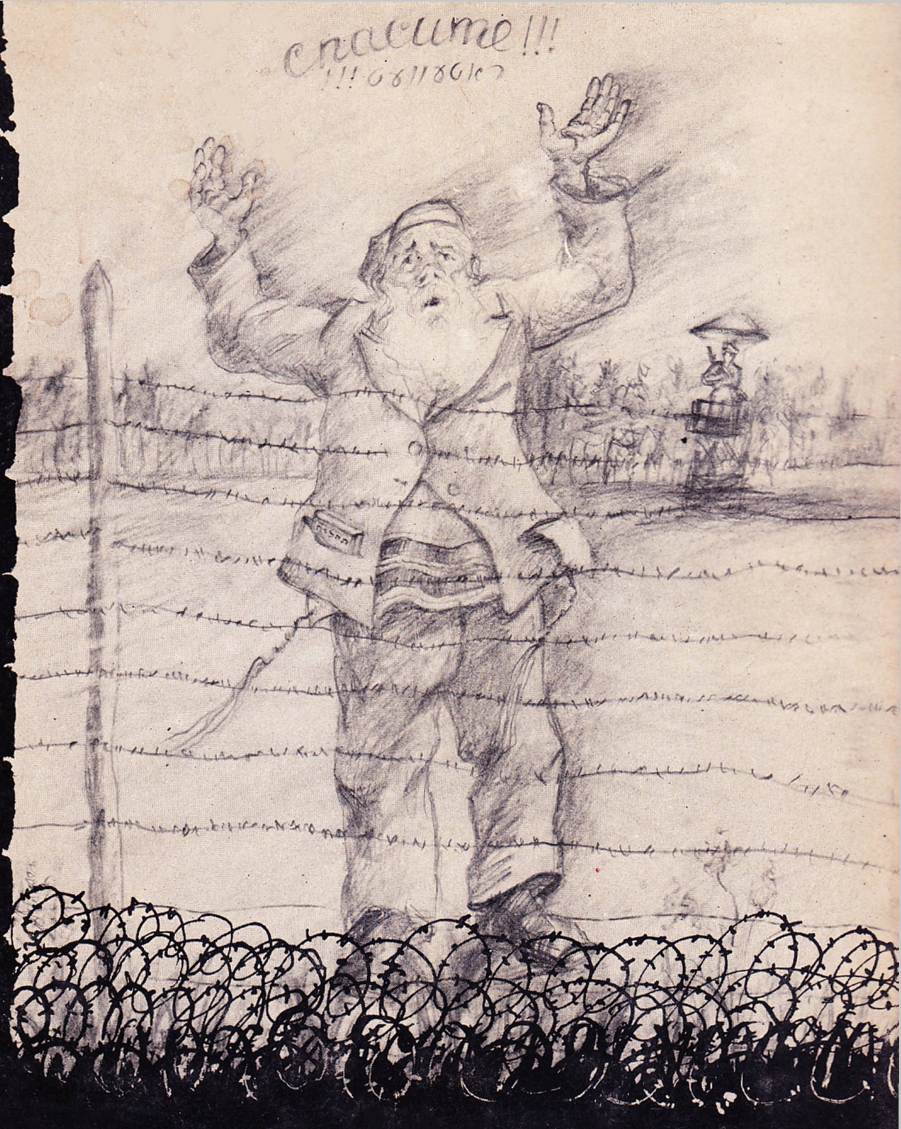


"SUBBOTA"

MY TWENTY YEARS IN SOVIET PRISONS

AVRAHAM NETZACH

"Subbota"

My Twenty Years in Soviet Prisons

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The experiences of a Russian Jew who survived twenty years of captivity in the prisons and slave-labor camps of the Soviet Union . . .

A first-hand account which encompasses the bleakest years of Stalin's dictatorship, a period during which millions of innocent Russian citizens were deported to prison camps in the remotest corners of the Soviet Union by the commands of this monstrously blood-thirsty tyrant. It was only by some divine miracle that the writer was able to survive these trials and finally leave the Soviet Union . . .

"Subbota" — rather than allowing this to become a malicious nickname, the main character makes it into a mark of honor. He never yielded to demands of the Secret Police, never signed a false accusation concerning himself or anyone else, he never compromised his religious beliefs. "Subbota" means Sabbath. "Subbota" means he won.

"Subbota"

My Twenty Years In Soviet Prisons.

Experiences of a Russian Jew, who survived twenty years of captivity in the prisons and slave-labor camps of the Soviet Union.

by: *Avraham Netzach*

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FOREWORD

The author of these memoirs, Avraham Netzach (a pseudonym), is a man in his late seventies. His family was wealthy and prominent in the Jewish communal life of pre-Revolutionary Russia, and he was given an excellent Jewish and general education. Remaining true to his traditional background, he grew up and became active in the Jewish community.

Later, as an accountant, he conducted the financial affairs of several large industrial complexes, at the same time providing, on a voluntary basis, material and spiritual aid to Jews in need. He was able to utilize his extensive education and natural intelligence to achieve close contacts with intellectual circles in Russia, which proved helpful in his communal work.

On November 22, 1935, all of this came to an end. It was in these years that the Stalinist terror reached its bitter climax. Hundreds of thousands were arrested on trumped-up charges. Few were ever heard of again. Among those arrested was Avraham Netzach.

Until 1955, he was fated to remain imprisoned in various Soviet jails and slave-labor camps — a period of twenty years, a large portion

of the average life-span. These two decades represent a tremendous display of Jewish courage and suffering under terrible conditions of death, sickness, and incredible human cruelty.

It is difficult to imagine how a man could live through all of these experiences in such a dark and bloody hell-on-earth and remain alive to tell the tale.

Avraham Netzach gives us vivid details of this living nightmare. Most interesting of all is the Jewish appeal the work has. He tells how, for example, he made a firm decision right from the beginning never to work on the Sabbath . In every prison in Russia, he was known as *Subbota* — Sabbath — and, despite all efforts to break his resolve on the part of the NKVD officials and prison administrations, he remained faithful to his religious principles.

Gradually he turned into a "permanent" prisoner, speaking prison language, living in the world of prisoners, and thinking largely in terms of avoiding the normal portion of beatings, torture, hunger, and sickness, and how best to win the continuous struggle against death . . .

He became acquainted with most camp-commandants and a large number of prisoners. He also learned how to deal with the various prison-regimes which dictated the rules of conduct in the different camps. When Avraham Netzach was finally released, after suffering through the very best years of his life, he found it extremely difficult to reaccustom himself to the

normal lifestyle of a free man. Even now, he says, he still conducts his life in accordance with the strict camp discipline.

The memoirs include accounts of his various arrests, his meetings with other prisoners and their terrible end, and unbelievable facts of life in Soviet prisons, such as hospitals where they helped the patients to die. He describes his first Sabbath in jail, how he spent Passover, how he said *Kol Nidrei* in jail with other Jews, and his attempted escape with some fellow prisoners.

The cry of thousands who went through the same terrible experiences as the author but did not have the same good fortune to come out alive is echoed in this unique work. It provides an important glimpse into the realities of life under the bloody Stalin dictatorship, and especially the tragic lot of many Jewish leaders, Rabbis, poets, and artists, all men of the mind and spirit.

The feeling with which these memoirs are written is quite remarkable. It demonstrates the power of Jewish faith in G-d, and the immortal Jewish invincibility without which Avraham Netzach would never have been able to live through the unbearable experiences of twenty years in Soviet jails.

Written in an exciting but simple and moving style, the portraits of real-life heroes and villains are here etched with a sharp pen and careful eye for detail. Here is displayed the entire panorama of the modern inquisition of Soviet Russia from a personal perspective. The work will certainly

come to be regarded as an outstandingly significant contribution to the past and present history of the Jewish people.

CHAPTER 1

My Arrest

The room into which I had been locked was rather large. Thick bars prevented any escape out of the small window, but broken glass let in the freezing Russian wind. The stone floor was too uncomfortable and too cold. I paced the whole night. When daylight came, I expected to be able to wash and to receive my portion of bread and water. But this morning no one came.

I remembered the evening in 1935 when two men came from the NKVD and arrested me. Scenes of my half-year imprisonment went through my mind. They sent me into exile in Siberia for refusing to depart from my beliefs. I found work as a bookkeeper even in Siberia. I continued to wear my beard and *peyos*,* and I did not work on *Shabbos*. What the NKVD did not understand was that it was only *Shabbos* and religious observance that sustained my existence.

I *davened** the morning prayers and waited impatiently for the door to open. Finally, reaching out through the window bars, I scraped together some snow to moisten my parched lips. *"Baruch Atah Adoshem, Elokenu Melech haolam, shehakol nih'yah bidvaro."* (Blessed are You, L-rd our G-d, King of the universe, by whose word all things came to be.)

By nightfall I could no longer bear the hunger and banged on my cell door. When the guard appeared and I asked him for a piece of bread, he cursed and threatened to take my clothes. "Sit in the cold, naked. You'll forget about being hungry!" It was obvious I could hope for nothing from the NKVD this time. The Soviet Secret Police were known for their cruelty to all prisoners. "You are an exile so the laws do not apply." As a Jew, I could expect even less consideration.

By the third night, I could no longer stand. I lay sleepless on the cold stone floor. Finally I dozed off just before dawn. In this semi-conscious condition, memories of my past came to me.

I had been born in Odessa, Russia, in the southern province, at the end of the 19th century. I was the eighth son, and, since I was the last child, I remained my parents' favorite. Our Jewish community practiced religious tradition, but the spirit of enlightenment had entered many households.

The craving of my friends for secular studies was very great. It was difficult, however, for a Jew to be accepted to the gymnasium, because, according to the law, Jews could comprise no more than ten percent of the school body. Therefore, young Jews studied on their own. It was possible to take the examinations and receive a certificate which qualified the holder for acceptance by the university. Our traditionally-oriented parents forbade us to study these secular subjects, but anyone who was determined found a way to pursue the spirit of enlightenment.

My father, strong-willed as he was, forced his traditional behavior on us. My grandfather had directed a *yeshiva** and we received excellent tutors in Talmud. My mother, may she rest in peace, was a sensitive woman. She guarded our health with devotion. While she pitied us because of my father's strict discipline, she never interfered. Our education remained my father's jurisdiction.

My mother's father had been a simple man. My grandparents worked very hard on their farm and achieved a high standard of living. I heard many stories of their great hospitality. Poor people would stay for months on end. My mother had inherited her parents' kindness. She never punished us and never became angry. My father, for all his strictness, never raised a hand against us. We saw him only on *Shabbos* and holidays because he worked such long hours. Then he would test us on what we had studied. If one of us did not remember, my father's harsh words were enough to upset any of us.

Once Father returned from work very upset, and the next day he did not go to work. We found out later, from my mother, what had happened. A clerk in my father's factory had been sick and did not report to work, although he sent his wife to inform the factory. The owner became very angry and gave instructions to fire the man. My father told the factory owner that, especially in the winter, it was unfair to dismiss the clerk. My father notified the owner that he, himself, would not report to work until the punishment was annulled. The owner became angry. "Are you telling me how to treat my workers? I am the owner. Only I can hire and fire. If you will not ask forgiveness, I will demote you from manager to clerk." My father refused and was directed to leave the factory until he would ask forgiveness. I still remember that winter. The house was bitterly cold. It was only with great difficulty that my parents found daily work which brought in money to buy bread and potatoes. The clerk sued the factory owner and was rehired. However, since Father had left voluntarily, the factory owner was not forced to rehire him.

After a month, Father received a letter from another factory. When he went to meet the owner, he was received warmly. He was offered a managerial position. There was one condition, however, and that was he must work on *Shabbos* afternoon for two hours. Father refused the job. That hard winter passed slowly.

Mother never complained. To the contrary, every day, when we sat down at the dinner table, she repeated the *Mishnah* of The Sayings of Our Fathers, "Thus is the way of the Torah; you will eat bread with salt." When winter passed and *Purim** was over, Mother told us we would celebrate *Pesach** as usual. That day, Father received a letter from another merchant. He went out and returned two hours later with a glowing face. The merchant had agreed to give Father the wages he had formerly received as a foreman in the factory plus a percentage commission. More important, the office was closed on *Shabbos* and holidays.

I began studying when I was five. I was deeply affected by my second teacher. Rabbi Shmuel was a young man who had

just come from *yeshiva* and made our lessons come alive. He carried us with him in his emotional excitement over the Bible and Talmud that we studied. In the evening, when our formal studies were finished, Rabbi Shmuel would tell us Chassidic tales. We sat enraptured and were deeply impressed by his stories of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chassidism.

I next studied in the small yeshiva in our town with thirty other students. One summer, a brilliant student named Ben Zion came to our town. He tested me and then suggested to my father that I study with him for the summer. My father approved and agreed to let me study at the student's home in the country where I could breathe fresh air.

Ben Zion became my teacher and told me that he really wanted to teach me secular subjects so that I could study in the university. I agreed, so we studied together. But then I received a letter from my friend Bezalel, who had gone to a big *yeshiva* to study. He suggested I come join him. When I told my parents that Ben Zion had been teaching me secular studies, they agreed to let me travel to the big *yeshiva*. I studied until I was twenty years old.

Memories like these were a comfort in jail. As I lay on the stone floor, a dream-like image followed these thoughts: My father, may he rest in peace, stood facing me, his eyes full of confidence, and he looked at me sternly and said, "Never fear them." How could I forget that command of my father? He was strong-willed and taught me more firmly by example than with words.

Suddenly, from my dazed sleep, I awoke refreshed and encouraged. I began to dance.

"You are still alive . . . and you have strength to dance," the guard suddenly shouted at me. "You'll really dance today." He ordered me to be still, but when I asked for bread, he answered, "That bread can cost you your life." By this time I knew I was undergoing one of the standard pre-interrogation tactics. When so absolutely exhausted, most victims would sign anything, but I was determined to resist.

In a few hours, the door opened and I was ordered out. I was so weak from hunger that the guard had to support me and lead me to the interrogation room. The same agent who had arrested me three days before, on November 22, 1937, stood there and stared at me for some time. "We had so much work that I simply forgot all about you."

CHAPTER 2
In Fear of Life

"My name is Maroka. I know every detail of your destructive work. If you confess promptly, you will suffer less and be given a lighter sentence — ten years. That will give you enough time to meditate on your activities and perhaps even realize that it is senseless to fight us."

He took a report out of his briefcase and handed it to me for my signature. I read it with growing shock. "These are all lies! I will not sign this. You accuse me of blowing up a division of the factory where I work on a Saturday. Everybody knows that I never reported for work on Saturday because I am a religious Jew. You accuse me of being 'harmful' and for spreading anti-Soviet propaganda when you know very well that I have no contacts with anyone at all."

A burly man in an NKVD uniform strode into the room. "Well! Didn't he sign yet? Give him to me. I like to handle the strong ones." He turned abruptly and left.

A moment later, the NKVD commander entered. With a cynical smile he remarked to Maroka, "Don't you see that he is exhausted from hunger? Give him a rest. Then he will come back to his senses and sign."

At once, I was taken out of the interrogation room and put into another cell. About fifteen prisoners were tightly packed together, sitting on the floor. I managed to push myself into a corner. They all asked the same question, "Did you sign? No?

You're a fool. They will starve and torture you to death, and in the end you'll sign anyway. You are suffering for nothing."

I didn't care what they said. Out of weariness I dozed off. "No sleeping here during the day," said the senior prisoner, awakening me. Shortly after this, the door opened and the guard called out the prisoners' names, giving each one a portion of bread. He did not call my name. "They only give bread to the those who admit to and sign the accusation," my neighbor explained.

At night I finally fell asleep, but was soon awakened by screams of terror coming from a nearby cell. "Don't pay any attention to them," the prisoner next to me said. "Every night we hear screams. That room is where they do the questioning." The screams died down before dawn and I fell asleep. Before long, they woke me and led me to my interrogator, Maroka.

"You haven't signed your questionnaire," he greeted me cordially. "Sit, won't you?" He handed me the questionnaire and busied himself with some papers.

I signed the first page, just routine personal information. The second page, though, was a re-hash of the accusations in the previous report. "I will not sign this," I told him firmly.

Maroka jumped out of his chair in fury, grabbed his revolver, and pointed it at me threateningly. Just then the NKVD commander came in and ordered me to go with him.

He took me to a large room where some thirty men stood in rows. There was a circle on the floor around each man, out of which he was forbidden to move. They were barefoot, most of them with swollen feet, some with open wounds dripping blood. Their eyes all had one expression — terror. They were given no food but, on the other hand, were forced to drink huge amounts of water. One collapsed as we entered. They gave him an injection and stood him up again.

"See what they look like?" the commander asked me. "They did not sign. You will look like that in a few hours." He placed me in a row, chalked a circle around my feet, and left. I looked around the room and studied our guard. He sat at a

table in a corner near me, holding a revolver in his hand. He looked about 30 years of age, his body built like a bull's. His broad shoulders leaned over the newspaper he was studiously reading, and he seemed not to notice when one of us momentarily leaned on the wall. I suddenly recognized him as a frequent visitor at the factory where I had worked. He gave me the impression that he did not particularly relish his duty here. I was fairly close to him so I risked whispering.

"I haven't tasted food in four days. You know I am a loyal, innocent person. Please get me a piece of bread. You will be blessed for your kindness."

Startled, he looked at me with confusion. Reaching into a bag, he took out a piece of bread and said, "Eat it fast or we'll both be in trouble."

I had barely tasted it when the NKVD commander returned. He rushed toward me and grabbed the bread out of my hands. He pulled out his revolver and shouted, "Tell me at once who gave you the bread, or I'll shoot you on the spot like a dog!"

"Yesterday, at the questioning . . ." I stammered. "I asked Maroka . . . I was so hungry . . . and he gave me a piece of bread . . ."

"How much did you pay him for it?" he screamed almost hysterically, still waving the revolver at me.

"This time, nothing," I answered. "But a while ago, before my arrest, I once forgot to report on time to the NKVD, and I was afraid of being punished, so I gave him a hundred rubles."

He immediately walked over to the telephone and ordered that all materials be taken away from Investigator Maroka and that Maroka be removed to a special room. Then he turned to me. "Well, do you plan to stand this way for a long time or are you ready to sign the charges against you? Don't get any idea that we'll give you bread here. Or maybe you're thinking of cookies? Sooner or later you're going to sign, but you will only stand here longer, like these idiots," he said, pointing to the other prisoners.

Losing my self-control, I angrily retorted, "You are right. They are idiots — because they let themselves be tortured." To his surprise, I simply sat down on the floor. He grabbed me by the collar and dragged me out of the room into the investigator's office.

"Finish up with questioning this swine," he ordered, trembling with anger, and then walked out. The investigator did not even attempt to persuade me to sign the minutes of my investigation. He summoned a soldier and ordered him to take me to the "prison." At the moment, that was salvation for me.

CHAPTER 3

"Paradise"

The prison was called "paradise" by all the prisoners because they were no longer dragged nightly to the tortures of interrogation. I was led into a room some ten meters long and two meters wide, with over fifty people crowded on the floor. From dawn until noon, half the group lay along one wall, while the other half sat along the other wall on their packs containing a few belongings. At noon, everybody switched positions. At night, half would occupy the "luxurious" positions at one wall, while the others would arrange themselves on the other side, half-sitting, half-lying, feet propped upon the fortunate ones lying down. At midnight, the whole cell shifted positions to permit everyone the luxury of lying along the wall.

At five o'clock, we were awakened and taken to the yard for fifteen minutes. There was a barrel of water, usually frozen. We broke the ice, washed with the icy water, then returned to the cell. I had my first opportunity to study my cellmates at this time. I was the only Jew there, and they all considered me a stranger. No one spoke to me. They did not move to make room for me to sit. I stood there a long while until, out of weariness and hunger, I fell in a dead faint.

"Open up! A man died!" my cellmates began shouting, while banging on the door. The guard who came dragged me out by the feet. My head bumped the floor all the way to the yard. I don't know how long I lay there. When I finally regained consciousness, sharp pains in my abdomen reminded me that I had been virtually without food for four days. I was returned to the cell just as one of the prisoners was being taken out. I took his place and, at last, was able to lie down.

The daily bread ration was brought in. It was officially 600 grams, but actually half of that. The bread was black and pasty. I was afraid to eat it because I knew from experience that I would get sharp pains. But I was hungry, so I nibbled until half of it was gone. I was right. The stomach pangs kept me up all night.

In the morning, the prisoner at my right received a package of food from home. "You must live far from here," he said turning to me. "You don't receive any packages. Maybe your family gave up on you? Here, take some of my food." He offered me a piece of roast meat. "Please eat," was all he said.

I thanked him gratefully and explained that in prison I ate only bread because I was a religious Jew. Cooked food must be prepared according to Jewish law.

"I understand you," he remarked. "I'm a Muslim myself. Oh sure, I'm a Communist, but everything at home is strictly according to our religion. But here in jail you have to eat whatever you have."

I told him my unwavering belief is that everywhere, even here in jail, I must remain a Jew. We became friends in time, and he poured his heart out to me.

"I was a member of the Party, an official, and ran a company employing many workers. It never occurred to me that I might one day be arrested by the Soviets . . ."

CHAPTER 4

The Man-eating Prison

In December, my group of twenty prisoners was brought to the central prison. An officer strode in and announced our sentences: ten years, ten years, over and over. Only the names changed. Each prisoner had to step forward and sign an affidavit that he had been informed of his sentence. We were all stunned. Some actually fainted. My name was called out last. I did not faint nor show any emotion. The whole ceremony seemed irrelevant to me. I was elsewhere, deep in my own thoughts. My father's face filled my mind: "Never fear them."

We were led up a flight of stairs. They opened a door and shoved us into a room some twelve meters square. There were already 98 prisoners in that room, so that the total numbered 118 men. I was the last and stood there pressed against the wall. It was impossible to move.

"Sit down on the *parashe*," the *starosta* (senior prisoner) suggested. The *parashe* was an iron barrel with a cover on top that was to serve the personal needs of the 118 men in our room for an entire day and night. The stench was so overwhelming that I collapsed. The others revived me and placed me along the wall near the window, which was broken as usual and let in the bitterly cold wind. The place alongside the wall had just been vacated because the occupant became sick. He was taken to the hospital, where he died a few days later. Usually that's what happened to patients in the prison hospital. By this time I was familiar with different Soviet prisons, but what I found here surpassed all my expectations. Here I found a murderous regime, dedicated to shattering the prisoners both physically and spiritually, robbing them of any vestige of humanity, of any spark of hope. The prison was designed to transform men into animals.

At five in the morning, we were awakened and led out of the room for a half hour. In this time we were to satisfy our needs, because the barrel in the room was obviously too small. It was emptied only once a day — during this half hour. We were also expected to wash, and, since there were so few spigots, this led to shoving and a long line. Only a few of the prisoners could both wash and relieve themselves.

The roll call was at six. At that time, a uniformed official of the NKVD would come in, whom I called the *Malach Hamavas*, the Angel of Death. He would stand in the doorway, contemplating us for what seemed to be an eternity. The first prisoner would ask, "Me?" He would stand there in terror waiting for the answer, "No." Then the next prisoner would go through this terrifying routine, and the third, until the answer "Yes." That unfortunate person was the victim of the day, for the Angel of Death would take him away at once. Usually the prisoner never returned, and the few that did no longer resembled human beings. Usually, we could not relax until long after the roll call.

At nine we received our small, daily portion of black, pasty bread. A while later they would bring the "main course," a bowl of dirty water with pieces of black cabbage and beets forlornly swimming in it. The vegetables were generally of the quality which was used as slop for cattle and swine.

Toward evening we were lined up again, and the same guard counted us. Then came preparation for sleep, with positions carefully worked out again.

If a prisoner had to relieve himself during the night, it was just too bad. No one was permitted to use the barrel at night or even to get up without permission of the *starosta.* The smell of the sweat mingled with the aroma from the barrel, making breathing itself unbearable.

CHAPTER 5

A Light in the Darkness

It was a strict prison, yet somehow many prisoners found ways to communicate with friends in other cells, and sometimes even with the outside world. One had to be very careful because fellow prisoners would often become informers.

One day, the barber entered our cell, announcing that he would give shaves and haircuts, but only for those who could pay. I had no money, so I did not even think about a haircut. When the barber finished with his paying customers, he came over to me and whispered in Yiddish, "Reb Yid, I'll do it for you for nothing."

I was surprised because he did not impress me as being Jewish. When I asked him to leave my beard and *payos*, he told me that there were two religious Jews on the floor above. "Could you say 'hello' to them for me, and perhaps find out whether we know each other?" I asked him.

"It will be some while before I get to their cell, because I operate on a strict schedule set by the administration." He did, however, suggest a way to contact them. There was a single toilet for everyone, where we were taken in the evening. That room contained a dark corner with a hole in the wall. The barber suggested that I hide a note there written in Yiddish. Meanwhile he would get word to the two other Jews to check the hole for my message. At first I was reluctant, because I was not sure how much to trust the barber. Finally, I decided to do it. I waited for the answer impatiently.

Around that time, I was called out by the administration. I was convinced that the barber had set a trap for me. Fortunately I was wrong. I pray that G-d forgives me for suspecting the barber. In the office, the bookkeeper asked my

given name and family name and told me that a hundred rubles had been received for me, for which I was to sign a receipt. In Yiddish he whispered that my wife sent the money. Then he asked me about my occupation before my arrest, and when I told him I was a bookkeeper, he promised to request that I be assigned to work in that office. He, himself, had been arrested and given a sentence of two years because of discrepancies found in the books of the place where he had worked. He had many friends among the officials, so they let him remain in his own town and continue to work at his profession. He had his own office and was able to maintain regular contacts with his family.

I soon learned that the request to assign me to that office was categorically refused because the administration regarded me as a "dangerous criminal." I heard this from the barber, who was certain that the bookkeeper had run a grave risk by making his recommendation and had suffered certain unpleasant consequences. This was only the first of many encounters I had with Jews who put their lives in danger for me.

Soon I found a reply to the message I had left in the hole. The prisoners on the second floor were Rabbi Yaakov and Shmuel, good friends of mine. Two days later, I wrote another note, enclosed thirty rubles, and put them in the same hiding-place. We continued to correspond regularly.

We had a daily exercise period in the prison yard for fifteen minutes. We were required to remain several paces apart and keep our eyes down so that we could not communicate with each other. Generally, the inhabitants of each cell went out separately, but one day another cell was taken out with ours. While tramping around the yard, I suddenly looked up and saw Yaakov. In our surprise, we instinctively cried out to each other, quite oblivious to our surroundings and the regulations.

"Yaakov!"

"Avrohom!"

Fortunately the guard did not notice.

I remained shaken all day. Rabbi Yaakov had always been full of life and spirit. His energy and ebullience were reflected all around him. He had always devoted himself to encouraging and helping others. Now he was melancholy, exhausted and scrawny, barely able to stand. I never saw him again.

CHAPTER 6
A Tragic Episode With Polish Jews

One evening, about a week after arriving in this prison, the prisoner lying next to me passed out and was taken to the prison hospital. All of us were upset because we knew that he was on his last journey. No one ever returned from that hospital. The routine of the prison continued, of course, and before retiring to bed we were lined up outside again for the roll call and returned to the cell. It occurred to me that tonight I would sleep more comfortably. Since my neighbor's place would surely not be filled so late in the day, I would have more room. I was wrong — someone did take that place. At first, I didn't notice him because the small bulb hanging high from the ceiling shed almost no light. When I tried to stretch, I realized he was there.

"I'm a Jew," he whispered to me. All night he told me his story:

"I'm from Lodz in Poland, where I left a wife and five children. I was a weaver with my own machine and I worked for different companies, doing the work at home. As long as there was work, I could take care of my family. But then the periods between jobs became longer and longer. It was hard to get food for the table, so naturally I tried everything I could.

"In 1934, we heard all kinds of reports about the wonderful life in Russia. We even heard about a Jewish weaver from Lodz who crossed the border illegally two years

earlier and had found a good job in a large textile factory. We were told this fellow had a fine, comfortable home, received good wages, saved up some money, and sent for his family to join him. On top of it all, the factory paid for his family's travel expenses.

"A fairly large group of us contacted a smuggler who helped us over the frontier. At first we worked in a textile factory in Minsk and earned good pay, but after a few months things changed. In 1935 all of us were summoned to the NKVD and forbidden to live in Minsk. We were given tickets and orders to come to this town and to follow special regulations. We were not to leave the town and had to report to the NKVD every ten days. We had no jobs because there were no textile factories in this town. We managed to get some work anyway, and became accustomed to the situation — until July 1937.

"All the Polish Jews in the town were arrested. We were held in separate cells, isolated from one another. It was my luck to be the first one taken for questioning. You know what that is like. It took five days. I do not recall exactly what they used to hit me with, but when I regained consciousness I was in a hospital with my head bandaged and casts on my arms and legs. A doctor came in. 'You are in a cast. Any movement, however slight, can be fatal. If you need anything, the nurse will help you. Just ring.' Later that day my interrogator came.

" 'I asked you to sign without trouble, didn't I? What do you need all this pain for?' He was oozing with phony sympathy. 'But anyway, you really are lucky. A friend of yours is on the way to the moon already . . .'

"Just then the doctor came in. 'Please do not disturb the patient now. He is in critical condition. As soon as he is better, I will inform you and he will be at your disposal.' The interrogator left and then she said to me, 'You must not excite yourself. Your head is badly injured and any careless movement is dangerous.' Then she leaned over my bed and whispered.

" 'I cannot speak Yiddish, but I am a Jewish woman. I'll do all I can for you. Right now I'm afraid there's not much I can

do. Don't move without help from me or the nurse, because you are in a serious condition. I'll try to keep you here as long as possible. That's all I can do for you now. They beat you with some kind of heavy iron. You're not the first. I see these crimes here all the time.'

"About two months later, when I was improved somewhat, the interrogator came in with the doctor. He demanded that I be discharged immediately and sent to the NKVD. The doctor protested that my condition required further medical attention and that I could not even walk yet.

" 'I'll cure him,' the agent snapped. 'I'll get him to walk. He'll even run for me . . .'

"That evening I was transferred to the interrogator, and, as I left the hospital, the doctor said good-bye with tears in her eyes. When I came into his room, the interrogator handed me the accusation sheet to sign. I refused. He did not beat me, he did not even answer me. He calmly called a guard who led me into a room where all the windows were broken. It was freezing. The door closed, leaving me alone. Suddenly, water started to gush on me from showerheads set in the ceiling. The temperature of the water kept changing, first icewater and a moment later scalding, then cold again. Then, it stopped suddenly and started again. I could see steam rising from my body and could feel myself beginning to freeze. I have no idea how long this went on. I do remember that the door opened and the interrogator called out, 'This will be your end. If you sign, I'll take you out right away and you will live.'

"I cannot tell you what happened after that, or how much time passed. When I regained consciousness, I was in a warm room and my clothes were dry. Apparently I signed the confession. I figured that I had brought real trouble to those Polish Jews who were arrested with me. I was kept in solitary confinement for two weeks in the NKVD and then brought to prison. I was put in a cell with thirty-five Polish Jews. Twelve of our original group were missing. They could not survive the questioning.

"My cellmates were furious with me and regarded me as an informer. They were bitter because they had resisted until they were shown my signature on the confession. I had declared that I had come with forty-seven other Jews from Poand as spies, and that we sent secrets to the Polish espionage from the Soviet Union, especially about the Soviet army. After seeing my signature they began to break and, one by one, 'confessed' to the lies."

This was the story my new neighbor told me. We did not sleep that night. He kept pleading with me to answer the question that tormented him — "Am I really guilty?"

The next day after roll call, the Angel of Death asked, "Who is new here today?"

The *starosta* pointed out the Polish Jew. When the Angel ordered him to come along, the Jew paled and grabbed me crying, "Help me! Help me!"

A few days later, it was our turn to go to the bathhouse. There was a Gentile prisoner who worked there with whom we would leave our money and cigarettes after undressing, so they would not be stolen. I used to give him a pack of cigarettes from time to time and became friendly with him. When there was a free moment this time, he came over to chat. "Last night they woke me up and told me to go to work because a group of prisoners was brought to the bathhouse. These were the Polish Jews. While they had their baths, a bunch of NKVD came. They turned off the water and went into the room. Each NKVD was carrying a sack which they threw over the prisoners' heads. Then they shoved them into some trucks. They left, telling me to wait. From far off, I could hear the echo of a machine gun. The NKVD returned alone, took the Jews' clothes and coins that had been left with me, and went. It's not the first time they've done these rotten things."

CHAPTER 7

Doctors Aid the Arrested to Die

Our prison, designed for a capacity of 1,000, held over 10,000 prisoners in 1937. The cells were inhumanly crowded and filthy. We could not change our underclothes, and we were able to bathe only once every three weeks. The bath, also, was used to torment the prisoners. Without any warning, we would be driven out of the cell to the bathhouse. We stood in line in the yard for about an hour, shuddering with cold. Then, we came into a cavernous room chilled from paneless windows. All of us, sick or healthy, were shorn, and we had to undress. Our outer clothes were taken for disinfection, but we carried our underwear with us. Then we went into the bathing room, where there were some benches and small buckets, but never enough of either. If you were able to get a bucket, chances were that there was not enough water. Soap? I never saw any. After rinsing ourselves, we used the same water to launder our underwear. This room was also bitterly cold. After every bath day, a great many prisoners would fall sick. We received our clothes back and wore them on our naked flesh, carrying the soggy underwear in our hands to the cell.

We returned and hung the wet underwear to dry. The prison doctor would appear at once and order them taken down because, he explained solicitiously, it was not hygienic. The *starosta* once asked him how, then, were we to dry out clothes. He suggested that they dry best while you wear them.

But we can become sick from wearing wet clothes in this cold," the *starosta* protested.

"Well," the doctor drawled, "that won't be a great tragedy. The Soviet Union will have a few less enemies."

The doctor won. We dried the clothes on our backs, and thirty-three people in my room fell sick. They were taken to the hospital. Only a pitiful few ever returned.

One day I was called to the hospital, where several NKVD officers wanted me. They asked about my occupation before prison. When I told them I was a bookkeeper, they asked me a few questions about bookkeeping and seemed satisfied that I was sufficiently skilled. They requested that the prison commandant have my documents ready, because they wanted to take me to work in one of their offices. One of the NKVD explained to me that I would be working for them as a bookkeeper and be quartered near the office. If my family desired, they could live with me. I was overjoyed.

Just then, the prison doctor came in. When he heard about the work I was to do, he emphatically forbade it, stressing that I absolutely must not travel because I was terribly sick and would not survive the journey. That was the end of my career as a bookkeeper for the NKVD.

A few days later, I was again summoned to the office. Only the commandant and the thoughtful doctor were there. He examined me and pronounced me physically fit. Even the commandant was shocked and exclaimed, "But just a few days ago you said that he was too sick to travel, so how can you say that he is 'capable' when you know we're talking about hard labor?"

The doctor chuckled and, quite ignoring my presence, cheerfully observed, "So there will be one less enemy — and a Jew to boot."

I was sent back to the cell. For the next few days, just about every prisoner was summoned to the office. All of us had mixed emotions. Leaving this hell of a prison was enough to make anyone happy, but who knew what awaited us.

CHAPTER 8

The Transport

Right after Purim, we were taken from the cell and driven into a cellar deep under the prison building. It was small and windowless. We were joined by the cell mates from upstairs, so Shmuel and I were together. Shmuel was only 18 years old. He was a thin, weak youth, but very strong-willed and always smiling.

We were getting ready for the transport. On the eighth day, we were all shaved and shorn. Shmulik and I refused to let them shave our beards. The "doctor" who supervised our "hygiene" ordered that no baths be permitted before shaving and without confirmation of bathing, the convoy would not take the prisoner on the transport. We still refused. The "doctor" turned docile and ordered that we be permitted to bathe. Now we felt secure. We undressed and went into the baths, when suddenly several soldiers rushed in, grabbed us naked, and hustled us to the barber, who shaved our beards by force. The "doctor" stood by all the while, observing the hilarious show, unable to control his roars of laughter.

Before dawn the next day, we were led out to the yard. Some one hundred uniformed NKVD stood there, armed with rifles and machine guns, with a number of trained police dogs. This was the convoy that was to accompany us on the transport from prison to the camp.

Now began the inspection of belongings. We were lined up by fours and ordered to undress. The NKVD searched through our clothes, looking for contraband. They meticulously examined the pockets, hems, collars, and cuffs, patiently deliberating for over two hours. We stood naked in the frost and snow. If they found a cup, bowl, fork, spoon, or knife, it was confiscated. Family photographs were torn up at

once, and the pieces, scattered. Then, one of the convoy, who served as medic, walked up and down the rows, carefully inspecting each of us. Only then were we allowed to dress.

Now they checked our documents. The last paragraph indicated for what term we were sentenced. Shmulik and I, and for that matter many of the prisoners, did not have a paragraph. Instead, our papers showed "C.R." for "counter-revolutionary". This, of course, was the most serious crime. The C.R.'s were regarded as incorrigible.

The prisoners were divided into groups. Armed soldiers and dogs surrounded each group, and mounted soldiers brandished sabers. Before we set out on the march, the commandant of the convoy addressed us, warning that whoever violated any of the convoy regulations and orders would be shot instantly. A single step out of line, to the right or to the left, would be considered as an attempt to escape, and the soldiers would shoot without warning. Then he turned to the troops and said, "Whom are we taking?"

The soldiers shouted in chorus, "Enemies of the people!"

"What will you do if they try to escape?"

"Shoot them without warning," came the choral response.

This little ceremony concluded, the prison gates swung open and out we marched. Hundreds of people lined the road. There were wives, children, and other relatives of the prisoners. They cried out, "What are you doing to our husbands! Give us back our fathers!" But the mounted soldiers drove them away while others spurred on the prisoners, "Faster! Faster! Gallop!"

Accompanied by the screams of our kinfolk and by the blows of the soldiers, we ran. We continued for several kilometers until we arrived, out of breath, at a rail junction where several railroad cars awaited us.

Forty of us were driven into each wagon. There was a small iron stove inside, but no fuel. There was a hole in the middle of the floor for the "passengers'" needs. Directly under the roof was a tiny barred window.

The door slammed shut and the train moved. With the cold and the clatter of the train, sleep was out of the question. Before dawn, the train stopped. One of the convoy soldiers came in and began chasing us from one side to the other, for no apparent reason. We had no idea what he wanted us to do, and like people unable to grasp reality, we ran up and back, the soldier cursing and shouting at us. Suddenly the train started, giving him no chance to jump off. He must have been terrified that we might attack him, for he pointed his gun at us and ordered us to sit on the floor. For endless hours we sat pressed together, forbidden to move a muscle, until the train halted and our frightened guard left the car.

Now two other soldiers came in and ordered us to line up along one wall. All they wanted was a correct count of the prisoners. That finally achieved, a bucket of water was brought in. It was barely enough for everyone.

