal wound. My feet were now completely paralyzed. I couldn't walk at all and all sensation below the waist was lost. The doctor had no clinical facilities, no medication, and probably very little skill. He predicted permanent paralysis. We were fed for three days in the labor camp and regained some strength by resting and sleeping. We then hired the services of a gentile with a horse and buggy to take us to Grandmother in Tlusta. I lay in the buggy, all covered up, as mother and Izzy passed as Ukrainians on our desperate journey.

Grandmother had managed to survive in Tlusta. My mother no longer feared to be in that town. Even the villain Schechter had been tamed. We lived in Uncle Mordechai's home. I was on my back, paralyzed. Mother had become a folk-hero due to her train-jumping exploits. At Grandmother's home, my husky cousins carried me on their backs. We now entered into a state of inertia, living from day to day in an animalistic

environment. The sun set, the sun rose. We ate, we slept, we spoke, we heard rumors. I was resigned to being a cripple for life. There was no treatment for my wounds except for a change of bandages. We simply lived an interval that had only one common denominator, survival. The Nazis had suddenly decided, inexplicably, to remain indifferent to our status as individuals.

But Momma was not indifferent. The wheels were always turning in her head and she knew, instinctively, that life would not continue indefinitely in this tranquil state of affairs. With great foresight and ingenuity, she had built a bunker as a hideaway. Her survivor instinct never relaxed for a moment. "We will do our best," she said calmly, "but will never surrender to these beasts. G-d will help." But our tradition teaches us not to depend on miracles, so she had the bunker built for three people. Grandmother refused indignantly to enter the bunker. She had a paranoid fear of suffocation. The bunker was ingeniously covered with a variety of articles and straw. Here we slept during the night, especially when we heard about the possibility of the dreaded German raids, the *Aktzia.*

One Friday, the calm was shattered by shouts and shots. Our house was across the street from the Judenrat (Jewish Council). We saw, from our window, the feverish activity of Nazis running to and fro, shooting Jews indiscriminately. Hurriedly, we descended into the bunker, fearing the worst. Shabbos

morning, no sounds of any activity were heard. We came out of the bunker and soon heard an explanation of what had happened. Two drunken Nazis began a shooting spree against Jews. It did not matter to them whether the Jews were simple innocent civilians, members of the Jewish Council or of the Jewish police. The fact that they were Jews was enough to deserve death. During the "sport," a woman, two children and forty men were murdered.

I was still Leibishel the invalid. I was given a small piece of delicious sponge cake by my husky cousin, Simcha. He was tall, with broad shoulders and great muscular strength. "If Simcha goes," I heard him say with bravado, "a few Nazis will go with me."

With all these problems besetting us, all we needed was an affliction of a different sort – a typhus epidemic. The combination of malnutrition, unhygienic conditions and the constant tension – culminated in a devastating epidemic of typhus which decimated the Jewish population. Every day we saw numerous funerals. Both Izzy and I had a sudden fever and were nursed with great care for five days by our ever-protective mother until finally the fever broke. She herself, having had a bout of typhus in her youth, was immune.

One Sabbath morning, balancing myself precariously with a set of canes (I was still paralyzed from the waist down), sliding and slipping awkwardly, I began to lift my leg slowly and felt a joyous disbelief – I was able to

move my leg! Carefully, slowly, fear and joy clutching my heart, I lifted my other leg. A miracle! My feet were mobile! I was no longer paralyzed. Momma laughed and cried, convulsive sobs of joy wracking her body, as tears streamed down her cheeks. Her little Leibishel was walking! Just like a baby beginning to walk, stumbling and falling, I began to discard my primitive canes after a full year of being completely paralyzed. A wave of thanksgiving to a Divine Providence swept through me. G-d was still with us.

Chapter Seven

I had recovered from the fever, but my wound had not yet healed. We had now entered another of those inexplicable tranquil periods when the Nazis would be totally indifferent to our presence, in contrast to the wild raids to round up Jews for the death camps and indiscriminate shooting of Jews on the spot without provocation. It seemed that they were like robots, acting under orders from Himmler, at clearly defined dates. During this peaceful interlude, we would go out to the fields (an illegal act, but countenanced by the authorities) and get food from the farms. After these outings, my wound would always open and pus would be discharged. Finally, due to my youthful resilience, the wound healed completely.

On one of my trips out to the fields to procure food, we were apprehended by a huge, gross, greasy Nazi named Tank (he was built like a monster iron Panzer wagon). He was known as a vicious killer. This time, however, he was uncharacteristically calm and human. Instead of shooting us (as was his custom if he met any Jew out of the confines of the town) he merely took our food away and let us proceed without further molestation. We were deprived of our bread, potatoes, milk and vegetables, but at least we were alive. On one of these trips, as I came home, my mother smothered me with kisses and hugs while tears rolled down her cheeks. It had been rumored that the Nazis had killed a young Jewish boy and she feared it was her beloved "Leibishel."



"...my mother smothered me with kisses while tears rolled down her cheeks..."

Our relations with the non-German gentiles was one of mutual hostility, despite our common roles as conquered and enslaved peoples. Some Jews paid money to Poles or Ukrainians to hide them from the Nazis. Although these gentiles were decent and righteous human beings who had a compassion for the Jews, the overwhelming majority took advantage of our plight. Instead of feeding and hiding Jews, they would take our money and betray us to the Germans. Some killed and robbed Jews on their own initiative. The Ukrainians, especially, were a miserable lot. They would propose a plan to hide and feed a number of Jews in the forests and bring them to a hidden bunker. Then, on cue, they would viciously beat and rob the Jews of whatever possessions they had left and drive them into the dense forests to fend for themselves, moneyless and starving.

Although leaving Tlusta was dangerous, we usually left the city to sleep in the fields, always fearing the deadly and dread *Aktzias*. The Nazis always demanded (and received) a certain quota of Jews for labor duties; the Judenrat always complied. The only exceptions were the aged or women with small children. One particular Ordnungsdiener (Jewish policeman) who had been recruited to serve the Nazis from a criminal underworld group, copied the Nazi hatred as if he, himself, were an Aryan. Despite the fact that my mother, with her two small children, was exempt, this monster arrested her and placed her in the Judenrat jail.

I shouted, I cried, I kicked him, but what can a 9-year-old kid do to a huge brute? All I received from him was a savage beating. I cursed him and prayed that he should be killed for his misdeeds.

Events that followed were disastrous for him, since this would-be Nazi was killed by a genuine Nazi.

Chapter Eight

The beating I received by the Jewish policeman, who illegally placed my mother in jail, remains indelibly in my memory. I remember being dizzy, I breathed heavily, convulsively. My legs trembled. Lying on the floor, all I could see were boots, uniformed pants with a black trim. Pain throbbed mercilessly around my skull and there was a bloodshot red mist across my vision. First he struck with his fists, but when I dropped to the floor there were vicious and agonizing kicks. I looked up through bleary, tear-stained eyes. It was like being at the wrong end of a lens. I remember the moustache (like Himmler, like Hitler), the mean mouth, the burning eyes of a man who enjoyed inflicting cruelty on others. Things kept swimming in and out, disjointed images, no connection among them and no logic. The brute swayed forward like a distorted reflection in an imperfect mirror, growing wildly larger, then shrinking away. I felt a searing agony in my head like a red-hot band of steel being squeezed around my forehead and skull. "G-d will punish you," I muttered under my breath. "You will be punished for hurting my mother." Some time later, during one of the wild *Aktzias* by the Nazis, he was shot in the head despite his policeman's uniform. Justice was done!

Eventually, mother was released by the Judenrat. The Judenrat, cowed by the Nazis and interested only in preserving themselves, supplied quotas of Jews regularly to the Germans whenever so requested.

Ostensibly it was for labor camps. Actually, it was like a cattle round-up. The camps of Auschwitz were the actual destination. Some, who had Judenrat "connections" (called Vitamin P – *Protektzia*) survived. You had to know someone.

As a result of the *Aktzias* in neighboring cities, they were all declared cleansed of Jews – *Judenrein*. Tlusta, which was still not *Judenrien*, became a haven for displaced and desperate Jews, seeking refuge. The town received an influx of strangers – men, women and children, homeless and crazed with fear. They came on foot, in wagons, in buggies, on horses – a veritable exodus from all the surrounding communities. Out of humanitarian considerations, many were taken into friendly, already overcrowded homes. Some lived in wagons, mostly camping out behind the Judenrat house. Rumors began to spread of a coming *Aktzia*. The Nazis would not overlook such a tempting target – an overcrowded city full of Jews.

One Thursday morning, at 5 A.M., Ukrainian bicycle riders were spotted, speeding in and out of town. This definitely presaged disaster. We ran from the fields, woke everybody and began to hide in our prepared bunker, which had been extended for four or five people and now contained a smothering fifteen, piled one on top of each other.

Grandmother, fearing suffocation, went with others to the cellar. My brother, Izzy, now 4 years old,

couldn't breathe under the weight of fifteen people but was sternly cautioned against crying or sneezing. Shots and shouts were heard outside, indicating that the *Aktzia* was in full force. The Ukrainians began with the Jewish campers, the strangers in town, who slept in their wagons in back of the Judenrat building. The Jewish policeman who beat me so mercilessly, was shot in the street, despite the fact that he wore his Ordnungsdiener cap, which was supposed to protect him from the fate of "ordinary" Jews. Then the murderers spread out throughout the town, herding all the Jews to the cemetery. They came into our house. They didn't spy our camouflaged bunker but did go to the cellar and took all the Jews found there (including Grandmother) to the cemetery. They assumed that they had found all the Jews in that vicinity in the cellar and didn't bother with our secret bunker area. Indirectly, thus, the Jews in the cellar were sacrificed on the altar of our own survival. We heard Nazis upstairs, outside, all around us, but suffocating and choking under the weight of our overcrowded bunker, we were spared. The *Aktzia* ended in the evening. Finally, we climbed out silently. One of us closed the open door of our house. This was a most stupid act (as a Ukrainian woman who saw the door close, told us later) since a Nazi could have seen that movement indicating there were still some Jews alive. It could have been disastrous.