With the water, they gave a loaf of bread for every four prisoners. The two-kilo loaves were frozen, hard as rock. No one had a knife in the wagon because knives had been confiscated. Somehow we smashed the loaves into pieces, but it was impossible to divide them into fair portions. You can imagine the quarrels this caused among the famished prisoners. Then they brought us a pot of soup. Hungry as we were, no one could stand to eat any. Those who tried spat out more than they tasted. At night, the soldiers threw some lumps of coal into the car but, characteristically, there was no wood for tinder.

In the wagon, there were two professional thieves with years of experience in Russian prisons and camps. The younger one, Mishka, assured us that we were truly blessed to be privileged to have them with us, for they were capable of coping with every situation. As a matter of fact, the thieves soon discovered a discarded pair of galoshes behind some shelves. Now we had kindling. The wagon was soon warm.

Shmulik and I stuck together. We decided to get into the good graces of the thieves by offering them our portions of soup, and also some sugar and other tidbits we had with us on the journey. For this, they promised to look after us in the

camp, where they had a host of comrades. Generally these thieves had remarkable influence in the camps. The administrations utilized them in exercising their "refined" methods against the other prisoners, who were usually innocent and respectable people.

The train always stopped out in a field somewhere, far from a railroad station, so that the populace would not see the transports of prisoners. In those days, the railroads of the Soviet Union were operating both night and day, transporting hordes of prisoners. Always north, farther north, the train rolled steadily, while the frost deepened and we suffered indescribably from the terrible cold. We pleaded with the commandant of the convoy to give us some coal.

"Be happy with what you received," was his answer. "I had to steal this little bit during the journey because they didn't allocate any coal at all for this transport."

We received no coal the next day and were soon stiff with cold. When the soldiers called us for roll-call in the morning, we could not move. They called the commandant, who stormed into the wagon and, cursing us roundly, beat us with his fists. Several soldiers beat the prisoners mercilessly with their rifle butts. The prisoners screamed with pain and, with their last strength, struggled to their feet for roll-call.

"Another conspiracy like that," the commandant warned us, "and I'll have you shot at once."

Nine days dragged by. Toward sunset of the ninth day, the train halted and the door opened. A fierce wind and a snowy blizzard swept into the wagon.

CHAPTER 9
"Cold Hell"

We were received at the camp with the same cruel bathhouse routines. When all of us were finished, we were taken to the transit camp, consisting of five wooden barracks. Our group of several hundred was driven into two barracks, which meant that there was no room to turn around because of the crowded conditions. Three tiers of bunks lined the walls, and those who were able claimed a place. The barrack was unheated, without water or privy. Body heat provided warmth. Exhausted, we all dropped off to sleep. This was the first night in our new camp, which we named the "Cold Hell."

At dawn we were awakened and given our bread ration. Then, a weird thing happened. Six young brutes strode in. Three took places at the door to prevent anyone from leaving. The other three announced that they were officials, and they ordered us to stay in our places while they made a search of our belongings. They started to paw through the suitcases and bundles, confiscating whatever came to hand — money, furs, warm underwear, woolens, and so on. Suddenly, another group came storming into the barracks and started beating the first six, calling them scoundrels and criminals. Blood flowed before they threw the "officials" out of the barracks. "We're the ones in charge here," they proclaimed, and then this second bunch began searching through the prisoners' meager belongings, clothes included. Now we realized who these "officials" really were, and a few of us jumped on them. The other prisoners stood by, but we thrashed the intruders until they began crying for help.

Their cries brought soldiers and, at long last, the real commandant of the camp. To our astonishment, instead of punishing the thieves, he shouted at us! "Enemies of the

people! Did you forget where you are? The very first day you come, you make a scandal and abuse innocent men. This is a camp, and you will pay dearly for this."

We found out later that we were not the first victims, but we were the first to resist and teach the bullies a lesson. The criminals and administration had developed a working partnership, the officials getting the loot and the robbers getting an occasional bottle of whiskey for their trouble. The criminals were an "elite" group, exempt from the hard, punitive labor the rest of us suffered.

The second day began with the medical commission. The doctor examined every prisoner, but it was all meaningless because he marked every record "T.T," meaning "hard labor," regardless of the prisoner's condition. At the second commission, we were questioned about our outside occupations. Some who claimed specialized skills were examined on the spot. When I answered that I was a bookkeeper by training, I was sent to a table where a middle-aged man sat. He asked me all about my work and whispered to me to wait until he finished all his work because he wanted to talk to me. When we were alone, he began.

"You are religious, and I quite understand, but you will find difficulties here with your religion. I will help you all I can, though that will not be very much. You will not be permitted to see your wife. She won't be able to send you any packages through the administration, because they will steal them. I will try to get in touch with her, and I will let you know everything I can. Today you will be sent to a camp where you will really work hard, more than you can bear. In any case, remember the directions back here — it's not far. If you succeed in escaping, you can always come here to me. I might be able to hide you here. They will search for you for several days on all the roads around the camp, and then I'll give you papers to get you to Moscow. There, I imagine, you will be able to take care of yourself and move further. But remember, whatever happens, you never spoke to me. For this conversation we can both be shot. Don't ask questions."

I stared at him, stunned and uncertain. "My father is also a religious Jew," was all he said.

That night we were lined up again. In a column surrounded by armed soldiers and dogs, we were marched away from the transit camp to our permanent labor camp. It was dark, but I still noted landmarks to be able to make my way back if I escaped.

At the new camp, we were driven into a long and narrow barrack, with two tiers of bunks on the walls. Each bunk was some eight meters long, and was to accomodate twenty men. In the middle of the barrack, between the rows of bunks, there was a table and a small stove for heat.

There was no sleeping that night. No sooner had we stretched out, than several staff people came in and started working on our record forms. We were asked not only about ourselves, but also in detail about our relatives on the outside and their addresses. Our interrogator was interested in the color of our relatives' hair and eyes. After this, we were separated into brigades, each under a "brigadier" who was responsible for our work and for everything pertaining to the prisoners.

It was a huge labor camp with some 8,000 in our division alone. We worked in ten areas in two shifts, the first from six in the morning until six in the evening, and the other from six in the evening until six in the morning. The 8,000 prisoners were divided into ten columns and each column into brigades. Each column was headed by a *natchalnik*,* whose function it was to assign the prisoners' work and make sure they appeared at the working quarters.

Fortunately, Shmuel and I were assigned to the same brigade. Our brigadier was an educated man, academically trained. As soon as he was appointed, he called us together and announced, "For me, understand you have to work well and fast. I hope that because of your good work I will not only be discharged from here soon, but I will also be rewarded with a medal . . ."

This little ceremony was not finished when in marched the *natchalnik*, who proceeded to curse us out eloquently and

Natchalnik (Rus.): Officer.

fervently. It was five in the morning by this time. There we stood, famished, after a sleepless night in the snow, waiting for another half hour until all the brigades were lined up to march out to work. I was shivering with cold and bitterly depressed. Suddenly, we heard an orchestra play a lively march tune. Only some perverted genius could devise a cheery march under these inhuman circumstances. Years later, I learned that Hitler's camps also used music in this way.

Our *natchalnik* was a young Russian art student. He was sentenced to ten years for forging government debentures. With his enthusiastic way of forcing us to work, and by his general bullying, he would atone for his sins and gain an early release. If he ever found a prisoner on his board, which served as a bunk, after five in the morning, he beat him brutally and dragged him out by the feet. He mercilessly drove sick prisoners with a doctor's certificate out to work. Obtaining a certificate of sickness from the doctor was no light affair. Two doctors attended the 8,000 prisoners, and each doctor could release no more than ten patients daily from work. The eleventh could collapse with a raging fever — he would not be given a work release certificate.

We reached our work site. The one in charge of the job studied us carefully and then said to the brigadier, "More than half of your people are old, and more importantly, it doesn't look like they've ever done physical labor. This work is hard. They'll never be able to do it. Why don't you request that your brigade be sent to another division where the work is lighter?"

"Don't worry," our brigadier reassured him. "They will fulfill even two norms. I'll see to that."

We were presented with shovels, picks, and axes then marched off to work. After a long march, we reached a riverbank. The icy wind penetrated our bones. The brigadier marked off a sizeable piece of ground for us to dig out. This was to be our norm for the day. "You won't go home until the norm is finished," he informed us.

We worked like the possessed because we were simply frozen, but all of our efforts were useless. The earth was deeply frozen, and our primitive tools could barely dent the

soil. We sweated enough to raise steam from our bodies. Our clothes froze to our skin. The brigadier kept shouting, "Faster! Faster!" Night fell. It was nine o'clock, and the norm was not yet fulfilled. The brigadier was furious, but we were completely drained by then. More and more prisoners sank to the ground, only half-conscious, and were frozen to the dirt so we could not move them. Only then did the brigadier assemble us and return us to the zone containing our barracks and the camp administration.

When we reached the gate of the zone, we found the other brigades waiting. They were angry with us because they had to stand so long in the cold, hungry until our arrival. They were ready to attack us, but fortunately the labor-camp commandant was standing right there. He sensed the sullen and dangerous mood around him, so he ordered that we be admitted without the regular time-consuming search. (We were searched twice daily, once in the morning before going to work, to be sure no one had any bread hidden in his clothes, a terrible crime. Then, in the evening, we were again searched for any contraband: knives, bread, whiskey, letters, or money. The morning search was brief and cursory, for they were anxious that we get to work as soon as possible. The evening search was long and deliberate, for they were in no hurry.)

We entered the zone and reached our barracks but could not yet enter. First came the roll-call. During this ritual, all the columns stood lined up at their respective barracks. The duty officer, accompanied by the senior *natchalnik*, went from column to column, counting the prisoners. Then the Russians went to their office to make an accounting of the men.

Usually there were discrepancies. And that is exactly what happened on our first day after work. We stood outside — frozen, famished, and fatigued — forbidden to budge.

Hours later the roll was concluded, and we followed our brigadier to eat, escorted by armed guards, since we were still in quarantine, a three week status. We could not set foot outside the barrack without an armed guard's supervision, nor were we to have any contact with other barracks or brigades.

The camp area was about a kilometer long, with three rows of barracks to house the prisoners. In the center were the administration buildings, the kitchen, storerooms for food and clothing, the infirmary, bathhouse, laundry, and a canteen that seldom had anything to sell.

Shmuel and I did not eat from the non-kosher kitchen. We could not purchase anything in the canteen, for we were still in quarantine and were forbidden to move about the camp. The commandant had "pity" on our plight. He sent us a little boy who offered to buy something for us in the canteen. We gave him five rubles and asked him to buy herring, sugar and *makhorka.** We never saw him again, so we had to be satisfied with dry bread and water. The next day I asked the commandant the whereabouts of the boy he had sent to us. A look of innocence was all I received from him, coupled with astonishment that we would give money to a stranger. He warned us not to mention this again because we had violated regulations and could be severely punished. For us, this was an effective lesson in the cooperation between the administration and the degenerate criminals in the camp.

CHAPTER 10

My First Shabbos in Labor Camp

It was Thursday night, the eve of my first *Shabbos* in camp. It was a rough day of hard punitive labor. Shmuel and I were sprawled on our planks, unable to fall asleep. Our thoughts were tormented by our harsh situation and, particularly, by the consideration of our "cell-mate," Queen *Shabbos.* Even by Soviet law, every citizen had the right to one day's rest a week, but here in camp no laws applied. Work was endless, unremitting, from year's start to year's end. There was no rest except for two days — November Seventh, the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, an international Socialist holiday, and May First. What could we do to avoid violating the *Shabbos*?

We wrote to the *Utchatchik*,* explaining that in our religion Saturday is a sacred day when we are forbidden to do anything. To avoid any jealousy among prisoners of other faiths, we suggested that we be placed in the dungeon over *Shabbos*. These were special punishment cells for solitary confinement, reserved for violators of camp regulations.

I wrote out our request Friday morning, and before going out to work I handed it to the commandant's secretary. It happened that on that day the commandant of the Third Division visited us at work. He delivered a speech, making clear that we were still alive thanks only to the humanitarianism of the Soviet government. By rights, as foes of the first victorious proletarian revolution, we should have been shot at once.

"Our power of the people," he orated sonorously "has given you your last opportunity for rehabilitation. You can demonstrate this only through labor. If you exceed your norms, you will be well treated and you will have good prospects of returning to your homes after your ten-year terms to live like all free and fortunate citizens of our great Socialist homeland. For those who fail to work honestly and conscientiously," he continued in a lower tone, "we possess methods of insuring that they will not see their homes again. For the first three days only, you will be given the full ration of 600 grams of bread, regardless of the results of your work. After the third day, your rations will depend on your productivity. Whoever fails to meet his norm will not receive his full ration and will die of hunger."

Those last menacing words frightened all of us. We threw ourselves into the work with incredible energy. Well before mid-day we had finished half of the day's norm. Our brigadier was overjoyed and rushed off to report to his superiors about his achievement. Several people came from the office to verify the report, and when they were convinced it was correct, they took our brigadier back with them. The entire camp swiftly learned that we had excelled; that on the second day of labor we had exceeded our norm. We were now the "shock-troops," an example for others.

Utchatchik (Rus.): Foreman who records amount of work finished.

The achievement of half the norm so thoroughly exhausted us all that as soon as the brigadier left, we simply stopped working altogether. It was evening. Shmuel and I washed our hands, *davened Mincha*, and then welcomed *Shabbos*. Meanwhile the others gathered up the tools and prepared to return to the barracks. We waited for the brigadier because without him we were forbidden to enter the zone containing our living quarters.

The brigadier returned elated. He noted that we did no more than the first half-norm but paid no attention. No matter what was actually done, all that mattered was what we had been officially recorded. By now we were the heroes of the day, and he reveled in his triumph.

When we arrived at the zone we found a huge sign over the gate paying tribute to our brigade for its "great victory" in achieving over 100 per cent of the norm on the second day of labor. At the gate were the officials of the camp who saluted us and resented us as an example to all the brigades in the camp.

After roll-call, Shmuel and I said *kiddush** over bread and water and lay down on the planks. This was the first night in camp that we slept peacefully. *Shabbos* morning we awoke with everyone, and then Shmuel and I went to the bathhouse, where we hid among the piles of wood. When everyone had gone off to work, we returned to the barracks and hid on the shelf-bunks. The *natchalnik*, whose job it was to check the barracks, promptly found us, and started shouting and cursing, "If you are sick, you could have said so and we would try to get you a release from the doctor. Now you will be considered deserters from labor. You will bring trouble upon yourselves and on me, too."

He added a few choice curses and muttered, "What am I going to do with you now? I guess I'll take you to some light work job right here in the zone. You'll chop firewood for the kitchen. That way it will mean that you were kept here in the zone for a job, and I can avoid reporting you to the commandant."

We had no choice but to tell him the truth. We thanked him for his good intentions and explained that we were

religious Jews who must not work on *Shabbos* and that we had written this to the commandant.

As soon as he heard this, he trembled with fear. "Oh, in that case," he said regretfully, "I can't help you at all. Oh, did you get yourselves into a fix now . . . I must deliver you at once, with a full report to the office. I don't envy you . . ."

The commandant sat there in the office with several other officers. When they heard the *natchalnik's* report, they stared at us uncomprehendingly, as though we had just arrived from the moon. They cursed us, but I could detect that their interest was piqued. There was a glimmer of respect for us.

"Too bad I didn't get your request until today," the commandant said, turning to us. "If I had gotten it yesterday, I would have seen to it that you would be at work today. What do you think?" he raised his voice. "Do you imagine that you are here at your mother-in-law's? This is a camp, not a resort. We can give you the kind of treatment that will make you envy the dead. The simple fact that you wrote a collective request is proof that you are organizing a mutiny in camp, and you can be executed for that. Oh well," he directed his remarks to me, "I can understand you. You are older. You were raised in a backward way. But this lad," he said pointing to Shmuel, "was born after the revolution. Where did he get this fanaticism? This must be your influence . . . What do you mean — you don't want to work on Saturday —" his tone softened. "What did you do before your arrest? Didn't you work on Saturday? Perhaps the labor here is too hard for you. But here everyone must do at least one month's hard labor. Later we'll see. If you conduct yourselves properly, I'll make every effort to assign you to some lighter work here in the zone. Just now you caught me in a good mood. Take my advice. Go right back to your work. Quietly, with no fuss, we'll get you back to your brigade. This is the first time, so we won't punish you for today's foolishness."

I thanked him for his graciousness and explained that we were not seeking easier work. We were quite prepared to continue the same hard labor. We only wanted to be released from working on *Shabbos*, since that is our holy day, and we had never worked on *Shabbos*.

My answer seemed to unnerve the commandant. He stood up and angrily stalked out of the room. Two soldiers came in at once and led us away to the place where our brigade was working. Then we were transferred to the one in charge of the section. This happened to be a young Jewish woman. The work supervisor working under her was a young Russian, and the next person in charge was also a Jew. The Jewish woman tried to persuade us to work the first two *Shabbosim,* promising to do whatever she could to get me assigned later to the bookkeeping department and to find Shmuel to some light work in the zone. "There," she explained, "it might be possible to avoid working on *Shabbos.*" She pleaded with us not to compel her to give us over to the work supervisor, who would cripple us. When we continued to refuse to go to labor, she turned red with anger and walked away.

The work supervisor ordered the Jewish official to undress us and, half-naked, ordered us to stand on top of the lookout post until the end of the day. The lookout post was a tower supported on beams some seven meters high. Guards would stand there to observe the prisoners and prevent escapes. The soldiers wore special fur coats and felt boots, and they alternated every three hours because they could not endure the cold any longer than that. The icy wind up there cut like a knife. There we stood, half-naked, with signs hanging from our necks reading, "**SUBBOTA**" — Sabbath.

Our brigadier came over to the post several times and shouted to us, "IDIOTS! Get off and go to work. You'll freeze to death up there. Your own people have abandoned you to the supervisor. Can't you see that?"

The cold kept getting worse. Suddenly, a soldier came running and handed something to the brigadier. He hurriedly gathered the brigade and they left. He did not forget us, though. Before leaving, he ordered us not to move until his return. Shortly afterward, the Jewish official came and helped us down from the post. By ourselves we could not have done it because we were stiff with cold.

"It's a miracle. Not far from here a dam broke. Your brigade was rushed there to help hold back the water. That gave me a chance to come here to free you. By evening you

wouldn't be alive." He took us to his room and gave us tea with sugar and bread.

"I have got to get back to the dam. I'll lock you in from the outside. If anyone knocks, don't answer. No one is here, understand? I'll come back and get you back to the post so no one will know you ever left it." We took to the hot tea at once, and when we were warmed somewhat we *davened*, made *kiddush* over the bread, and stretched out. We must have slept soundly, for we did not hear our host returning.

It was getting late, time to replace the "humiliation signs" around our necks and climb back up to the post. The frost again penetrated our bones. Time moved sluggishly, imperceptibly. Finally, the brigadier returned.

"Are you still alive?" he called to us in surprise. "Can't seem to get rid of you. I figured you were frozen to death long ago. And you claim to be weaklings and can't do any work . . ."

Shmuel and I jumped and ran in order to warm up a little. Then, with the entire brigade, we headed back to the zone. At the gate, we found the *natchalnik* waiting to take us to the dungeon. We were punished with five days in isolation. Naturally, we had to go to work. However, we received only half a bread ration, 300 grams a day.

As soon as we entered the dungeon, the criminals there surveyed us. Apparently they liked my clothes. They surrounded us and negotiated about making exchanges . . . Among them I spied our old friend from the transport, Vasko. He complained that I had long promised to exchange with him, and now I was negotiating with these others. It was obvious that you could not play games with this bunch. They meant what they said. I calculated that, rather than a stranger, one of our own thieves should enjoy them. I closed the deal with Vasko. It is true that my clothes were a bit large on him, as his were a trifle small on me, but I was pleased with the outcome. It could have been worse; I could have been left with no clothes.

The next day the *natchalnik* took us to work with the brigade. We used every ounce of strength but could not possibly begin to fulfill our norm. A system of collective responsibility was in force. If even one prisoner failed his norm, then the whole brigade was detained. It was eight o'clock at night already. They had all finished their tasks, except for Shmuel and me. We could hear the prisoners grumbling that, because of those lazy Jews, they all have to stand there and freeze. The two of us could hardly stand by that time. For a long time we worked alone, but finally the brigadier ordered that everyone lend a hand because it was so late; he was afraid the whole column would be kept from roll-call because of us.

It was ten by the time we reached the zone. The commandant shouted that, because of us, the roll-call was delayed for two hours. He threatened to send the whole brigade to the dungeon if this ever happened again. "It's all because of the *Subbotniks*,"* the brigadier apologized. "Saturday they don't want to work because they are holy. The other days, they just don't feel like working. Rough 'em up a little bit and they'll learn to work."

The brigade went to roll-call while Shmuel and I were taken to the dungeon. A few hours later, a messenger brought good news. We were given amnesty and freed from the dungeon. When I came to the barrack, the *starosta* gave me back the clothes that I had exchanged with Vasko, cleaned and pressed. Vasko had asked the *starosta* of our room to tell me that a thief never forgets anyone who does him a favor . . . Who knows where you can find decency . . .

CHAPTER 11

My First Passover In Labor Camp

Just before Passover in 1938, I was summoned to the camp office. A representative of the local commandant informed me that my wife had sent a package containing warm clothing, a hundred rubles, and a packet of *matzos.** He gave me everything except the *matzos.*

"Because of your not working on Saturday, you will be having enough troubles. I advise you, for your own welfare, not to take the *matzos.* Ask the commandant to return them to your wife. Then there can be the possibility of discussing transferring you, and maybe your friend too, to some lighter work in the office."

I thanked him for his advice and good intentions, asked him to give me the *matzos* because I would not eat *chometz** on Passover. I added a request to see my wife.

The representative apologized and added, "I can only warn you that you are doing yourself, and especially your young friend, a grave disservice. There is talk in camp already that you are demoralizing the other prisoners of your brigade. You know that there are plenty of ways of eliminating undesirable elements here. They'll send you off someplace. On the way 'something' will happen. Your bones will never be found. About a visit with your wife, that's forbidden because you have been convicted of a serious crime."

He gave me the *matzos* and said no more. I walked off delighted that we had *matzos* for Passover. We went out to work as usual on the day prior to Passover as usual. Our brigade was dismantling an abandoned railroad line. One group dug out the old ties, and another group carried them to a spot some meters away. I was in the second group.

"You are a healthy, grown man," the brigadier said to me. "You can carry ties. Everybody works according to his abilities." It really was hard labor. The ties had been in the soil for many years and were sodden and heavy. We had to carry them uphill, so we formed teams of two for each tie.

During the day, an NKVD officer came and observed us for a long time. He apparently concluded that we were not exerting ourselves sufficiently. He ordered that only one person carry a tie. Most of us were incapable of lifting a tie by ourselves, so one lifted a tie onto his buddy's shoulders. Others simply collapsed under the load and could not carry the burden uphill. The work was just impossible, and the results were worse than before. The brigadier could see that we would never fulfill our norm, so he asked the NKVD man to permit us to carry in groups of two again.

The NKVD man was infuriated. He suddenly drew his revolver and the shocked brigadier jumped aside in fright.

"I'll teach you how to work," he roared. "I'll look at my watch. Whoever does not carry his tie to the pile and return in time will be shot on the spot. We will have a few less enemies, and the others will learn to work . . ."

We took him literally and rushed to work with every ounce of strength. By three o'clock, we finished carrying off all the ties assigned to us. When the supervisor came and inspected our work, he was so impressed that he even permitted us to rest until the remainder of brigade could finish their norms.

In the evening, when all the prisoners went to eat, Shmuel and I *davened* the evening service of Passover. Then, on the shelf where we slept at night, we spread out a cement sack and set the *seder** on it. We put out 3 *matzos* for each of us. We didn't have *maror*,* but we didn't lack bitter experiences. We had no wine either, but we had it in our thoughts, and we began the *seder*. First we recited the *kiddush*, the prayer in which we praise G-d that we merited to arrange the *seder* and to enjoy the Feast of Redemption in which our forefathers left the slavery in Egypt for freedom.

After *kiddush*, Shmuel asked me the four traditional questions that sons ask their fathers at the *seder*. We celebrate the *seder* to remember how bad the situation was for the Jews, and how G-d took the Jews out of Egypt. We Jews are presently in a bad situation, especially here in Russia where learning *Torah* and fulfilling the commandments are prohibited. We must ask G-d to redeem us and to take us from this bitter exile to *Eretz Yisrael** where we will be able to keep the *Torah* and the commandments in spiritual and physical freedom.

Shmuel and I then spoke of our relatives. I described how my wife and my mother were now sitting in their houses with no one to perform the *seder* for them, and that they were surely shedding tears over my condition in this brutal camp. And Shmuel told how his father and mother were also sitting at the *seder* and crying over his condition in this terrible camp. Shmuel and I were in the camp for no wrongdoing, but that we had studied Torah and fulfilled the commadments; we had done no harm to anyone. We also decided that, whatever awaited us the next day, on the holiday of Passover, we would not work. Just as the nation of Israel believed that G-d would redeem them from Egypt, so we believed that G-d would save us from this camp and that He would take all the Jews from Russia and bring them to Israel; just as the Jews could not escape from Egypt, so the Jews could not escape from Russia. Only G-d could take them from Russia and bring them to the land of Israel.

Two hours later, when the other prisoners came back from the dining room, we had completed our *seder*. Our feeling (Shmuel's and mine) was that, with the help of G-d, we would soon escape from the camp. The holiday had raised our spirits and strengthened our belief in G-d. It reinforced our hope that we would be strong and would attain a physical and spiritual freedom as had our forefathers in Egypt.

The great wonder was that my comrade in strife, Shmuel, who was still young and physically weakened, was strong in spirit and suffered the afflictions with great forebearance.

Even when he saw how the officers tortured the prisoners whom they disliked without any reason, Shmuel did not fear these cursed officers and did not worry about them at all, but was steadfast in his decision to continue in life with his keeping the Torah and the commandments in the camp also. His steadfastness also influenced me. I felt that Shmuel, who had not tasted any reward from his short life, but was always chased by the NKVD for studying Torah and was always pressed by the government, nevertheless continued his life with a firm belief that G-d would help him. He would escape from these wicked people who didn't allow him to study Torah and keep the commandments. He believed that he would escape to freedom in Israel and would freely practice Torah and the commandments. After some years of trials and tribulations, he left Russia for the land of Israel. As for myself, already an adult who had seen the miracles of how G-d had helped me to be a practicing Jew, even in the dismal conditions of Russia, and now was weakened physically from the hard labor, starvation, and cold, I vowed to be strong in my hope that G-d would take us out of the camp and out of Russia. I had faith that G-d would take us to the land of Israel, where we could fulfill the Torah and the commandments in complete freedom. And so it finally happened, after many years.

Late that night we presented our brigadier with some *matzos*. He was very grateful and promised to help me.

"You'll have to go out with the rest of the brigade. Otherwise I'll have to report you. Out there we'll find a way to keep you from working on the holiday."

The work site covered several kilometers, with thousands of prisoners and a great many free men working there. Having so many people bustling about gave us occasional opportunities to drop out of work and snatch a moment's rest. There was a water-pump and there were supply rooms and some heated rooms for the officials. An occasionally lucky prisoner would find some pretext to go into one of these rooms and warm himself after the bitter frost. The free men there would chase them out. If an official would find prisoners

there, the free men would suffer and the prisoner would be beaten viciously.

On the first day of Passover, Shmuel and I evaded the brigade. The brigadier pretended not to notice our disappearance as we went wandering around the area. Before long, we were stiffened with cold and sought some place to hide and warm ourselves. We went into the room at the water-pump. The workers were afraid that our presence would jeopardize them. After a few minutes they chased us out. We found a tiny abandoned, unheated room, where we huddled in the intolerable cold. In the evening, when the brigade finished its work, we came out. Our reception was unfriendly.

After roll-call, everyone went to the mess-hall while we two *davened*, conducted the second *seder*, and lay down to sleep. The following morning, the brigadier had a paternal conversation with us.

"You know that there are no secrets in camp. The commandant has already been informed that you did not appear for work yesterday because of your holiday. The rumor is that you will be tried for collective refusal to work. You are well aware that your reward for this can be a rope. I won't force you to work on your holy days, but I will not suffer along with you. Do as you wish without involving me. I want nothing to do with the whole thing."

Avoiding work that day was much more difficult than the first day, but we managed. Frozen and famished, we wandered around the work area. When it became dark, we *davened* and then returned to our brigade and started working. Returning to the zone, we found the *natchalnik* waiting for us at the watchtower. He summoned us to go with him.

"Look here," he said to me. "If you want to destroy your life, that's your affair. But why are you pulling this boy into this tragedy? He was born under the Soviet regime wasn't he? It's your influence. This will make your situation even worse because you will be charged with collective refusal to work. Commandant Sidorov is waiting for you and I'm taking you to him. Listen to me. I don't wish you any evil, G-d forbid. The

commandant isn't the least interested in your trial, because this can cast a shadow on his whole career. He can send you to the other world without any trial, and he has done exactly that more than once. Be very careful now. Consider very carefully how to get out of this danger."

In the commandant's office we found Sidorov and another man in NKVD uniform with a colonel's stripes. The colonel spoke calmly and patiently, as though he counted his words.

"What is the nature of your refusal to work on Saturdays and Jewish holidays?"

"Only religious."

"We have taken a particular interest in this matter. We are informed that, according to Jewish law, work is permitted on Saturday if danger to life is involved. Hence, it is clear to us that your refusal to work, especially in a collective manner, is of an absolutely political nature. I simply warn you that crimes of this sort may be punished by execution. We shall grant you one more chance. If you assure us that henceforth you will work honestly and diligently every day of the week, as do the others, we will give you your proper sentence. In addition, if your conduct is good, we might transfer you to some lighter work."

He paused for our answer. The silence in the room was painful.

"Well, what do you say?"

"I will not work on *Shabbos* and *Yom Tovim** under any conditions," I answered categorically. Shmuel said the same.

"I believe you will reconsider this," the colonel answered in a mixture of anger and exasperation. "In the meantime, go to sleep."

The next day we were taken to a new work site and were given large shovels. Six men were placed at a truck. Our job was to dig soil and load the trucks. The earth was moist and sticky. The shovels sank in the clay and could be pulled out only by herculean effort. With sweat and strain, we succeeded in loading one truck in two hours. The drivers, paid

by the number of loads they hauled, were angered that, because of us, their earnings would be trifling. They called out the NKVD supervisor and argued that we had sabotaged the work and deliberately delayed the trucks.

"I see that a ten year sentence isn't enough for you," the NKVD man shouted at us. "For work like this you'll be sent to the other world." He drew his revolver and gave us the usual warnings that whoever did not work hard would be shot.

We worked with our last strength, some falling in dead faints. Suddenly, one of our brigade, an accomplished anti-Semite, called out, "We have these troubles because of the two Jews. Just because they don't feel like working on Saturday, we all are punished with hard labor. If we don't get rid of them, we will all die like dogs . . ."

His words had an instant effect. The bunch jumped on Shmuel and me and would have killed us had the brigadier not intervened. He was afraid that he would be held responsible for the outrage.

When I returned to the barrack, I noted that no one spoke to us. Everyone kept a distance and gave us sullen looks. I knew the "laws" of the camp and understood that one day we would be erased without a trace. We had only one choice — to escape as soon as possible, before it was too late. But how?

CHAPTER 12
Escape and Capture

Plotting our escape, we did not sleep that night. The camp was divided into two regions, one of barracks, and the other for labor. The barracks region was guarded by soldiers with trained dogs at the gate, while the gate of the work region had soldiers posted on high observation towers. One gate out of this region was designated for the hired drivers and their trucks. Every evening after work, when the drivers left to return to their own quarters, a long line of trucks waited to be

cleared by the three soldiers on guard there. We decided to exploit the moment that the soldiers were busy with the trucks to escape from the zone. From there I planned to go to the Jew of the transit camp who had promised to help.

The next day, we went out as usual with the whole brigade. It happened to be a rather pleasant day, with a lighter work assignment, and the brigade was in a more cheerful mood. After a few hours, Shmuel and I asked the brigadier for a pass to the doctor because we felt ill. Since we had no fever, we did not get a release from the doctor, but we did not return to the work. Instead we went to our observation spot, from where we could observe the trucks at the gate. As we expected, there was a lot of confusion there; the soldiers were arguing with the drivers, who stood in a row alongside dozens of trucks.

We got out safely. Night fell and the darkness protected us. I tried hard to recollect the details of the route we had travelled from the transit camp. After a few kilometers, we reached a crossroad, one road leading to the town where my acquaintance lived, the other leading to the office of the secret police. The only problem was to remember which was which. I could not.

Suddenly we saw a man's shadow. Our hearts pounded as we watched him approach. When we could see that he wore prisoner's garb, we felt a bit reassured because, frequently, prisoners would leave the camp with passes on different missions. I took out a pack of *makhorka,* the rough prison tobacco that was priceless here, and offered it to him. We figured that we would see his reaction to us and act accordingly. Instead of accepting the *makhorka* he pulled a revolver and shouted, "Raise your hands!" The "prisoner" was a disguised NKVD on the lookout for escaped prisoners.

He demanded to know how we got here. We explained that we had lost our way and were trying to get back to the zone. Of course he did not accept our excuse. Instead of returning us to the camp, he took us to the secret police office.

"So you wanted to escape, did you?" he turned to us after his disguised officer left. "Get undressed. I want to see what you have hidden under your clothes." Meanwhile, he buzzed on the phone for a soldier. From prison experience, I knew that the order to undress is the prelude to a murderous beating. I thought of my father and his words to me, "Never fear them."

We stood there naked, the soldier searching through our clothes. Out of my pockets he pulled several *matzos*, sixteen rubles, and a package of *makhorka*. When he saw our *tzitzis** and *yarmelkas,** and especially when he saw the *matzos*, the commandant sprang up in anger. "Now I see what you are. Clericalists! Enemies of the Soviet! I'll teach you. You won't run away from the camp again. No," he smiled cynically, "I won't kill you. I'll fix you. You will plead for death."

At his order, the *manevrovi** group came in, a sight that dismayed us. This was a detachment of sadists, specialists in torturing prisoners captured in attempting escapes or violating camp regulations. Many prisoners were permanently crippled by these beasts, and any number were beaten to death. When this would happen, they carried their victim off to the hospital and concocted a report that the prisoner died from an "accident at work."

You see these kikes?" the commandant asked pointing at us. "They are rabbis and counter-revolutionaries. They were captured trying to escape from the camp. What do you think? After your investigation, will they want to run away?"

We lay naked on the floor, ready for the punishment. At that moment, the door opened and a well-dressed man entered. (Later we learned that he was a high official in the Security Ministry, the KGB.) The commandant sprang to attention and offered his guest a seat.

"What's going on here?" the visitor asked.

"We caught two prisoners attempting to escape."

What are these fellows doing here?" he continued, pointing to the *manevrovi* group. "Get out," he ordered.

"What's going on here?" he repeated. "Why are people lying naked on the floor in your office? What is this, a fascist camp? I see that the rumors about prohibited methods used against prisoners are true. Let these men get up and dress, then we'll continue with the investigation." By now he was very angry.

We dressed. When I picked up my *talis katan** that the commandant had ripped in his anger, I noticed that the visitor was observing me with great interest.

"Now, exactly what happened with them?" he asked the commandant.

"They attempted to escape from the camp. The officer caught them and returned them to my office."

"What did you find in their possession?"

"Sixteen rubles and *matzo*."

"This is peculiar. People escape from camp without any documents, without food, and almost penniless? Do you have any food or money in the barrack?" he asked, turning to us.

"Oh yes. We have *matzos* because there are still four days left to Passover. The camp cashier has fifty rubles of mine," I replied.

"Why did you want to escape? Tell me how it happened."

I had been studying his face and got the impression of a strong similarity to the Georgian Jews. This encouraged me . . .

"I am in the same barrack as this young man here," I started, pointing to Shmuel. "We are religious Jews and observe our laws stringently. Today is our Passover holiday and we are forbidden to do any work, so we went away from the brigade. Somehow we got lost and could not make our way back to the zone. From a distance, we saw a man and called to him. I asked him directions and offered him some tobacco. Instead, he pointed a weapon at us and refused to hear our explanation. He led us to this office, accusing us of attempting to escape."

"Is that so!" the visitor exclaimed. "You celebrate holidays in camp! Without permission you walked off from your work! I will write out a prescription for you that will cure you of all your laziness . . ."

He wrote out an order that, for going away from their work without permission, the two Jewish prisoners are punished with five days of solitary confinement in the dungeon, but are required to go out each of these days to work with their brigade.

A soldier took us out of the office to the camp. He got his revenge on the way, striking us with his rifle butt.

CHAPTER 13
"Hell on Ice"

At the watchtower, we found a reception committee, waiting to greet us — our brigadier, the *naryadtchik*, and the local commandant.

"I thought that you were intelligent men," the commandant began. "From today's incident, I see that you are not in control of your senses. We will deal with you as with deranged people. But I give you one last warning. Get rid of your rotten tricks and get to work like everyone else."

We were led to the isolation cells. The thieves already knew about our attempt to escape, and this seemed to have raised their esteem for us. They treated us like comrades and did not bother us. When the guards brought us our portions of bread, we refused to take them because of Passover. The thieves were resentful because we should have taken the bread and given it to them.

The next morning we were taken out of isolation and even had a chance to snatch a moment in the barracks to taste some *matzo* before joining the brigade going out to work. The adventures of the day before and the lack of food had exhausted us. We could not complete our norms. To our

surprise, no one took notice of this, and even the brigadier made no remark. It seems that all he wanted was some way of getting rid of us. At night we went back to the dungeon where we had a bit of *matzo* that was to serve as our holiday repast.

The following day was Friday, the seventh day of Passover. I told the brigadier that it was a holy day and we could not work.

"Damn your holidays," he screamed. "Get away from here, so that at least no one will see you. Just remember to return in time to come back to the zone with us. I won't wait for you. If you don't show up today, that'll be your end and maybe I'll finally be rid of you. Tomorrow I'm not going to take you out of isolation at all."

The next day was *Shabbos* and they did not summon us from isolation. When they all went out to work, Shmuel and I were alone. We *davened* and said *kiddush* over some scraps of *matzo*. In a few hours, the *naryadtchik* of the dungeon came and ordered us to follow him. A soldier was waiting for us and he took us to a farm house surrounded by a park. He led us into the yard and said, "You have two hours to clear away the snow from here. A high official lives here. See that you impress him with your work."

"We deeply regret that we cannot do this," I explained. "If we could work on Saturday, we would not be in the dungeon."

"You won't pull any of your rotten tricks with me," the soldier shouted. "Take off your things!" he ordered, pointing his rifle at us. We undressed and laid our clothes on the snow.

"Fall!" he ordered. We fell to the ground and lay there half-naked in the snow. The cold cut into every limb. The sadist stood there aiming his rifle at us.

"You'll freeze to death here," he gloated. I agreed with him. There was no future for us in that snow, so I decided we had nothing to lose. I stood up and started to put on my clothes. Shmuel did the same. The soldier warned and threatened us louder and harder that he would shoot.

"You won't shoot us. We are in an enclosed place and you won't have any excuse about attempted escapes. If you shoot

us you yourself will be executed. I don't care, shoot. I won't ever see my family again anyway."

He was enraged, but apparently my words were effective. He started to club us with his rifle-butt, then suddenly withdrew, seeming to remember the regulation of staying three meters from the prisoner to avoid allowing the prisoner to wrestle the weapon from the guard. There we stood, facing each other. He wore a fur coat, but soon could not stand the cold. He led us back to the dungeon, promising to write a report. Even the dungeon was a palace for us at that moment. It seemed warm after the icy cold we had endured. We thanked G-d that we were delivered from this death peril, *davened mincha** and *maariv** and then lay down to sleep.

CHAPTER 14

Conversation With The Devil

After our abortive attempt to escape, our situation worsened seriously. Every *Shabbos* we would wander about in the bitter cold until our limbs were swollen. No one permitted us to come into a warm room for a few minutes because they might be suspected of helping us. There was a Jewish doctor-prisoner in the camp, assigned to the hospital, who had the authority to release prisoners from labor because of illness. He would never sign for Shmuel or me, even when we were actually sick. Everyone in camp knew that we were religious Jews, and the doctor was afraid that the officials might suspect him of being in contact with us.

The doctor was particularly angry at me. "You are master over your life," he argued, "but what right do you have to bring tragedy upon this young lad? He's barely past his childhood. He hasn't begun to enjoy life. He's too weak to endure the hard work and hunger. You will have this on your conscience because he is completely under your influence. Persuade him to work on *Shabbos* and save his own life."

Could the doctor understand that only by keeping the sacred *Shabbos* and *Yiddishkeit* could we have life and freedom? Apparently not.

On weekdays I worked extremely hard, so as not to fall behind the other prisoners. I wanted to deprive them of the sneer that the Jew does not work on *Shabbos* because he is lazy. Shmuel was frail, however, and could not do this. His weakness, I must make plain, was of the body alone. His spirit was that of a hero. I had an opportunity to observe this . . .

One day, our brigade was assigned the job of sifting gravel. We had to take a large shovel of gravel to an elevated place so that the sand would trickle out, leaving only clean gravel in the sieve. This was particularly strenuous work. Even prisoners who did manual labor as free men, and were accustomed to heavy muscle work, exhausted themselves and failed to meet their norms. On top of this, the brigadier stood there, constantly driving us because the norm was a large one.

I strained myself and at least kept up with the others. Shmuel could not even raise the shovel.

Later in the day, an automobile arrived at our work area, and a short, thick-set man stepped out. His NKVD uniform had no rank insignia. We soon learned that he was the overall commandant of the camp, an accomplished sadist and murderer who terrified prisoners and officials alike.

He stood there for some time, observing our efforts. All the subordinate officials stood around him at attention and kept looking at him apprehensively. His arrival frightened everyone. We prisoners redoubled our efforts in the dead stillness. The only sound was the rhythmic clatter of stones falling regularly and swiftly on the sieve. Suddenly, he walked over to Shmuel, took the shovel out of his hands, and set to work like the devil. The shovels of gravel flew as if from a machine. None of us could maintain his pace.

After a few minutes of this demonstration, he returned the shovel to Shmuel and said, "Did you see how you are supposed to work? This is not a vacation resort . . ."

All of us stood immobile, expectant. One man was calm and perfectly composed — Shmuel. He stood at attention and, to our astonishment, replied, "Citizen commandant! From the hunk of dry bread that we get for a whole day, and from sleeping only a few hours on hard boards, you can't work long like that."

We were shocked, certain that Shmuel was through, that he would receive a terrible punishment. No one had ever permitted himself such impudence. The commandant was silent. He simply looked at Shmuel, amazed at his answer, and without a word returned to his car and drove off.

When the shock wore off, everyone was deeply sympathetic with Shmuel. He was looked upon with awe. He was a hero and now wielded great authority among the prisoners.

I was disturbed by the incident, convinced that the murderer would not let it pass without punishment. The brigadier added to my concern, "You think that they don't know that you are mixed up in this? Both of you can prepare to go to the other world. There you won't have to work on *Shabbos* . . ."

In the Hebrew month of Av, August, men suddenly came to wake Shmuel in the middle of the night. They ordered him to take all of his belongings and go with them to the other part of our camp. (Our camp was divided into two parts by a thin wire.) Every evening after work, Shmuel and I would meet near the wire and talk. Whenever I could obtain bread, I would throw it over the wire to Shmuel. In this way, many weeks passed. Suddenly Shmuel was no longer there. After several days, the *natchalnik* took pity on me and explained that Shmuel had been sent with a group of thieves to another prison-camp far away from ours.

CHAPTER 15

Hard Labor

On the 14th of *Kislev*, 5699 (December 7, 1938), the head labor supervisor informed us that we were reassigned to a brigade working in cement. He added that this was a stroke of rare good fortune because our working day was to be a mere eight hours, and our food rations would be improved. According to camp regulations, we were to work no more than ten hours daily, but our actual working day lasted twelve to fourteen hours. Adding the time it took to go to work, the return to the barracks, and the roll-calls, we had every bit of four or five hours of sleep a night. Briefly, our transfer looked appealing.

At six the next morning we were lined up at the guardtower. The early morning winter cold was searing and we were impatient to get to work. We "cementers" were privileged characters you see, and we went out to work first.

Our work place was some hundred meters square. By way of a rope ladder, we entered a pit thirty meters deep. Cement poured constantly out of huge pipes, while we distributed the cement evenly all over the pit. When the cement was thirty centimeters deep, we used an electric vibrator to press it down. This process shook up the operator and left him exhausted. Simply pulling the heavy machine from place to place used up all of our strength. According to regulations, the operators were to have rubber boots and coats because of the electricity that had already caused several deaths. Two men in the brigade that preceded us, we learned, were electrocuted. In such events a report was made that the prisoner died a natural death . . . and the vibrator continued to pound away.

The cement poured forth without stopping. The pace gave us no respite, not even for a moment. Eight full hours of this left us almost unable to climb the rope ladder. At the watchtower, we met other brigades that had worked at cement and were familiar with its joys. They had laughed that morning at our anticipation of working only eight hours. Back in the barracks, we just fell on our planks. At the roll-call we were permitted to sit because we had no strength to stand. However, we had the glory of having the work supervisor declare us as the first-ranking brigade, fulfilling our norm by 156 percent. He made a speech at that opportunity — cement brigades that exceed 150 percent of the norm would be the subjects of special reports to the central office of NKVD in Moscow. These men would be released before their terms. We knew this was a lie. Prisoners were freed ahead of their terms only by escaping to the world to come.

We slept six hours that night, but couldn't get up. From the first day of cement work, men had no sensation in their hands and feet. Nevertheless, we were awakened at six and out we went to work. The job this day was no easier, but at least it was different. We loaded the cement onto wheelbarrows, which we pushed up a slope on a narrow board and then dumped into trucks. We ran back to load the empty wheelbarrows. Some fifty wheelbarrows would be rolling up that board at once, one worker rushing the other. Here, for the first time, I understood the true meaning of the "back-breaking labor" of our forefathers in Egypt. Every wheelbarrow weighed over a hundred kilos (200 lbs.). Pushing them up and back at a fast and unrelenting tempo, we could feel sweat coursing down our bodies, while a tightening sensation gripped the heart. Our eyes could not focus straight. Some unfortunates fell off the board with their wheelbarrows, causing the whole line to wait. The supervisor would assist the unhappy prisoner with generous curses, and even with blows, until he dragged himself and his wheelbarrow back onto the board.

Two of our brigade fainted that day. The doctor was summoned, but the supervisor said that it is only an act, a

pretext to avoid work. The two men could not move and there they lay until we finished our work. We lifted them onto boards which served as makeshift stretchers, and though we could barely carry ourselves, we carried them back to the zone. They were taken to the hospital where they both died.

All of us were stunned by their deaths. Some said there was no sense in suffering such intolerable hardships because sooner or later we would all die here. In the morning at reveille, we found one prisoner under the plank cot, dead. He could not stand it any more and commited suicide.

The barrack was in turmoil. We did not go out to work until they sent in soldiers who drove us out with blows. We came to work very late and were ordered not to budge. We stood there immobile, until an NKVD officer arrived.

"What you did today indicates the organization of a collective sabotage, an act that makes you liable to execution. However, headquarters has taken into consideration the circumstances of this event, and also your past labor record, and has decided to be lenient. Today you shall work two shifts without interruption. We believe that you will demonstrate, through earnest work, that the incident was indeed exceptional and will not recur."

Since we were late to work, another brigade was assigned to the cement job. We were sent to a different work site with a Jewish supervisor. He recognized me at once and gave me a light task. On the second shift, we worked only until midnight because he had no more work for us to do. He let us into the office, where we stretched out on the floor. In the morning, he gave us a certificate that we worked two full shifts and had exceeded our norm by two hundred percent. For the first time, our brigadier and the whole brigade were pleased with me, their Jew. They realized that they enjoyed this treatment because of me.

In the course of time, I became friendly with this supervisor. He called me for several days' work in his office, gave me bread and sugar, and on one occasion told me how he got his position.

"My grandfather was a very devout Jew. My father died young and I was raised by an uncle, an engineer who saw to my education. I also became a construction engineer. I attended *shul** on *Yom Tov* and gave generous regular contributions to the *shul.* The Jews of the town drew up a petition and collected signatures requesting the repeal of the decree. I signed too. Instead of cancelling the order, they arrested me and accused me of anti-Soviet agitation and propagandizing fanaticism among the youth. I was given ten years which I served here in camp. When my sentence was completed, they 'suggested' that I remain here to work because they had no specialist to replace me. I knew that if I did not consent, I would be compelled to remain anyway, not as a free worker but for another ten or twenty year sentence. So I 'agreed'."

He was most sympathetic to me and promised to make every effort to have me transferred to lighter work in the office in my own field.

CHAPTER 16
Office Work

It was *Shabbos.* I was in the dungeon, as usual, for refusing to work that day. During the day, the *natchalnik* came in and ordered me into the barrack. The official in charge of the planning section was waiting for me there. He told me that, according to the decision of the medical commission, I was to be released from the cement work and was assigned to work in his section. This, of course, was a lie. The truth was that an order had been issued that, until I consented to work on *Shabbos,* I was to be given the harshest work. I knew that this change of duty was due to the Jewish engineer for whom I had worked two shifts a few days before. I learned later why the administration agreed. They had to send an urgent plan to Moscow and needed someone with my qualifications to help them.

Sunday I went out to work with my brigade as usual. When we arrived at the work site, the brigadier sent me to the office of the planning section and warned me to bring a certificate from the commandant when I returned that evening, because this assignment was temporary.

At eight o'clock, the person in charge of planning arrived, Mikhail Alexandrovitch. He explained that, officially, they could not use me in the office because I was to be punished for not working on *Shabbos*. However, they had three weeks to prepare the finance plan for the construction work for 1939 and he could not possibly do the job in this time. "The manager agreed to use you here temporarily," he said, "with the condition that if the Third Section of the NKVD learns of this, you will assume full responsibility, and that she knows absolutely nothing about it. Therefore you must be extremely careful not to be too obvious. I will lock you in my room and don't you let anyone in. I won't be much help to you because I am busy with other work."

He gave me a pile of papers and left. The documents were in complete disorder, and it took time just to put them in order. My job was to compose the financial plan, how much money would be needed for the year's constructions, with a chart, and how much would be needed for special expenses every month. Before my arrest, when I worked as an accountant, I had made similar plans but never on such a scale. Besides, it was some time since I had done this work, so it took considerable effort.

I threw myself into the work and did not note the passing of time. It was late in the evening when I looked up from my work, but since prisoners were forbidden to have watches, I had no idea how late it was. The brigadier had ordered me to be at the gate no later than eight o'clock, so that the entire brigade should not be delayed on my account — even one missing prisoner could hold up an entire brigade.

The official came in and told me it was nine o'clock. I jumped up in alarm. He was pleased with my work and offered me a drink of vodka. I had to decline. I ran to the gate

in a frenzy. Fortunately, a brigade was late in arriving and the column was there waiting for them. My brigadier warned me that if I was ever late again, and the brigade was delayed on my account, they would make me into chopped meat.

They were unhappy with me anyway because of my lighter work assignment. No one in the barrack spoke to me. They did not restrain themselves, though, from remarks to each other that I could hear. "That Jew works in a warm office and we have to go out to hard labor in the frost."

Naturally the brigadier encouraged them. "All Jews hang around where the work is light." I had to keep silent.

I slept only a few hours that night. I awoke with everyone and went out with my brigade, feeling blessed that I did not have to go to the cement work. In the office, I was alone. Mikhail Alexandrovitch had told me earlier that he would not be in today because he would be busy with other matters. Suddenly, the manager came in.

"What are you doing here? Why aren't you working with your brigade?" she demanded, pretending to be surprised. The guard was frightened and walked out of the room. Only then did she ask me to show her what I had already finished. She was delighted with my work.

"What school did you graduate?"

I told her the truth. I had studied in *yeshiva* and learned accounting from practical job experience. She was impressed.

"I had thought that *yeshiva* students were inept at any practical work. But don't imagine that I am totally uninformed about religious matters." She hastened to correct any misconceptions. "My parents were not particularly religious, but my grandfather was a *shochet*.* I would be pleased to help you, but there is a special recommendation about you from the NKVD commandant. They have a terrible opinion about you because you won't work on *Shabbos*. Is it really that important? If you would only ease up a little, I could eventually make efforts to have you work permanently in the office, especially since we need someone with your qualifications."

I thanked her and explained that it was a question of ultimate importance for me, and that under no conditions would I forego observing *Shabbos*.

"I'm really surprised at you," she answered. "In that case you will work here as long as possible." She said good-bye and left.

At seven o'clock, Mikhail Alexandrovitch returned. When I told him about the visit of the "Boss-lady," he was pleased because he was afraid that she would not permit me to work in the office. That day, I was at the gate promptly. The brigadier looked happy, because the day's report recorded a norm of 150 percent. This was, of course, a bit of a departure from the truth. The brigadier realized that I had a share in the report.

The next day, I was alone. My boss, Mikhail Alexandrovitch, entered in the evening, drunk, to examine what I had accomplished all day. Friday I worked only until prior to sundown. Mikhail Alexandrovitch knew that I would not work on *Shabbos*, but to spare me trouble, he had me come to the office on Saturdays — not to work but to sleep all day long.

Saturday morning I told the brigadier that I was going to work as usual. He was delighted. "Finally, finally," he obviously thought, "I had regained my senses." I was pleased too. This was my first *Shabbos* outside the dungeon. I locked myself in the office and had just finished *davening* when Mikhail Alexandrovitch came in with bread and some vodka.

I ate and lay down to sleep. Well toward evening I awoke, *davened mincha*, and ate the third meal of *Shabbos*. At night Mikhail Alexandrovitch came and gave me a note for the brigadier that I had worked faithfully this day. It had been a long time since I had such a *Shabbos*.

My good fortune was short-lived. The manager had to leave for Moscow the following Sunday with the completed plan. I had to have it prepared in time. Friday afternoon I handed her the finished material. She was grateful and, as a gesture of gratitude, she gave me a warm fur coat and a kilo of sugar. Both were priceless in the camp. The following day, *Shabbos*, I again spent in the dungeon.

CHAPTER 17

In the Dungeon Among Thieves

The joys of working in the office were brief. When I returned to the cement job with the brigade, the brigadier assigned me to the roughest duty — the vibrator. By the end of the day, the machine had shaken out every ounce of strength I had. I managed to learn how to handle the machine and soon was doing 150 percent of the norm. The brigadier recorded barely 100 percent, ascribing the rest to one of "his" people. I received less bread than the others, since I was constantly being punished for not working on *Shabbos*. This was also the reason for the refusal to permit me to draw from the money I had deposited in the office, so I could not purchase anything to ease my hunger. I kept quiet though, because I was not eager to make my condition worse than it was. By the end of a week, I could barely stand.

Thursday night I was awakened and ordered to dress. At the barrack door, two soldiers with trained dogs were waiting for me. I was ordered to walk ahead of them. When we passed the camp gate, they ordered me to run. With dogs nipping at my heels and the soldiers shouting, "Faster! Faster!", we finally reached our destination. There was no signs on the building. Only later did I learn that it was the Third Section.

I was led into a large room. A thick-set, middle-aged man sat at a desk. He looked at me in silence with penetrating eyes as I stood at the door. He leafed through the papers in an open file on his desk. After a few minutes of painful silence, he looked up at me.

"Do you think we don't know that you worked in the office and kept your Saturdays that way? This was done to show you that it's possible to work in a warm office instead of doing exhausting physical labor. I must admit that we found

your office work satisfactory. You seem to know the work. Now you have an opportunity to live like a human being. If you work in the office, we will transfer you from the camp to a barrack for employees, where you will have a mattress, quilt, pillow, and even a sheet. But, with one condition. You must stop this insane comedy with your kikey Sabbath. I give you several days to consider this. If you go out this Saturday to work with your brigade and conduct yourself correctly, then, in a few weeks you will be transferred to the office. As you see, your fate is in your hands."

"I understand that very well," I replied. "However our Torah strictly forbids labor on Saturdays, so I can give you my decision right now."

This answer was unexpected. He jumped up in anger shouting, "Did you forget where you are? Do you think this is a synagogue?" He pressed a button on the desk and my two escorts came in at once.

"Take this swine to the hole. He'll stay there until I give other orders."

The "hole" was an isolated prison in the camp, reserved for recidivist-murderers with long terms, incorrigibles who cared for nothing. They would not tolerate any outsider. When the administration wanted to get rid of an unpleasant prisoner, they placed him in the hole and, for a bottle of whiskey, the prisoner was eliminated.

We came to a wooden building surrounded by barbed-wire. Manned observation towers were strategically placed around the building. An officer opened the gate and a pack of wildly barking curs jumped at me. The officer recorded information about me and took me into a barrack. Behind me, an iron door slammed shut. I was in the hole.

The room was large. Two levels of iron shelves lined both walls; a stove with huge logs burned in the middle. It was a cold day, but the room felt like a bathhouse. I considered my situation. Experience had taught me how the minds of murderers worked. I knew that any evidence of fear, or any plea for mercy, could be fatal. It was imperative to present a front of fearlessness.

I took an unoccupied place near the above, removed my wet clothes and set them out to dry. I read the *Shma,* the central proclamation of our faith, and like an established resident in the barrack, I took a space on a wall-bunk. The day at hard labor with cement, then the running and experiences of the evening, all left me exhausted and I fell asleep at once. Suddenly, I felt a sharp pain. I looked up and saw one of the prisoners standing over me with a club.

"What's the matter with you?" I demanded angrily. "What do you mean by waking me up that way?"

"I've been waking you for some while, but you act like you don't hear me. Climb down. We have some chatting to do."

"We'll have plenty of time to chat. Right now it's still dark, and I feel like sleeping." I turned over and composed myself for sleep, ignoring the man.

"Looks like you don't know where you are," another thief spoke up. "I hear that you're a believer. Well then, climb down from that bunk and say your confession for your Jew G-d, because there's a good chance you won't walk out of here alive."

"If that's the case then I certainly am in no rush," I yawned in feigned indifference. "How about leaving me alone now so I'll get to Paradise well rested." I pretended to go back to sleep, when suddenly I was struck again on my leg with the wood. I jumped up and demanded, "Who's the *batko** around here?"

"Who do you think you are? Why should we introduce ourselves to you?" answered one of the men who actually was the *batko.*

"I'm no better than you are," I answered, "but since you're telling me to recite confession, I want to know for what sin you're going to kill me."

"You know, I think I'm beginning to like this guy," the *batko* smiled. "They say you are religious and a political enemy of the country. But when I saw how you came in here last night, hanging up your stuff to dry, and weren't afraid we

Batko (Rus.): Lit. "Father". Leader of thieves.

might take something away from you, you impressed me like one of the boys. Now I'm all mixed up."

"What is there to understand?" I shrugged. "They must have promised you something to lay me out and then they'll try you for murder and execute you. That's how they'll get rid of us all, letting us kill each other off." A conversation developed and by the time it ended, they accepted me as one of their own. Before we knew it, the dawn broke. Two prisoners went out to get breakfast. To my surprise, the *batko* gave me two portions of bread and some sugar as well.

"Take it," he urged. "It's your Sabbath, so you'll have some for your meal. Are you surprised I know about that? There was a Jew in our village back before the revolution. When I was a little kid, every Saturday I would go there to put out the lamp, stoke the stove, feed the horses, and other such things. For doing that, I would spend my Saturdays with them, eating with the family. I'll never forget those Friday nights, the candles on the table, the delicious foods, and those songs they used to sing . . ."

No one came to the hole all that day. My companions played cards and I slept in my warm place near the stove. No one annoyed me any more. I *davened* and had my *Shabbos* meal, singing *Shabbos* songs out loud. This *Shabbos* among the thieves was the most peaceful one I had during my entire stay at the camp. After the meal, they asked me to tell them why I was sentenced. They were particularly intrigued by my account of our escape. The escape impressed them, and, as a result, they had real respect for me. That is doubtless one reason they did not murder me.

I was in the hole for two weeks. I was sent there in order to be tortured, even killed. Instead, I had a good rest. This however soon ended. The thieves were moved out with a transport and I was alone in the hole. The commandant of the Third Section went on vacation and his replacement ordered that I be returned to my brigade.

CHAPTER 18

The "Easy" Work

I was back in the fresh air, working at cement again. We started working twelve hours a day instead of the eight we had been promised when we began this work. Cleaning the tools and returning the rubber boots took another hour, so that we returned to the zone very late, well after the roll-call. We fell into our bunks dead tired.

We were not fated to sleep that night. At two o'clock, the *naryadtchik** awakened us. The earthworking brigade had failed to fulfill its alloted task, so we were to go out and help them. We were simply unable to stand. No one moved. The *naryadtchik* left and the camp commandant came in cursing. When he saw that imprecations were ineffective, he threatened that for such an organized mutiny, we would pay with our lives. "I warn you. Do as you please. Your lives are in your hands. You will all be shot like dogs." And with this, he walked out.

We were truly frightened and started to crawl out of our bunks. When we came to the site, there were thousands of prisoners there. It appears that high officials came all the way from Moscow, and in their honor we were to demonstrate our achievements. Our brigade was treated like royalty, placed in the center of the site, so that our work could serve as an example and inspiration for the others. The camp commandant announced over the loudspeaker, "The brigade of cementmen showed an example of proletariat patriotism. On their own initiative, they volunteered to come and help fulfill the plan after a twelve-hour day of work at cement."

Our brigadier followed with his announcement. "Our brigade undertakes to work until we fulfill a norm and then tomorrow we shall do a regular day's work at cement."

Naryadtchik (Rus.): Work supervisor.

The officials applauded, "Bravo! Hurray for us." The brigadier and several lower ranking officials stood over us as we slaved, urging us on. Sweat poured from us although it was bitter cold. That's how we worked until the officials left. Only then would the brigadier permit us to take a break. This went on until morning, when we had to go to our regular jobs at the cement.

At the job, we found someone from the zone with bread and gruel. It was still dark, so the prisoners threw themselves upon the food ravenously, disregarding the filth on their hands. We didn't even have a few moments to catch our breath before the brigadier hurried us on to work. Sleepy and weary as we were, they did not greatly benefit from our efforts that day, and the next day the whole job had to be done over. It made no difference though; bad as our work had been, we were forced to stay there the full twelve hours.

It is hard to describe our condition as we returned that night from work, but one man fell under a truck and was instantly killed. We saw this happen. The brigade was horrified. We were late in arriving at the zone. Spontaneously, a mutiny broke out. The men started shouting that we refused to go back to work again.

The brigadier realized that more than execution for the mutineers was involved — *he* would also be punished severely, so he quickly hurried off to inform the NKVD. All we had in our favor was that only a day before we had been presented to the officials from Moscow as examples of discipline, and these officials were still in the camp. A mutiny at this point would jeopardize the camp officials. They were not at a loss — that very evening, the brigade was dissolved and we were scattered among the forest brigades.

Forest work was even worse than the cement. We walked some six or seven kilometers in deep snow until we reached the work site, so our meager energies were sapped before we started working. The guards indicated an area in the forest where we were permitted to move. One who stepped outside those borders risked being shot without warning. That careless step was proof of attempted escape. Every prisoner

had a quota, a certain number of meters of lumber he was to chop during the day. A single incomplete quota detained the entire group until late at night. We worked in deep snow, and it was not unheard of for a man, not agile enough to evade a falling tree, to be crushed to death, or at best, crippled.

We were naive enough to imagine that the camp directors entertained no plans for revenge for the mutiny. Three days after we started in the forest, when the Moscow officials were gone, the brigadier came storming into the barrack late at night and awakened us with his shouting. We were rushed to the office of the commandant, where we were kept standing, cold and frightened, until he finally arrived with his assistants.

He began by criticizing our production, saying that for several days we had failed to complete our norm. The forest-manager attempted to defend himself by pointing out that our brigade had done 110 percent of the norm. The commandant interrupted him sharply commenting, "The figures apply only when the lumber is stripped of branches and bark and delivered to the storehouse ready for shipment."

This was, of course, not true, but it was quite adequate for the commandant to punish us with hunger. Half of our bread rations were denied, giving us only 300 grams of bread a day. He was not finished yet. He abruptly flew into a rage. "What happened here these past few days was no coincidence. It's because we are too liberal with you, too tolerant of people with the impudence to refuse to submit to the laws of the Soviet, who refuse to relinquish their clerical and subversive activities against the Soviet Union. The *subbotnik** will be punished and no one else will want to follow his path."

He pointed to me and, in the presence of the entire brigade, ordered that I be taken to *kartzer*,* the dungeon. *Kartzer* terrified every prisoner. Usually, only the most dangerous criminals were kept there. Death from hunger and exhaustion was not uncommon. Doctors and even guards were afraid to enter. I was obviously being sent there to die.

It was late when I arrived at the dungeon, and I lay down inconspicuously in a corner. The other inmates were playing cards. The game was noisy, but my weariness and need for

Subbota, (Plural: *Subotnik*) (Rus.): Keeping the Sabbath Commandments.
Kartzer (Rus.): Dark cell for punishing misdemeanors of prisoners in Labor camps.

sleep were stronger. I slept soundly enough not to hear when they brought the daily ration of 300 grams of bread. The routine was that if anyone overslept the distribution of bread, the others took it. For anyone who spent a period of time in the dungeon, this was a question of life itself. To my astonishment, the thieves were decent to me — they woke me up and I received my portion of bread.

I washed and *davened.* The prisoners were impressed by this, observing me in silence. Then I ate half my bread, wrapped the rest in some paper, and placed it on the windowsill. This really surprised them, because no one would ever let his bread out of his hands. However, no one touched my little package.

The dungeon was crowded and humid. The room was never aired and we were not permitted to go out to get fresh air for weeks on end. Besides, we were always hungry, for all we were allotted was 300 grams of bread and cold water. In a few days, I could not endure any more and fell unconscious. The prisoners, shouting that a man was dying, banged on the door. A guard appeared and I was taken to the hospital, where I was given an injection and placed on a bed. I felt lucky.

A Jewish woman doctor worked in the hospital. When she saw me the next morning, she summoned me to her office for an examination.

"I can't keep you long at the hospital because, according to regulations, only patients with high temperatures may stay here. But you are fortunate. Tomorrow, a special medical commission will examine several dozen prisoners who are weakened by illness and will assign them to a special brigade, a so-called *slabbo** detachment that will perform light duties and receive better rations. I will be in charge of this detachment. The only thing I can do for you is try to get you into this group."

In this way I was assigned to light work, as a messenger for the medical section. Every morning after roll-call, I went to this section and sat in the corridor at the doctor's office. My job was to bring and return patients and do other such errands. Afternoons were my own. I spent that time fetching

Slabbo (Rus.): Infirm or sick people.

water for my barrack-mates, because it meant so much to them to have some water when they finished a day's work.

Two months passed for me in this *slabbo* detatchment. The threat of returning to my brigade became serious, but again I was fortunate. The night-watchman in the medical section was released and the doctor had me appointed to his job.

One day that spring, during the Hebrew month of *Nissan*, the doctor called me into her office and told me that a transport of prisoners had just arrived in the section of the camp situated on the right bank of the river. Among them was my friend Shmuel. "He doesn't look like a youth of eighteen. He's more like a broken old man. The worst part is that the transport is not stopping here but moving on to *Kolima.**"

Kolima evoked horror everywhere in Russia. The worst camps were situated there, and few prisoners ever survived. The transport itself took no less than three months from our camp, and Shmuel would never survive its rigors. He would die en route. "How can I rescue my friend?" I pleaded with the doctor. She suggested that I personally request from the head of the medical section that Shmuel be examined by the medical commission. They would undoubtedly declare him incapable of making the transport to *Kolima*.

The next evening, while I was on duty as watchman, I noticed the official. He treated me rather decently. I pleaded with him for Shmuel, but he angrily told me that it was too late.

"That means you are signing a death sentence for a youth of eighteen. In his condition, he will never reach *Kolima* alive."

He became angrier. "What shall I do! I can't release one man, and a Jew to boot. To release him, I have to detain the whole transport, call a special medical commission, and release at least a few others with him. Oh well, you just make trouble for me. I'll have to think of something I guess," he concluded.

A few days later, a messenger brought me regards from Shmuel. I gave him some food for Shmuel, and from then on Shmuel and I maintained regular contact.

Kolima: (Rus.): Bitter cold area in Russian Far North with virtually no inhabitants.

One evening shortly before Passovr, Nikolai, a co-worker of mine, came in with some packages of medicines.He put them in the storeroom, all except for one package which he handed me. "It's a gift," he explained. It was a packet of *matzos* sent to me from the free world. Since I was officially under punishment, I was not supposed to receive any packages, especially *matzos* from the outside. Nikolai had bribed the postal worker, also a prisoner, and brought me my holy gift. We burned the wrapping at once, and I hid the uncovered *matzos* on a shelf in the medical stores where I was watchman. I sent half the *matzos* to Shmuel. Nikolai promised that the following day, when he was to deliver medicines to the other side of camp, he would smuggle the *matzos* to Shmuel. I took two *matzos*, wrapped them carefully so no one could tell what they were, and at night put them in the doctor's office. In the morning she thanked me. "It's been years since I've seen *matzos*. It reminds me of my home, my grandmother . . .

I performed the *seder* at night, while on watch duty in the medical section. I slept during the day in my barrack. On the third day of *Chol Hamoed** I was awakened from my sleep, and to my delight and surprise — there was a broadly grinning Shmuel. He handed me a document declaring that, due to lack of evidence, he was being released from camp.

Shmuel was born in a large Russian city to a religious family. Since the Communist government forbade Jewish learning, Shmuel was taught secretly. The NKVD came one day and sent all the pupils in his *yeshiva* to five years' work in *Cozachstan.** Even in *Cozachstan*, the pupils continued to learn together, so they were sentenced to ten years of prison-camp. The witnesses were forced to testify that they had a conspiracy against the secret police.

My own future as a prisoner did not affect my happiness for Shmuel. We made a covenant at that moment — not to lose confidence in G-d.

My pleasant assignment in the medical section lasted four months, until late August. Early one morning the doctor called me to her office, "I'm afraid I must give you bad news. I've really been wondering for some time now why the OGB (the

government's security service) hasn't maintained an interest in you. Now I understand. The head of the OGB has been away from his post and has just returned. He learned that you are here with a comfortable job, so he ordered that you go back to work with your brigade without delay.

"Won't you reconsider about *Shabbos*? This contest with the OGB head is dangerous for you. Aren't you permitted to violate the law under such circumstances?" she pleaded.

I was truly moved by her compassion and grateful for the priceless favors she had done for me. I tried to tell her so, and then added, "As for *Shabbos*, whatever dangers are involved, I must follow my path and place my trust in G-d. It's all in His hands."

CHAPTER 19

The "Lichtiger" Brigadier

Late one September night in 1939, two armed soldiers awakened me and ordered me to march ahead of them out of the camp. They forced me to march in this manner for over two hours, until we reached a two-story building. One of the soldiers led me into a large room, took a receipt for delivering me promptly, and left.

Six men sat around a writing table, each in OGB uniforms with insignias of high rank.

"How is your health?" was the first solicitous question.

"Thank G-d," I replied. "I wonder at refined gentlemen as yourselves not offering me a chair. I have just come ten kilometers, rushed all the while by soldiers. I'm sure you realize that I am not able to stand."

"We have a principle that an enemy who refuses to submit must be liquidated," the senior officer answered. "You have been in camp for an extended term and still maintain your counter-revolutionary principles. The fact is that you should have been dispatched to heaven long ago. We have decided to make one more attempt with you. We simply are interested in

making you a man like all men. But first, we want to clarify one point: What, in essence, is the substance of Judaism in your opinion, and why do you religious Jews oppose the Soviet Union?"

I did not reply. He repeated his question. I did not reply. He furiously drew his revolver and shouted, "If you keep silent you will never speak again!" I did not reply. Dead silence dominated the room. One of the officers who had not participated in the questioning, as though the whole business was no concern of his, jotted something on a note and handed it to my interrogator. He studied the note and replaced his revolver in its holster.

"Why didn't you tell me right away that you do not reply when addressed in the familiar term?" He sounded mollified. "You must excuse me. But I warn you. You had better answer our questions."

"Thank you, sir. I must answer but you must also conduct yourself according to the laws. I request, therefore, that the interrogation be recorded in writing."

"We have a great deal to do today," interjected the officer who had written the note. "We shall postpone your interrogation. I can assure you right now, if you don't work on Saturday, we will send you to the "Lichtiger's" brigade. We believe that after a few months in that brigade, there will be no problem of working on Saturdays — or any other days for that matter." He summoned a soldier and instructed him to return me to the camp.

The "Lichtiger" was one of the notorious murderers in Russia, as were the others in his brigade. Generally, robbers and murderers in camp had their own routine, living by the "law of thieves." One of the fundamental precepts of their code was not to work in camp, regardless of any repressions or punishments meted out. The "Lichtiger" ignored the conventional thieves' code, but instituted his own principles. His brigade worked and did an excellent job. In return they enjoyed special conditions and privileges. The main privilege was the right to rob the other prisoners of any possessions they liked. On days that packages from relatives were

distributed, the "Lichtiger's" brigade would enter the barracks at night and appropriate the best, especially money. No one dared protest unless he was ready to pay with his life. It was understood that the officials received their share of the loot. Now I was to work — and live — with this band of killers.

At five the next morning, I was transferred to the barrack of my new brigade. I had never seen a barrack like this in any camp. It was a large room with broad windows. Instead of bunks along the walls, there were beds with mattresses, sheets on each bed, a pillow and a cotton blanket for each prisoner. At the end of this hall there was a room with red walls, a table and chairs. On the table there was a phonograph. A sign on the wall urged, "Maintain the quiet and cleanliness of the barrack; it is your home."

I was greeted by the *dnevalni** who showed me to a bed and explained, "This is your place. You will wake at five, wash yourself, and make your bed. Keep the barrack clean. Don't spit on the floor. Food and utensils are to be kept in the cabinet by your bed."

A few minutes later the eighty-eight members of the brigade strode into the barrack. Their looks and expressions left no doubt about their character. A tall, husky man with red hair and piercing eyes came over to me and put out his hand. "I am Alexander the Lichtiger. I'm the brigadier. From now on you are a member of my brigade. I'm telling you now that you have to work well and obey all my orders. We're sharp people here. We punish every wrongdoing, but we are fair.

"You are a counter-revolutionary," he continued, "and we are all Soviets here. In your opinion, you are an honest man and we are all robbers and murderers. But here in my brigade you had better forget what you were on the outside. Here we are all prisoners, we are all equals, and we have to treat each other like brothers. If anyone in the brigade calls you a counter-revolutionary, or if you call anyone a thief or killer, you'll both get what's coming to you. My fist hits hard," he said, brandishing a huge fist.

"Now I'm going to get bread for the brigade. I'll get white bread for you. I know that except for bread and water you

Dnevali (Rus.): Barrack orderly in prison-camp.

don't eat anything and, besides, your stomach is in a mess. A package came for you, but since you won't work on Saturday, they marked it undeliverable, to be sold to the prisoners at government prices. But don't you worry about it. They won't pull any stunts like that with me. You'll get your package tonight. Whatever you receive you can keep in your cabinet. Don't worry, no one will take anything."

The brigadier returned with bread rations, 1200 grams for each man. I got only 800, but it was white bread. The *dnevalni* brought in four teapots and four large pitchers of boiling water. We all sat around the table and had bread and tea.

After our meal, we went out to the roll call. Some hundred brigades were lined up behind each other. Each brigadier called the names of his brigade and the supervisor checked whether any prisoners were missing. At six o'clock we heard the signal and went out to work. At both sides of the gate, guards again counted the prisoners marching out.

At the work site, we lowered ourselves down a ladder into a deep pit where we laid a cement foundation for a large building. We hauled heavy wheelbarrows of cement for six hours without a break. At noon they lowered pots of kasha and meat to us by rope. Everyone, including the brigadier, sat down to eat lunch. They did not even call me to eat because they knew I would not eat non-kosher food. We worked four more hours after lunch and then returned to camp.

The *dnevalni* greeted us cordially at the barrack. The room was spotless and the tables set like those in a restaurant. The plates, glasses, and spoons were laid out properly, and two prisoners served the food. The menu consisted of salted fish with cabbage and potatoes, kasha and meat, and tea at the end. I enjoyed my white bread and tea.

The prisoners observed me with interest, heard me say the blessings after eating, but said not a word. It seems they had strict orders from the brigadier not to bother, mock, or embarrass me.

We had a good rest on our beds before the other brigades returned from work. They rushed like maniacs to the mess hall to grab places because, for four-thousand prisoners, only

three-hundred seats were provided. An hour later we heard the signal for roll call. All brigades lined up in straight rows and the count began. Generally there were two roll calls a day, one in the morning before going out to work, and then in the evening. Sometimes someone would escape and the watchmen would spot tracks near the fence. A signal would be sounded in the middle of the night, rousing all the prisoners from their sleep, and we would be chased out of the barracks for a count. There was invariably a great deal of confusion. Some prisoners would not have a chance to dress. They stood in the cold in their underwear until the entire count was completed and the escaped prisoner was identified.

Normally, after the roll call, our brigadier would assemble us in the room and turn on the phonograph. Some danced while others chatted. I took no part in the entertainment. I *davened maariv* and went to sleep. All I cared for was a chance to lie down for a while in a real bed.

At times, our brigade would have a little "night-job." This happened on days that prisoners got packages and money from their relatives outside of prison. The brigade broke up into groups of three men for each barrack, one to stand watch at the door while the other two entered with knives in hand. They would waken the unfortunate prisoners and order them to spread out their money and packages, and then they would take anything of value. If a prisoner attempted to resist, they chased him out of the barrack naked. This effectively intimidated the others. Later, the raiders handed everything over to the brigadier, who divided the spoils.