During the entire night, we heard sporadic shooting in the cemetery area, but we slept in the house.

Friday morning, an eerie calm had descended on Tlusta, the silence of the dead. The Nazis were gone. We searched the empty houses and fields for survivors. There were none. Grandmother had been killed. Husky Jews were given shovels to dig their own graves and were then shot. Simcha, the curly-headed giant who had vowed to take Nazis with him when the time came, went to his death quietly. Mother searched vainly in the cemetery for Grandmother's body, to give her at least a decent burial, with no success. An acquaintance, Mr. Dinner by name, was ordered by a Nazi, "Jew pig, get me some water." (He had been discovered in a bunker but was not as fortunate as we were.) He found his wife and two children killed. He covered himself with their bodies, pretended to be dead himself, and thus survived.

Sunday morning. The order had been given that Tlusta, too, was to be declared *Judenrein.* All surviving Jews were ordered to be concentrated in a ghetto. Mother knew that a ghetto was only a prelude to a concentration camp. We decided to escape to Rozenuvka. On Tuesday, all surviving Jews packed their belongings to go to the ghetto. We climbed up to the attic where straw was kept and slept there. A decent gentile woman asked us to be quiet since her son was pathologically anti-Semitic. She brought us food and drink and we

rested, content to be safe, at least for the moment. We heard of a slaughter on a Sunday morning, when all the gentiles were in church. The Jews in the ghetto were like sitting ducks in the ghetto concentration area and were wiped out. My mother had been right again.

Finally, we were told by the woman that we would have to leave. She was embarrassed by her neighbors who derided her for hiding Jews and fearful of her anti-Semitic son. She told us of a Jewish labor camp not too far away. That was our next destination. At the camp we found 300 Jews. We found cousins, sons of Uncle Mordechai (who had been killed), but most of our family had been wiped out in the fury of murder and fire. There were no Nazi or Ukrainian guards at the camp, only Jews. We asked ourselves, "How long will this last? What will happen next?"

Chapter Nine

We were now in a Jewish Labor Camp, with no Nazi or Ukrainian guards. We were able to relax temporarily and the events of the past months seemed like a nightmare – the hiding in the bunker, the round-up of Jews, the shooting all day long in the cemetery, the mass graves, the loss of Grandmother without proper burial or mourning, the dramatic jump from the cattle train, my wounds and paralysis, the typhus, the misery, fear and depression of seeing no end to our torture.

A Ukrainian woman volunteered to take Izzy and raise him as her own child. We were caught in a dilemma. Should not at least one of us live and survive to greet father when he comes home? (We still had this unshakable optimism that father was still alive in the Russian Army!) On the other hand, how could we part with our beloved beautiful little child and have him raised as a gentile, unaware of our great Jewish heritage? The decision was finally made. Judaism teaches us to preserve life! We gave Izzy to the woman.

A few days passed. Word spread in the camp that someone was looking for Mrs. Mayer. It was the Ukrainian woman bringing back our beloved Izzy. She was unable to cope with his day-and-night crying, asking for his Momma. So Fate had decided, once more, that we three remain together, come what may!

Mother was constantly worried that some day, we would be surprised by a murderous *Aktzia* in the camp. "Let us sleep in the fields," she warned us. "At least we

can flee when trouble begins, rather than be caught in a death-trap." We worked in the fields, cutting and threshing wheat. We used the spare strings, ordinarily used to tie up wheat bundles, for material to knit sweaters. We would barter the knitted sweaters for milk or bread with the peasants. Our overseer happened to be one of that rare breed, a decent German, who tolerated our primitive barter deals—the wheat strings, the surreptitious theft of wheat bundles and all the other petty business dealings we used in order to survive.

We heard about a particularly vicious Sunday *Aktzia,* in which our dear Uncle Mordechai, his wife, his son Yisroel (who carried me on his back when I was paralyzed) and sister Chava were all massacred. Only cousins Shmuel and Abie somehow managed to survive. The days passed in unrelieved misery and fear.

That summer, in the fields, was the most bearable of all the war years. In the woods, it was cool. The trees were heavy with leaf, shading the paths. When the sun blazed through, we could see the dew rising from the ground, as if they were wisps of steam. We welcomed the heat of sunbeams, the freshness of the air, the sounds of birds. Nature seemed to thrive despite the butchery of humans.