One morning the *dnevalni* brought me my share of the money and articles. I thanked him but declined to accept since I had not "worked" that evening. He kept the stuff for himself and I was never again offered a share in the partnership.

The third day after I joined the brigade of the "Lichtiger," right after supper, the brigadier called me. "Come, we're going to the censor for your package." The censor was an OGB official who examined the packages and letters received by those prisoners who were permitted to correspond with their free relatives. The censor read the letters, opened the

packages, and sifted through every article. He carefully sliced up bread and sausages into tiny chunks. Cigarettes were broken, and tea never passed at all.

The brigadier requested the censor to give me my parcel. "You know," the censor protested, "that there is an order from the commandant that, until he works on Saturday, he gets no letters or parcels."

"This man works in my brigade," the "Lichtiger" cooly explained. "I make decisions about my men." The censor promptly telephoned the commandant of the OGB. To my astonishment he was given permission to give me my mail. By now I had two packages waiting for me in the storeroom.

In examining the packages, the censor broke and messed up everything. The brigadier returned to the barrack and sent several prisoners with boxes to help me carry my things. At the barrack we laid out everything on the table, restored some semblance of order, and put it all away in my cupboard. I asked the *dnevalni* to prepare the table in the dining room. Some prisoners brought boiling water and a pot of tea. I put half of the food I had received on the table, and the whole barrack joined the party.

The brigadier was not there at the time. When he returned, I offered him some food. He laughed and remarked, "My people bring me more in one night than you received in both packages." He asked me whether I had shared my largesse voluntarily or whether they had demanded it of me. "Don't be afraid," he reassured me. "Where I am, no one will bother you. Another thing — I've decided to give you a private place for your prayers where you won't be disturbed."

Near our barrack there was a heated room used for drying the prisoners' work clothes. This was one of the "privileges" the "Lichtiger" gained for his people. He instructed the *dnevalni* that when I was there, I was not to be disturbed.

The next day, a Friday as it happened, we learned that we would go on the night shift. The *Shabbos* problem was perplexing. In the other brigade the situation was simple — I went to the commandant and he placed me in the dungeon.

But here, the "Lichtiger" was boss, and it was inadvisable to make experiments with him. Meanwhile, the sun was setting, so I *davened mincha.* The "Lichtiger" called me to the side and told me that this *Shabbos.* I would not have to go to the dungeon. His people, he explained, are not to be punished. He told me to go out at night with the whole brigade, but not to worry, "You won't work on *Shabbos . . .*"

I could not understand how this would be, but I realized that I would have to take orders from him. I welcomed the *Shabbos* queen, said *kiddush* over a cup of sweetened water, and used some leftover bread and butter for my *Shabbos* repast — and I thanked G-d for caring for me.

We all went out to work. The brigadier lined us up and reminded us, "We have special working conditions. Everybody works twelve hours and we go by the norm, meaning how many meters of concrete we pour. It's hard work for sure, but we don't get ripped out by the cold fifteen or sixteen hours outdoors each day. We have special conditions and privileges and, most importantly, we're boss in the camp at night. We can take whatever we like from anybody. But remember, we get all this if we work hard and fast and fill our norms. If we don't, then we're not big shots anymore. We'll sweat just like all the other prisoners."

The men took to their work and the brigadier took me to a small room that was used to store brooms. They were used to spread the concrete evenly. "Crawl in," he instructed me. "I'll lock you in from the outside. Be careful not to make any sound. If they find you here, we're both through."

It was morning before he opened the door. I was shuddering with cold. He took me back to the brigade, and we returned to the camp together. The barrack was warm. Everyone had breakfast and lay down to sleep after the night's labors. I *davened* first and then sat down to my *Shabbos* meal. I had received my ration of bread. There was sugar and butter from my package and hot tea in the barrack. In a word, this was one of the very few quiet *Shabbos* days I did not spend in the dungeon.

I hadn't finished *bentching** when the brigadier came over and sat down next to me.

"Before you came to my brigade, I was summoned by the commander of the Third Section. He told me they were sending me a Jewish prisoner convicted of sabotage, an incorrigible — because he continues to act the same way in prison! He won't even work on Saturdays. The commander gave me instructions about handling you, how to get rid of you as fast as possible. He told me not to force you to work on Saturday because that wouldn't do any good anyway. Instead, I am to give you a work load too heavy for you to perform. That way you will antagonize the rest of the brigade because they will be penalized and they will hate you. The next step is to be a new trial for sabotage, and the verdict will be execution. The commander didn't know that you are safer here than elsewhere. Are you wondering why I put out so much for you?

"No, I'm not a Jew," he laughed, reading my thoughts clearly. "But that has something to do with it. I am the ninth child in our family. We were poor peasants in a village in White Russia. There was a terrible famine in our region when I was born. Many of the villagers left to find bread elsewhere. My family stayed because our horse died, and my father said he didn't care to wander in strange places with small children.

"I was the youngest and my mother couldn't stand to watch me die slowly of hunger. She went to some acquaintances in the village and asked them to take me in for a few months, until the famine passed. Unhappily, it didn't take long, just a short while, and my parents died. I stayed with that family. They were Jews. Yankel the beltmaker had five children and the youngest, Laibele, was my age, about two years old. We grew up like brothers."

The "Lichtiger" sat there pensively for a while. He spoke again in a soft voice.

"I've told you that they sent you to my brigade to liquidate you. But I have my own principles of justice. Think what you want about me, but I'll tell you one thing — I never forget someone who is good to me. It's your good luck that you

remind me of Yankel the beltmaker, and I'll never let anyone do you any harm."

I was exhausted, so I lay down to rest a bit, but I could not sleep. I lay there for hours, pondering the brigadier's explanation, until I heard the signal for night work. This was the day prior to *Rosh Hashana,** and that posed a serious problem for me: should I depend on the brigadier, or should I follow my old routine and go to the dungeon? Walking to work, I remarked to the brigadier that I had decided to go to the dungeon rather than cause him more trouble. Insulted, he looked at me and said, "Depend on me. I'll arrange it."

When we came to the job, he told me to wait until he assigned all the work. Then he took me to the hut that served as a broom store. He locked it from the outside and told me to open it for no one. "I know it's a big holiday for you. You can pray in peace here both days. I'm not Jewish, but pray for me too." He wished me a good year and left.

I *davened* with a broken spirit. Eight more such *Rosh Hashanas* awaited me. After *davening*, I made a sumptuous holiday meal of some candies saved from the package I received. Afterward I sat on some brooms and recited *Tehillim.** Toward morning, the brigadier returned and I went back to the barrack with the rest of the brigade. After the roll call I *davened*, ate my holiday meal, and lay down to sleep. I awoke only when we were summoned to work.

CHAPTER 20

Kol Nidrei In A Dark Cellar

The holiest of days, *Yom Kippur,** was almost here. I was so worried that I could not sleep. It was impossible to go to the dungeon because that would make my brigadier look incompetent, since he could not force me to work on *Shabbos* and holy days. Besides, it would disturb the relatively quiet life I had in the brigade and would have seriously worsened my situation. My broom closet was out too, because some people

worked there now weaving brooms. Days flew by. It was the day preceding *Yom Kippur* and I still did not know where I could go the next day.

That evening, when it was time to go out to work, the brigadier noticed my concern. It was obvious that I was seriously upset. He was infuriated when I explained my trouble. For a moment I was afraid he might beat me but, with effort, he restrained himself.

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?" he shouted, almost in desperation. "Am I supposed to remember all your holy days? Why, this is your holiest day! I remember Yankel used to stay in the *shul* all night long. Get up," he said after thinking awhile. "We'll have to find some way out for you. I won't abandon you, especially tonight . . ."

We arrived at the work site. I stood by patiently while he assigned the various jobs to the brigade, then he signaled me to come. A few hundred meters from the site there was an unfinished structure. He led me into a dark cellar with water a meter deep. Wooden posts stuck out of the water, set about a meter apart. Large stones fell periodically from above into the water. It took us some while until our eyes adjusted to the dark.

"Get up on a post," he ordered me. "Just don't sway too hard when you *daven* because if you fall into the water there won't be anyone around to help you. But since you sacrifice so much for your faith, I'm sure G-d will protect you. Please, don't go out of here until I call for you."

I remained alone. Standing on a post about thirty centimeters wide, it was hard to keep my balance. It would be impossible to stay in this position all night. I jumped across from one post to another until I was next to the wall where I could lean. This was a better place anyway, because the stones fell less frequently here. The jumping exhausted me, and the threat of falling stones did not help much either. Catching my breath took some while, and then I started to prepare for *Kol Nidre.**

I pictured the fate of the Jews, connected with this wonderful prayer, from the days of the Spanish Inquisition

until my own childhood years. I remembered my first *Kol Nidre* in *shul.* 1905. A wave of pogroms flooded the Jewish villages and settlements of Russia. The newspapers were filled with foul anti-semitic tirades blaming the Jews for all the troubles afflicting the Russian people. "Beat Jews! Save Russia!" was the call heard all over Russia. Every day brought more news of murdered Jewish women, children, and elderly people.

A pogrom was being prepared for our town. The tension and fear was communicated even to young children. In this mood we all went to *Kol Nidre.* The men had all put on their white *kitels** and *talaisim,** and the *chazan** was prepared to begin. An old man stood up, his long white beard flowing, and called out, "*Yiden!** We are all in terrible danger. They are preparing a pogrom against us. They have guns; we have nothing with which to fight. Our only weapon is *Kol Nidre.* Our only defender is G-d. He must have mercy on our wives and children and rescue us from their claws. Let us *daven* with spirit!"

Now, as I readied myself for *Kol Nidre* in this cellar, I was in no less peril than my townsmen thirty-four years before. Since I had been so young then, I had not realized the gravity of the danger, but now I could feel it at every instant. A careless movement and I could fall into the water and drown. If anyone heard a sound and discovered me, I would be executed. The sound of the stones falling into the water was merged with the cries of my townsmen that *Yom Kippur* night. The sound of my *Kol Nidre* joined their calls, and it joined the noise of the stones.

I prayed all night. Eventually I heard my brigadier calling. I felt like I had just been awakened from sleep, even though I had been wide awake the entire time. Now I began to feel the weariness. But how was I to get out in this black darkness? The brigadier had two paper cement bags with him. He set them afire. Using this light, I jumped across the posts until I got to the cellar door.

I could barely stand. The brigadier supported me. I could see that his eyes were glistening. G-d, I thought, a night of

miracles. Just getting through the night, and not having to profane the holy day, and saying *Kol Nidre*, and on top of it all—seeing tears in the "Lichtiger's" eyes! Why, his name alone was enough to terrify not only prisoners but even the officials! He had killed more than once, and had faced death himself, and he could weep when he saw my condition after a *Yom Kippur* night . . .

"You must excuse me," he apologized, embracing me. "I had no choice. There just was no other place to hide you. I really do believe now that G-d has mercy on you."

When we came back to the barrack, I collapsed. The "Lichtiger" asked one of the prisoners to help me undress. They put me to bed, covered me with several blankets since I was shivering, and summoned a doctor. He gave me a shot and wrote me a permission slip to stay in bed two days. I was fortunate, because now I had a whole day to *daven* and rest.

At night, when they all went out to work, I made *havdala,** the ceremony that ushers out a *Shabbos* or holiday, and had my meal. I slept well that night, not even hearing them return from work in the morning. The "Lichtiger" had warned them to keep still so that I would not be disturbed.

After the two days I had to go back to work, but I was still weak. The brigadier noticed this and assigned someone to help me with my heavy work. This man actually saved me. Two days later the brigadier told me that he had instructions to send me to the planning section. There, I was received by the Jewish woman engineer who was in charge of the construction work. She was delighted to see me and explained that the problem was the 1940 financial plan. They had made the plan and I was to check it thoroughly, making corrections, and noting any improvements. According to her calculations, this was to take about ten days.

I explained that the next day was *Succos** and immediately after it came *Shabbos*, so that actually there would be only five working days. She was displeased. I assured her that I would make every effort to complete the plan in time, and that with G-d's help I would succeed.

"I trust you," she replied. "I'm pleased that this will give you an opportunity to observe your holiday properly."

I shut myself in my room and worked through the night. It was good to learn that the plan was not at all badly prepared, so it would be no problem to finish it in time. Before daylight, I returned to my brigade and we went back to the camp together. On the way back the brigadier told me that the commandant of the Third Section knew that I was working in the office. He had agreed because they needed me there because of my expertise, although he was reluctant about freeing me from my regular brigade duties. Officially, as far as the administration was concerned, I was still doing hard physical labor with my brigade.

I was grateful to G-d that I would not have to hide in a cellar or go to the dungeon for the holidays. At night, when we went out to work, I took along bread and butter for my holiday meal. The brigade went off to hard labor and I went to the planning section. I locked my door. Here I could finally *daven* peacefully, confident that no one would disturb me.

There was a jug of drinking water on the table. I had a cup with me to wash my hands before the meal. I was right at home, thinking, "G-d, what miracles You perform." At home no one would dream that I felt blessed at this moment, that this evening I lacked nothing — except freedom from the camp. After eating I said some Psalms and lay down to sleep. The second night of *Succos* passed similarly.

There was something waiting at the barracks in the morning. Our brigade was being transferred to the day shift. That was good news because work went better and faster during the day. However, after *Simchas Torah** I saw that I would not complete my job in time, so I asked the supervisor to permit me to remain in the office overnight. Without returning to the barrack on Tuesday night, I could work without a break until Wednesday night and finish on time.

I worked two solid days without interruption and on Thursday morning I submitted the plan on time. The supervisor was so happy that she promised to make every effort to

have me assigned to some easier work. When we said good-by, she wished me success and freedom from the camp.

A few days later I was summoned to the camp administration offices, where I was informed that my job assignment was changed. Now I was to be night-watchman over three storehouses.When I went back to the barrack and told the "Lichitger" that I was being transferred to another brigade and must therefore also move to a different barrack, his reaction was emotional

"I'm very sorry you won't be with me any longer, though I'm happy you will be rid of your physical suffering, the hard labor, and having to go to the dungeon to spend *Shabbos*. The main thing is that you will be a little further away from the Third Section."

He assembled the whole brigade around the table and delivered an impressive farewell address. "You see this man who lived with us just a short while? He is a Jew, and a religious Jew at that. There are lots of people here who make up lies about Jews. By knowing this refined person, you can tell that they are all lies. Let's wish him to live to be released from this hell and to return to a normal life."

The "Lichtiger," whom everyone considered to be a heartless murderer, did me many favors— but I never expected this sort of farewell.

CHAPTER 21
My New "Easy" Work

I went to the barrack of my new brigade and reported to the *dnevalni*, asking him to assign me a bunk. I explained that I had been appointed as watchman for the storehouses and was ordered to live in this particular barrack. He would not believe me, so he went to check with the *koloni* commandant. When he returned, his attitude was quite different. He assigned me a bunk to sleep in and a cabinet for my things.

This barrack was generally better than the others,

although not as "luxurious" as my old brigade's. Along both walls there were two tiers of bunks made out of plain boards. Each bunk was furnished with a mattress, pillow, and a cover.

The next morning after roll call, I reported to the headquarters of *Tchiss*,* the section that distributes food and clothing for the camp. I was asked the usual question — my age, health, and why I was sent to the camp. When I told my "crime," he wondered why I was assigned this sort of work. "Here you will have a serious responsibility. You will have to keep guard over three things: the storehouse where the bread is divided into portions, the clothing stores, and the foodstuffs stores. You realize, of course, that you are new here, and you will be dealing with experienced and shrewd thieves. They keep thinking up new schemes. If there are any robberies, you will be held responsible and you will be tried for them."

He paused awhile, apparently confident that I would be intimidated and have no stomach for the job. When he saw that I agreed anyway, he gave me a receipt for a fur coat and felt boots. "You may wear the coat only at night when you are on duty. In the morning it is to be returned to the storehouse." I could keep the boots so they could dry out. In conclusion, he told me to acquaint myself with my duties and to give him a final decision the next day. It was obvious that the commandant was particularly interested that I not become the watchman.

That evening in the barrack I became acquainted with the members of my new brigade. They were prisoners assigned to service jobs in headquarters: bakery, kitchen, laundry, bathhouse, storehouses, minor repair work, janitors in the rooms and offices, etc. My reception was most uncordial. I was the only Jew there and, more importantly, I was an outsider who could interfere. Clearly this was the reason the commandant wanted to scare me away from these duties.

Early the next morning I went out to meet my new bosses. Eight men worked at the bread storehouse, slicing and weighing the bread in portions. As expected, the supervisor of the store did not greet me with glee. "Don't be like the other watchman — always coming around here begging." He spoke

Tchiss (Rus.): Section for food distribution in Labor-camp.

angrily and was trying to intimidate me. "I have no extra bread. Everybody gets what he's supposed to," he added. I reassured him quietly and explained that he need not worry at all about me.

Thieves were constantly circulating around the bread store. The store functioned twenty-one hours daily, from 2:00 a.m., when fresh bread was brought from the bakery, until 11:00 p.m. at night.

My reception at the other two stores was no friendlier. The supervisor of the foodstuffs store, also a prisoner, even had a brotherly talk with me and advised me how to get out of this business. "I'm surprised that a man in your years should get into such dangerous work. They've been looking for a watchman for a long time, but no one wants the job. Now they snared you. You're only one man in charge of three storehouses, and all you'll have is a stick in your hand. These thieves come in bunches, armed with knives. Killing a man is as hard for them as drinking a glass of water is for you. Take my advice. Don't be stupid. As long as it's not too late — get out of the job."

I thanked him gratefully for his solicitous counsel and told him, "I'm not as stupid as you think. I've survived more than once in the camp and I'm not impressed. G-d helped me until now and I hope He will continue to protect me."

Until I came, the director of the clothing store and his assistant used to spend the night in a small room in the store. I informed them that from now on they would sleep in the barrack. "At night, when I'm on duty, I won't let you into the store unless you come with the commandant."

"Are you threatening us with the commandant?" he questioned angrily, and with a veiled hint I caught quite well.

"I am not an inspector, and I'm not interested in your business. But at night, when I am responsible, no one will come in here. I can handle outside thieves by myself." I had no doubts that I was surrounded by wolves. Either I acted decisively or I would be doomed. I was not particularly overjoyed but I felt pleased to be rid of the crushing physical labor and spending *Shabbos* in the dungeon.

I slept well that day, and at nine in the evening I started on my new job. The food store was already closed. The bread storekeeper was making his daily accounts. When he saw me he shouted, "No entry allowed here for outsiders. If you have any business with me, knock on the window and I'll tell you."

It was obvious that I was superfluous here, a potential troublemaker. I went to the clothing store, which had just been locked, and checked the three locks hanging there. One was open. I asked a passing prisoner to call the storekeeper, who came at once. He did not realize that I was the one who sent for him because he went over to the locks and showed me the open one.

"Do you see this?" he called out loudly. "That's the kind of watchman you are." His shouting quickly brought a crowd.

I answered him quietly but firmly, "I'm the one who sent for you. I saw you lock up the store. I'll overlook it this time, but if it happens again, you won't be back here. Remember, you're a prisoner here just like me. Now lock up and I don't want to see you around here any more."

The onlookers nodded in agreement with me. The storekeeper was bitter and left without saying a word. My first night's work had begun.

At five o'clock, after reveille, many people came for bread and *balanda*,* a watery soup they gave for breakfast. Roll call followed immediately, but I could not go because the storekeepers had not come yet. Right after roll call, a prisoner came to tell me that the commandant wanted to see me. I told him I could not leave until the storekeepers arrived. A few minutes passed and the commandant himself was there, swearing at me for not being at roll call. I told him he should complain about the storekeepers who did not get to work on time. I could not leave the stores and then be responsible for thefts.

That afternoon the *natchalnik* summoned me. The commandant had charged me with refusal to appear at roll call. I explained that, according to regulations, I must not leave my post until the storekeepers took charge of the locks. I was

Balanda (Rus.): Broth given to prisoners three times daily.

not anxious to be given ten more years as an accomplice in robbery. I did not refuse to be at roll call, but the storekeepers must be there punctually at seven.

Another provocation was also unsuccessful. They hoped that I would refuse to go to work on *Shabbos*, and they prepared a special piece of work for that night.

Friday evening I *davened* in a corner behind a door, made *kiddush* over two pieces of bread, and by nine I was in the clothing store. I took my overcoat and went out. The storekeeper was busy with some people and did not notice me. When the others left, he realized that my coat was gone. He went outside and bumped into me. In surprise he blurted, "You came?" and quickly caught himself. "I mean — so early?"

"Why it's my regular time for coming." I pretended not to understand. "It's nine o'clock already." He locked up and left quickly. He must have hurried off to tell his buddies not to come because their plans were disrupted. Nevertheless, there were more prowlers than usual. I had hoped to be able to say some *Tehilim* that night, but there was no chance. All night I was busy chasing away the prowlers. It was a pleasure to hear reveille in the morning.

I was awakened in the middle of the day. The commandant wanted me. "Why don't you shave off your beard and *payos*?" he demanded sharply as soon as I came in.

"I have permission from the head of the medical department."

"You won't have any privileges with me. You know good and well that, according to the hygiene regulations, no one may have hair or beard. I'd better not see you with beard and *payos* tomorrow unless you want the dungeon," he threatened me. These officers were former prisoners and had no authority to punish. The most they could do was write a report to the *natchalnik*, so I was unimpressed by his threats.

The second night on duty another surprise awaited me. About ten o'clock, when the bread store was still active and all eight of the crew were working, a tumult was suddenly heard.

I did not go over there. I had not yet assumed charge of the store for the night, so I wanted to stay completely out of the business. About a half hour later, when they were closing up, the storekeeper told me that three prisoners, armed with wicked-looking knives, raided the store and stole several loaves of bread. How eight healthy men, none of them underweight, also armed with knives for bread cutting, could be overpowered by three men — this was *their* secret. I refused to mix in.

However, the next day after roll call the commandant called for me. Without a word, he took out a document stating that last night "unidentified" individuals stole five loaves of bread. He ordered me to sign it. "As far as I know, this happened before I took charge of protecting the store. I was not present, so I shall not sign," I informed him with a calmness I did not feel. The commandant realized I was determined, and though he was furious, he dismissed me.

I returned to my barrack, *davened* quietly, and had my piece of bread. Before I had a chance to lie down a messenger called me to the *natchalnik*. As I walked in the door, he started shouting at me for not having presented a report first thing in the morning about the robbery the night before. "During my duty nothing happened," I told him. "I only heard that this happened before the store was closed. Besides, I can't understand how eight men could be frightened by three attackers. But I'm no commandant, and it's not my job to make investigations and write reports."

The *natchalnik* understood me perfectly. "You may go," he mumbled.

After this I had some peace. Apparently they were resigned, at least for the time being, to my having the job. A few days later I was called to the chief *natchalnik* at headquarters. He greeted me affably and even offered me a chair.

"I've read your documents. You were a chief bookkeeper for a large firm before your arrest. You might be able to assist us in a problem we have. There's always a weight shortage in the bread store. I know they take off twenty grams from each

ration. There should be a surplus of several dozen kilos of bread a day, and instead they are short some thirty or forty kilos daily. I don't want to try them for stealing. I would rather not have anyone ever accuse me of permitting stealing in my camp."

I answered that to determine the cause of the shortage would require a thorough accounting. He called the bookkeeper and we sat down to work together. After our study I suggested that the store was not the only target for thefts — that there were robberies in the bakery too, and that was why the shortages were so large. The only remedy was to change the storekeepers. I proposed a certain prisoner who was an honorable man and would not steal. The *natchalnik* thanked me and told me to send him the man.

My candidate was Honno Izraelevitch, the one who used to allow me and Shmuel warm up in the little room he had as a storeroom at building projects. He was lucky to get a job like this, but he was always afraid the thugs might kill him. I persuaded him not to be so timid, that he could depend on G-d's protection.

We went to the *natchalnik* and on the second day Honno took over the bread store. Gradually he changed the crew and, not surprisingly, there were no more shortages. The rations were weighed scrupulously and everyone was satisfied.

My work also settled into a routine. The fellows had respect for me because they realized they would not defeat me easily. Even the *natchalnik* of the *Tchiss* was afraid to pester me any more, and I enjoyed some tranquility.

Winter came with the bitter cold. Even a fur coat was not enough for a ten hour outdoor shift. I kept running around the area all night to keep warm. Naturally, after work I still had to stand for a long while at roll call.

One day, when I returned to the barrack frozen, I found a fifteen your old Jewish boy waiting for me. His face was pale and thin — he was barely able to stand. The first thing I did was tell him to wash, and then we ate. "I heard about you, so I came to ask you to help me because I just can't take much more," he told me.

He was from a village in White Russia. His father was religious and refused to work on *Shabbos* so he could not find any kind of job. He became a *melamed,** teaching children *Yiddishkeit** — illegally of course. The officials learned of this and exiled him to a camp far off in Siberia. He was never heard from again. Long afterwards, a man came to the family from Siberia and told them that their father was persecuted for not working on *Shabbos* in the camp. Finally he was shot, and a report was fabricated that he had been attempting to escape.

Mattes, the boy in my room, was the eldest of five children. He went to Moscow to an uncle, and there he studied and worked. From time to time he would buy a tub of butter and send it to his mother, who would sell it and support the children. One day the police caught him with the tub of butter. Because he refused to tell the name of the seller he was sentenced to five years in labor camp. More than a half year had passed and the family had no inkling of what had happened to him.

I spoke to Honno and we arranged for Mattes to slice bread in the bread store. He was a capable lad. He *davened* every day and never ate non-kosher foods. In the evening after his work, I taught him some *Torah*.

Honno had a friend, Avraham Moseievitch, in the camp. He was an educated man who had important jobs on the outside. His enemies wanted to eliminate him, so they contrived a charge that he had taken a bribe for which he was rewarded with five years in camp. Since he was so capable, he was given the job of providing the camp with foodstuffs. In the barrack near the storehouse he had a small room that served both as his office and his living quarters.

Frequently, when he was away on a buying trip, he would give me his little room, and eventually I moved in. We did not interfere with each other because our shifts did not coincide. I worked while he slept and he slept during my duty shift. On occasion he would bring a few potatoes which we roasted on the little stove. Then the four of us — Avraham, Honno, Mattes and myself — had a decent meal.

Once Avraham Moseievitch brought a kilo of white flour, eggs, and a glass of oil. "I've got an idea," he proposed. "Let's have a *kugel** for *Shabbos*. Why not? Let our enemies fume..." He brought a new pot that I glowed out, and on Friday we made a *kugel*. It was hard to resist eating it at once. Then on *Shabbos* after roll call we sat at the table and had *kugel*. It brought back memories of home.

I suggested to Avraham that he bring flour and the extras every week. From then on, we had a real *Shabbos* meal with *kugel*.

One day Mattes told me that he had met a Jew in camp who was in sad condition. Unable to fulfill his labor norm, he received no more than 300 grams of bread a day, and was dying of starvation. Later we found that there were other Jews in this situation. We decided to develop a reserve of bread from the leftovers in Honno's store and use it to keep such people alive. Bread was the most valuable commodity in camp and could not be procured for any price.

We managed to struggle through a hard winter that year. Spring was coming, and with it Passover. We had to think about *matzos*. In 1938, I had arranged that *matzos* should be sent to me directly in camp two months before Passover. I hoped they would arrive in time, but Hono was doubtful. "How do you know your friends are even free and that there's anyone who can bake the *matzos*?" he asked.

Passover was two weeks off. No *matzos*.

"How about us baking *matzos* ourselves?" Honno asked me one day. I looked at him. In camp, in our condition, to bake *matzos*? I couldn't imagine anything so preposterous. "You just supervise the *kosher* part," Honno answered my unspoken doubts. "I'll take care of the rest."

The next day Honno arranged with the *natchalnik* to overhaul the bread store and freshen everything. The walls were whitewashed, the floors thoroughly cleaned, and new tables installed. It was evident that Honno really intended to bake *matzos*. When the refurnishing was done, Honno called me in before locking up the store. He led me to a corner where a bag of flour was concealed.

"See that? Before milling the grain the stones were cleaned spotless. The flour was poured into a brand new sack, never used. We brought it here right away. Is it *kosher*?" he asked proudly.

"Oh yes," I said, very impressed. "But why take such risks? I'm still hoping for my *matzos* to come. There will be enough for everyone."

"Whether your *matzos* will come, I don't know. But that you will eat of these *matzos* — this I do know. Come back in about two hours. You'll have something to see then," he smiled.

About two that night I returned to the bread store. I was stunned to see, off in a corner behind a cardboard partition, an elderly woman kneading dough, while my pupil Mattes was standing at a table rolling out dough with a rolling pin and puncturing holes in the flattened dough with a wheel from a watch. Honno stood at the oven taking out freshly baked *matzos*. It was unbelievable. My G-d! How much courage You gave Your people — to be willing to risk their lives for our faith, baking *matzos* right in a Soviet labor camp!

The next morning Moseievitch's little office was graced with a new box wrapped in a white sheet containing fifteen kilos of *matzos*. I was overwhelmed with this feat, but was a bit hesitant about using the *matzos*, since I doubted that they were sufficiently supervised in accordance with the law through the entire preparation process. I was still hopeful that, with G-d's help, I would get those *matzos* from the outside. I looked up Nikolai, my friend the photographer, and asked him to check whether any packages arrived for me in the central post office. I knew quite well that the package could just lie there until after Passover.

The next day he told me that there was a package for me, but they refused to give it to him. Generally, all mail for prisoners, letters and packages, must clear the camp censor. The censor was the wife of the investigating judge of the NKVD, who was known for his cruelty. I went to her and pleaded. She gave me her standard reply, "Quit coming

around here pestering us. When a package comes for you, we'll send for you. No one will take anything away from you..."

I told her that I was not concerned, Heaven forbid, that someone might pilfer anything. It was simply that the package contained some home-baked foods that I must have since I was ill and could not eat anything else. I was merely asking her to do me a small favor and save me from starvation.

Toward evening I was called to the censor, and sure enough, there was a package for me. She opened it in my presence and looked in wonder at the unusual contents. She had never seen *matzos*. I offered her a *matzo*. She tasted it. "This is supposed to save your life?" she shouted at me. "It doesn't have a human taste. No salt, no sugar, no pepper. And for this I had to come specially all the way to the main post-office?"

She was really angry and felt I had fooled her. I told her the truth. I am a religious Jew and on Passover I must not eat any bread. If she had not given me the package, I would have fasted for eight days. She did me a great favor, I emphasized, for which I would always be grateful.

The day before Passover I burned out the oven. Moseievitch brought new aluminum pots, plates and spoons, and also some potatoes. *Maror* was in plentiful supply in camp. All we needed was a bit of wine. We boiled some strong sweet tea to use for the "Four Cups." And so we had our *seder.*

I arranged with one of the bread store workers to cover my duties for me for a few hours on *seder* night. Mattes asked the "Four Questions" and we all said the *Hagadda,** ate *matzo* with a baked potato, and washed it down with sweet tea. Toward morning I went to my post to replace the worker who stood my shift so that no one would know that I was not at work as usual that night.

I can still visualize all those men associated with that *seder* night. Honno is already in Paradise, may we all be granted long years. Mattes no doubt celebrates the holiday of Passover

wherever he may be. Even Avraham Moseievitch, who must certainly be retired by now, is unquestionably conducting a quiet *seder*. How I long, just once more in my life, to see these precious men; men who showed such sacrifice for our faith will never be torn from *Yiddishkeit*.

CHAPTER 22

Plight of The Polish Jews (German-Russian Pact)

A week before *Shavuos* 5700 on the Jewish calendar, the spring of 1940, our camp was suddenly divided, one half of it ringed with barbed wire. A gate connected the parts of the camp, manned by armed guards at all times posted in a small guardhouse. Passage from section to section was forbidden. In the "new" part of the camp were the club, bathhouse, laundry and barbershop.

A few days later a transport of several hundred new prisoners arrived and were quartered in the club barrack. That evening when I went to Honno in the bread store, he told me that the new arrivals were Polish Jews. By order of the officials he brought them six-hundred-fifty-four portions of bread. He could see the Jews but could not talk to them because of strict orders prohibiting any kind of communication with the newcomers. "You'll be able to see them from far. They're going to the bathhouse soon."

I went to a barrack near the barbed wire and could observe them as they went to the bathhouse. They were dressed well and most of them had large valises. When they went into the bathhouse, they left the valises on the ground outside. Several thieves realized this at once. They slipped through the barbed wire and started to take the valises. Fortunately the commandant noticed this. He ordered his men to take the valises into the club building.

When the men came out of the bath and didn't see their possessions, they started shouting. The commandant quieted them and explained that they must never leave their things unattended. Thieves had already attempted to steal them. The newcomers could not understand. They were brought to an internment camp, they had been told, and how do thieves get into an internment camp?

They were led into the club. This was a large wooden structure that could hold over a thousand people. The chief official of the camp addressed them. The Polish Jews addressed him as "Mr. General." He reassured them that this was only a transit-camp, and in a few days they would be taken to a special internment camp where they would not have to work and would enjoy lovely accomodations. The naive men, unfamiliar with Soviet accomodations, asked him, "Mr. General, in that camp will we be able to get foodstuffs like butter, sugar, milk, and fruit?"

"You will have *everything* there. You will be here only a short while. But you know already that there are thieves here, and we cannot protect you from them. You must, for your own sakes, deposit your belongings of value with us: gold, silver, foreign currency, even your better clothes. You will be given receipts, and when you arrive at your permanent camp, everything will be returned."

The men felt more confident after these words. And a number did give up their gold watches, fine suits, and other valuables. It goes without saying that they never saw them again.

Honno succeeded in talking to a few of the men. He learned that they were residents of Poland who fled to Lvov (Lemberg) in Russia. They were arrested without warning or accusation and were carried off in trucks to an unknown destination. Their wives and children were taken separately and sent elsewhere, also unknown. The men knew nothing of their families and the families nothing of the men. Some of the men were Communists who could not comprehend how, in a Communist land, a man could be arrested and exiled for no

reason whatsoever. Among these unfortunates were a *Rabbi* and a *yeshiva* student. A few days later they were sent on the next stage of their journey.

In Elul 5700, September 1940, these same Jews returned with a transport of convicts to our camp. Less than half remained alive. In tatters, the survivors were exhausted and famished. They were housed in the club. Three tiers of bunks were placed in the large room, and they slept on bare boards. Honno had access to them because he provided them daily with bread, and they told him what happened to them during the past months.

Leaving our camp, they marched for five days surrounded by armed troops and vicious dogs. The soldiers made them hurry all the time. Those who stopped were urged on by the snapping dogs. Their daily rations were water and 600 grams of bread. They started before dawn and were driven until sunset. At night they slept under the sky in the fields.

Their camp consisted of five neglected and filthy barracks without bunks. Dead tired from their terrible march, they fell on the dirty floor, packed in as tightly as herrings in a barrel. The men were dirty and the air was intolerable. Many fainted.

Even so, their rest was brief. Late at night the *natchalnik* divided them into ten brigades and appointed a brigadier over each. He ordered the brigadiers at once, and told them, "Here in the Soviet Union there is a law — no work, no food. Therefore, beginning tomorrow all brigades will report for work in the forest. The norm is five set meters of wood per man. At first you will get 400 grams of bread a day. Whoever fails his norm gets 300 grams. Convey this to your brigades. You are responsible for discipline and for good honest labor by every man."

When the brigadiers came back to the barracks, they found no audiences for the news. The exhausted men were all asleep. The next morning at five they were roused and taken out to work. They hiked eight kilometers to the work site. Soldiers had marked certain trees in the forest to indicate the borders of the work zone, and they announced that anyone stepping outside these bounds would be shot without warning.

Now the brigadiers told the men about the orders. Among these Polish Jews was a young Communist. On the spot, he organized a meeting and declared, "We were arrested and deported for no reason. In the camp, only a few days ago, the general explained to us that we are interned as Polish citizens. Since the Soviet Union has a friendship pact with Hitler's Germany, which is in a state of war with Poland, we are considered enemies of a friendly power, and so are interned. According to international law, we, as war internees, cannot be forced to do such hard labor. They are required to provide us with food and decent accommodations. Therefore, we must categorically refuse to do this work. All in favor, raise your hands."

All hands went up. The men requested the convoy to escort them back to camp and, of course, were refused. But the solidarity was perfect — no defections. Not a man budged to do the work. They sat in the forest all day. That evening, returning to camp they lined up for roll call, and the *natchalnik* furiously let loose.

"Your action proves a collective conspiracy. Death is the penalty for that crime. You are lucky to be Polish citizens. I want you to know that no enemy ever beat us. If you continue to refuse to work, we'll hold you on a diet of water and 300 grams of bread. In a little while you won't be able to work even if you want to. Since you are new here, we'll give you another chance. If you start to work regularly tomorrow, we shall consider today a rest day and draw no conclusions from it."

These people were inexperienced and could not imagine they were dealing with a government uninhibited by laws. The young Communist stepped forward again and declared, "We are internees and you have no right to compel us to work. If you attempt to force us by hunger, we shall submit a protest to the International Red Cross."

This impudence was unprecedented in a Soviet labor camp and almost unhinged the *natchalnik*. It took obvious effort to control himself. He answered with his gentle cynicism, "Here in camp, I am boss. No Red Cross will help you. No one will ever know when you were here or when you die."

From then on their ration was 300 grams of bread and a little bowl of rotten cabbage soup. This was to suffice for a full day. The poor wretches suffered horribly.

One night, a band of soldiers charged into the barracks and chased the inmates out into the yard, where they lined up for roll call in their underwear. The officials explained that there were indications of an escape from the camp. The check lasted until morning. Naturally, the roll call showed no one missing, and it was obvious that the whole business was a lie. Frozen and weary, the prisoners returned to the barracks. Their possessions were scattered all over the floor, all pockets emptied, and any last remnant of a valuable — a garment, or watch or a ring — was gone.

The brigadiers went to headquarters at once to demand the return of the stolen articles. They did not come back. For this audacity they were placed in the dungeon. Now all the men were equal — no one could buy even a piece of bread.

They stayed at that camp for two months, long enough for the majority to die. The two hundred survivors were brought back to our camp. The director of the medical depatment in our camp was a Jewish doctor. I told her of the desperate plight of the Polish Jews and asked her to help them. She appointed a commitee which determined that the majority were not fit to do hard work. They also prescribed medications to keep them alive.

They did not, in fact, go to work, but they were given only 400 grams of bread daily. We understood that the lives of these Polish Jews were largely in our hands. Honno and I decided to ask the head of the bakery to give us 42 kilos of bread a day that were not to be recorded in the books.

Taking all that bread was dangerous, so the head of the bakery pondered for some while, but finally agreed. Now the problem was how to distribute the bread. We decided to make 70 portions daily of 600 grams each, quantities easier to manage than odd amounts. We spoke to a *yeshiva* youth from the group and told him to prepare three lists of 70 names. Each man would receive an extra ration every third day. Now a fresh complication arose — there were 225 in the group,

meaning every day's allotment would be short five. All we could do was tell him to omit the names of any people who still had money or valuables to exchange for bread.

This was a mistake. One day the *natchalnik* suddenly sent for me. When I came in, he closed the door saying, "I never thought you would try such adventures. But you must have realized that you are jeopardizing yourself seriously. Stop acting like you don't know what I'm talking about. Your only luck is that the Jew didn't go to the right place. If he had gone into the NKVD headquarters across the hall, then you and Honno would stop dealing with bread. You'd get another ten years. Let's talk man to man. I'm not interested in firing Honno. Since he's been in the bread store, I've had some peace and quiet. No bread is ever missing and the prisoners have stopped coming to me bellyaching." When I asked for the name of the informer, he told me. I promised to clear up the affair quietly, and I promised that there would be no recurrences.

I talked to the *yeshiva* youth. He told me that this fellow had gold and bought bread for himself every day, so his name was not placed on the list. The young man thought that, for the welfare of the group, this fellow must be liquidated.

I mollified him, explaining that one doesn't liquidate so readily. I asked to see the man. That night he came. His first reaction was, "How did you know?" I told him that the Russian to whom he informed about us was more compassionate to the Polish Jews than he was. He burst into tears and swore that he had no money left and that he had not bought any bread in a week. When the young man refused to list him, he became angry and went to the *natchalnik*. He swore that he deeply regreted his act. This man had been a chef and chefs were in short supply in camp. I persuaded the head of the *Tchiss* to take him on as chef.

I met him a few weeks later, a transformed man, well-fed and even ready to help others. He asked me to give him a pot of my own, and he would have potatoes cooked for me daily in some oil, and I would not have to be concerned if it was *kosher*. I thanked him for his graciousness, but did not take

him up on his offer. I was always careful never to exploit friendships for personal gain. The officials realized this and respected me for it. When I asked them for a favor for someone, they never suspected me of an ulterior motive.

There was a fifteen year old boy among the Polish Jews, tall and broad shouldered, whose parents remained behind when he fled to Russia. He was intelligent and industrious, but not very robust. He had no trade and spoke no Russian. It so happened that in the barrack for prisoners with *propusks,** they needed a *dnevalni.* A judicious word or two with the appropriate offical and the young man was assigned that duty.

The *propusk* people worked in the administration and had, as noted, freedom to circulate throughout the region. They were the chief merchants, the aristocracy of the camp. They made full use of their privilege of movement, and bought all sorts of products "outside" and then sold them in the camp with a most satisfying profit margin. They never neglected their own well-being. Their barrack was always adequately stocked with potatoes, fresh fish, onions, sugar, milk and so on. The ordinary prisoner could only dream about such delicacies.

The job of *dnevalni* was a stroke of high fortune for the boy. He had to keep the place clean and cook for the *propuskniks,* using the foods they brought. Naturally, he did not go hungry. Before long, he became a favorite in the barrack and could help others. Every evening he would come to the bread store and knock on the window. When asked, "Who's there?" he would invariably reply, "*Amcho,*" (Hebrew for 'Your People'). This became his nickname. He was always in a good mood. Honno used to give him bread, which he would share with the hungry. In general, he was concerned for the Polish Jews, and, through the *propuskniks,* he would provide them with foodstuffs. He even obtained some milk daily for the old elderly Rabbi. *Amcho* got hold of some barley at times and cooked a thin gruel for the Rabbi, who was sick. *Amcho* really kept him alive.

Propusks (Rus.): Special passes allowing the bearer to leave the camp area at certain times.

*Elul** came. The *Rabbi* sent the *yeshiva* youth to me to ask the *natchalnik* for permission to *daven* with a *minyan.** I knew that such permission would not be granted, so I advised him to say no more about it, but to post a guard at the barrack door to warn of the arrival of any official. They did this and had a *minyan* all month. But then, on *Rosh Hashana* eve, they *davened* so loudly that they were heard. The *natchalnik* came running to see what was going on. When he came into the barrack and saw the enthusiastic *davening* of the Polish Jews, he was stunned. He tiptoed out without a word. Later he ordered them to *daven* more softly.

The *Rabbi* asked me to come daven with them on the Holy Days, but I was afraid. The day before *Yom Kippur* I gathered a *minyan* in my room, where we had our pre-fast meal of bread, potatoes, and tea. After the fast, they gathered again in my room. We had a feast with herring and whiskey which they brought.

That night the Polish *Rabbi* died. I asked the doctor not to embalm him. That same night the *tahara** was performed and *tachrichim** were placed on him. Before daylight, Avraham Moseievitch and Honno brought lumber in a wagon for the coffin and then carried him to the cemetery in the same wagon. He was buried properly, apart from the other graves.

Before he died, the *Rabbi* gave his *siddur** to the *yeshiva* boy, telling him to give it to me as a gift. It was an old *siddur*, torn, and in many places soaked with tears. Naturally I cherished this priceless gift, but when the *natchalnik* learned of this, he confiscated it. I went to headquarters and asked the *natchalnik* to return my *siddur*. He told me that religious books are prohibited in camp. I retorted that priests and monks may have their books so why could I not. I warned him that if I did not get my *siddur*, I would go on a hunger strike. The *natchalnik* realized I was in earnest so he gave me the *siddur*, but warned me that no one else could use it.

A harsh winter came, and we had to start thinking about Passover. We wrote to Moscow to have *matzos* sent from there

Tachrichim (Heb.): Linen shrouds.

Siddur (Heb.): Prayer book.

for the Polish Jews, and in a few weeks thirty packages of *matzos* arrived. This would be barely enough for the *sedarim*. We considered buying potatoes so the Polish Jews would have something to eat for all eight days. At night Avraham Moseievitch went to the *kolkhozes*,* bought five tons of potatoes, and brought them to the camp at night. He delivered three tons to the camp commissary and hid the other two tons in the club that housed the Polish Jews.

A new decree was issued after Passover isolating political prisoners from the others. More than three thousand men were squeezed into eight barracks. The crowding was oppressive and the general situation of the prisoners worsened. The bread, when fresh, was gluey, and day old bread was like stone — completely inedible. The discipline became harsher.

A pole in the center of the camp now had a loudspeaker. Early on June 22, 1941, the 17th of *Sivan* 5701 the announcement thundered out that Germany had attacked the Soviet Union. That day the *natchalnik* called for me and informed me that I was no longer permitted in the criminal section of the camp. Since I was sentenced under Paragraph 58, I belonged with all the counter-revolutionaries and fascists. It was the first time in a long while that I heard that term "fascist" used in camp. More than a year earlier, after the friendship pact with Hitler Germany, they stopped calling us fascists. Now we were again crowned with that epithet.

I lost my living quarters and my good job. I was assigned to a construction brigade that was on the night shift. My work consisted of nailing the wooden forms into which the cement was then poured. I had to haul the boards up broken makeshift steps to the upper stories — and this was considered light work. Friday night I went to the dungeon on my own, and Saturday night I was sent to the Third Section. The *natchalnik* there was new.

"I understand that you do not work on Saturdays," he began. "I have also studied your file and saw the crimes you committed against the Soviet Union when you were free. I want you to understand that we are in a state of war now. We

Kolkhoz (Rus.): Collective farm, as organized by the Soviet regime.

are fighting bitterly against the German fascists. What we could tolerate in peacetime is unacceptable today. If you continue to refuse to work on Saturdays and you carry on your traitorous activities in camp, I shall find some method of dispatching you to the moon . . ."

I had plenty of trouble on the job too. The new brigadier was upset with me. "I had pity on you and gave you a light job, and that's how you pay me back? The camp paper reports that I'm a lousy brigadier, that my people don't feel like working, so they sit around in the dungeon. For that I'm going to give you work to make you forget when your *Shabbos* is."

Now my job was pulling wires over armatures some 30 or 40 meters in the air. They didn't want us to fall while working, so we were tied to the armatures. After a few hours the thongs ate into your flesh, so you felt like screaming with pain. When it was time to be untied, workers would get so dizzy that they fell to their deaths. Fortunately I was given five days in the hole as punishment for not working on *Shabbos*. 300 grams of bread and water keep one hungry, but at least I was free from that work for a few days.

I was led out from the dungeon on the sixth day. An armed soldier waited for me. He looked Jewish. Ordering me to march ahead of him, he followed in silence as we walked some five kilometers. Suddenly he ordered me to fall to the ground. I was frightened because I knew that he intended to shoot me. I turned to him, and he was standing there with his rifle pointed at me. Instinctively, I started to shout.

An unknown man came running up, and from behind grabbed the rifle from the soldier, who stood there confused. The man ordered us both to the machine factory that was actually part of the camp, merely situated on the roadside. It seems he was the director of the factory. He turned us over to his soldiers and sent for the chief of security. (The security patrol, a unit of armed troops, guarded the prisoners working in the factory.)

When the chief arrived, the director instructed him to write a report that while walking to the factory, he, the director, observed a soldier about to shoot a prisoner without

cause. He disarmed the soldier and brought both men to the security office at the factory. Then the director instructed the soldier to sign the report. The soldier suddenly burst into tears and confessed that the *natchalnik* of the Third Section had ordered him to take the prisoner out and shoot him on the road.

When the director heard this he took back the report, returned the rifle to the unhappy soldier and sent him back to the military barracks. "I'll settle this with the *natchalnik* myself," he muttered. In the meantime I was to be kept there until the troops escorted the factory workers back to camp. That night I was sent directly to the dungeon. What happened between the director and the *natchalnik* I never learned.

A few days later I met the same soldier. I told him that I intended to do him no harm. We talked and I learned that he was indeed Jewish. I was curious to know why he consented to murder an innocent man. The *natchalnik* called for him one day and told him that if he refused the order to shoot me, he would be shot. He was afraid and came to get me. He was even more frightened now that he met me unexpectedly. "I couldn't have shot you," he swore, "even if the director had not come." Sobbing, he fell into my arms. My face, too, flooded with tears to think of how these camps could corrupt a human being!

CHAPTER 23

Changing Labor Camps

I was re-appointed as watchman. I worked in the forest again. Each *Shabbos* I spent in the dungeon.

One Saturday night, when I returned to the barrack, I felt tension in the air. All the prisoners were nervous. I overheard that, in a building we had constructed, a wall had suddenly collapsed. Since we were a brigade of political prisoners, we were suspected of sabotage. None of us slept that night. In the morning we were not taken out to work. The barracks were

surrounded by special patrols and no one was permitted to go out. About midnight we were ordered to gather up our belongings and to line up outside. Surrounded by armed soldiers and guard dogs, we left the camp.

Our column had some three thousand men, a line that seemed to stretch endlessly. It was not a cold night, but thick snow soon penetrated our clothes. We worked up a sweat marching, and, with our soggy clothing, we were soon steaming. It became hard to keep moving, so some prisoners threw away their pathetic sacks of belongings.

By dawn we had covered over ten kilometers. We did not know where we were going. It became warmer, the snow became rain, and soon water was flowing off us. It was even harder to walk now. The weaker fell and the rest were driven on. Two soldiers stayed with the fallen prisoners. When we had gone some distance, we heard rifle shots. The two soldiers soon caught up with us.

Twenty kilometers were behind us. I could feel myself weaken. Suddenly I fell and could not move. The column continued and a soldier stayed behind with me, holding a fierce dog by a chain. He urged the dog to attack me, but restrained it with the chain. The dog reared up on its hind legs, slavering, lunging wildly for me, its long sharp fangs snapping. Out of sheer terror I jumped up and ran, the soldier just behind me, until I caught up with the column. Fortunately we were close to the "transport-point." This was a large area enclosed by barbed wire, one every 25 kilometers along the road, and it provided a place for prisoner transports to rest. There was firewood there, and soon fires were blazing to dry our clothes.

I sat there half delirious with exhaustion, when, unexpectedly, that soldier came over to me. "Recognize me?" he asked expectantly. I did not have the vaguest notion who he might be. "Seven years ago I was a prisoner too. We were in the same transport from prison to prison. I was terribly hungry and had no strength to go on. You gave me a few lumps of sugar and that saved my life. Anyway, not long after

that, I was freed. They mobilized me when the war started, but they could not trust me, so instead of sending me to the front, I am a prison guard. When I saw you fall, I stayed behind to save you. I sicked the dog on you because I knew that was the only way to make you move. Our people never forget a favor. Be careful now because we still have a long way to go."

Hours passed and we finally got some bread. However, before we had a decent rest or could dry out our clothes, they drove us on. That night we arrived at the first camp location and were taken to some dark and filthy barracks. We had no energy to take off our soggy clothes, but fell asleep weary and famished. They did not let us rest long. Suddenly we heard shouts to get out for a "shakedown," prison jargon for inspection for contraband like knives, cards, watches, money, and other articles forbidden to prisoners. Generally these inspections were conducted by soldiers, but this time the "inspectors" were common thieves.

At five that morning we were awakened and separated into brigades, the newly appointed brigadiers being criminal inmates. Before we set out to work, the *natchalnik* addressed us.

"We know that one of you committed sabotage on the building you were working on, a dastardly act at a time that the entire nation is sacrificing its life's blood to defend our land against the fascist enemy. However the Soviet government cherishes justice and refuses to destroy innocent thousands for the treachery of a few. For that reason you were sent here to the labor camp, so that you may demonstrate your intense remorse through devoted labors. I am confident that you understand fully."

After this inspiring lecture we received 300 grams of bread and some soup of black cabbage, salted fish and several spoonsful of dry potatoes that stretched like rubber. At seven, staggering from lack of sleep and frozen, we trudged out to work.

In the forest the trees were already felled, and we were to pull out the roots. Our tools were picks, shovels and axes. We

had to start by digging holes around the roots. The roots penetrated deep into the earth and stuck tenaciously to the soil.

We worked that day without a break, yet by nightfall less than half the norm was filled. The electric lights covered only a small part of the site, so most of the men worked in darkness. Even with the greatest efforts, we failed to meet the norm. Hungry and weary, we dragged ourselves back, carrying injured comrades on our backs.

We were taken to new barracks, clean ones, with buckets of hot water, and each man was given 300 grams of bread and a bowl of black cabbage soup. Later the *natchalnik* came storming in, furious for our failing to meet the norm. "Since this is your first day I shall overlook it. If it happens again, it's the hole for the bunch of you."

The next day we were back at the same work site, stayed until ten at night, and still did not fill the norm. Someone had a ingenious idea; instead of pulling the roots out of the ground, a most difficult and time-consuming job, we simply chopped off the part of the root that protruded from the ground and covered the rest with dirt. Thus we filled our norm adequately and could return to camp after only fourteen uninterrupted hours of labor.

A surprise awaited us. A huge banner over the entrance proclaimed that our brigade excelled in doing 150 percent of the norm. Our reward was 500 grams of bread and a decent meal. Prisoners of other brigades told me that they received 300 grams of bread and cabbage water, but were told that if they followed our example and surpassed their norms by 150 percent, then they would likewise receive more bread and dessert. The dessert was some cabbage rolled in dough and then baked. This was a rare delicacy in camp, a dream for the prisoners.

On the third day, we were back at the same site. The boss told us that today's work would be easier because the roots were from young trees. To compensate for this luxury the work area was expanded. The trouble was that on this day the

boss stood over us all day watching us work, so yesterday's method was out. That day we did not meet the norm. It was late at night already and barely half the area was cleared. We were afraid we would have to spend the night there. The boss called the brigadier and proposed a deal. The prisoners would give him all 65 portions. In return he would record us as having done 150 percent of the norm.

In the camp black market, one dessert brought 50 rubles. Our desserts would clear enough for two liters of whiskey for the boss. That could be sold to the camp thieves for 4,000 rubles and perhaps even more.

We came to the roll call quite early that day, and found the Scroll of Honor lauding us again in huge letters, this time for surpassing the norm with 200 percent. Each of us got a dessert at the meal. The prisoners gazed longingly at the delicious dessert, barely able to resist biting into it. We knew that we must forego this delight or else we would pay with cruelly hard work and hunger to boot.

When I came into the barracks I was told that a young man named Yaakov, who worked in the camp office, was asking for me. I went to the barrack of the headquarter workers and found a young Jew in civilian dress. We sat on a bench and he explained that he heard I did not work on *Shabbos*. He also heard that I did not eat the regular camp fare because of *kashrus*. He wanted to help me.

In the offices of the headquarters there were twenty rooms that needed to be heated and this would be my new job. I was to go to the woods daily and bring a wagonload of firewood. Early, before the officials arrived, I would warm up the stoves in each room. I accepted immediately.

The next morning I went to Yaakov's office and he took me to the *natchalnik* of the planning section, introducing me as an honest and dependable person. The *natchalnik* accepted Yaakov's recommendation and immediately wrote an order authorizing me to have a horse and wagon to haul wood. He also permitted me access to the office at night.

I went directly to the stables and showed my requisition for a horse and wagon. The stablehands complied at once, leading out a horse and pointing out a wagon for my use. I was apparently expected to harness the beast myself. I had no idea where to begin and the workers roared with laughter. The only way out of my dilemma was to offer one of them a packet of *makhorka* to hitch up my horse. Where I would get the *makhorka* was another problem, because tobacco was a precious commodity in camp. However, after two days I could harness the horse myself.

The *natchalnik* complimented me on my work after a few days on the job, and translated his appreciation into a note granting me 800 grams of bread daily. In camp, especially in wartime, this was the supreme reward. I liked this new work too. During the day I went to the forest for wood and at night I heated up twenty stoves. Compared to the punitive labor in the forest this was paradise. But... *Shabbos*?

Near the office there was a shed with lumber, overseen by a respectable Russian prisoner. At night, after kindling the stoves, when we both had some free time, we would chat about all sorts of things. Eventually we became quite friendly. I asked him to cover for me every Friday night. All he had to do was light the stoves and then close the doors, because I prepared the wood at each stove. I promised him a packet of *makhorka* every week and he agreed. When I told Yaakov about my promise, he remarked that *makhorka* was hard to come by, but he would see what he could do. He finally arranged with the *natchalnik* to provide me with a weekly packet. Now everyone was happy. My Russian friend had tobacco and I had my *Shabbos*. Again, G-d had favored me — the work was light.

CHAPTER 24

Heating Stoves

My pleasant job caring for the stoves at headquarters gradually lost its charm. Before long, the firewood accumulated in the woodshed was depleted, and besides heating the stoves I now became woodchopper as well. Following a night of stoking twenty stoves, there was little time for badly-needed sleep. Early in the morning I was harnessing the horse and off to the forest, sawing down trees, then trimming off the branches and hauling the load back. Then I had to chop wood and distribute it among the twenty offices. I had barely enough time to receive my portion of bread before I had to rush back to the offices and heat the stoves.

The wood was wet and it took some three or four hours before it was burning properly. It took me all night, running from one office to another, adding kerosene and blowing up the flickers of flame. I could not close the doors of the stoves before morning. Warming the rooms was no snap, since the temperature was reaching forty below. When the officials arrived for work, the rooms were still frigid and they complained. Of course, I was to blame.

The *natchalnik* of the planning section sent for me, angrily accusing me of sabotaging my work. He charged me with purposely botching the work so that the staff would not be able to work properly. He warned me that I would receive the appropriate punishment. I explained that I had to go to the woods and chop the trees myself and that this was the reason why it was wet. I worked in a frenzy all night and the rooms were still cold. I suggested that each room be provided with an iron stove that I would heat before morning. The office people would only have to toss in wood during the day, which I would provide for them. He refused, saying, "I won't permit my officials to become stokers."

I had to find some solution. The chief quartermaster of the camp was Jewish, so I went to him and told him all my troubles, asking him to place an iron stove in the office headquarters of the chief *natchalnik*. That very evening we put a large iron stove in that office, screening it with a partition. I gathered some wood left over from some construction jobs and heated that stove all night. When they came to work the next morning, it was like a sweatbox. The secretary, the first to arrive at work, was surprised. I showed her the stove and explained that periodically she should throw in a few chunks of firewood and the room would stay warm all day. She was delighted.

When I returned from the forest with the load of wet firewood, the *natchalnik* in charge of planning sent for me and informed me that I was relieved of my duties. I was to be punished with five days in solitary for not discharging my duties properly, and thereby causing the staff to be unable to do their work because of the cold. The best proof that the rooms can be heated, he emphasized, was the fact that the chief *natchalnik's* office was pleasantly warm. "You are just too lazy to heat the other rooms," he had ended angrily.

I asked him to accompany me to the chief's office to see the secret of warming that room. When he saw the stove he said no more, but cancelled his orders. Now, iron stoves were placed in every room and I was still the "heater." New provocations awaited me.

One of the rooms in the headquarters was the office of the medical department camp. The manager was a young former prisoner who had served time for robbery. He still maintained cordial relationships with his former colleagues, the worst thugs in camp, whom he provided with whiskey in return for the clothing and valuables they stole from the prisoners.

One evening, as usual, when I came into the medical department to light the stove, I was greeted by a frightening scene — the desks were broken, the cabinets were overturned, and torn documents were scattered all over the floor. It was obvious to me that this was a plot aimed at me, carried out by the manager. I was afraid to summon the guards, knowing

that the robbers would kill me for revenge. I went to Yaakov and told him the story. He was unperturbed. "I'll take care of this with the *natchalnik* in charge of planning. Don't worry."

I managed to survive until morning. When the planning department *natchalnik* came into the room, he had already been briefed by Yaakov. He informed the chief *natchalnik* at once and he came right over. Later the medical department manager came and exclaimed that there were secret documents scattered on the floor. He added that in the cabinet there were three bottles of whiskey that he always has handy for "emergencies" for the headquarters staff.

"Looks like that Jew with the beard did this job," he smirked. "He is a cheap thief after all. He took the liquor and got to look through the secret documents at the same time."

"That's what I call a snake. No matter how much you pet him he'll bite you anyway," the chief *natchalnik* said, turning to me. "We took you in so you wouldn't starve to death. You get 800 grams of bread a day and you have a light job. And you return these favors with such a nasty piece of work. You pose like a holy man and suddenly you get thirsty for some whiskey, or maybe you figured on selling the stuff. And you pull out secret documents to boot. You're not going to get out of this mess alive."

I attempted to defend myself and succeeded in angering him even more. "If you had less impudence and a little more respect, you would keep quiet until you are permitted to speak," he shouted. "Your nerve is intolerable."

He turned to the plans department *natchalnik* and said, "This is the Jew you recommended as an honorable man. Now you see that you can't guarantee anybody, especially a Jew. You probably don't know yet how much arrogance these people have. They always push their way to the highest positions. Even in labor camps they manage to weasle out of working and live off other people."

The manager, no less an anti-Semite than the chief *natchalnik*, beamed at the success of his scheme. Just then the plans department *natchalnik* told me to step out of the room.

I went out and left the door open a crack so that I might hear what happened. No less than my life was at stake. The plans department *natchalnik*, perhaps on purpose, spoke loudly so I missed very little.

"Comrade, staff *natchalnik*," he began, "I have informed you a number of times that the man who considers himself a Communist and is a member of our Party, and is in charge of as important a function as the medical department — this very man is involved in quite unsavory undertakings. This demoralizes the prisoners in the camp. It is no secret in camp that thieves and murderers attack newcomers to the camp, then rob them of their better clothes and their valuables. Might the director of the medical department explain why his wife and sister-in-law have already been detained on several occasions by the police while they were atempting to sell these articles stolen from the prisoners?

"Let me explain what happened here. This whiskey that is supposed to be for the staff's use seems to find its way into the camp. This is the reward paid for the stolen things. The broker in this arrangement is the director of the medical department. The fault of this Jew, the stove heater, is his naiveté. When he saw the stolen articles here in the office, he asked the director what they were. This apparently frightened the crew and they decided to dispose of him."

With this, shouting broke out in the room, and I thought it would be wiser to move away from the door. Hours passed and finally the plans department *natchalnik* summoned me. He greeted me in a friendly manner as I entered. "I'm really beginning to believe there is a G-d in this world after all. You don't know how close you were to death. If Yaakov had not informed me in advance of what was going on, I could never have been prepared for this excitement. I keep an eye on you, and I can tell that you are a holy man if you can suffer so much for your faith. That's why I trust you, and that's why I tried so hard for you. Maybe it's all to your credit that I won in this contest with that vermin. Well anyway, you can thank G-d for what He did."

I was grateful to him, tried to express my gratitude, and went off to the camp. My *naryadtchik*, who already knew all about this episode, greeted me with a cheerful demand for whiskey all around to celebrate my rescue from that band of killers.

One day some weeks later, Yaakov told me that he had described the work I had done, preparing the annual plans balance, to the plans department *natchalnik*. Now the *natchalnik* had a similar job here. Naturally he was late, and only two weeks remained to send the plans balance to Moscow. I told the *natchalnik* that to prepare the material in time I would have to work day and night.

Two weeks later, a day before the deadline, at two in the morning, I finished the job. All that needed doing was copying the figures on clean forms. I was exhausted after so many sleepless nights, so I put the completed papers in an envelope with a note to the *natchalnik* asking him to have the figures typed because I was simply incapable of doing that. I placed it under the glass on his desk and went to sleep.

I awoke to find the *naryadtchik* standing over me shouting, "Can't even wake you up! I've been pulling and pulling on you and still you sleep. The plans *natchalnik* telephoned for you to come right now. I don't envy you. He told me he has a gift for you — fifteen days in solitary."

I was confused. I must have spoiled the report somehow and this was the last day to send the information with the camp airplane to Moscow. If that happened, then my life is finished, I thought. The wind could not have carried me faster than I ran. Soldiers in watchtowers even stopped me to ask where I was running. When I came into the office I found the *natchalnik* pacing the room angrily. His face was flushed and his eyes burned. He was so mad that he could not talk, but finally he exploded.

"I warned you that if you could not finish the balance on time, then you should not start it at all. What am I going to do now?" It was now clear to me that someone really fixed me this time by taking the balance I had left on his desk at night.

But when I came into his room and saw that everything was in place I was relieved. I showed him the report on his desk and he immediately called the *naryadtchik* to tell him that what he had said before was an error — I had done my work properly and on time. He added that I was getting five days of rest until his return from Moscow.

I stayed in the office until the retyping was completed to my satisfaction. I said good-bye to the *natchalnik* and he promised to send for me on his return.

At the end of the five days the *naryadtchik* informed me that I should return to my old job of heating the stoves. I went out a bit early and headed first for the office of the plans department *natchalnik*. He greeted me cordially and told me the balance was well prepared, that not one figure had to be altered and that he had even earned a citation for excellent work. In recognition of my work, he brought me a fine gift — a suitcase, two packets of butter, two packets of sugar, ten white rolls, and assorted small things. I thanked him, but declined to accept his gifts.

"These are hard times, wartime. Better to give the rolls and butter to your children," I suggested.

"You earned this by your good work," he insisted. "Just don't take it to your barrack because there it will be stolen. I'll give you a place in my metal cabinet. Put it there and when you come to work, you'll be able to eat it. Incidentally, from tomorrow on you will be working in my office."

I started working in the *natchalnik's* office, but unfortunately this lasted only two days. On the third day, Thursday, he informed me that, contrary to his own wishes, I could not remain in the office. If the staff *natchalnik*, a vicious anti-Semite, learned that I did not work on *Shabbos*, then I would not even be able to keep my stove heating job. He felt it would be wiser if I returned to my previous duty and receive 800 grams of bread a day. Back I went to the woods to saw trees, chop wood, and stoke ovens. This lasted all winter.

As in earlier years, I received *matzos* from home before Passover. I gave several to a Jewish prisoner who brought together several prisoners in a dark, unused, broken-down barrack to conduct the *seder* there. Yaakov got some potatoes and together we had our *seder* in the staff office.

Yaakov told me that on Passover he always ate only *matzos*. Even after the Red Army occupied Poland and he became a Party member, Passover was always holy. This was his first Passover in the camp and he never imagined he would have *matzo* here. "I guess if someone really wants to keep *mitzvos*,* then G-d helps," he observed.

I had been suffering for some while from stomach pains. A prisoner in camp is of negligible worth. Dozens of prisoners died every day from all sorts of sickness, from hunger, or from being killed at work. I must have been lucky because the doctor agreed to examine me and even sent me for an X-ray. It showed a swelling in my stomach.

Each day it became harder to saw trees and to chop wood. I spoke to Yaakov and we decided he would talk to the plans department *natchalnik* about arranging some lighter work for me. The *natchalnik* replied that he would be delighted to employ me in his office but the obstacle was my refusal to work on *Shabbos*. All he could do for me was to have me transferred to another section of the camp, far from where we were. The chief *natchalnik* there was a Jew and he might help me. There was also a hospital where I could be treated. It would take a while until a transport was sent there. In the meantime, I had to continue heating the stoves.

Quite early every morning, before any officials came, I *davened* in the chief *natchalnik*'s office where it was warm and cozy. I usually locked the door and removed the key. One morning, just as it became day and I started *davening*, someone opened the door with his own key. I did not have time to remove my *tefillin** when the chief *natchalnik* came into the room. He was an infamous murderer and anti-Semite. In sudden surprise I slipped out of the office into the corridor with my *tefillin*. There I quickly removed and hid them in the metal cabinet I had used for the *matzos*. I was certain the

natchalnik would call me at once and I would really be punished. For some reason, time passed and all became quiet. Later I told Yaakov what had happened. He reassured me by explaining, "The *natchalnik* acts swiftly. If he did not punish you on the spot, that's a sign you got out of his paws this time. Maybe it's the first time he ever saw a Jew in *tefillin* and he decided to act as though he didn't even notice you. Anyway, I'm going to talk to the plans department *natchalnik* to have you hospitalized as soon as possible."

Yaakov relayed the whole story and asked him to hasten my departure to the hospital. That same day, Yaakov brought the good news. The chief *natchalnik* agreed to send me with a special convoy to the section of the camp that had the hospital.

CHAPTER 25
The Hungry Passover

On Tuesday, the 4th of *Iyar* 5702, April 21, 1942, a convoy official sent for me. Naturally, he did not dare tell me where we were going; prisoners must never know their destinations. For the first time in my lengthy prison career, however, I did know. This time I was going to the camp equipped with a hospital, to treat my stomach. It was a full day's journey, and in the evening we arrived at the camp. At the gate I was searched and the official ordered me to shave off my beard and *payos*. I refused and resisted their efforts to do it by force. The official summoned the *natchalnik*, and I explained to him that I was a Jew and, according to Jewish law, I have to wear a beard and *payos*.

"Here, the only law is camp law, not Jewish laws. For hygiene reasons it is forbidden to have any hair. You cannot be an exception," the *natchalnik* replied.

"I have already been in a number of camps," I argued, "and I always received permission from the medical department to keep my beard and *payos*." I asked him to permit me again to present my plea to the hygiene official. The

natchalnik ordered them to pass me. The official who had met me at the gate led me to a barrack that was so jammed with prisoners, I could not find a place to lie down.

After several hours a Jewish man came and asked me to follow him. He led me to a separate room, called a *"kabinka"** in camp parlance. There were two beds.

"You will live here with me. I'm called David Golod and I'm in charge of the camp storehouses. Yaakov spoke to me on the telephone and asked me to take care of you. Your work won't be so terrible. You will draw up the daily reports for the stores. I'm sorry that I can't provide you with as much bread as you received in the other camp. Here they give only 400 grams. Later, when you become friendly with the kitchen workers, you might be able to get some raw foods from them, like potatoes, herring, fish, and oil. I myself don't take anything from the kitchen even though I'm manager of the food storehouses. You see that I always remember that I'm a Jew and I won't ever allow them to say that I took anything."

I thanked him and explained that I shared his principles. David was pleased and we became friends immediately. He showed me through the camp. We went into the infirmary barrack. There were no beds there. The unfortunates lay on the same bunkboards which every barrack boasted, all of them jammed together in acute discomfort. The food was the standard fare too, with the same watery *balanda* soup. The bread rations were even smaller than usual. Only those with intestinal disorders were occasionally given 200 grams of bread and a half glass of warm milk.

The medical personnel were housed in a special barrack that was separated into two sections, one for doctors and the other for aides. There were other barracks for healthy prisoners who worked in the forests. It would be stretching a point to call these men "healthy." They were perpetually exhausted, and due to this weakness they could never fulfill their norms. Their punishment, a reduction of rations to 400 grams, resulted in a vicious cycle, and constantly worsened their condition. The camp was not called a "sick camp" without reason. However, there were three brigades which

Kabinka (Rus.): Cabin, hut.

were composed of healthy people. They worked in the woods and even surpassed the norms by 200 percent. These were the only properly fed prisoners.

The camp *natchalnik* was a Jew, who himself had been a prisoner for three years. After his discharge he had remained to take on his new post. David had been here two years by the time I came, after having been director of a large factory. As soon as he arrived, the *natchalnik* had appointed him manager of the stores. The use of the little room for his quarters was a fringe benefit.

My work consisted of assembling the figures for the previous day, and of telephoning this information to Yaakov, who was chief quartermaster in the central camp from which I had come. In addition I wrote out daily the *naryads** for the woods workers. A *naryad* is a record of each person's productivity for the day, amounting to the percentage of his norm that he filled. Every second week I totaled the *naryads*, and every month I submitted the totals of each prisoner and of the entire brigade.

I had enough to keep me busy eighteen hours a day, but I was content. I had a clean warm room with a fine roommate, a bed with a mattress, sheet, and a blanket. These were rare in camp. I had the incentive to excel in my work. *Shabbos* was a free day for me.

My stomach trouble kept getting worse. Camp bread was vile, was not baked thoroughly, and consisted of only 20 to 30 percent flour supplemented with barley and potatoes. I could not digest it and had intense pains. The doctors were outspoken anti-Semites and could not tolerate the thought that we Jews had better accommodations than the others, and they hated us even more. They refused to give me medications and insisted on operating. David had contempt for their skill and dissuaded me from consenting. "Sure they'll operate, but you'll stay there under the knife."

The hunger worsened in camp daily. The prisoners kept weakening and the death list grew. A novel moral code developed. The victim of a bread theft had the right to kill the thief. This bread was called the "bloody morsel." The hunger

Naryads (Rus.): Work assignment.

and vitamin deficiency caused the spread of an eye disease we called "chicken blindness." As soon as dusk fell, the victims could not see at all. The doctors said that fish would cure the ailment. It occurred to me that I should organize a fishing brigade.

I approached the *natchalnik* with this plan. I explained that there were many prisoners in camp who were incapable of doing heavy labor in the woods, but were fit for lighter work, like making fishnets. Besides, there were several Cossacks in camp who had been fishermen on the outside and they could teach their craft to the others. In order to give the sick men incentive to work, I proposed that 20 grams of bread should be given for every square meter of net made. Where would the extra bread come from? The work reports of the woodsmen would be padded judiciously, adding to the amount actually performed. This provided 20-30 extra kilos of bread daily for the ill.

The *natchalnik* asked me and David to prepare a detailed plan and present it to him.

In a month we had enough fishnets to occupy sixty fishermen. We selected the stronger of the patients and for a week they were given 800 grams of bread and a portion of *kasha** as well. This was the first brigade that marched to the gate (with an escort of ten soldiers) to their new work. Canvas tents were erected for their temporary use, since the camp was some distance from the river.

After a week, a shipment of two tons of fish arrived. We could only cook half of this because we lacked salt. We decided to bake the remainder on pans because baked fish, at least, was edible without salt.

The prisoners were rejuvenated. Those who were weakened by hunger began to feel stronger, night vision improved, and the number of volunteers for the new job constantly increased. Before long, 800 men were employed at netweaving. Five brigades were fishing a total of six to ten tons daily. We had enough to send to other camps in the region.

Kasha (Rus. & Yid.): Cereal made of grain.

A new spirit was felt in the camp. I myself derived no benefit from the new development, subsisting as usual on my 400 daily grams of bread. I was slowly starving. When the *natchalnik* heard this, he ordered a special pan to be set aside for me. Every day I received a fish which I broiled myself. Now my hunger was assuaged and I could again see at night.

Winter came, ending our good fortune. The fishing ceased, and as the really cold weather had begun, they stopped sending men to the woods. This was a small blessing, because their rations had been cut. More men died, perhaps twenty or thirty a day. They were buried naked in a common grave.

I received a letter from home that they would soon be sending me *matzos* for Passover. The letter was addressed to my old camp. I was afraid that I might never get the *matzos*, since the censor would probably write "Address changed" on the package and return it to the sender. Immediately, I sent a letter giving my correct address. I asked David to send the letter through some free person in Moscow. It worked out, and I was confident that the letter was delivered properly.

My stomach ailment worsened until I could not eat anything. I could barely walk because I was so weak. The doctors told David that I must go to the sick barrack. They promised to put me where the congestion was least. They also promised that I would get white bread and medication. In two weeks I would be well, they said.

They gave me 20 grams of white bread and a fish patty every day, which I gave to one of the medics. My medicine was opium drops. One evening they gave me a dose that put me to sleep immediately. How long it took until I awoke I cannot say, but I was trembling with cold. The room was pitch black; I could not see anything. I became aware of frozen human bodies around me. Groping in the dark I felt hands, feet and heads. I was stark naked. Gradually I came to my senses and realized I had been thrown into the hospital morgue, ready for burial with the corpses.

Suddenly I heard two men enter the morgue cellar. I wanted to say something but could not utter a word. They

threw a corpse on top of me, and I shouted. They were terrified and fled. Shortly, they returned with lamps to see what was going on. I could see that I was lying on a dirt floor, naked, and surrounded by dead bodies. I pleaded with them to carry me to David's room, because I certainly had no appetite for the hospital. It was obvious that this was their way of eliminating me.

David went to the pharmacy and brought a bottle of spirits. A part of it he used to massage me with. The rest I drank. I felt a bit warmer and fell asleep. When I awoke I found some white bread at my bedside, which David had brought. I ate and felt refreshed. David told me that on the day which I had spent with the corpses, the doctor had told him that my sickness would be a prolonged one. The doctor had used this opportunity to recommend that David employ a friend of his in my place. Apparently the doctor was eager to be rid of me without delay.

As time passed, I recovered my strength and returned to work. One day a Jewish prisoner, named Berkovitch, approached me. Before he could say a word he collapsed. I summoned a doctor, who soon established that the man had fainted from hunger. David brought him a bowl of *kasha* from the kitchen, and we watched the life return to him. From then on he was our frequent visitor. David arranged for him to get a daily portion of *kasha* from the kitchen. In camp, this was a great favor.

Passover was almost upon us. The female *natchalnik* of the political education department was also censor for the letters and packages of the prisoners. This woman also held the high rank of captain. She asked me to calculate what percentage of the quota the woods workers had filled the day before. In passing she asked me what *matzos* were. I explained in detail, and informed her that Passover fell in ten days.

"What will you do if you do not get *matzos* from home?"

"I'll eat potatoes. And if I don't get potatoes, I'll just go hungry for eight days." With that our conversation ended. Only later did I discover her purpose in asking the question.

Passover was drawing closer. David whitewashed the room, fixed the stove for Passover, and acquired new utensils. Everything was ready for Passover — but no *matzo*. It almost seemed that, out of spite, we had none. David could not even get any potatoes. He was deeply concerned because he knew I would fast for eight days if I did not have this food.