For the first time in years, we were not beset by the gnawing of hunger. The Germans gave us food, the Salvation Army kitchen gave us soup, the peasants gave

us milk and bread. Mother's supply of zlotys was being depleted, but her optimism never faltered. Determinedly, she set lips and chin, murmuring, "No defeatism! No depression! We will and must survive." Many of the older people in camp, their resistance feeble due to malnutrition and age, succumbed to typhus. We were immune and young, so we survived the epidemic in camp.

The administrator, unlike the German supervisor, was a Pole. We later discovered he was actually a Jew, masquerading as a gentile. He advised us to hide Izzy, since children were not allowed, legally, to live in a work camp. We, ordinary Jews, lived in wooden barracks. The "aristocracy" of the Jews (Judenrat, overseers, Ordnungsdiener) lived in better living quarters, called *Chotkes.* Life continued throughout the summer in a series of uneventful days.

Mother, who always feared *Aktzias,* awoke one morning murmuring, "I hear machines, motors." Sleepily, I replied, "Come on, Momma, let me sleep. There are no machines, everything's quiet." "Leibishel," she replied, fearfully, "I tell you I hear machines and motors." Despite my pleas not to disturb my sleep, we were hurriedly dressed and fled to the fields. At 7 A.M., there were the dreaded German shouts, brisk orders of Hitler's military machine. Shots were fired. Wild screaming of victims. We were lying very low in the fields, since potato leaves are very short and don't offer

good cover. We saw Ukrainian women walking through the fields, and were desperately fearful that they might inform on us. We kept our heads down to the earth. We heard Ukrainian peasants, walking by, relishing the rumors of Jews being massacred. In the evening, the shooting stopped. A heavy rainfall soaked our tired bodies, but we welcomed the moisture for our parched throats. A peasant woman, compassionately, gave us bread and allowed us to sleep in the stable, warmed by the closeness of horses and cows. During this *Aktzia,* 400 Jews were killed, forced to dig their own graves before being shot. Where were we to go now? Every place in the area was now *Judenfrei.* Only mother's premonition, the hearing of a machine, had saved our lives.

We now had neither home nor bunker, or even the wooden barracks of work camps. We had been reduced to the status of primitive animals, sleeping in the fields, keeping our heads low behind wheat stalks, foraging for food and drink, clinging to life by a mere thread. I remember one small child who raised his head just a little too high, as the *Aktzia* was being finished. A keen-eyed German immediately spotted his tiny head and an entire family was discovered and killed.

The golden leaves of autumn began to wither as the cold and bitter winter approached. The Germans sent death-squads of Ukrainian police to slaughter anyone who was ill with the dread typhus fever. One beautiful

girl, thanks to her physical attractions, was sheltered by a gentile. She was only 18 years old. She succumbed to the fever of typhus and was murdered. Illness became a passport to death.

One day, all three of us were caught by Ukrainians. We had been immune to the typhus because of previous typhus bouts. Izzy, although healthy, was an immediate candidate for a pistol shot since he had no shoes. This was considered tantamount to being an enemy of the State. Hastily, mother found some ill-fitting shoes and placed them on his tiny, delicate feet. Like all other miracles of our past harrowing experiences, unaccountably, we were not killed.

A constant nightmare that plagued my senses was a terrible fear that mother would be killed and Izzy and I would be spared. In my own mind I had made a resolute decision. If mother were killed, I didn't want to live. I would either commit suicide or surrender myself to the Nazis. During this period of fear of violent death, little beautiful Izzy, blissfully unaware of our dangerous plight, joyously played with the horses and cows; all the gentiles knew him and catered to his childish activities.

Then a horrible moment came. The Jews were mumbling among themselves that mother and Izzy had been captured by the Nazis and about to be murdered. Hysterically, I made plans to go to the village where they were imprisoned, but the Jews restrained me, forcibly. With almost superhuman strength, I pulled

away and fled to the village, sobbing hysterically, barely able to breathe. I found mother and Izzy guarded by Ukrainian police. Mother began to cry uncontrollably, upbraiding me for coming. "Why did you put yourself in such jeopardy?" she screamed at me. "Why couldn't at least one of us survive?" Although only a child, I calmly answered with adult conviction: "Mother, I don't want to live without you." We had finally come to the end of our rope. Our luck had run out. But we faced death calmly. Clinging to life seemed impossible anymore.

Chapter Ten

The forces of Nazism, Ukrainian nationalism and the anti-Semitism of the Polish peasants were gradually decimating the Jewish population. More and more areas were declared *Judenrein.* The extermination camps were destroying Jewish souls day and night. In the rural areas, Jews were considered fair game for any hooligan, whether part of the Nazi army or simply a member of irregular forces that roamed the forests or countryside. Mother was imploring me to escape on my own, feeling that at least one of us should survive. She, as a woman, enfeebled by the stress and strains of keeping herself and her two children alive, felt she no longer had the energy or wish to survive. I replied that without her, life would be meaningless. I didn't want to live and see my mother and little brother destroyed.

One day a search party of Ukrainians, hunting Jews (much as the English gentry went fox-hunting) for sport or money, came upon us. A burly Ukrainian grabbed my mother in a big bear hug, lifted her high in the air and flung her to the ground. We were all terrified that the moment of truth, imminent death, had arrived. Mother was pushed and punched as I watched in horror at the bestiality of human beings. Again and again she was thrown to the ground, grazing hands and bruising knees. Every time she tried to get up, she was knocked down again. Blood was gushing from her nose, as the brute kept on punching and kicking with relish, enjoying his sadistic impulses. A mighty fist

crashed into her stomach, as the blow sank into her belly, the shock was bad, the pain was excruciating and she was unable to breathe. Seeing her bent forward, with her mouth open, covered with blood, gasping for breath, I was overcome with rage and tried to pull him away. He brushed me aside with a crushing blow of his hamlike fist, like a fly swatted down by human hand. He struck mother with a club, a heavy blow across the back. Disregarding the fact that I was a mere child facing a hulking brute of a powerful man, I flew at the man, wild with rage, kicking and scratching. He clubbed me too, but I didn't feel the blows, lost in furious rage. Distracted by my feeble onslaught, he allowed mother to stumble away. Ukrainian police ran after her, shots were fired. I knew, in my mind, if she were killed, I would, even as a child, fight the Ukrainians to the death, come what may.

"Is my mother alive?" I sobbed, even as rifle butts rained down on my small body. I barely felt the pain. I heard the Ukrainian beast growl, "The devil take her (Zum Teufel!), the woman got away; I'm going to dig a grave and bury these two children." A Ukrainian woman unexpectedly interceded. "Don't kill them here, maybe they have money in that Jewish camp." I gasped, suddenly aware of a hope for life. "Yes, we have lots of things in a box at the camp." Greed overcame bestiality. They loaded us on a buggy and brought us to the camp barracks. But I knew I had no box, no money

and no things. When they realized they were duped, I was beaten again. Through my bleeding mouth, I managed to blubber, "We have things at the home of a Ukrainian woman who was hiding us," praying for any respite. A sad commentary. The Jews at the camp watched quietly as all these events were going on. There was no move to ransom us, no attempt to shield us. We had all reached a level, little more than animalistic, where self-preservation was foremost. Each one for himself. The Ukrainians, furious at finding no possessions or money, kept yelling, "Where are the things, where is the Jewish gold?" Finally, after five hours of beatings, my face smeared with blood and bruises, one Ukrainian found a measure of mercy. He brought me water to wipe away the blood. They were exhausted themselves from the fury of their sadism and finally left.

I crawled out into the fields, because I knew mother always felt the fields were her best sanctuary. Incredibly, I found her, hiding behind tall wheat stalks. We hugged each other, we kissed, we prayed, even as tears of thanksgiving rolled down our cheeks. "Leibishel, Yitzchakel, you are alive, alive," she repeated again and again, as if to reassure herself that she was really hugging and kissing her two beloved children. "I was sure I lost you both," she murmured, burying her face in our necks and cheeks. I know now, that had she not escaped, the Ukrainians would have killed us all. For two

kids, it didn't pay to waste valuable bullets.

We returned to the camp. I couldn't tolerate the smell of horses and straw in the stables. Rumors spread one day that a Jewish woman had been shot, her body thrown into the river. Always fearful of the worst, I ran to the river's edge and saw a woman's bloody body floating on the surface. A Ukrainian nudged me, grinning maliciously and pointing to the corpse. "Jew boy, that's your mother." I gasped in horror. But a Ukrainian woman nearby reasssured me that it was not Mother. We soon found Mother and Izzy alive and well, having undergone another episode of horror.

At this stage, many German soldiers tried to save Jewish lives but were prevented from doing so by the bloodthirsty Ukrainians. One day, a Jewish partisan tried to kill a Nazi, but his gun jammed. He hid in our camp. The next day a squad of soldiers surrounded the camp lining everybody up for inspection (Mother was always afraid of being trapped like this). But they were searching for this one intrepid Jew who had dared to fight back. They found him, brought him to Tlusta, placed him against a wall and executed him.

The first blustering winds swept down from Siberia and the Arctic wastes. The winter of 1943 had descended upon the few survivors of the Nazi horror.

Chapter Eleven

I remember the cold and hunger of that brutal winter of 1943. We had no warm clothing, we were barefoot in the snow and had very little food. What the Nazis and Ukrainians had not accomplished, the brutal forces of nature were about to finish. The population of Rozenuvka had shrunk to 20 Jews. Due to hunger, actual starvation, with low resistance to infection, the remaining Jews were gradually dying. Every morning, frozen Jewish corpses were found, half buried in the bitter cold and snow.