For the first *seder* I invited David and Berkovitch. The table was elegantly set with white paper representing linen. I brewed three glasses of tea to symbolize the four cups of wine. To the surprise of my guests, I placed three *matzos* at each setting. We celebrated the first *seder*.

For the second *seder* we had no *matzos*. I explained that in camp I always saved several *matzos* for the following year, and we ate all the supply last night. I did not tell them this at the first *seder* because I knew they would not have eaten a *matzo*. I explained that I purposely did this because it is a duty for every Jew to eat *matzos* the first night of Passover, while the rest of the holiday he may eat whatever he pleases except for *chometz*. Besides, if they did not have *matzos* the night before, they would have eaten *chometz* because there was nothing else to eat.

David was furious with me and threatened to go away from our quarters for the rest of the holiday because he could not watch me fast for a whole week.

On the third day the censor called on me, the woman in charge of cultural affairs. One of her duties was to educate the prisoners culturally and politically, and to transform them into "honorable" people. She asked me to calculate the percentage of work norms filled by the prisoners the past two days. She did not come earlier because David had told her that I observe the holiday.

When I handed her the document she remarked that my hands were trembling and asked about my stomach condition. She knew about my being thrown into the morgue cellar. I thanked her and said that my stomach was enjoying undisturbed rest since I had nothing to eat. She thought I could not eat the camp black bread because of my illness, so

she returned shortly with a white roll that exuded a deliciously fresh aroma. She assured me that it was baked on a new pan so that I might eat it. I had to explain, after thanking her for her thoughtfulness, that on Passover I eat only *matzos*, potatoes and fruit. She could not begin to understand this.

"You simply can't survive such long fasting," she argued. "You have someone waiting for you back home. It's better to eat this roll than to die." I will admit that the aroma of the roll made me feel physically faint. I asked her to excuse me because I did not feel well.

The next day I felt still weaker and she came again. This time she brought several cookies made of white flour, sugar and oil. "I baked this for you myself to save your life. You must eat or you will die." She told me that her husband had been an officer here in camp and had been mobilized and then sent to the front. In a few weeks she was informed that he had fallen in battle, which left her with three small children. That was why she could not be indifferent to my starving to death.

I did not answer. All I felt was the aroma of the cookies tearing my innards to pieces. I felt like I would faint any moment. Just then the doctor came in to check on my condition. He examined me and said to the censor, "I've never, in all my practice, had such a stubborn patient. Can the Jewish religion demand that a man die for a Passover custom? He refuses to realize that he just won't last more than a few days without food."

The touchingly compassionate doctor, who was so concerned for my life, was the same one who ordered me to be thrown alive into the morgue cellar with the corpses. Now he came to save me.

On *Shabbos Chol Hamoed,** David tried to persuade me to eat. "Are you allowed to fast on *Shabbos*?" he demanded. "Even that anti-Semitic doctor told me to talk you into eating because you won't make it anyway." I calmed David down, and told him that I had a blessing from my father; with G-d's help I would return home well. I was confident that with His help I would survive it all.

On Monday the censor was back. I guess her conscience gave her no rest. I lay there fully alert, but had my eyes closed. I had an attack of severe abdominal pains. She poured a glass of hot water and gave me some to drink — I could not even hold a glass by then. The pains receded somewhat. She tried to force a piece of white roll down my mouth but I resisted. She stalked out angrily. Just then Berkovitch came in and sat near me, weeping wordlessly. (Later he told me that he wept because he could see me dying and could do nothing to help me.) He sat at my bedside all night, from time to time giving me drinks of warm water.

By the last day of Passover I lay semi-conscious. In the morning Berkovitch washed my hands ritually because I could not do it by myself. He gave me the *siddur* and I barely pronounced the words. I have no idea what happened after that ...

When I refained consciousness, I saw the director of the medical department at my bedside. She must have given me an injection that made me feel terribly hot. I groaned and she cried out, "Now you will live long!"

I could not *daven Maariv.* David brought me some dried white bread and a little sugar. They soaked the *sukhares** in sweet tea and spoon-fed me like an infant. I slept soundly after eating, waking the next morning at eight. I could not put on *tefillin* myself. David had to help me.

That same day Berkovitch came with the good news that he was to be released from prison. In his excitement, he swore to settle in the town near the camp so he could send me food every day until I recovered. Two days later he was actually freed. I asked him not to keep his word, but to return home as swiftly as he could. I asked him one favor — to stop at the post office and find out whether there was a letter or package for me. I gave him a written authorization to pick up my mail.

That evening Berkovitch came to the watchtower of the camp where David and I were waiting. He told me that some time before Passover, a package had come for me. It was returned because the censor who was authorized to receive

Sukhares (Rus.): Candies.

mail for the prisoners had given a written declaration that I had died. Later, another package and a letter arrived for me, but the censor had ordered that they be returned.

Now I understood why the censor was so emotionally involved with my ordeal of fasting on Passover. Her conscience troubled her. We went to the *natchalnik* and told him what the censor did with my package of *matzos* and how I had almost died as a result. "There is a package for me at the post office right now, but the censor refuses to accept it and orders that it be returned," I concluded.

The *natchalnik* was angry and he called the censor, asking whether it was true that a package for me was at the post office. Pale with anger and fear, she stammered that it was true. He ordered her to have the package on his desk before noon that very day. Without a word, she left. Within two hours the package was on the *natchalnik's* desk. He sent for the director of the medical department and, in her presence, ordered the censor to open the package. They found two packets of butter, but because so much time had passed the butter was green and rancid, and the kilo of sugar was spoiled.

Unexpectedly, at that moment, a car with the chief *natchalnik* arrived. When he walked in, our *natchalnik* sprang to attention. The rest of us were in a dilemma, not knowing what to do.

"Since when do you distribute packages in your office?"

"It's a special case," was the answer, and he told his superior the saga of the censor and my mail.

The chief asked her if mail had come for me lately which she had failed to convey to me. She admitted that there had been two letters but she had ripped them up. She did not want me to find out about the two packages she had ordered to be returned. The chief then told me to write to the prosecutor, with a complaint against the censor, and to hand it to him at once. He, the chief, would personally see to it that she was properly punished.

The censor broke down in tears, pleading with the chief to have mercy on her orphans, whose father had given his life in battle for the fatherland.

"Don't apologize to me," he retorted. "Talk to that man. He's the one you could have killed."

I declared that, in view of the fact that her husband had died fighting the Nazis, I was prepared to forego my charge against her, but only on the condition that she swore never again to abuse prisoners. These words seemed to impress the *natchalnik.* He promised not to notify the prosecutor about this affair, but that the lady would be relieved of her duties.

Berkovitch kept his word. He stayed in the town for two weeks and brought me a daily supply of milk, potatoes, white bread, sugar, and some green onions. That must have cost him a small fortune, considering prices of the time. I recovered my health. I pleaded with him to return to his family. We said good-bye and he departed.

There was a young Serbian prisoner named Nimshitch. From the first, he led a glorious life. Officially he was a fireman, whose job was fire prevention in camp. Actually, he was an NKVD informer. We could never be too cautious in his presence. He had an eye on everyone and scurried off to the NKVD, constantly informing on us. We never let him set foot in our *kabinka.*

Early one morning, when I was *davening,* the Serb walked by and saw me wearing *tefillin.* I was standing at a window overlooking a plowed field surrounded by barbed wire, where no trespassing was permitted. I was certain no one would see me. The Serb, however, was permitted to roam anywhere. I was not overly concerned as I assumed that he did not know what *tefillin* were, and would therefore not have anything to report to the NKVD.

As time passed I forgot the incident. Unexpectedly, one Friday evening in July 1943, we were wakened and ordered to prepare for a trip. Our camp was to be closed down and we were being transferred elsewhere. I was worried about my *tefillin.* I could not put them on, because during a search they would be discovered and confiscated. I could not simply carry them because of *Shabbos.* But, as G-d had helped me in the past, He would help me this time too. The *natchalnik* came to

our *kabinka* and told David that he had assigned a wagon for the belongings of the weak and sick prisoners — we could put our things on that wagon.

I was worried about the wagon because I had to go with the rest of the transport. David reassured me that he would put my gear on the wagon. He warned me to lock it well, and as soon as we arrived at the new camp I should reclaim my things — otherwise the crooks would pilfer it.

Our convoy pressed us to march faster so that we would arrive at the new camp that same day. The heat was awful and they gave us no water. We got our first drink when we came to the camp late that night. I was very worried about my things on the wagon. On the road I recited *Atta Chonantanu** so that as soon as we arrived I could claim my belongings. I went to the gate, and sure enough, my suitcase was torn. The top was broken. Fortunately none of my belongings were missing. Even the 200 rubles I had hidden there were intact. The only article I could not find was my *tefillin*.

This was obviously no ordinary robbery. I checked around and learned that Nimshitch had been poking around among the valises. They told me that he had just left for the room where they boiled water for drinking. I went directly there and met Nimshitch as he was walking out — drunk. When he saw me he burst out laughing. "Your things with the boxes that you pray with are in Heaven already. I sent them there by fire."

I was stunned as I ran to the stove, where I found charred remnants of straps remaining from my *tefillin*. Nimshitch stood by, laughing out loud.

"Why did you burn my *tefillin*?" I screamed at him.

"I wanted to burn up your religion," he sneered.

I could not control my anger and I shouted at him, "You are going to die like a dog, and you won't go to heaven but straight to hell!" The shouting became a fist fight and prison bystanders separated us.

Sick at heart, I made my way to camp headquarters, where our transport was assembled. We were separated into

brigades, forty men to each. I couldn't sleep that night, so I went around trying to find David, to talk out my bitterness, but couldn't find him.

Early the next morning I was called to the camp *natchalnik*, as I had expected. The *natchalnik*, was furious. "Because of your *tefillin*, which you even had in your possession without permission, you were ready to kill a man? You will sweat for a month, grubbing stumps. You won't have any appetite for praying then, nor for condemning people to death." He would not let me say a word in my defense.

I went with my brigade to work. It was a rough day. We were still weary from the transport, and hungry because they had not given us a bite of bread. We hardly made it until dusk, when the boss called it a day. Back to camp we went, where we were treated to 400 grams of bread each.

The next day, coming back from work, I was ordered to report to the camp *natchalnik*. There I found the plans *natchalnik*, Nikolai Alexandrovitch, of the central camp, for whom I had kept books and who always treated me with friendship.

"I am truly sorry," Nikolai Alexandrovitch began, "but I am compelled to punish you. Tomorrow you will be sent with the transport to Camp 3." (The camps were numbered in series 1,2,3, etc.) This punishment did not disturb me at all. I had spent several years in Camp 3. The *natchalnik* of the medical department was a Jewish woman who would not permit me to be forced to do hard labor, as I was doing at this camp. Nikolai Alexandrovitch knew all this, but we both acted as though I was being severely punished. I understood that this was punishment for the fight with the Serb, but still I asked what my sin was.

"You ask why?" shouted the camp *natchalnik*. "You killed a man!"

Now I was really scared, but in a moment everything was clear. One of Nimshitch's choices had been to leave camp without a guard. On the night of the fight over my burned *tefillin*, Nimshitch had gone to a neighboring village to a wedding, where he became wildly drunk. In the morning,

when he returned in a drunken stupor, he had entered the prohibited zone of the camp. You had to know the password to enter there, and the password was limited to the officers commanding the guards.

The soldier on duty, seeing a stranger, had demanded the password. Instead of answering, Nimshitch had begun cursing the guard. When Nimshitch refused to answer the second challenge, the guard fired twice in the air and once at Nimshitch, who fell dead.

The officials regarded this as a fulfillment of my curse. I was a dangerous man to have around and the sooner they were rid of me, the better.

Nikolai Alexandrovitch was shaken by this event, but I felt that deep down he was with me. Aloud he remarked, "If that's the case, then you are dangerous and they are right in sending you away." On another occasion he explained to me that since my first day in this camp began on such a note, he knew that life would be extremely unpleasant for me here. That is why he arranged that I be transferred to Camp 3.

That day David came, but he had no idea what had happened. He apologized for not coming earlier, but he had been busy evacuating everything from the liquidated camp. When I told him about the Serb and the *tefillin* he said, "*Tefillin*, with G-d's help, you will replace, but that's the fulfillment of the words, 'So may all Your foes be destroyed'."

David was not pleased about my punishment of transfer. He felt that he had enough pull from the first camp to get me assigned to light work and undisturbed *Shabbos* observance. I assured him that Nikolai Alexandrovitch had not acted out of malice but that he truly intended my well-being. In Camp 3 there was farm work, so I would surely get a light job and there I could get fresh vegetables and milk.

David and I said farewell like brothers and I went to the watchtower to await my transport. Some forty juvenile thieves were there already, all about thirteen or fourteen years old. These were to be my travelling companions to the new camp.

We left at about ten in the morning. My young companions had no baggage and, considering their age, they tripped along lightly. The going was harder for me. Being a camp veteran, I had a bag with my winter clothes, but the boys helped me carry it. It was a hot day and since we marched through an uninhabited forest, there was no chance to get a drink of water. Happily we were overtaken by two empty lorries, so the convoy told us to jump in. By nightfall we were at Camp 3. I later learned that David had sent out the trucks.

When we arrived at the gate, the *naryadtchik* greeted us. Seeing the children sent to him, he told us to wait while he went to headquarters. An NKVD officer came out, the former censor of Camp 1 with whom I had had the trouble with the *matzos*. When she saw the "merchandise" they sent her, she said that these children had no place there and she refused to accept the transport. She ordered me to go into the watch office and sent the rest back.

"Nikolai Alexandrovitch telephoned me that you are coming," she opened with a surprisingly friendly tone. "Now you will see that I am not as cruel as you thought. I will never forget that you acted magnanimously toward me and I intend to reciprocate as best I can. I was told that you suffer from *tzinga.** Most prisoners in the Soviet camps are afflicted with it. I will see to it that you do farmwork, where you can have vegetables that will cure you."

She called her secretary at once, also a Jew, and told him that since he was quartered alone in a *kabinka,* to have another cot placed there for me. She gave me the first day off, to rest from the transport, and promised to discuss my work assignment with the farm *natchalnik* the next day. She then brought up the subject of the *matzos*.

"Please believe me that they forced me to act as I did. I was afraid they would fire me and I would starve with my children. When they forced me to send your *matzos* back, I planned to bring you fresh rolls each day that I baked myself and that way to atone for the evil done to you. I did not realize that you are actually forbidden to eat anything else. When I saw that

Tzinga (Rus.): Scurvy.

you would not take a bite of my rolls under any conditions and I saw you suffering so from hunger, my conscience gave me no rest — I could not sleep. I'll tell you the truth. I could hardly believe it when you forgave me at once and saved me from being tried and fired. I am delighted that now I can do something to show my appreciation. You are a rare man."

CHAPTER 26

Work In The Agriculture Section

On the first day of the Hebrew month of *Av*, August 2, 1943, I went to work in the *selkhoz** in Camp 3. The *natchalnik* was less than delighted to greet me, and remembering him to be a drunken thief, I expected as much. He knew that my presence in the agricultural section would not be a source of comfort for him. But, he had no choice. He had orders to put me to work in the hothouses and in the greenhouse.

In the hothouses they raised various sorts of vegetables, like cucumbers, tomatoes, and carrots. There were some thirty hothouses and a large greenhouse for flowers in the area. They were all warmed by steam. The boilers for the central heating were near the greenhouse and were kept hot all the time.

In the greenhouse there were large tubs with rich black earth. The tubs were sunk several meters into the ground. There they raised green onions, pumpkins, and watermelons. Every tub was labeled with information about the pumpkin or melon, when it was planted, when it sprouted, and so on.

The boilers were heated by a mute, and my job was to check and control the temperature in the hothouses and in the greenhouse. Exactly at sunrise I removed the glass roofs so that the sun's rays would reach the growing plants. When he described my duties, the *natchalnik* warned me grimly that I was not to doze for an instant. I must check the temperature all through the night so that it did not vary. In addition, I was

Selkhoz (Rus.): Farming section of prison camp.

to keep on the lookout for thieves. For this last order, I had at my disposition Prince, a huge trained dog with a long chain that permitted him to cover the entire agricultural area.

The *natchalnik* said that when I heard Prince bark, I must respond at once. "I have the impression that you are not easily frightened," he smiled cynically. "Why don't you just take Prince out of his doghouse and chain him, and you can take it easy the rest of the night?"

The *natchalnik* was certain that I would be afraid of the dog in general, or frightened that if I approached him, he would jump on me. In either case he would have the finest excuse for claiming that I was not fit for the job. I went over to the doghouse. Prince was a large, black dog, looking more like a wolf to me. I acted more fearlessly than I felt. I shouted to the dog to go out, and almost instinctively he started running in the direction in which he was used to going. He seemed to realize that I was his new master. Only when I placed the chain on him did he growl threateningly, but I was out of his range by then.

I had a few lumps of sugar with me. Knowing that Prince loved sugar, I gave him some. By the end of the first night we were bosom companions.

The *natchalnik* warned me that I was forbidden to pluck or eat any large vegetables because that would be considered stealing. In deference to his wishes, I ate green onions all night long until my mouth tasted like gall. Naturally I plucked them from the borders where they would not be missed. In the morning the *natchalnik* meticulously examined every row and looked terribly disappointed that he could not catch me stealing a tomato or cucumber.

When I was ready to go back to the camp I noticed that my coat seemed heavier than usual. I put my hands in the pockets and felt cucumbers and tomatoes. I acted as though nothing unusual had happened, hid them in some deep grass, and nonchalantly went to the watchtower. The officer of the guard at the gate, looking like he had a culprit in his grasp, ordered me to show what I had in my pockets. I showed him my *siddur*.

"No!" he shouted. "I don't mean that. Pull out everything you stole." I noticed that on his table there was already a report describing my thievery. I pulled off my coat, threw it at the officer and hollered, "Here. Look yourself."

While the *natchalnik* and the guard officer were searching through my coat, I surreptitiously slipped the report off the table. Finally, having found nothing, the officer said to the *natchalnik* that it was a mistake and he told me to continue.

When I came into the camp zone I found the director and Nikolai Alexandrovitch waiting for me. They called me into the office and asked what happened. The *natchalnik* of the *selkhoz* had already telephoned in the news that I was a thief and could not be kept on that job, and that he was sending a report recommending severe punishment. I showed them the unsigned report and told the whole story.

"I'm beginning to believe in G-d," the director exulted. "This is a real miracle. If you hadn't noticed that they put something in your coat and if the guard had found it, we could never have defended you. For stealing those vegetables the chief *natchalnik* of the camp would have given you fifteen strict days in the dungeon and you would never have lived through them."

She declared that she would try to get the *selkhoz natchalnik* fired from his job. She promised to order that I be assigned to heating the boilers, for then I would get 800 grams of bread. "Don't let it bother you. Eat all the green onions you can lay your hands on. It's the only thing that can cure your *tzinga*," she encouraged me.

That evening when I came to work, the *natchalnik* was in an unhappy mood, though he tried to be pleasant to me. He told me that today my job would entail heating up the boilers. I was to provide the wood. He figured that I would not know how to get the wood and that would be an excuse for getting rid of me.

Near the *selkhoz* there was another camp industry, a furniture factory. I took three tomatoes and three cucumbers from those I had hid in the grass the day before and went to

the watchman of the furniture plant. He was effusingly grateful for this gift, ready to do anything to show his gratitude. He made a proposition that I bring him a similar gift of greens daily, and in turn he would gather up waste wood from the factory operation so I would be provided with fuel. That night he brought me three sacks of wood and that lasted until morning. We arranged that on Friday he would stoke the fires for central heating.

Having sufficient wood, I then let Prince out on his chain and I *davened* an undisturbed *Maariv*. I dined on bread, onions, and the two cucumbers and tomatoes the *natchalnik* had "stolen" for me the evening before. I had not finished *bentching* when I heard someone poking around outside near the hothouses. The dog barked furiously. I went out and found a stranger who introduced himself as an agent of the Third Section. He explained that he came every night to pick up two kilos of tomatoes and cucumbers. I apologized that I could give him nothing because the *natchalnik* had left no such instructions, and I had no scales. I also asked why the dog did not attack him. He told me that he once worked as a dog trainer and in fact had trained Prince.

The next morning the *natchalnik* checked the temperature, examined the plants to be sure none were missing, and then asked whether anyone had come that night. I told him about the visitor who claimed to be from the Third Section and demanded vegetables. "Didn't you give him what he wanted?" he asked me nervously. "Next time give him whatever he wants." He emphasized this so I might understand that at all costs one must get along with those people.

Our nocturnal visitor called again the following night, wanting to select tomatoes and cucumbers himself. I told him that my *natchalnik* was tough and would not let anybody pick the vegetables because then he would not be able to check on pilfering. I would pick for him according to the rows in which the vegetables grew.

"I'll check tomorrow how much he steals every day," the agent fumed. The next day I purposely told the *natchalnik* that I did not permit the agent to make his own selection,

adding that he was insulted. This was too much for my poor *natchalnik* and he burst out in dismay, "Do you know what that man can do? He can lock us all up!"

"When you don't eat garlic, your breath doesn't smell," I quoted at him unctuously. He understood but acted as if he did not hear.

A day later, when I returned from work, the director of the camp sent for me, demanding why I did not behave cordially to the member of the Third Section. "We know that the *selkhoz natchalnik* is a crook who surrounds himself with accomplices so he will not get caught. But that's life here in camp — and not only in camp," she added obliquely so that I might understand what was involved. "It's better to be on good terms with the Third Section," she concluded.

"I did it on purpose. I wanted him to understand that he's not going to scare me out of this job. It's not my duty to cover up his thievery. Let him do whatever he wants, but I want him to realize that he will not gain anything at my expense." I mentioned further that the *natchalnik* does not give me any fuel for the boilers and I have to acquire the wood illegally. She immediately issued an order that the furniture plant was to provide me with a daily supply of lumber discards. I was grateful for her help.

One night I heard Prince bark loudly. I found Prince wrestling with three thieves. One of them had jumped on Prince with a knife. When Prince sprang away, the other two tried to grab him. Seeing me from a distance, they waved for me to get back into the greenhouse, but I approached them anyway. They threatened me and advised me to forget I ever saw them. I told them I had no intention of troubling them but that it was unadvisable for them to steal any tomatoes or cucumbers since they would never get it past the guards who search carefully. There was a better plan, I pointed out. Not far away was a field of sugar beets, which brought a hefty price in camp and were not guarded. They left and the next night they brought me some large sugar beets, a gift for my advice.

Early in the morning the *selkhoz* cowherder came. He also suffered from *tzinga* and asked me for some green onions, the only cure available to us. Of course I gave him some and added some beets. In return he brought me some milk and soon we had a daily exchange of merchandise. Besides this, I found a way of exchanging beets for milled oats, which I received regularly from my new friends the thieves. Cooked in milk, they made a fine *kasha*. I began to live as I never did in camp. With this diet I felt healthier and stronger.

The *selkhoz natchalnik* began trusting me, confiding secrets to me, even offering that I take over the vegetable store where "you can make money," as he put it. The system, as he taught me, was simple. You record only part of the actual weight, and when the man from the store picks up the rest, he pays well for it. The profits are divided among a number of beneficiaries. Besides this, there was milk in the store and butter, cream, and other foods which I would be able to eat every day.

I thanked him and suggested he find someone else because I was not in this line of work.

He looked at me like I was some peculiar sort of being, obviously sorry he had confided in me. I explained that I would not inform on him because I was not a camp detective. He could do whatever he wanted, but I would not have the vaguest pang of envy. Still, just to be sure, he informed me that for a bottle of whiskey he could have me made eternally silent, so discretion should keep me from mentioning our conversation. Our little talk ended with a declaration of friendship for me and an invitation to eat all the onions I wanted.

Some time later the director told me she was to be transferred to another camp. Since the *selkhoz natchalnik* would then get rid of me, she thought it advisable to get me a good job now. Meanwhile, I became acquainted with the boss of the *shirpotreb*.* This was a complex of manufacturing units for furniture, pottery, metalware and other articles. The *natchalnik* was a devout Christian who had served his ten

Shirpotreb (Rus.): Section of production for internal prison use.

years and then remained on the job. He had sympathy for me as a person suffering for his own faith. He told me he would take me into the furniture works, and I would be free on *Shabbos*. 800 grams of bread and his promise to find light work for me looked good. I thanked him and asked him to permit me to continue at the *selkhoz* as long as possible because my *tzinga* was not yet completely cleared up.

CHAPTER 27

In The Furniture Factory

In *Elul* 5703, September 1943, the *natchalnik* of the *shirpotreb* offered me a job as storekeeper of the new blanket shop. I knew that as soon as the director of the camp left I would be out of the *selkhoz*, since she was my "guardian," so I eagerly accepted. In a few days I was called to the headquarters office where I found the director dressed for the trip and the new *natchalnik* in uniform with a colonel's insignia. The director's three children were there and she told them, "Do you see this man? He is the one I told you about. Even though I caused him to fast for eight days he did not take revenge. Wherever you meet people of his kind, all your lives, you must help them."

She told the youngsters to shake hands with me and then she spoke to her successor. "This is an honest man. We communists may learn from him. Please, I ask of you, treat him well."

Her recommendation, as I learned after some while, was not especially effective. In the meantime I worked in the blanket shop on the night shift. My job was distributing materials like thread and accessories and then, in the morning after work, I gathered up the finished blankets. My ration was 600 grams of bread daily.

The new *natchalnik* instituted a harsh regime. The soldiers checked the prisoners more rigorously; every inmate was carefully examined. An attempt to take out several meters of

thread was punished by the dungeon, and then assignment to the hardest labor. The prisoners in our shop could not bring anything into camp to exchange for bread any longer. The workers became hungry and sullen and their work suffered. The norms were not filled and the quality of the blankets deteriorated. The *shirpotreb natchalnik* and I were hurt by this because we were responsible for the production.

Chatting with this *natchalnik*, I told him why the norms were not being met and why the quality was so poor. I suggested that we tell the workers to exchange thread with the *selkhoz* workers for food, since they did not have to pass a guard checkpoint. The *selkhoz* workers had bribed the guards and exported produce undisturbed. I gave this idea to just one prisoner and immediately the whole shop knew. A regular marketplace developed. The workers, now decently fed, cared about their work, so the norms were filled and the quality improved. Everyone was happy now. This lasted all winter. In the Hebrew month of *Nissan*, April 1944, the supply of thread ended, the shop was closed, and I was transferred to the furniture factory.

My new job was carrying boards to the factory. The first Friday evening I interrupted my work. When the foreman asked who would bring the boards tomorrow I told him that I did not work on *Shabbos* so every carpenter would have to get his own lumber. Of course this answer did not please the foreman. He complained to the *natchalnik* of *shirpotreb*, but to no avail, so he went to the *natchalnik* of the camp.

That same night the camp *natchalnik* sent for me and presented me with a list of my "sins," including the fact that during the whole time at the *selkhoz* and *shirpotreb* I did not report for daily roll call and that I did not work on *Shabbos*. At that moment he gave me three days incarceration in the dungeon for the missed roll calls. He promised to punish me later for the lack of work on *Shabbos*.

Shabbos morning I was taken to the *kartzer*, but that evening the *shirpotreb natchalnik* came and told me he had succeeded in having me released. He said that he intervened

with the camp *natchalnik* and assumed the responsibility for my missing roll call since I had to wait every day until his arrival.

I worked in the carpentry shop a few more days and on Friday morning the *shirpotreb natchalnik* had me transferred to attending the *sushilka** on the night shift. The *sushilka* was a large storehouse for drying boards, using temperature controls. My job was regulating the temperature and guarding against fire. This gave me enough time to *daven* and to eat. One of the *shirpotreb* guards was a friend from the transport. I asked him to adjust the temperature controls for me on Friday night, so that I would not violate *Shabbos*. I gave him a pack of *makhorka* in return. My duties were not demanding and my *Shabbos* was secure, so I had no complaints. The camp *natchalnik*, a vicious anti-Semite anyway, was less pleased when he learned of my arrangements. He summoned me at once and declared that a criminal like me must do hard labor and, not have a duty that a child can fulfill.

My *shirpotreb* boss happened to be present and defended me, insisting that my job is a responsible one. He pointed out that I had to make sure the apparatus did not malfunction and no fires broke out. "Why do you persecute a man who does his job well?" he demanded.

The *natchalnik* retorted angrily that he was too ardent in defending a Jew who would not work on *Shabbos*.

The *natchalnik* assigned me to the most dangerous job in the furniture works — operating the electric saw. I had to haul logs, place them in position for the saw, and then cut them into boards. The work was arduous and extremely hazardous. A moment's carelessness or an unpredictable knot, and the log could spring backwards with terrific force, causing grave injury and even death. Finding workers for the saw was a job in itself. To avoid working on *Shabbos* I had to keep ahead of schedule all week, working late hours to provide carpenters with their supply of lumber for the day. The *natchalnik* soon realized that I did not work on *Shabbos*, but he ignored that because he was happy to have someone handle that electric saw.

Sushilka (Rus.): Room where laundered clothes are dried out.

Another Passover was coming and I had no *matzos* yet. I was worried because I remembered how I starved the year before and understood that it would be absolutely impossible to do it again this year. I would have to work at that saw during *Chol Hamoed.* Doing that while fasting would be my death.

A day before *Yom Tov* I had a visitor whose arrival was like a gift from Heaven. It was the photographer I had met in camp three years earlier. He told me that when he was released from prison he remained in the town near my camp and just learned the other day that I was here. "I'll never forget that you saved my life. I want to do whatever possible for you now."

I shared my worry about the *matzos* with him and said that, from experience, I knew that my *matzos* could well be in the post office, but the camp administration was casual about picking it up. I asked him to check in the town post office about a package and to try to claim it for me. The next day, Friday, was the day before Passover. I worked hard all day preparing plenty of boards for the two days of Passover. In the evening I washed for the holy day and prepared for a *matzo*-less *seder.* I stayed in the little house where they kept the saws so that I would not be disturbed. I had a new pot to brew some tea which served for the "Four Cups." Suddenly the door opened and in came the photographer with a box of *matzos.*

I cannot describe my delight. He had been at the post office first thing that morning and, after a long investigation, learned that just a few days ago a package had arrived for me. He bribed the official and received the package with the understanding that he would bring a receipt for the package signed by me. By law he should have brought the package to the camp post, but he brought it directly to me. "Let's not worry what will happen later. Right now you won't go hungry."

Shabbos morning I went to the little room with the saws in it, locked the door and *davened,* then ate some *matzos* and rested. Here I had the second *seder* and spent the holiday. Monday night, the first day of *Chol Hamoed,* I was called to

camp headquarters. The *natchalnik* inquired about my health, an unusual and disturbing question. This scoundrel was not concerned with that at all.

"Your brigadier informed me that you have not taken any bread for three days now," he said accusingly. "You are planning a hunger strike, or perhaps you are starving yourself so you will be taken to the hospital. You are scheming to get out of work. I warn you that you won't play these tricks with me."

I assured him that I had no plots in mind at all, but I did have an ulcer so I could not eat black bread. I maintained myself with potatoes which I dug at night in the field.

The next day the *selkhoz natchalnik* came and advised me, as a devoted friend, not to go to the fields at night for potatoes because of the danger. "Why don't you just come to my store? My workers will provide you will all the potatoes and vegetables you want."

I expressed my gratitude for his good heart, and told him, "Don't think I'm so stupid. I know it's better to steal from the field than to take anything from your store and then be stopped by the soldiers." He was embarrassed that I understood what their trap was, and slunk out.

The night watchman, whom I knew, really did go at night for potatoes. Knowing what was being prepared, I warned him that the *selkhoz natchalnik* was laying a trap for this particular night and would probably send the dog to attack any thief. I suggested that he go with several comrades and take sticks.

The next day when I came to work, the watchman told me about the night's adventures. Four men went to the field, one to watch while the others dug. The dog suddenly bounded out. The guard gave a signal and the others sprang at the dog with metal staves. The dog fell in a bloody mess. Then the *selkhoz natchalnik* arrived on the scene. They beat him with their staves, broke his arm and fled in the darkness.

Late that night soldiers came and asked for me. The guard told them that I worked only during the day and was asleep in

the camp barrack. They did not believe him. They turned on the light in the room with the electric saw and could see that no one was there so they left. The guard was grateful to me for warning him in time to avoid trouble and he promised to help me on *Shabbos* and take no pay.

That day soldiers came again, asking me how many times I went potato digging at night. I replied that I did not have to steal potatoes at night in fields because the *selkhoz natchalnik* offered me all the vegetables I wanted from the store. The *natchalnik* was right there during this exchange. He could not deny what I said, so the soldiers left empty-handed.

At night they woke me and sent me to the camp *natchalnik.* Again he questioned me about my not taking the daily bread ration. I repeated that I could not eat black bread because of my intestinal condition, but I hoped that in a few days the pains would subside and I would be able to toast the bread and eat it with hot water. Then he asked whether I heard what happened that night, how the *selkhoz natchalnik* had suffered a broken arm and the dog had been injured so badly it had to be shot.

I answered that I could not understand how the *natchalnik,* armed with a revolver, could let himself be beaten and not even catch the culprits. "If you think I have anything to do with it you can check with the guards. They will verify that I was in my barrack in camp all night so I could not know what was going on out there."

He smiled sarcastically and said, "I know you weren't there. That's just your luck. I guess that's how it was fated for you. But I'll catch you yet."

The next day, when I had a few free minutes, I visited the *selkhoz natchalnik* who greeted me with phoney friendliness. His arm was in a cast held by a sling. I sympathetically asked him what happened and he described the misfortune of the previous night. I reminded him that he had once promised me some green onions and since I did not feel very well and was afraid of a recurrence of *tzinga* I would like to get some now. He gave me a pack of different vegetables and invited me into

the greenhouse because he wanted to talk. "When was the last time you were in the potato field?" he asked abruptly.

"I've never been there."

He looked at me in surprise. "You yourself said that you go there to dig potatoes."

"That was just a joke. You know that I don't steal. You had a chance to prove that when you tried to frame me. My friend, G-d has kept me until now and He protected me from you too." I was never bothered again. He was afraid.

My work at the saw became more arduous. Twice a week I worked twenty-four hour shifts to prepare boards for *Shabbos*. In my early camp years my feet had become frozen. Now, after long hours of standing, my feet gave me serious trouble. The *natchalnik* nevertheless kept annoying me, calling me to say he had learned that I did not work on *Shabbos*. "I'll give you a week to consider this. If you won't work like everybody else, I will bring you to trial for sabotage."

I told him there was nothing to consider. I never worked on *Shabbos* and I would not do so in the future.

His cruelty was not limited to me. He kept picking on the young Polish boy we called "Amcho." When this unfortunate child came from Poland to Russia in 1939, he had declared himself an English citizen since his family was in England. When the Polish Jews were released from camp, he received special treatment as an English citizen and was not freed. The youth wrote to the English consul to intervene since, as an English citizen, there was no justification at all for holding him in camp in the first place. The letter was not passed by the NKVD censor. For writing to a representative of a foreign power Amcho was punished with five days in the dungeon.

When I heard of this I went to the *natchalnik* to ask him to free the boy. "First of all he is just a child. Besides he really is not a Soviet citizen and should have been released with all the other Polish Jews," I argued.

The *natchalnik* was irritated by my impudence in mixing into other people's business so he gave me five days in the dungeon too. He also threatened to send me to Kalima. I

answered him that nowadays no one knew where he would be the next day, and when he threatened to send me to the black mountains of Kalima, he could not be too sure that he also would not be sent there tomorrow.

This last comment drove him into an hysterical rage, and he ordered me taken to the dungeon at once. It was late Friday afternoon. Amcho was my neighbor there. We shared the hunk of bread I had in my pocket — that was our *Shabbos* meal. Our five days included the holiday of *Shavuos*, and we were pleased that we need not worry about how to evade work during those days. There was no one there besides us, so I used the opportunity to teach the boy to *daven*, to say the *brachos*,* and recite *Shma.**

We were famished when our five days were over. I borrowed 800 grams of bread from the attendant of my barrack and we ate it. The next morning I went out to work and at the watchtower met a new camp *natchalnik*. In the furniture works, the *shirpotreb natchalnik* told me that Monday night, while I was in the dungeon, an order came for our *natchalnik* to report immediately for combat duty with his military unit at the front. His replacement had arrived the day before, an elderly colonel who did not appear to be a harsh man.

I told the *shirpotreb natchalnik* about the boy, Amcho, and asked if he could give him a job in the furniture factory. I gave the brigadier of the furniture polishers two packages of *makhorka* to teach Amcho his craft. In a few days Amcho was one of the most skilled polishers and his daily bread ration was raised to 800 grams.

One day I had a caller, Moshkovitch from Chernovitz, who was sentenced to eight years in 1940 for the crime of being a bourgeois. He was an older man who had been torn from his family. He heard that I had helped many people in camp so he came to me. Moshkovitch had been at hard labor all this time and was drained of strength by sheer hunger. The *shirpotreb natchalnik* helped me again, appointing Moshkovitch the *dnevalni* of our barrack. Now we had another Jew in our group.

In wartime, bread was in terribly short supply, causing severe hunger in camp, especially since the work was difficult. As a result, the hospital was always overfilled. Many exhausted prisoners were forced to remain in their barracks until they died.

One day the doctor told me that in Barrack 4 there was a Jew dying of hunger. The Jew had heard that in camp there was someone who did not work on *Shabbos* so he asked the doctor to call me to him. I went to Barrack 4 and found breathing corpses, men too weak to move, expiring from starvation. The miserable trifle of food allocated to them was stolen by the medics. There was no one to whom they could complain. The men were so far gone that complaining was useless anyway.

A faint call came from a bunk in the far corner. As I approached, I saw a middle-aged man who was weary and hardly able to move. He was serving five years and had completed about half of them. He was forbidden to write to his family, so they did not know where he was and could not send him any packages. His investigation lasted nine months. All the while he was in jail, he had to exist on 300 grams a day. Hunger and all-night questioning brought him to such a state that, upon arriving in camp, he could not fulfill even half of his norm. His ration was reduced. The Jew, weakening each day until he finally collapsed at work, was hospitalized for almost a year. He was not cured. His only cure could come from food, and they gave him none. Now he was thrown into the barrack, where fresh corpses were found every day. "Please, please, get me out of here alive," he cried.

Moshkovitch and I decided to take this new man, Yankel, to our barrack. The *shirpotreb natchalnik* agreed to appoint him watchman of the vegetable patches which the factory workers had planted around the camp. This way his presence in our barrack was legal, and most important — now he received 500 grams of bread daily. Until he regained some strength, we did his work for him.

Amcho was a favorite all through the camp, even the

guards did not search him. They all liked him because he was energetic and always ready to help others. In addition, everyone had sympathy for him as an orphan who saved himself from the Nazis and was thrown into camp though he was innocent. We used this opportunity to help Yankel. I would get some vegetables every day from the *selkhoz* store and give them to Amcho, who would get them to Yankel. We also got Yankel some oats for *kasha.* He gradually regained his vigor and could do his own work as watchman and even help Moshkovitch in cleaning the barrack.