At this time, I had made a remarkable discovery about myself. I had lost all sensation of fear. I could no longer even feel fear. It was as if someone had turned off an electric switch and my mind had been altered. I could never be frightened anymore, neither by Nazis, Ukrainians or starvation or cold. I would steal, if hungry, sneaking down to the village. I would hide, if hunted. If I were threatened, I would kill. Nothing could hurt me anymore. All normal human emotions (pride, love, compassion) were forgotten. I knew there was another world, somewhere, where Nazis and murderers and cold and hunger were not known. There had to be a world where people sat in warm restaurants eating wholesome food, listening to music, going to concerts and theatres, with warm loving households and human relationships. Someplace, people rode in carriages and taxis, wore silk and furs and diamonds; there were weddings and dancing and presents and fes-

tivals and synagogues and bar-mitzvahs. Someplace, people celebrated Passover with matzos, Sukkos with esrogim, Purim with hamantaschen, Channukah with candles. There surely was another world instead of this misery of hundreds of miles of thinly populated provinces, of stunted trees and miserable villages with thatched roofs and cold floors, buried in snow and winding mud roads. There were homes with indoor plumbing and running faucets and steaming kettles. Here, we had outdoor privies with an unbearable stench.

We had heard that Berlin, Hamburg and Dresden had been devastated. We knew London had been through a crucible of fire and destruction from the Nazi blitz. But surely the countryside was spared. I knew there had to be neat green fields and paved roads and beautifully kept cottages and houses, neat and tidy townships and well-tended lawns and flower beds. In contrast, we lived under a gray boiling sky, shivering in Siberian winds, frozen in swampy fields, ice puddles, coarse grass covered by frost. Our clothing was threadbare – canvas smocks, our feet numbed in primitive shoes, no boots, covered occasionally by a coarse blanket stolen from a horse. Freezing snow was everywhere. We trudged in the deep snow drifts, our ragged clothes full of lice, our hair covered by fleas, living little more than animals.

We lived on garbage scraps, occasionally stealing

some soup in the village. If we were lucky, we found lumps of potatoes, turnips or carrots. We gulped down everything, whole, too hungry to try to chew or digest.

And then, in the midst of this nightmare of misery, we were stimulated, nay, galvanized by something in the air. The Germans were melting away, retreating westward. One day, they were an arrogant master race, flaunting their power over the "sub-humans," with a powerful war machine of tanks and airplanes and bombs and concentration camps. And, now, they were a ragged army in full retreat. The Russians were coming! The Russians were winning!

Hitler had made the same mistake as Napoleon. The Russian winter and the Red Army had defeated Nazism! Russian men and women began to appear. They had joined the Nazi army and had been conscripted to fight the Russians, but the Nazi animals had enslaved them, too, as sub-human slaves, so they had no heart to battle for their German masters. One Russian woman gave me an egg – an egg!! – my first egg in three years. Fearing the Russian advance, the Ukrainian collaborators were also fading away. A few Ukrainians (called Banderas) still tried to kill the few surviving Jews. The Banderas had been promised independence from the Russians by the Nazis and despite imminent defeat still fought the Russians in the forests, at the same time mutilating and murdering any hapless Jews caught in their net. A few of our cousins, who had

survived all the horrors of the past few years of Nazi occupation, ironically were murdered in the final days of the war by the Banderas.

I remember seeing units of the German Wehrmacht passing through Rozenuvka on their way back to Germany. They self-righteously claimed they were front fighters and knew nothing of the Nazi atrocities behind their lines, committed by the SS. Could this be true? They must have heard! Could six million humans be killed and they were not aware of the Holocaust? It defied credibility. Still they appeared to be slightly more decent. They guarded us against the Banderas, slaughtered cows and gave us food, finally fleeing before the Russian advancing troops.

Russian tanks appeared in the field. A Russian captain gave us food and clothing. Everything seemed so rosy and peaceful. And then a catastrophe occured in Tlusta. Many Jews, seeing the Russians coming, ran out to greet them thankfully as liberators. Suddenly, two German planes appeared in the sky and bombed the area to smithereens, killing all the Jews from Rozenuvka who had fled to Tlusta as a safe haven. Once more my mother had been proven correct in not going to Tlusta. Now that the Russians were firmly in control, we went back to our village. All the Jewish homes were destroyed, our bunker was gone. We moved into an abandoned home. Some Jewish Russian soldiers provided us with food and shelter. They opened furniture

storage houses that the Nazis had abandoned and gave us utensils and furniture. The Germans had also stored wheat. The Russians gave it to us. We ground the wheat into meal and baked bread. We bartered wheat to the gentiles for other food and began to feel like human beings once again. Izzy was frail and emaciated and we had a bit of trouble trying to restore his weight and vitality.