Before *Rosh Hashana* the censor informed me that a communication was received indicating that a parcel had been sent to me by mail. I asked her to give me a copy of the document and she was insulted and said, "I won't steal anything of yours." I explained that I had unbounded trust in her, but all kinds of things could happen. From experience I knew that parcels got lost and, especially with the food shortage, some hungry person might steal my package. She agreed and gave me a copy of the communication, remarking that as soon as it arrived she would send it to me.

Weeks passed. No parcel arrived. I went to her again but she insisted it had not come. I wrote to the photographer who brought me the *matzos* and asked him to visit. He came at once and I gave him a copy of the sender's receipt, verifying that a package was sent to me four months ago. He promised to check in the post office personally. He returned the following evening and reported that my package has been sitting there in the post storehouse for the past six weeks. It was possible that the foods had spoiled already. If the package was not claimed within ten days it would be sold.

I told this to the censor and she was somewhat confused. She was embarrassed to be caught in a lie and she tried to pass it off as a post office error. "And perhaps your friend is in error?" she suggested.

Later that day she sent for me. I took Moshkovitch and Amcho along and brought two extra sacks, because I knew there would be quite a bit of food in that parcel. In accordance

with regulations, the censor opened the box in my presence. I received some 10 kilos of barley, 4 kilos of sugar, 3 kilos of cooked sugar, a sack of white *suchares* (dried, zwieback-like bread), and several packets of *makhorka.* When I took possession of the foods, I saw through the window that the prowlers lurked outside, waiting for us to come out so they could claim their share.

I sought some ruse to evade them so that they would not steal everything I had. I put five packets of tobacco on top and as soon as we went out the door I let the packets drop, as though unintentionally, being careful to have them fall far from us. When the thieves saw the tobacco they jumped to catch the packets and we succeeded in disappearing. I took only a small part of the package into the barrack and hid the rest in a secure hiding-place. Sure enough, the robbers were soon there. I showed them that I had received very little, and they already had the tobacco. Still, I had to ransom myself with a half kilo of sugar and a kilo of barley.

I took two packs of tobacco to work next day and gave them as a gift to the *shirpotreb natchalnik.* He declined to accept them since they were worth a thousand rubles. I told him that what he did for me and for my friends was priceless and it was my pleasure to do something for him. He accepted the gift and the compliment.

When I returned to the barrack that evening after work, I found Yankel in bed writhing with stomach pains. As soon as I had left for work, he had cooked an entire pot of barley with three spoonfuls of butter and had gulped it all down. He said to me, "I felt so lucky. I haven't felt so full in such a long time . . . However his emaciated intestines simply could not digest the food. Gradually the ache eased and he suffered no lasting effects. In a few days he was able to eat normally and it took him just a few weeks before he finished off almost the whole package. This is what really cured him. Yankel became a new man.

The package caused me new enemies too. One was the *natchalnik koloni,* himself a prisoner. He was angry because I had only given him tobacco, while the thieves received tobacco

and food as well. He had his revenge by telling the camp *natchalnik* that I *did* not work on *Shabbos.* The new *natchalnik* sent for me. "I hear that you are an honorable man and I am most reluctant to employ severe measures against you. However, I am a military man trained in discipline. In camp, discipline is an absolute necessity. You simply cannot be an exception in camp and not work on *Shabbos.* I am certain you realize that one man cannot win a battle against a nation of 180 million. Therefore I give you a month to ponder this and decide," he concluded.

I did not answer. The Holy Days were approaching. Since I would have to miss so many work days, it was prudent not to argue with him.

Sunday, the day before *Rosh Hashana,* Amcho fell sick. The doctor diagnosed it as a lung inflammation. His temperature passed 40° centigrade. I was afraid to send him to the hospital because it was not a place to be cured, so I gave the doctor a pack of tobacco to come to Amcho and give him an injection. Before *Yom Kippur* his temperature fell and he was feeling much better.

That was a particularly hard day for me. I went to work on Saturday night and did not stop for over twenty hours. I prepared enough boards to last through the Holy Days, Monday and Tuesday. After work I locked myself in the room in my shop and stayed there both days. I *davened* and rested. I spent *Yom Kippur* there too, *davening* and fasting. After *Yom Kippur* I went to the *kabinka* of the camp *natchalnik*'s secretary, where several Jews had gathered. One recited *havdala* and we wished each other "Next Year In Jerusalem."

Succos fell on Monday and Tuesday. I did not feel strong enough to prepare enough boards in one day to last over *Yom Tov,* so I asked the director of the medical department to free me from work for a few days, which she did. I could observe the holiday officially, without being disturbed. I spent day and night through *Chol Hamoed* getting lumber ready for the last days. I also asked the *natchalnik* to give me a day's rest so I could stay in camp. The evening of *Simchas Torah,* all the Jews gathered in the secretary's *kabinka* and we celebrated all night.

There was a standard procedure in camp that every prisoner was to appear before a medical commission once in three months to determine the prisoner's work capability. I asked the director of the medics to place Yankel in the invalid category. This enabled him to get a light work assignment, to help Moshkovitch in cleaning the barrack, and to get an additional 400 grams. He was no longer hungry.

It took two months before the camp *natchalnik* called me back. It was a Sunday, November 17, 1944, the first day of the Hebrew month of *Kislev*. "Quite a while has passed and I have had no answer from you."

Instead of answering, I told him my life story.

"I was born into a strictly observant family. I studied in a religious school for six years and then in a *yeshiva*. After that I worked as bookkeeper in private businesses. After the Revolution I worked for eighteen years in various Soviet enterprises, until the day of my arrest. I never worked *Shabbos*. They tried all sorts of methods to force me, but they never succeeded in uprooting my faith. As a Communist and as an intelligent man you probably know that, according to the Soviet constitution, every citizen has a right to his religious belief. Nevertheless, for years now I have been punished only for the crime of obeying the teachings of the *Torah*. You must agree that keeping me in prison is itself contrary to the law. Never in my life have I deceived anyone or stolen anything and even in camp I have never harmed a soul. I only keep my faith. I don't work *Shabbos* but I make every effort that this should not affect the factory operation. For that reason I work late at night on two evenings each week."

The *natchalnik* heard me out intently. "I understand you perfectly well and that's why I called you for this conversation. I am concerned only for your benefit. It is possible that I will be sent to the front shortly and who knows who my replacement will be. My suggestion is — do not work all day *Shabbos*. Turn on the saw in the morning, that's all, so that it will look like you are working. Be there, so there will be no impression of a demonstration."

I acknowledged his good intentions and his attitude and explained that I was not the least interested in demonstrating anything. I did not want to deceive anyone because all my life I endeavored to live with truth. I would not work on *Shabbos* nor violate the teachings of the *Torah*.

He never brought up the subject again.

Another winter passed. Again I wrote my photographer friend and just prior to Passover he brought me a package of *matzos*. This time I had to take care of more than myself — now I had Yankel, Moshkovitch and Amcho too. The photographer bought us fifteen kilos of potatoes, but this was still meager for four men. Well, we hungered a bit in honor of Passover . . .

We celebrated the first *seder* together in my barrack late at night, when everyone was asleep. I had the second *seder* with Amcho in my work room. *Chol Hamoed* I worked day and night. Not having enough to eat led to exhaustion. I asked the medical department director to free me from work the last days of Passover, but she refused on the grounds that this might cause us both serious trouble, since she might be accused of freeing me for a religious holiday.

An inspection commission came to the furniture factory shortly after Passover and studied my work too. They agreed that my job was hard and that I deserved at least a kilo of bread daily. I thanked them and explained that I would settle for the 800 I had been receiving, but at least half of it should be white bread because of my stomach troubles. They promised to intervene and expressed confidence that my request would be granted. A week later the medical director told me that orders were given for the 400 grams of white bread, but the headquarters of NKVD Third Section countermanded the order. A dangerous political criminal who had already attempted to escape from camp must be treated mercilessly.

May 10 was a great day in camp. That day we learned the war was over and, simultaneously, that amnesty was granted. The amnesty was only for criminals. We political prisoners,

sentenced under the notorious Paragraph 58, were excluded from the kindness of the Soviet Union at this great event.

Yankel was among the amnestied. He swore that as soon as he got back home he would send me a package. While thanking him, I reminded him of the passage in Psalms, "Place not your trust in the generous," meaning never to depend on another even if he is generous. Yankel was surprised by my response, "How can it occur to you that I would forget you!" he protested. "You literally saved my very life. I am in debt to you."

Moshkovitch, Amcho, and I happily escorted Yankel from camp. I asked him to send an occasional card. He declared at once that he would not write because he did not wish to risk being sent back to camp. We never heard from him after his release. Five years later, through an intermediary, he sent me a sum of money.

*Shavuos,** was approaching now, Friday and *Shabbos*, the 18th and 19th of May, 1945. Again, the perennial problem of how to get out of work. It happened that a commission was expected from Moscow. I suggested to the *shirpotreb natchalnik* that he transfer me to the night shift. That way I would not have to work during the day. At night no one was in my work room anyway so I would be able to sleep.

I stayed in my barrack all day on Friday and at night reported to my job where, to my surprise, I was met by the *shirpotreb natchalnik*. He brought me a holiday gift — a fine herring and a white bread. That was a feast proper for *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov*. The *natchalnik* did not come for that reason, though. He wanted to get something off his chest, to confide a life's secret to me.

"You probably never imagined that I am a Jew," he began. I was in fact stunned by this revelation. "My parents were Jewish peasants in the Ukraine. This made them "*kulaks**" and they were driven out of their village with all the other *kulaks*. One winter night the Chekists broke into our home. With a convoy of armed troops, they led everyone off to the railroad station of the nearby village. We were put in a cattle car, without food, for a four week transport to Siberia. Of my whole family, I alone survived.

"I was twelve then and a Russian couple adopted me. They had lost their only daughter. They loved me and I was happy with them. When our settlement refused to become a *kolkhoz*, I became an orphan again.

"The *starosta** had pity on me and took me in. He had one daughter and treated me like his own son. We lived in a *kolkhoz*.* That year a school was erected where I also studied. Since I was an excellent student they sent me later to a middle school in the city. There I lived in the home of a teacher, a truly good man, who helped me a great deal in my studies. He exerted himself to get me into a three-year teacher's seminary. When I received my teacher's diploma, I was nineteen.

"I returned to our *kolkhoz* as a teacher in the local school. Besides teaching the village children, I instructed adults in reading and writing. The textbooks told how Soviet peasants live freely and happily on the *kolkhoz*. At this point, the people challenged me 'Why don't we see these wonders? After all, eight years ago the *natchalnik* also promised us these delights that we read about in the books. Yet, in the end he appointed himself as chairman. He lives nicely and we don't even get enough bread for our hard work. Besides we have no right to get passports. We are like serfs chained to the *kolkhoz* and we have no right to go anywhere else.'

"Their arguments were justified and, remembering my own family tragedies, I decided to write the Soviet Union *Kalinin** at once. The answer arrived in the form of two NKVD men, who tore into my room at night, arrested me, and imprisoned me in a big city.

"At the interrogation they showed me my letter to *Kalinin*, demanding that I tell who participated in composing the letter. I told them the truth, that I did it myself, with no one's knowledge. They tortured me and threatened me with death by a firing squad until I signed that my sister was involved. After six months of investigation I was sentenced to ten years camp. I was declared guilty of concealing my background from the authorities because, while in the seminary and later while teaching, I did not reveal that I am the son of a *kulak*.

Kalinin: President of Soviet Union after 1917 Revolution.

"In camp I worked in a furniture factory, and was soon appointed foreman because I mastered the work quickly. When my term was finished they suggested that I could remain at the same job. Now you know how I attained the career of *shirpotreb natchalnik.* When you arrived, I remembered my Jewish parents. I did all that I could to make your life easier, so you could keep the Jewish laws, things I have no notion about. I've told you all this because we shall probably soon separate. Soon we shall have German POWs in this camp, and all Russian prisoners will be sent elsewhere. Who knows who will help you there . . ."

Dead silence. I thought of generations, especially Jews, living under this black regime. I reassured him about myself. G-d helped me and I prayed He would continue. I advised him to leave this work, change the nationality in his passport, insisting they record him as "Jew," and move to a city where there are Jews and where he could marry a Jewish woman. We embraced like brothers.

CHAPTER 28

The "Forbidden Potatoes"

The camp prepared for the German prisoners of war. The furniture works, like all camp industries, closed. All the prisoners were occupied with fixing the barracks for the new tenants. Apparently they could not give German prisoners of war the same inhuman accommodations fit for Russian prisoners, who slept on filthy tiered bunks. For the Germans they installed beds and cabinets, double windows, and other comforts of which Russian prisoners had never even dreamed. All this had to be done in three days. The brigades worked 12 to 15 hours daily, but everything was ready on time.

The next day, 16 *Av* — July 26, 1945 — after finishing work, we were transferred to another camp. However, no one arranged sleeping quarters for us. The existing barracks were overflowing with prisoners who had arrived first. For us, they erected lean-to shelters in which we slept on the naked earth.

Luck was with me. I met an old friend. He he was an old settler with a good job and lived in a separate *kabinka*. He was happy to see me and invited me to his room, where he brewed some tea and brought me a loaf of bread and butter, something which I had not tasted in a long time. We enjoyed our meal and spent the night reminiscing — there was much to talk about.

My friend would not let me return to the lean-to where it was horribly crowded and a person could choke from the awful stench. His room was small, but two could sleep there.

We had arrived at the new camp on Thursday. The place was in turmoil the first days, and the officials were unable to tell if anyone was absent from work. I had two days of rest. Friday evening I welcomed *Shabbos*. My friend had a *propusk* that permitted him to go outside the camp zone, so he was able to acquire foodstuffs like white bread and butter, herring, eggs, and the like. We ate like kings that *Shabbos*.

Sunday morning there was a general roll call that lasted until past noon. We were all recorded according to our documents and were separated into brigades. The next day they told us that we would be reporting for work in the morning.

We were lined up at six o'clock Monday morning, 300 men in five brigades. Escorted by a convoy of fifteen soldiers, one officer, and three dogs, we set out on a march of ten kilometers. We arrived at a large potato field, and each brigade was assigned an area to dig. We were told that as soon as we finished with this area we could return to camp for rest.

As we started, a heavy rain began to fall. The earth became mud, sticking to the shovels so that we could not pull anything out of the ground. We were soaked to the skin and trembled with cold. The soldiers had raingear, so they were not as drenched as we were. But they were young, drafted for the army, and sympathetic to our plight. We thought they would free us from work and let us return to camp, but the officer told our brigadiers that, until the norms were filled, we could not go back.

When leaving camp, we had taken some buckets along, confident that since we were digging potatoes they would let us cook some for lunch. But soon we received a warning from the *selkhoz natchalnik* that if we dared cook one single bucket of potatoes we would be sent directly to the dungeon right after work. This made us bitterly resentful and we all threw down our shovels to begin a strike. The soldiers were indifferent. They were also hungry. The officer went to the camp to ask the *natchalnik* to free us from work because of the rain. An hour later a messenger came from the *natchalnik* permitting us to return to camp.

The camp *natchalnik* was erratic in temper. Everything depended on his mood that day. We began to recognize signs; if he came to work with his cap on straight, he was in a good mood, and he would grant every request, whether from soldiers or prisoners; on the other hand, if his cap was tugged over his eyes, things were bad and we tried to avoid him. Any prisoner he came in contact with was punished with three days in the dungeon for no reason whatsoever, and every soldier also was arrested for three days.

We were lucky that day. His hat was on straight. Otherwise we would have all been tried for sabotage...

The *selkhoz natchalnik* was waiting for us at work the next morning. As usual, he was not quite sober after carousing the previous night. He was angry that we had left work the day before. He cursed and threatened that if we did not meet the norm this day, then we would all be charged with sabotage. He confiscated the buckets and gave them to the soldiers, warning that if they allowed us to cook potatoes then they would be tried along with us.

We were hungry enough to eat raw potatoes. I tried it, as did many others, but my abused intestines could not tolerate this delicacy. Toward evening the soldiers gave us back the buckets and permitted us to take some potatoes back to camp. As soon as we entered the camp zone they confiscated our potatoes and took them to the armory. We were left hungry again. We had dug up 35 tons of potatoes, but since that was

far less than the norm, our rations were cut to 400 grams.

I received intense stomach pains that night. My comrade went for a doctor, but he refused to come. In the morning, I went to the doctor asking to be hospitalized for a longstanding stomach ulcer. I told him that I had been feeling intense pains lately and that I was afraid of hemorrhaging. The doctor examined my papers and, after studying the diagnosis, he wrote a note admitting me to the hospital. I was there half a day and rested a bit. To get a release from work you had to have a high fever, and since my illness did not bring on a high temperature, my stomach could burst but I would still not be freed from work.

I had to report for duty at 6:00 A.M. like everyone else. It happened to be a day of rain and hail. We marched through mud, on the way to work in a forest. As soon as we entered the forest one of the prisoners fled. The convoy had no dogs that day, so we were ordered to sit in the mud, guarded by five soldiers, while the others pursued the fugitive. They surrounded a large area of forest but could not find him. Suddenly they heard a rustling in a tree, a soldier fired, and a dead fugitive tumbled out of the tree. Two soldiers went to the camp for a wagon and carried the body back.

We continued to work the site, all of us in a most ugly mood. The work did not go well, and after a half day we had dug barely five tons. The soldiers observed in silence. They calculated that, in our current mood, mutiny was not far off and the prisoners might attack them. As it happens, we were on good terms with this group of soldiers. They never beat us as they commonly did to other convoys. And yet these "good" soldiers shot a man in front of us. They seemed to feel this, for the officer began justifying what had happened, that he had to do his duty or be, himself sentenced to a long term in camp.

When we returned to camp we were detained at the tower. The camp *natchalnik* came, his hat askew, obviously in a mean mood. After a brief conversation with the officer, he addressed us.

"When you came, I thought you were decent people, that

you would work honestly and I would have an opportunity to treat you honorably. But four days have passed and not once have you filled your norm. This is collective sabotage for which you can be sentenced to death. But what you demonstrated today borders on insurrection. You wanted to kill the guards and escape. Thanks to the self-control of the officer who refused to react to your provocations, a serious bloodletting was avoided. We do not intend to give you a pat on the head for this . . ."

Each of us was thoroughly searched and we went to the barracks. A nurse was waiting for me with instructions to take me to the hospital.

Again I was blessed with good fortune. A few days later I learned that during that very night, all 300 men were dispatched on a transport to *Kolima.* They were never heard from again.

CHAPTER 29
The Central Hospital

On August 3, 1945, I was brought to the camp's central hospital. I was carefully searched and the inspector of the sanitary department took me to the barber. I informed him at once that I would not permit them to cut my beard or *payos.* He summoned the commandant, who tried to persuade me by speaking pleasantly.

"You realize, of course, that this can be done against your will, but I don't want to exercise force against you. It is obvious just by looking at you that you have suffered a great deal, that you are truly sick, and we do want to heal you. I admit that your beard is clean, but this is a sanitary regulation that cannot be violated. If you refuse to permit this shave, then we cannot admit you into the hospital."

I asked to be sent right back to the camp in that case, because under no conditions would I consent to their touching my beard or *payos.* Now he faced a dilemma. Finally he told

me to wait and he left. He returned shortly with instructions from the director of the sanitary department to shave me only as I directed, to give me a bed in a special room in the surgical section, and to prepare me for stomach surgery.

The barber was a Polish Jew who knew how to cut a Jew's hair, leaving *payos*. The next day the director of the sanitary department examined me and remarked that I am badly in need of nourishment and must regain my strength. I asked her to prescribe a milk diet, since for *kashrus** reasons I would not eat other foods. I specifically wanted raw milk in glass vessels. She gave me a funny look and smiled, "Oh, am I having troubles because of you . . ."

Right after this I had barely *davened* before they brought me 200 grams of white bread, a glass of milk, 20 grams of butter, and 20 grams of sugar. In the afternoon a surgeon examined me and ordered X-rays and various tests that would last about two weeks.

Two weeks later a committee, including the surgeon, a cardiologist, and the director of the sanitary section, came. The doctors felt that speedy surgery was indicated, but the director held that, in my weakened condition, I would not survive an operation. She urged that they wait and meanwhile build up my strength and use medications. They conferred at length and finally accepted her proposal.

I knew she was Jewish but was mystified about her unusual involvement in my case. A few days later the mystery was cleared up. One evening, after the patients were asleep, she visited me. We had a very long conversation and she told me that she came from a devout family. She had heard a lot about me and my troubles in camp and had always wanted to help me get admitted into the hospital, but the *natchalnik* of the Third Section blocked her. Now she had finally succeeded.

"However," she explained, "we must both be extremely cautious. Officially, when others are present, I will treat you sternly. I will attack you for not eating the regular food from the kitchen and even threaten to throw you out of the hospital. The informers will convey this to that scoundrel in the Third Section and it should mollify him a bit. It will be for your

benefit. I will not call on you. Whatever you need you can let me know through my secretary, a Jewish girl with a good soul. Through her I will take care of all your needs. Maybe G-d will help us to meet one day in freedom and then we will recall in happiness the troubles we have now." She bade me a good night and left.

Several days later I was called to the hospital office. They suggested I work a few hours a day at bookkeeping. The chief bookkeeper noted that he knew I was observant and would not work on *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov.* He had seen my file and also knew that I was an expert at this work. He also would arrange that instead of the regular hospital fare, I would get raw foodstuffs from he store. He would instruct them to give me new utensils from the store so that I might prepare whatever foods I like.

I promised an answer the next day. Of course, I did not tell him, but I wanted to check with the director. That evening I spoke to her secretary, who was already familiar with the whole business. She had proposed my candidacy for the job when the chief bookkeeper asked her to check the records of the patients to see whether there was a bookkeeper among them. The director, she told me, was aware of this and consented. The only restriction was that for my health's sake I was to work no more than three or four hours daily, and to alternate from one morning to the next afternoon and so on, so that my absence on *Shabbos* would not be noticeable.

I worked three hours the first day. The chief examined my work and confessed that his regular workers, trained in camp, could not do the job in two days. That day I received provisions from the store — potatoes, farina barley, oil, and sugar to last a week. I cooked a little each day and could feel my strength increasing gradually.

A short time later the commandant sent for me and asked why I did not shave off my beard and *payos.* "Is it for appearance or religion?" I told him that in camp I stopped thinking about appearance long ago. I was religious and this was what my religion demanded. He started to lecture me

about being an ingrate to the director of the sanitary department. She was extremely compassionate to me, taking me into the hospital so I would not have to do hard labor. She got me the job in the office and permitted me to get provisions from the store, and here I go on making trouble for her by not conforming with regulations and so on and so forth.

I realized at once that the commandant was trying to trap me and I did not let him. I insisted that the director was not that good to me. I was in the hospital not because of her, but because the doctors compelled her to admit me on account of my terrible condition. About the provisions I had received from the store — that was arranged by the chief bookkeeper because he needed me and she did not even know about it. As a patient I had the right simply to lie in bed and wait for my operation. I worked only because I wanted to and I accomplished more than any two men there could have done. If I did not receive provisions, I would not work.

The commandant was taken aback by my retort. This did not coincide with the informers' tales that the Jewish director took care of me and made special conditions for me — which was actually the truth. But my explanation impressed him. I felt that he was convinced that the accusations against the director were baseless.

The director's secretary told me a few days later that the commandant asked her whether I made trips to the director frequently. She told me that a worker in the bookkeeping office had informed against me, so I should forget about the foodstuffs for a while. She would use the earliest opportunity to have the informer sent out of the hospital and the status quo would be restored.

It was a few weeks later that the informer and other recovered prisoners were sent back to the camp, and I began receiving food again. I was still working a few hours a day. Meanwhile the Holy Days passed — *Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur* and *Succos* — and no one was aware that I did not work on those days or that I had *davened.* I asked the secretary to give me the names of Jewish patients so that I might visit them and eventually be of some help to them.

The first Jewish patient I met was from Debrecin, in Hungary, a little weak man of forty-five. In the thirties he had emigrated to Poland, and when the war broke out he fled to Russia. When he was arrested in 1940 with other Polish Jews, he had declared that he was of Hungarian background. The NKVD gave him a document to sign, ostensibly to affirm that he was from Hungary. In camp, the Second Section sent for him and showed him a document confessing that he was sent from Hungary to Russia to spy for the Nazis. They informed him of his five year sentence to hard labor. He had already served six years, but apparently no one was thinking about releasing him. His tribulations and hard labor brought on heart failure and he was sent to the central hospital. He told me that the Jewish director gave him help and saved his life. Now he felt all right, but he was afraid of returning to the hard labor that would surely kill him.

By trade he was a manufacturer of candies and had his own business in Debrecin. I asked the secretary to have the director assign him a job in the hospital kitchen where he might bake for the patients and the officials too. Before long he was at work. I benefited from this too, because every week he sent me some white rolls for *Shabbos*.

*Chanuka** was coming and I longed for *Chanuka* lights. I found some old sheet metal and fashioned it into a lamp and asked the secretary to permit me to light the lamp in the archives room where no one went. She gave me the key. I used the oil I received as part of the food supplies.

Once, as I went to light the candles, the secretary told me not to lock the door and to wait because the director was coming. She came promptly carrying a gift — a packet of white flour. "We had the custom of making *Chanuka latkes**," she smiled, "so I brought this for you so we can make a real *Chanuka* evening. Tomorrow is Sunday so no one will come to the office. You can prepare then."

The smith at the hospital devised a frying pan for me and I made *latkes* in it. In the evening the director and the secretary

Chanukah gelt (Heb & Yid.): Gifts of money customarily given to children on *Chanukah*.

both came. I made the blessings over the lights, and then we ate *latkes* and drank tea.

"I haven't tasted *latkes* in twenty years," the director murmured with glistening eyes. "This reminds me of my childhood. It was such a happy holiday for us. The house was so bright, guests came and Father gave us children *Chanuka gelt*. Rebbe,** what do you really think? Will we ever again light *Chanuka* candles without fear? Will we ever celebrate the miracle of *Chanuka* as we used to long ago? Maybe we are living in the Messianic Era, because they say that then Jews will endure terrible suffering . . ."

I comforted her that she would certainly live to see good times for Jews.

She broke into sobs. "How I envy your faith! Here in camp where we see such horrors, there are moments when I would rather just stop living."

A few days after *Chanuka*, I was called to the commandant and informed that he had an order from the Third Section to send me back to the camp. All that was missing was the consent of the director of the sanitary department.

"If you are really a friend of hers, then you should ask her to sign you out of the hospital. Otherwise, she is liable to be dismissed from her position and severely punished as well. The *natchalnik* of the Third Section cautioned her long ago that she is altogether too partial to the Jewish prisoners. This preferential treatment is not permissible. But as long as ordinary prisoners were involved, we did not make an issue of it. But in your case, it will not go so smoothly. She permits you to wear a beard and *payos* in the hospital and you receive food from the store so you do not have to eat regular kitchen food. All this, just because you want to be an exception among all the prisoners. Now you have permitted yourself to kindle *Chanuka* lights. Do you really think we do not know every last thing you do? There are no secrets from us. The Third Section *natchalnik* even explained the significance of your

Chanuka festival. You kindle the lights to recall the days that you slaughtered the Greeks who wanted to bring enlightenment and wisdom to the Jews. In the last analysis, you Jews are a nation of murderers and that's why no one likes you. Even today you are ready to kill all the Arabs and grab Palestine by force, so that you can re-establish your government there."

He concluded with the warning that I had better get back to the camp immediately to avoid a lot of trouble for myself and the director of the sanitary department.

I continued to deny vigorously that I had any special connection with the director. I was in the hospital because I was sick and that could be verified by a medical commission. I told him to quit threatening me, because I had already endured the worst troubles in camp and I had been unjustly sentenced in the first place.

The truth was that I became most uneasy after this interview. I undestood that the commandant acted on his own, but I could not foretell how successful he might be. There is nothing too base for these murderers. I went directly to the secretary and asked her to convey the whole matter to the director at once. I added that she should consider whether it might be wiser for me to return to the camp, because I did not want her to suffer because of me.

I heard from the secretary the next day, which quieted all my fears. As far as the director's position was concerned, she was calm because she was on excellent terms with the chief *natchalnik* of the camp. In fact, she was his family doctor. The whole business of the day before was a concoction of the commandant, who found out that he was being sent to another camp. His intention was to use this intrigue against the director to ingratiate himself with the higher officials and thus save his own job. What he did not know was that he made his situation worse.

The commandant came into the bookkeeper's office a few days later asking for a statement that he was not in debt, a note he needed in connection with his transfer to his new post. The chief bookkeeper happened to be busy just then so he asked

me to give the statement. I looked up his file and saw that he owed 600 rubles for products he had taken from the store. I did not indicate that I found anything and wrote a note that he owed nothing here. My chief signed and the commandant walked out very pleased. He must have thought that I acted out of fear of him and was trying to buy him off. I had my own calculations. I wanted to be rid of him without delay, once and for all.

The next day I informed the bookkeeper that, by error, I had taken out the file of another officer with a similar name, and I just realized that this fellow owed 600 rubles. To correct this error, I immediately wrote to his new camp asking them to deduct 600 rubles from his pay and remit it to us. My chief was a bit surprised that I made such a mistake, but he was pleased that I corrected it in time to receive the money before the books were closed out for the year.

At the first opportunity I told the director about this little affair and she laughed with delight. It was a fitting way of settling accounts. She was especially pleased with the way I handled the matter because he could have been detained on account of debt.

It was time to draw the final balance for 1945. The chief asked me to work six hours a day because the books had to be closed by January 20 and there was a great deal of work. I told him it depended on my state of health. Especially with the freezing weather, my feet were constantly swollen. I promised to do whatever I could to help him get the balance ready by January 20.

I worked like a Trojan for two weeks and two days. The accounts were sent to the central office before the deadline. The chief bookkeeper received a reward of 1400 rubles. He gave me 400 rubles, saying, "I must thank you for the whole thing. Actually you earned the whole prize money."

In February, an old Jewish prisoner was brought into the hospital in critical condition. He had been injured at work, and his wounds were poorly bandaged, so that he had suffered from a serious loss of blood. It was imperative that he have a transfusion without delay. It happened that only one worker in the camp had the proper blood type, and he agreed to give

blood only if he got a kilo of butter in return. A kilo of butter cost 400 rubles on the black market at that time, a sum the poor old man did not have.

I thought that G-d had probably sent me the 400 rubles I received for the bookkeeping to save this man's life. I gave the money to a nurse, and she procured the butter. That same day the transfusion was done, and the old man's life was saved. That evening the director sent for me. She was moved by the story and remarked, "I'm becoming more and more convinced that G-d is leading us." She thanked me for being so generous.

The exertion from preparing the balance sheets had sapped my strength. The director noticed this and ordered me to be examined by a heart specialist. The specialist told me that I needed at least one month's total rest with no work at all. In addition, he sent me to a surgeon to check my swollen legs.

Tuesday, during the weekly visitation, the director came in with the two doctors who treated me. They examined me carefully. After conferring, they prescribed a special diet with a larger serving of butter. Now I received a daily glass of milk, 25 grams of sugar, five kilos of potatoes weekly, and 300 grams of butter. The doctors told me to go out for fresh air every day, so I went for evening walks with a man who worked in the kitchen as baker. We would talk about Divine Providence and how visible His work is in prison camps.

CHAPTER 30

My Third Arrest

On 8 *Adar* I 5706, February 9, 1946, a Saturday night, as I was having *Melava Malka*,* two soldiers came in with an order for my arrest, issued by the commandant. They made a thorough personal search and ordered me to accompany them. We left the camp and after a long march reached a wooden structure surrounded by a fence of barbed wire. High watchtowers, manned by armed troops, guarded the building.

Melava Malka (Heb.): "Farewell to the (Sabbath) Queen" — special meal eaten on Saturday night after termination of Shabbath.

The building was called *Tiza*, a prison for men awaiting trial for crimes committed in camp.

I was taken in to the prison *natchalnik* and was searched again by two soldiers who confiscated my belt, a knife, a pencil, and my eyeglasses. Then I was put in a tiny room that could hold only one person. I received 400 grams of bread daily and a lunch of cooked meat which, of course, I did not eat. The guard was not at all bashful — he gobbled it up at once.

On the fourth day I was taken out for the first time. After a fifteen minute exercise period I was taken to the *natchalnik*, who knew me from earlier camps. His reception was most cordial and, to my surprise, he even offered to sell me tobacco. I bought some and he threw in a newspaper for me to read, contrary to regulations. But he knew me and was certain I would not inform. In any case, he had nothing to fear because what is a prisoner's word against that of a *natchalnik*?

That night the door to my cubicle opened and a soldier handed me a furcoat, a warm hat, and felt boots, all outlandishly too large for me. He gave me a rope to tie around my clothes so they would not fall down, and then took me out of the prison and ordered me to move quickly. I was knee deep in snow, yet he kept chasing me to go. "Faster! Forward!" I ran that way for an hour, soaked through with sweat despite the 40 below zero temperature. We were close to our destination when I sank down in the snow.

He did not let me remain there, and with my last ounce of strength I struggled upstairs, where I was taken into a large room. Seven men in NKVD uniforms sat at a table, one of the men a colonel. The room was suffocatingly hot, and the iron stove in the corner glowed red. Exhausted from running, I stood for a while in my heavy clothes. Finally I threw off my coat. The colonel snapped, "You are an old prisoner. It's time you knew about discipline. No one gave you permission to take off your coat. Put it on!"

He threatened to have me put in chains, but by then I could not hear any more — I had collapsed in a dead faint. They threw cold water over me and I came to, with stabbing

pains in my chest. I could not stand the heat and, still sitting on the floor, I tore off my warm cotton garment. The colonel was unmoved, and ordered me to put it and my coat back on at once. Otherwise, he warned, they would put me in chains.

I could not quite recover, though, so they summoned a doctor who examined me. "This man had a heart attack. Keep him here and you won't have anyone to put on trial because he won't live."

The doctor left and the colonel took a paper out of his briefcase. It was the letter I had written Mattes.

"This letter is enough convincing proof to execute you. But we are not murderers. We have no interest in killing people. We want to re-educate you so that you may become a productive citizen of our fatherland. But it is imperative that you first confess your crimes committed in camp. This will be the first indication to us that you sincerely wish to be an honorable Soviet citizen."

He then launched into an exhaustive inventory of my crimes. "From your first moment in camp you carried on an uninterrupted campaign of anti-Soviet propaganda. Why, back in 1937, as soon as you got off the vehicle that brought you to camp, you announced that everyone in your transport was an innocent victim, tortured during the interrogation to confess to false charges. You even allowed yourself to express the idea that we NKVD have murdered people!

"Seven years ago when the Polish Jews were brought to camp, and there were explicit orders not to have any dealings with them, you were the first to make contact with them. Here we had taken these people into our land, given them homes, work, and livelihoods. Instead of gratitude to the Soviet Union, they engaged in speculation, in slanders against the Soviet order, and refused to accept Soviet citizenship. And you kept in contact with these sworn enemies of ours and even organized others to help them in their fight against us.

"All the while you were in camp you refused to work on Saturday. And if that wasn't enough, you enticed others into this degenerate practice. That young boy who was with you in camp, a child born in the Soviet and innocent of any

knowledge of accursed capitalism — you managed to confuse and lure him into your insane superstitions, so he shouldn't work Saturdays and he therefore disobeyed the camp administration.

"You were engaged in religious propaganda outside camp too. Here are two letters that you sent out illegally through a prisoner being released. We know that you have a fine memory and you will tell us how many letters like these you sent and to whom.

"If you confess your crimes, your punishment will be mild, say five years. We know that you are a qualified bookkeeper and we will give you an opportunity to work at your profession. Good work may mean reduction of your sentence by half. Then you will be discharged with good recommendations and you will have a chance to live honorably like all Soviet citizens. If you continue to be obstinate and refuse to express remorse for your crimes, then you alone will be responsible for the death sentence you will receive. We will give you a short time to consider," the colonel ended.

I told him I had nothing to consider because I had long ago decided never to sign any false accusations against me. He didn't even answer me. He barked an order into the telephone to have me taken to room number 3.

A soldier took me back to the prison where the *natchalnik* told me some good news. The hospital director had called and asked him to give me a liter of milk every day because I was ill. He also suggested that I sign an authorization for him to collect the money I have in camp so that he might purchase foodstuffs for me.

Naturally the whole story was a fairytale. As soon as I signed the authorization he changed his whole demeanor. Now he cursed me for fighting against the Soviet Union. "No person ever beat us," he boasted and then ordered me taken to room number 3.

It was a torture room. I stood there confused. The whole room was a half meter in size, no window, no air, no light. An electric bulb burned all the time, casting a melancholy

grayness that burned the eyes. Day and night were indistinguishable. To my left was a metal bucket with a wooden lid. To my right was a large stove sheathed in sheet metal, heated from the other side, making the room a hotbox. There was no table or chair, and instead of a bed, some boards hung just below the ceiling. Three pieces of wood nailed to the wall served as rungs to get to the "bed." My feet hurt dreadfully and I could not stand long, so I climbed up to the bed. It was barely a half meter from the ceiling. Turning over was impossible so I had to stay in one position. Of course it was even hotter up there than on the floor. I lay there soaked in sweat and, despite my exhaustion, could not sleep. I hardly survived until morning.

I did not really know the time, but from the sounds of neighboring prisoners being let out to wash, I figured it was morning. I had no right to such luxuries. The guard opened the little window in the door, handed me a pot with about two liters of water, and told me that it would have to last for 24 hours of drinking and washing — myself as well as the floor. It was almost enough for washing my hands and face and washing down the piece of bread they gave me. I did not wash the floor.

In an hour the medic brought me three tablets that he said were sent by the director to be taken three times a day. I knew what kind of tablets they were and, while the medic watched, I threw them into the bucket. He was a decent man even though he was compelled to deceive prisoners. He knew that the effect of the tablets was to confuse the person so he would sign whatever he was told to sign. He walked out without a word.

Towards evening they brought some boiled milk in a filthy black pot. I refused to accept it and told the soldier that the *natchalnik* promised me I could boil my milk in a special pot in his room. The guard just laughed, answering that I was neither the first nor the last prisoner lied to by the *natchalnik*. "Our *natchalnik* is a wonderful person until he extracts the poor prisoner's last *kopecks*. Then he shows what he can do."

It was a hard night. I couldn't lie in that bed. Because of the heat I couldn't breathe. When I climbed down, I could not

stand because of my feet. I went up and down those steps all night finding no place to rest.

In the morning the medic came with more tablets which I threw straight into the bucket. He looked at me sympathetically and offered me some drops to strengthen my heart. "You can take these. I'm giving them on my own," a hint and apology for the tablets. Into a clean jar of water he poured some valerian drops which I drank, and I felt better. We didn't exchange another word.

I stood on my feet all day. The heat kept me off the bed. When they brought me food that evening I declined to take it and asked that either the prison *natchalnik* come to me or that they take me to him. Naturally no one came. Instead, later that night, the door opened and a voice ordered me out. A soldier handed me the furcoat, the hat, and the boots and told me to put them on. I refused and demanded that the *natchalnik* come. He came with chains in his hand.