In the midst of our euphoria, fear clutched at our hearts once again. The German divisions, not yet fully defeated, were counter-attacking. Nine days after our liberation, the Russians were swept back by the fury of the German counter-attack. The Jews retreated with the Russians, on trucks or on foot. We would not dare remain for another Nazi occupation. We walked with the infantry. A snow storm descended upon our column. My primitive shoes had wooden soles, my feet were frozen. I lay down in the snow. "Mommy," I cried, "there is no way I can walk anymore." I would rather freeze to death, as some did. We ended up in Rozenuvka; we moved in with a friendly family and pretended to be Ukrainians. We were only worried about informers. Some German soldiers joined us, being billeted in the same house, with sixteen people in one room. We had one overwhelming fear. We were supposed to be Ukrainians, but Izzy, still a child, had to be watched every morning because he had a tendency to speak in Yiddish. I heard one Gestapo brute growling about the "damned Jewish communists"—the expected

outburst of a frustrated Nazi at being defeated by Russkys. (I would like to make this commentary: At that time, the Russian Red Army was our ally, our liberator; it is ironic that now, in the 80's, the only State in the world that has anti-semitism, disguised as anti-Zionism, as State policy, is the Russian Red Empire.) No one informed on us. After ten days, there was fighting in the immediate vicinity and the Russian army surged back into Rozenuvka. The German Army, the vaunted master race, was finally defeated, never to return.

Our little family hitch-hiked to Czernowich, where we began to live a normal civilized life once again, for the first time in four years. We were no longer afraid of being shot. For us the war was over, although there was still fighting in the West. The Russian Army began to conscript able-bodied Jews into the Red Army. Poles and Ukrainians were also conscripted.

Whereas the Jews were happy to join in battle against the remaining German Army, finally on equal terms with guns in their hands, the gentiles seemed unhappy at the idea of further battle against their erstwhile collaborators.

My two cousins, Abie and Schmuel, joined the Red Army, eager to kill Germans. They sent packages of clothing to us. Mother said, "I wish they were not in the front lines; I would rather have them here than their clothing." Abie survived, but Schmuel died fighting the Nazis.



Epilogue

DR. FRANK

With the liberation of Eastern Poland by the Red Army, as far as the Mayer family was concerned, the war was over. Still to come was the Normandy invasion by the Americans and British, the long tortuous battles in France, the liberation of Paris and then the brilliant aggressive military tactics of General Patton which put the German army in a vise between the Russians and the Allies. Finally, the Beast of Berlin, the madman-monster, who had held Europe hostage and captive so many years and had wreaked such destruction on the innocent people of the civilized world, with special viciousness and emphasis on destroying the Children of Israel, this ogre of the 20th century, finally lay burning in the flames of Hell, his body enveloped in the gasoline-soaked fires at the bunker in Berlin, on the Wilhelmstrasse.

As a young medical student, I had witnessed the torch-light parade of his storm troopers celebrating his ascension to power on January 30th, 1933. I saw the

grim faces of the SA and SS, the brown and the black uniforms, the Hitler Youth, the Hitler girls in their white shirts, flowers in their hair. I remember the rhythmic trump of marching feet, booted, hob-nailed, goose stepping, in a cadence of death, a macabre ballet which heralded the coming Holocaust. The sky above the march route reflected the red glare of the flaming torches – the symbol of Nazism was fire – fire – fire – the fire of torch parades, the fire of the burning of books, the fire of the burning synagogues of Kristallnacht, the fire of the cities of Rotterdam, Warsaw, London, Coventry – as the Nazi bombs destroyed humans and property, and finally the fires of the crematoria of Auschwitz.

The final fire of the blood-soaked body of Hitler offered little consolation for the mourners of the Holocaust. Little did I realize, as I watched the light of thousands of torches, flickering and dancing in the night air, that this fire would consume the aristocracy of European Jewry. The scarlet banners had flapped in the breeze, the symbol of Nazism and death, the swastika of red, white and black held high by the masses as the kettle drums echoed a constant thud, synchronized to the marching feet. I marvel now, with the wisdom of hindsight, that no one assassinated Hitler during these birth-pangs of Fascism, before they accomplished their goal of extermination.

Now Europe lay devastated, her cities burned out by

bombs and artillery, the countryside being the stage for lawless marauders with the breakdown of civilization's veneer of law and order. Like most Jewish families, the Mayers had not been spared the agony and anguish of the Holocaust. Father was dead, grandparents were gone, many cousins had been killed. Only the nucleus of mother and two small children had survived. There followed a dreary period of D.P. (Displaced Persons) camps, a few more years of wrestling with red tape in order to get entry visas to the United States. And, finally, arrival in the New Promised Land, with the Statue of Liberty welcoming the Remnants of Israel to a life free of persecution and prejudice.

Mrs. Mayer borrowed money and opened a small grocery store. She refused to accept welfare or charity, standing independently on her own two feet, determined to make a new life in the then-flourishing area of Brownsville. Rent was $40 a month. She worked long hours and managed to prosper in the small grocery store enterprise. Izzy and Leon, young adolescents, helped out as much as they could. Mrs. Mayer would not allow Leon or Izzy to get jobs (the other neighbors' children all became clerks, errand boys, factory workers). She insisted that the foundation of an education was paramount. And so young Leon was enrolled in Thomas Jefferson High School, joined the Bnei Akiva and six months prior to graduation became a student at the Yeshiva Chaim Berlin. After graduation, Leon took

night courses at The City College of New York. Doggedly determined to excel in his studies, his young mind steeled in the adversities of the Hitler nightmare, he eventually received Smicha at Chaim Berlin and attained academic degrees in college. Later he taught at the Yeshiva Torah Vodaath, became an assistant principal, and even taught at his alma mater, the Yeshiva Chaim Berlin.

Izzy, on the other hand, received his early education at Chaim Berlin and continued on to receive his Smicha from that institution. His secular education at Brooklyn College earned him a degree—and he too taught at Yeshiva Torah Vodaath and also at Satmar Yeshiva.

Leon found his niche in the competitive world of Wall Street, where his perceptive talents saw a challenge in the field of stock brokerage. He became successful immediately and during this prosperous period met and married the very attractive Sarah (who bears a remarkable resemblance to Shirley Jones, the actress). Their marriage was blessed with three children, Shlomo, Hindy and Bezalel. Now that he had reached an affluent stage, he moved to the thriving community of Far Rockaway, now known as West Lawrence. He plunged into the fields of communal activity, giving time and money to a multitude of synagogues, yeshivot and learning institutions.

And then, suddenly, tragedy struck. The mother who

had shielded her small children through the hell of murder and fire of the Nazi cauldron, was struck down with a malignant cancer. This grand lady, who tore the plankings out of a speeding cattle car headed for Auschwitz and threw herself and her two small children onto the onrushing fields of Poland, the maternal heroine who heard machines and motors heralding a German death raid when no one else had an inkling of any impending terror, this spunky and stubborn Jewish mother, who built bunkers to elude the SS and Ukrainian police and survived and saved two small children, could no longer fight the insidious, invasive malignancy. Silently, helplessly, the children saw their dearly beloved mother wither and fade in an agony of pain, victim of a disease which medicine has yet to conquer. During her last days, weakened by the ravages of the cancer, she spoke to her children, "I'm not afraid; I can't take the pain any longer." And so the mother who fought Hitlerites with courage and determination, succumbed and surrendered to death.

A fourth child was born to Leon and Sarah after his mother's death, a little girl, and was named after Leon's mother, Rachel.

This human tragedy was soon compounded by economic problems. The brokerage firm which Leon had been involved with had gone out of business. Financial problems multiplied, debts piled up, loans were made to plug a leak here and then a new leak would spring

elsewhere. The mounting debts, the losses in the market, the need to constantly seek new capital – all created a destabilization in the Mayer household. Even rudimentary essentials eluded a desperate Leon Mayer. Ugly rumors abounded about the Mayer finances. The outlook was gloomy and depressing. And, then, undaunted by adversity, Leon rebounded with a vengeance. He joined the New York Mercantile Exchange. Like all beginnings, it was quite a struggle, but with G-d's help, his fortunes turned upwards. His creditors were repaid, sunshine was back in the Mayer household. He now lives in Lawrence. His two older children are now married. Shlomo, his *bechor,* is married to Naomi (nee Sklar) and they are the proud parents of a beautiful little girl named Elana. Hindy is married to Mark Mazel, a former student of Ner Israel. Leon's philanthropy had redoubled with the newly-regained affluence. He is especially active in Holocaust institutions and causes. Little Izzy is now a bearded pillar of the West Lawrence community. With his lovely wife, Barbara, they have recently celebrated the bar mitzvah of their twin sons, Yaakov and Eli, and are now looking forward, together with their other children Shlomo, Esti and Tova, to the forthcoming wedding of their daughter Shaindee to Nachman Schorr.

On the entire wall of a merged Hillel and Hili (Hebrew Institute of L.I.) school, Leon has donated a sculpted memorial to the memory of his father and

mother. The memorial depicts the ordeal of Jewry during the Holocaust.

I have received massive mail during the serialization of the Leon Mayer Saga. Most are laudatory. Some ask, "Why Leon Mayer?" The answer is simple. Leon Mayer's story commemorates and immortalizes the courage of an undaunted mother faced with the superhuman task of surviving the Nazi terror with fatherless children, and should serve as an inspiration. It preserves a heritage of which we can be proud. Leon's personal life can be characterized from a passage we recite during Hallel, praising the L-rd who "Raises from the dust, the poor; from the dunghill uprears the needy."

As for the Holocaust itself, let us re-read again the prayer of the Sabbath, *Av HaRachmim*—"All compassionate Father. Beloved and pleasant while they lived, death could not sever them. For the blood of His servants will He avenge. He remembers them. He does not forget the cry of the afflicted." Neither shall we.

Joseph Brown



Leon, left, and Izzy in a recent photo.