I had once experienced chains. The pain is unbelievable. The chain is stretched so tightly that the links cut into the flesh, making deep wounds. I cannot describe the pain. It was plain that I was not to get my way with this outlaw, so I put on the clothes and the soldier led me away. He chased me back along the same route as before, to the *natchalnik* of the camp NKVD.

As soon as I came in to him I tried to throw off the heavy clothes and sit on a chair. He started hollering that I was not in charge and that no one had told me to remove my coat or to sit down. He warned that I had better stand straight and answer questions. "Otherwise I'll take steps so that you won't be able to sit even when I permit it," he warned me.

I stood like a statue. It was cold outside but I was sweating profusely. The *natchalnik* fired questions at me. "Who are your good friends in camp? Who are your enemies? What kind of relations did you have with the hospital director? Did the hospital doctors treat you well? Who is this Jew 'Mattes' to whom you sent that letter? How did you help the Polish Jews who were in camp? How did you get the prayerbook from the Rabbi of the Polish Jews?"

I answered the questions in order.

"Among the camp prisoners and among the administration officials I have no special friends or enemies. The doctors treat me the same as they treat all the prisoners. I have no complaints. The hospital director who examined me several times is unfriendly to me. She even threatened to throw me out of the hospital on different occasions because I would not eat the kitchen food. Mattes was with me in camp for several years. After his release he wrote me a few times but I didn't reply because, on general principles, I don't carry on correspondence from camp. As for the Polish Jews, I could not help them even if I wanted to because they were separated from us. That *siddur* was given to me by the *dnevalni* of the Polish Jews as they were about to leave the camp. I never knew the Rabbi himself."

The interrogation was not transcribed. He kept at me for three hours as I stood with the heavy furcoat and all. He would not permit me to sit. Finally I told him that I could not and would not answer any further questions. He called the soldier to take me back to prison.

I was sick that night. I banged on the door, calling them to send a doctor. At first the guard acted as if he did not hear, but when I kept banging he shouted through the little window that he would clap me in irons if I did not quiet down. By this time I did not care what he did to me, so I kept on banging. When he opened the door, my appearance was enough to arouse his sympathy. He left the door open a while to let in air and refresh me a bit, but he was afraid of the other guard standing outside, so he closed the door. He did not call the doctor.

Somehow I managed to survive until morning, when the medic came with the only medication he had — valerian drops. They gave me some relief. When they brought my daily ration of bread I refused it, declaring a hunger strike until the *natchalnik* came. It took him a few hours. I insisted that every prisoner, even one sentenced to death, has the right to fifteen minutes of outdoor exercise a day. This right had been denied me, so I was on a hunger strike.

The *natchalnik* explained that he could do nothing for me since I was under the exclusive jurisdiction of the NKVD, so I must register all my demands with them. He left and had my bread sent straight back to me. It was clear that hunger would change nothing. If anything, they would like me to fast and become so fatigued that, at the interrogation, I would break down. I divided the bread in two, and ate one piece immediately. The other I saved for that evening, to eat before the interrogation.

The procedure was repeated late that night. The soldier who took me to the NKVD made me run so fast that, when I arrived, I fell in the snow and could not get up. Two soldiers came out, took me under the arms, and carried me upstairs. I was not able to stand so they laid me out on the floor. They removed the furcoat and boots only when the doctor they had summoned arrived. He examined me and wrote a note to the NKVD *natchalnik*, who read it and regretfully explained that he could not fulfill the recommendations, since I had not signed the bill of charges. The doctor left.

Two soldiers picked me up and sat me on a chair. The *natchalnik* took out a piece of paper and started reading the same list of questions he had asked me the day before. "Now, if you answer these questions properly, I shall record your replies and we can have the trial without delay. You will then return to camp and have lots of fresh air," he taunted me.

"Whether you sign or not, you won't get out of camp anyway. But you are still a young man. It's really not worth dying yet. I'm giving you good advice and a chance to live."

During the questioning, a lanky major in NKVD uniform came in. He glared at me intently with baleful black eyes. "What do you mean sitting there during the interrogation like you're in a cafe?" He grabbed me by the collar and stood me up. I stood, but not very well, and the interrogator continued with the questions. I told him that I was in no condition to answer and, they were required to give me medical help.

The major blew up at this. He pulled a newspaper from his pocket and slapped me on the head. I felt an intense pain and passed out, for how long I do not know. When I revived, the

major was standing over me ready to hit me again. He lifted the newspaper and a piece of iron fell to the floor. The *natchalnik* took the iron and asked the major to go.

"You saw that major. When he's the interrogator, the prisoner is a cripple forever. He just happened to come in, but when he hears that someone refuses to sign the bill of accusations, he goes into a frenzy. There's a good reason we call him 'Tiger'. I did not give him permission to conduct your interrogation. If I had, you would have signed long ago. You are lucky — my old mother heard about you. I gave her my word of honor that I would not beat you, that you would leave here alive. But you should not misuse this. The questioning must end. The sooner it happens, the better for you, so you can hope to live and be free one day.

I lay there on the floor, half-conscious, and did not answer. He called a soldier and told him to take me back to prison. I was completely drained. I considered my situation but did not change my resolve. I understood that, one day, the interrogation must come to an end, but whatever I signed would be a stain of shame forever.

Late that night my door opened and they led in a tall, fat man of about thirty. His head and hands were bandaged and he groaned, pleading with me to help him climb up to the bunk. All night he lay there groaning; I was overwhelmed with my own troubles and could not fall asleep. The two of us lay there, in the dark, and not a word passed between us. In the morning the medic came with my dose of tablets. He motioned to me not to toss them into the bucket that day, and gave me three more tablets for my neighbor. I climbed up to the bunk and told the new prisoner to take them three times a day. Snapping that he knew what the tablets were for, he threw the pills on the floor.

We became more friendly and he told me that the major had beaten him during the questioning so they had to bandage him, and then they had finally sent him to prison. He told me how he got into his present fix. He had been a civilian official in the central camp stores that were designated for officers and

high officials. They used to buy a great deal on credit, and an audit showed that merchandise, valued at several tens of thousands of rubles, was missing.

He presented a list of all the officers in debt and the amounts, but this was not accepted and he was ordered to pay the full amount within a few days. He could not do this, so he was arrested. Now they were torturing him to sign a confession that he and his co-workers had stolen the merchandise. He refused to sign, so the investigation was given over to "Major Tiger" who beat him with that iron.

"When they brought me here yesterday I figured you were one of their plants when you gave me those pills. I've worked here a long time and I know all about that. But when I looked at you closely I recognized you. I saw you the first time at the central hospital, in the director's office. She told me that you are a most honorable person even though you are religious and will not work Saturdays. She said that she helps you with food and whatever else she can."

He looked at me closely while he spoke, as though he was trying to see how I took his words. I realized at once that this guy was an agent planted by the NKVD, playing the role of prisoner. I played dumb, as though I did not understand what he wanted from me.

I was not taken for questioning that night. I stayed in my room with my "buddy." I could not sleep because I simply did not trust him. In the morning the medic came with tablets for both of us, and valerian drops for me. They also brought me milk cooked in the filthy pot, so I spilled it into the bucket at once. Again the nightly routine was repeated. They brought me the winter clothes and took me for questioning.

A new interrogator was there, of medium height, pale, with distracted, dreamy eyes. I was surprised to be greeted pleasantly and offered a chair. He permitted me to remove the furcoat. He introduced himself by name and said he was the substitute for the *natchalnik* of NKVD. He offered me cigarettes, expensive ones, but I declined.

It was known in camp that the *natchalnik*'s substitute was a drug addict, so his cigarettes were suspect to me. It was also known that when he had his narcotics he was cordial to the prisoners, but woe to anyone who fell into his hands when he did not have his dope. At those times, your life was in danger. Fortunately, this was a good day.

Finally I did take a cigarette and he courteously gave me a match. Instead of besieging me with questions, he apologized.

"You should not be too resentful if we are often too strict with prisoners. The Soviet Union is a new order beleaguered by enemies. It is quite possible that, in this struggle, innocent people fall into our hands, but you know the Russian proverb, 'When you chop wood, chips fly.' You know that in 1937, the capitalists and *kulaks* plotted a revolt against the Soviet Union, but thanks to the genius of our great leader Stalin, they were crushed. It is conceivable that there were innocent victims among them, but this is unavoidable in such a battle. Concerning religious people, we have, in my opinion, made an error. They were not a serious threat politically — all they wanted was to live according to their religion. Unfortunately, I'm just a little cog and I've got to carry out orders from above.

"Believe me, I get no pleasure from conducting your interrogation. I'd be delighted to help you. Surprised? Let me tell you about myself. You'll understand.

"I'm a child of poor peasants who died in the famine years. Until I was fifteen I was raised in a Jewish home and even learned *Yiddish* — I still remember some. Later I went to the city to find work and, like other kids without parents to look after them, I fell in with young thieves. I was caught and sent to a children's home. I was smart and they sent me to military school and I became an officer in NKVD. My upbringing in that Jewish home had a deep influence on my life. Maybe it's not accidental that my wife is Jewish. Now do you see why I made such efforts not to be assigned your investigation?

"I know you are innocent. I realize that it's not right to ask a man to sign to crimes he did not commit. But what can I do? If I don't carry this questioning to a conclusion as they

ordered, I will be seriously challenged. All I can do for you is to save you suffering, because you are going to sign eventually anyway — they will hand you over to the 'Tiger' and he will beat you to death. If you agree, I will edit the charges so you won't get more than five years. I will try to have the trial set as soon as possible and then have you sent to the camp hospital where you can begin to feel like yourself again. Better times are coming you know. It's quite possible that, meanwhile you will be rehabilitated and you will be able to live a quiet life. Think about it. I'll be waiting for your answer."

He called a soldier and told him to take me back to prison. I was more shaken by him than by the earlier harsh interrogations. Did he really mean what he said or was he a consummate charlatan?

A magic wand seemed to have been waved over the prison too. My milk was in a glass as I had requested, and I received 200 grams of white bread. I ate in the corridor, *bentched*, and returned to my room. My roommate was not in the room while I was away. He returned, without remembering to replace the idodine-smeared bandages on his head and arms. His body showed no signs of the terrible beating he suffered. I had not made a mistake.

As I came in, he told me that the stove was broken. The new air in the room was refreshing. For the first time I had a restful sleep that night. The medic brought the tablets in the morning. He was in a cheerful mood as he winked at me. "You won't need any other medicines right now." My situation, clearly, had changed.

My naive, friendly interrogator was convinced that he had persuaded me, but his friendliness left me most uneasy. I knew that I would have a lot to endure before receiving my ten year sentence. My only hope was that the trial would quickly be over.

That day the prison *natchalnik* summoned me and he initiated a long conversation. The hospital director had called him about me, and he had described my situation. When he told her that I would get a term of a "mere" five years, she had

answered (he claimed) that she would take me into the hospital to train me to be a medic. That way I would not have to work so hard and could live an easier life.

I had no doubts that he was lying through his teeth, and that this was the tactic of the friendly interrogator to force me to sign the confession faster. I did not react to the *natchalnik*'s words and returned to my room. My neighbor was gone by now. They were apparently confident about me, so they could send him to do another such job elsewhere.

The door opened and a soldier cheerfully called out, "Pappy, got to get washed up for the trial." I asked how he knew when my trial was to take place. He said that the prisoners took baths only on the day before their trials.

I met six men in the bathhouse, all in military uniform, all with bandaged left arms. They could not undress themselves so I helped them. They were all Red Army officers and in 1945, after a bit of tippling, made some uncomplimentary remarks about the Hitler-Stalin pact. That very night they were tried and sentenced to ten years of camp. They were assigned to a brigade of robbers and murderers and could not get along with them. They went on a hunger strike, insisting that, as Red Army officers, they did not belong with criminals.

That night they were loaded on a truck and transferred to a camp of murderers, whose death sentences had been changed to life at hard labor. When the officers realized what sort of associates they had, they declared a strike. They were put in chains and, after a few hours, when the pain was unbearable, they capitulated and consented to work properly. Being young and healthy, they could fill their norms and more, so they received a large ration of 800 grams of bread. Before they could taste the food, the killers attacked, beat them murderously, and stole every last crumb. They were tired and hungry and could not complain because the bunch of hoodlums had killed more than once in camp.

They went to work hungry the next day, but could not fill their norms, so they received only 500 grams. They did not enjoy even this, for the thugs took that away too. This went on for a few days.

Young, healthy men, officers with honor, were now helpless victims. The demoralization, the physical pangs of hunger, brought on depression. One day, while at work in the forest, they all chopped off the fingers of their left hands. They were isolated at once and placed in prison. Here they were tried and received only ten years. Now they were waiting for a transport, but they had no idea to which camp they would go.

I found my food portion waiting in my room, and I gave it to the guard. I had a wonderful night's sleep because my neighbor was gone. The medic brought me tablets again the next morning. "Today you must be strong to take what's coming," he whispered so the guard should not hear.

A soldier soon came with the winter clothes and off we went to the interrogation. He drove me ruthlessly through the deep snow. The door of the interrogation room was locked. They kept me at the door for over two hours, and I understood that the questioning today was going to be a difficult one. The door finally opened. The friendly interrogator sat at the desk, head down, apparently oblivious of me. I just stood there in the middle of the room, sweating in the heavy clothes.

My head suddenly started to swim and I sank to the ground in a dead faint. When I regained consciousness, a soldier was standing over me and splasing cold water on me. He remarked to the *natchalnik* of the Third Section, who was in the room, "He's alive!" The *natchalnik* walked out and the friendly man did not even look up all this while. He must have been accustomed to having prisoners collapse during questioning.

The soldier picked me up and put me on a chair. The interrogator stalked over to me wordlessly and stared into my eyes, as though he wanted to hypnotize me. His pale face was contorted, and his bloodshot eyes looked insane. This, I realized, was one of his bad days. He must not have had his narcotics that day. He stared into my eyes and finally I had to avert mine. The telephone rang suddenly and he had to answer. "The *natchalnik* just left . . . Yes, send the whole files

on the convicted officers immediately to the Minister in Moscow . . . Their hands were bandaged. They were sent yesterday on the transport to the designated camp."

He hung up and turned to me. "I'm afraid that we cannot conclude your case today. I do not feel so well. Nerves. Something tragic could happen and you would not have to bother with a trial." He paced the room distraughtly, and suddenly blurted out, "Soon I'll be boss here and I'll finish your business as I please."

He called the soldier and had me taken back to prison. The *natchalnik* there asked how the interrogation had gone, and I said that after I had fainted, the interrogator was not interested in my answers and had sent me back here. I added that I felt awful and asked for some cold water. He refused angrily because I did not tell everything about the interrogation. He needed to know so he could report to the Third Section *natchalnik*, to whom he had the loyalty of a dog. He ordered me to be taken to my room, where the stove glowed a heat that made breathing difficult.

After a few hours I was called to the prison *natchalnik's* office. On the desk was a flask of water and a glass. He took out a piece of bread of some 200 grams, explaining that this came from the hospital director. I enjoyed the bread and water. Then the *natchalnik* proposed a deal. "I'll have you transferred to a good room, airy, with a bed and other conveniences. All you have to do is to sign this confession. If you agree, I will call for an auto to take us to the Third Section and you will finally be done with this whole business."

I thanked him for the bread and water and patiently explained that I could never confess to deeds I had not done. He was less than gleeful to hear this. "I am only seeking your welfare. I've seen plenty of people coming back from questioning and have seen the condition they were in. A miracle happened to you today, but miracles don't happen every day."

Back I went to a hard night in my room, which was filled with hot, suffocating air. In the morning the medic brought

my daily pills and did not ask how I was — he could tell by looking. He gave me the valerian drops and purposely kept the door open to let in some fresh air. He took my temperature and examined me.

"You won't last long in this condition. Your heart is really weak. You had better try to get that investigation over as soon as possible if you want to stay alive," he advised.

That night, for the umpteenth time, I went back for questioning, through the deep snow. I was chased mercilessly by the soldier and arrived feeling exhausted. My interrogator's mood was a good one.

"You were born in a silk shirt," he said, greeting me like an old friend. "Yesterday you were in danger of never leaving here alive, but I was able to control myself — barely. But let's forget yesterday. I'm not nearly as bad as I must have seemed to you yesterday. But remember that this interrogation is dragging on too long. You are an intelligent man. Your obstinacy makes no sense at all. You make yourself suffer and you waste our time, and we haven't enough of that. Besides, you are endangering your life.

"If I don't manage to finish with you very soon, my boss, the NKVD *natchalnik,* will take over your case, and he might call on the 'Tiger' to lend a hand — and then that's it for you.

"Now, it so happens that I've got a family celebration today, my wife's birthday. You know that she's of your nationality. I promised her to finish the questioning today. So I'm asking you and advising you for your own sake — read over the questions and answers as I have edited them. I'll give you enough time so you can consider every word and sign."

He handed me the document. After a moment I could see that all he had changed was the style. Instead of legal terminology he used ordinary expressions. The content was the same as the confession the first interrogator had wanted me to sign. I told him I could not sign it.

He suggested that I write the answers to the various questions as I saw fit. I copied the first question and answered

it briefly — "No". He jumped up in a fit of temper and grabbed the paper from my hand. He called two soldiers and barked, "The cellar."

The cellar was far below the building; the floor was under water with a sheet of ice on the surface. I took a few steps, the ice broke, and I fell into the freezing water, losing consciousness.

I do not know how long I lay there, but on recovering I found I was back in the interrogation room. The cellar water had stunk horribly and the smell permeated my clothes and filled the room. The friendly interrogator ordered me to be taken to another room to undress and dry my clothes at the stove. Being weak and revolted by the stink, I collapsed. The soldier revived me with cold water.

In a few hours they told me to dress and I was taken back to prison without further questioning. I cannot imagine how I made it back. I had a high fever, my head was spinning, and I could not see.

The stove in my room was out, but not unintentionally. It was bitterly cold. My teeth chattered and I was shivering so violently that I could not undress and climb up to my bunk. Even the guard felt sorry and helped me. I could not sleep because of my fever. I called for water, but in vain. Somehow I survived until morning.

The medic took my temperature, which was over 40 degrees Centigrade. He called the doctor at once. Diagnosis — lung inflammation. "I am sorry I cannot take you directly to the hospital, as your questioning is not finished. You must make an effort to conclude it swiftly. I will request that the trial should take place at once so that you might be transferred to the hospital and your life can be saved."

So much for the doctor. I asked him for medication to strengthen my heart and asked him to tell the *natchalnik* that I was not to be taken for further questioning until my fever subsided. He promised to do this, adding that he had no influence in the matter. I understood the hint.

They brought my bread ration later but I refused it and asked the guard to tell the *natchalnik* that I was on a hunger

strike, because in my condition they were not allowed to keep me in prison. I demanded to be transferred to a hospital. The *natchalnik* came at once, pouring invective. He put the bread in front of me. "You won't scare us with your fasting. We'll just be rid of you more quickly," he shouted, and slammed the door.

That night — back to interrogation, but without the furcoat and boots. The frost was penetrating. My beard was soon coated with ice. I was taken into the office at once. My friendly interrogator sat wearing a furcoat and boots, because the room was as cold as outdoors. He told me to sit on the floor. "How do you feel after yesterday's bath?" he sneered. "I heard you caught cold. The doctor even wrote a note to send you straight to the hospital because you are dangerously sick. I have everything prepared so that your trial will be first thing tomorrow morning, and then you go right to the hospital. Now your life really is in your hands."

I answered that he wasted time for nothing. "Besides, I've been tried twice already without signing a confession. So what's all the fuss about now?" I added.

"Right. We insist you sign for all the trials together." He came closer to me, stared at me intently with that cynical sneer on his face. "I really pity you, but I guess my methods aren't right for your character. You call for sterner methods. But still, I'm not giving up on you today. I am certain that tomorrow you will beg to sign."

He called a soldier to take me back to prison. The night was the worst yet. All night I screamed for water, delirious. It did no good, and I was barely alive by morning. My bread that the *natchalnik* sent back was on the table. I didn't think about striking but simply could not eat. All I wanted was water but they gave me none. Hours later, during the day this time, I went back for questioning, again without warm clothes. It was impossible, but I arrived there, burning with a fever above 40 degrees Centigrade, my mouth bone dry, with a fierce headache, and my feet stumbling.

At the NKVD building I fell and started gulping snow, the coldness putting out the fire inside me. The soldier threatened

to shoot if I did not get up, but I had no strength. He had to pull me upstairs. The NKVD *nathcalnik* and "Tiger" were waiting for me, with my papers on the desk. The *natchalnik* said the confession was written as I wished and as soon as I signed, the auto would take me to the hospital because my condition was getting worse.

I asked to read the papers before signing. The *natchalnik* was insulted — how dare I mistrust him! "I have been a member of the Communist Party for twenty years, and you have the impudence to challenge my honesty!" he screamed. "Get out. Into the hall. Wait until I call."

I could not stand, but the soldier would not permit me even to lean on the wall, and certainly not to sit. I stood there for an hour until the "Tiger" motioned for me to come in. They gave me a document to sign which stated that I had no further testimony to give and that I requested the investigation be closed and my case given to the court. I protested that I had never signed any bill of charges, so how could I ask that my case go to court?

The *natchalnik* answered angrily, "You think you are intelligent, so you must understand that by law a man cannot be tried unless he verifies he has no further evidence. Naturally, during the trial you will present your arguments, prove your innocence, and even call witnesses for your defense. If you refuse to sign, we must keep you in prison and I cannot guarantee you will survive, considering your state of health."

I concluded that I could not continue to endure this. I signed and collapsed.

I regained consciousness in room 3. The stove was out, the air freezing. I shivered with cold. The medic arrived in the morning, gave me valerian drops, and urged me to be strong because I would need strength for the trial. The trial was set for the next day.

CHAPTER 31

The "Fair" Trial

On Friday morning, 21 *Adar* 1 5706, the prison *natchalnik* sent for me. He handed me the bill of charges and requested me to sign a receipt for it. Then he told me that I had a half hour to familiarize myself with its contents. The bill had some ten pages of typewriting and, under normal circumstances, a number of hours would have been needed to study it properly. In my condition — high fever, alternating chills and fever, and general weakness — the letters swam into a blurry, black, undecipherable mass. I strained to concentrate on the document. However, as I began making some sense of it, the *natchalnik* took it away and sent me back to my room. All he needed was my signature on the receipt, and that formality had been completed.

I asked the *natchalnik* to heat my room because I was freezing, particularly now that I had such high fever.

"You are the most fickle tenant in my hotel," he said again with that cynical sneer. "It's impossible to satisfy you. If we give heat you complain it's too hot. If we don't give heat you complain you are cold."

The door to my room was purposely left open to let out any remaining warmth, and now it was an icebox. I could not accommodate myself to the bitter cold, as every position was too uncomfortable to maintain, so I asked the guard for some warm water. He laughed and told me they were bringing the *balanda* soon, so I could warm up with that. I reminded him that he knew very well that I never tasted the *balanda* all these years in camp, and he retorted sarcastically, "You may order special courses suited to your taste in an elegant restaurant. In prison you eat whatever you get."

Later I received my bread ration and a liter of cold water. I could not eat because of the fever, but then I realized that without food I would be devoid of strength, so I soaked the bread in the water and ate it. My temperature did not go down, and I had another sleepless night. In the morning, I was told my trial was scheduled for that day. Since it was *Shabbos* and they did not want to disturb my religious sensibilities, they would not have a car take me to the court, but I would walk.

I was accustomed to these perfidies, so this did not surprise me. I had barely finished *davening* when two armed soldiers came to escort me. It was a painful trip. I trembled with cold, my head pounding as I stumbled along. The soldiers kept urging me to go faster until finally we arrived at the "Camp Court."

The courtroom was dominated by a large table covered with red linen. Three men sat at the table, the chairman and two subordinates. One was young, certified in the bookkeeping office of the camp headquarters. He knew me from my hospital bookkeeping work. The NKVD *natchalnik* and the "Tiger" were also in the room. The chairman opened the proceedings with the declaration that, since the prosecutor could not attend due to illness, the defense could not speak either. Hence I would be required to defend myself.

I stated that I was in a hazardous state of health and I had received no medical attention whatsoever. In these circumstances I was unable to defend myself, and so I asked that the trial be postponed. The chairman turned to the subordinates at either side, formally asked their opinions, and immediately replied that the Court rejected my request. The trial would proceed.

To my inquiry as to whether the proceedings were being recorded, the chairman replied that the secretary was in the next room, as per regulations. I then asked that the records include my request to postpone the trial. The chairman again went through the motions of taking counsel with his colleagues and again reported that the Court rejected my request. I then asked that the records include my protest that

the proceedings were not conducted in consonance with the laws of the Soviet court procedures. The chairman's response was that, for defaming the Soviet court, I would be punished with five days in the dungeon.

Then the substantive proceedings began. The chairman asked me if I had any comments on the charges enumerated in the bill of charges.

"I can say nothing because I was not given the opportunity to acquaint myself with the bill. They showed it to me for only a few minutes, in order to trick me into signing the receipt. According to the accepted procedures, I am supposed to receive a copy of the accusations no less that three days before the trial. This means that I did not receive the bill at all.

"Secondly, in this room there are the *natchalnik* of the NKVD and a colleague of his who conducted my interrogation, which is contrary to regulations. I therefore request that they be told to leave so that they do not influence the court proceedings. I wish to emphasize, too, that they conducted the investigation illegally. They tortured me and then threw me into a water-filled cellar, so that I became sick. Finally — I am now running a fever of over 40 degrees and my health keeps me not only from defending myself, but even from following these proceedings. Therefore I maintain my protest and again request a postponement."

This was all the chairman could tolerate. Without even taking counsel with his co-judges, he shouted, "I'm calling to your attention that you are acting contemptuously by permitting yourself to slander the Soviet court and the authorized organs of the Soviet Union. I punish you with another five days in the dungeon and I warn you that if you disrupt the proceedings of this Court and employ falsehoods, I will exercise more stringent measures against you ..." The Court went on with its deliberations.

"Why were you sentenced to ten years in labor camp?" the chairman asked.

"In 1937 I was arrested and, with no trial whatsoever, I was sent to labor camp for ten years. This was an illegal act. I am imprisoned although innocent. Therefore, I demand to be set free."

The chairman laughed. "If you wish to play insane, we can help you by sending you to an insane asylum."

I asked for witnesses for my defense, including the medic at the prison who could verify my condition when I had returned from the previous interrogation. This request was denied, with the justification that I had declared in writing at the end of the interrogation that I had no more witnesses. The Court then started with the prosecution witnesses.

The first was a prisoner who was sentenced to a long term in camp for collaboration with the Nazi occupation during the War. He was a Ukrainian peasant, totally illiterate.

"Do you know the defendant?"

"Yes."

"Do you know that the defendant is an enemy of the Soviet Union?" The witness nodded, a gesture accepted by the chairman as affirmation and ordered it recorded as such.

The member of the Court who had worked in the bookkeeping office knew me and had sympathy for me. Apparently he could take no more of this, so he asked the witness to tell the court why he was sentenced.

"During the Occupation I killed 80 Jews in our village in the Ukraine. But it wasn't my fault. The Germans made me do it," he finally blurted after stammering a while.

"Can you tell the Court how the defendant expressed his anti-Soviet propoganda amongst the prisoners?" the same judge continued.

Again the witness pondered a few minutes before saying, "About a year ago the accused brought a copy of the newspaper *Izvestia* and read it with other prisoners."

A roar of laughter greeted this accusation. The Third Section *natchalnik* couldn't restrain his disgust and jeered,

"Idiot!" They didn't ask any more questions. The chairman was unhappy with his colleague's questions, which had spoiled everything. The witness was led out.

I asked the court to record precisely everything the witness testified. Again the chairman turned to his aides and, without waiting for their reactions, abruptly refused my request. Then I asked permission to make a statement, noting that a member of the Court clearly demonstrated the false testimony of the witness, yet this was not even recorded. The whole trial, I charged, was a farce. Although I realized that these remarks of mine would also remain unrecorded, and that the chairman would grant me several more days in the dungeon for my words, I was convinced that one day I would have an honest trial.

The chairman pretended not to have heard a word I said. He sent for the next witness. This was a thief, forty-two years of age, twenty-five of which he had spent in camp and in prison for murder. He admitted to twelve murders and denied the thirteenth. He walked into the room head down, not looking at me. He had spent years among Jews and knew some *Yiddish*. He had told me some fantasy about his mother being Jewish and being raised by his Jewish grandfather. He was sick a while back with *tzinga;* his whole body had been covered with sores. I helped him get medicine from Moscow and that had saved him. At that time I did not believe his fictions about being Jewish. I knew him to be a brute and observed him abusing prisoners. I helped him anyway, feeling that treating an evil person with kindness does affect him.

Now he was about to testify falsely about me. I guess he did have a spark of humanity somewhere inside, for he just stood there wordlessly. The *natchalnik* of the Third Section came to his aid with leading questions. "Does the witness remember when he arrived in camp in 1938, that the accused had proclaimed in the presence of many people that you were all innocent victims, that some of you had even been shot, that you were brought to camp to make you slaves, to work without compensation?"

A nod from the witness corroborated everything the *natchalnik* articulated in the question. This was the first material placed on record.

I asked the witness to name the camp where I was supposed to have made those statements. Again he stood mute. I asked the record to show that the provocative questions of the NKVD *natchalnik* were against the law, because the investigator is prohibited from being present at the trial, and certainly may not exercise any pressure against the witnesses or influence the proceedings in general.

Again a perfunctory nod by the chairman, right and left. My request was denied.

The third witness knew me well. He worked in the camp headquarters and was unofficially connected with the NKVD. He had started out as an NKVD officer but slipped. He had accepted a sizable bribe and released a known criminal after the investigation. He received five years for that. But he was still one of the boys and was not mistreated like the rest of us. He was no less than the camp fire prevention inspector. He did nothing. He lived the good life, to be sure, with his private quarters and good food. He was the professional witness, ready for any testimony needed against blameless prisoners. He did not have to be instructed in what to say.

In answer to the chairman's question about his knowledge of my counter-revolutionary activities, he replied, "I have known the defendant for some years. The whole time in camp he has worn a beard and *payos*. He ignores the regulations of the administration. He even declines to eat from the general kitchen. He poses as an altruist. He does, in fact, often help prisoners, but for the purpose of gaining their confidence so that his anti-Soviet propoganda might be more effective. He simulates constant illness and even put on the dying act to show how cruel the administration is and to arouse sympathy for himself at the same time. He slanders the administration, accusing them of stealing foodstuffs provided for hungry prisoners."

My reply was that the witness did not marshal any concrete facts against me, but had delivered a prosecutor's oration. I wanted a chance to have an advocate, paid for by myself, to defend myself in this improper trial. Naturally this was denied. I requested that the record show that my two demands for representation were denied. The chairman replied that the issue had already been resolved by the court . . .

The proceedings were completed and I was given my last word. I declared that, since the trial was contrary to the law, I declined to defend myself. This seemed to bother them, but they said nothing. I was sent to another room, where the secretary sat. He was apparently almost finished typing the verdict.

In a few minutes I was called back into the courtroom. The judges entered and the chairman read the verdict. They gave me ten more years in camp. The reason stated was that in 1937, I was sentenced for the first time to ten years for counter-revolutionary activities, yet instead of demonstrating remorse I continued to carry on anti-Soviet propoganda. I preached religious fanaticism and superstitions, sabotaged the directives of the administration, and so on and so on.

I had the right to appeal within seventy-two hours.

CHAPTER 32
Back To The Hospital

From the court I was taken back to my old room, where the air was still icy. My fever remained high. I was not able to eat anything. In a few hours the *natchalnik* and a soldier took me to the hospital. I was assigned a decent pallet. The director and two physicians examined me. Compresses were put on me, and I was given antibiotic shots.

At night, when everyone was asleep, one of the bookkeepers, a friend, called on me. He let me know that if I dictated an appeal against my sentence, he would write it because the time for submitting the appeal would soon be gone. Though I was miserably ill, we managed to get the appeal written. He promised to send it promptly to the *natchalnik* of the central headquarters of the camp.

In the morning I received a glass of milk and white bread with butter. Later the director examined me and ordered three daily injections of antibiotics. That night I felt particularly sick, so the nurse summoned the director, who came at once, and gave me two shots. I nearly lost consciousness. She stayed nearby all night. Suddenly I became violently sick. They poured some medicine down my throat, and I felt fire inside. Eventually, as if in a dream, I could hear the director telling the nurse, "Thank G-d the patient will live."

It was weeks before I could take even several steps and be out of bed. One day the *natchalnik* of the NKVD Second Section came with a paper from Moscow informing me that, since I did not appeal in the designated time, the trial verdict was verified. I told the *natchalnik* that I did appeal in time but apparently those who concocted the trial had also destroyed the appeal. I would submit a complaint to the chief prosecutor and prove that the whole trial had been conducted contrary to the requirements of the law of the land.

The *natchalnik* tried to mollify me. Since I was seriously ill, I could ask that the appeal period be regarded as unexpired. I should write an appeal at once, he urged, and he would send it that same day to Moscow. He asssured me that the appeal would definitely be considered. I understood that this was another deliberate attempt to mislead me. I thanked him for his good intentions and insisted that the original appeal was doubtless kept by the *natchalnik* of the Third Section, who never lets an opportunity to persecute me pass by.

"If you really want to help me," I told him, "please find the appeal written within the period and send it to the court in Moscow with a note that the appeal was held up in camp by error." That way, I was convinced, there might still be hope for it to be accepted.

"I have no say over the Third Section. The most I can do for you is to send in a new appeal." This was all he could say. I understood that all this was a charade, but I did write a fresh appeal and gave it to a Second Section man who came for it the next day.

The director said to me a few days later that she could not understand why the Third Section *natchalnik* hated me so. He had threatened her too, saying that she would pay dearly for taking me out of prison to the hospital and for fooling the prison *natchalnik* into thinking that the Third Section *natchalnik* had consented. She told him that she did not defer to him because a doctor's duty is to save every man, even a prisoner condemned to death. She said that she needed no one's permission for that. "The truth is," she added, "that I did use his name because otherwise I couldn't have gotten you out of prison and into the hospital, but he cannot prove that, because I did it on the telephone and nothing is in writing. But he did threaten that I shall pay dearly. Well, let's hope that G-d will keep us from him."

I told her about the appeal.

"I understand how hard it must be to start a new ten year term here. But a man as religious as yourself must never lose hope. Meanwhile, you had better take care of your health as well as you can in these circumstances. You have too much time to brood. Find some work you can handle in your condition. As long as I can, I'll try to get you some work in the hospital. Look around. If you find something, I will recommend you for it."

I was soon wearing my regular clothes and spent several hours a day walking in the hospital yard. I was slowly feeling better and began looking for work. Meanwhile Passover was coming and I decided it was better to wait until after the holiday.

A few days before Passover my friend and former fellow camp prisoner, the photographer, visited me. He had picked up a parcel of *matzos* for me at the civilian post office. The problem was getting it into camp, because the guards would not pass it. I asked the hospital secretary if she could help. She

said she had a pass to go to the central pharmacy, outside camp, and when she went there in two days to pick up medications she could also pick up my *matzos*. I introduced her to the photographer and they made arrangements. In two days I had my *matzos*.

I celebrated the first *seder* alone, on April 15th. It was not a happy occasion because it was the first of ten more Passovers in prison camp. But the Jewish sense of confidence that had sustained me in the past gradually reasserted itself. The feeling of this Festival of Liberation gave me the courage and certainty that G-d would help me ovecome future tribulations. One day I would go home. I always remembered my father's blessing that I would return home. There was no question in my mind that Russia was not home.

I hid the *matzos* in the office of the hospital secretary. This Jewish girl had her tragedies and, though she was not raised in a religious spirit, she was bound closely to Jewish traditions. Her father was a high-ranking Communist who was accused of criticizing Stalin. For that unspeakable crime, he was sentenced to camp and later shot. The girl was arrested because she had heard her father speak ill of Stalin and she had failed to inform the NKVD. In accordance with Paragraph 58, she was declared an enemy of the Soviet Union and was given ten years of camp. It was her tremendous good fortune that she met the Jewish doctor who was in charge of the hospital and then was appointed secretary.

When she saw the *matzos*, the secretary asked for one for herself and one for the director. Naturally I gave her more than one *matzo*. I also provided *matzos* for the Hungarian Jew who worked as a baker.

During *Chol Hamoed* I started looking more seriously for a job I could handle. I had some experience heating stoves so I thought this would be a good job enabling me to stay in the hospital. It was easier here because the central heating used large furnaces fueled by lumber waste. It wasn't hard compared to the backbreaking labor in the old camp. The problem was *Shabbos* and holidays.

I knew the three men who did this work in the hospital. One wanted to be a medic, so I promised to help him become one and that would leave a vacancy I might fill. As for *Shabbos*, the other workers were devout Christians and they readily agreed to fill in for me on *Shabbos*, if I would do their work on Sundays. I told the secretary about this and asked her to tell the director. In two days, one of the stokers was assigned a medic's duties and I was appointed as a stoker.

The work, I then learned, was not that easy, but the 800 gram ration was a compensation. Besides, I got raw foods once a week: 3 kilos of potatoes, 100 grams of farina-barley or rice, 40 grams of butter, and 2 kilos of salt which I could not eat anyway. I gave it to my co-workers at the furnaces. It was enough to keep me from being hungry, so I was satisfied.

I lived in the medics' barrack with some thirty men, each with a bed, mattress, sheet and pillow. My neighbors were decent men, political prisoners sentenced under Paragraph 58, so we had a lot in common and understood each other's troubles.

Shavuos was coming on Wednesday and Thursday. I arranged with the other workers to have them work for me on *Yom Tov* and I would replace them on the following Sunday and Monday. My birthday was just then and the Hungarian baker brought me a special *lekach* (cake) and some white rolls. He baked a *lekach* for the director and secretary as well, a treat for the holy day. We never had such a festival in camp, but apparently I was not fated to enjoy such tranquility.

After *Shavuos*, the director sent for me. The Third Section *natchalnik* had requested her to discharge me from the hospital because they decided I was to be sent to *Kolima*, the infamous camp in the far north. "He cannot forgive you for your disrespectful conduct during your trial, and especially, he says you threatened him that, for abusing you, he would one day face trial. He feels you have placed a curse on him, and since then he has had no peace at home. His mother-in-law, a pious Christian, told him that for having falsely accused you and causing you to be sentenced to another ten years, he

will be punished. She keeps urging her daughter to take the children and leave him. That's why he wants revenge by having you sent to the worst camp in north Siberia.

"I told him categorically that, as long as I have my post, I will not discharge a sick patient to be sent to death, and I shall not discharge you until you are fully cured. But he warned me that he will find a way of getting rid of both of us."

I suggested to her that it might not be worthwhile to risk herself for me, though I had every confidence that with G-d's help the Third Section *natchalnik* would have his downfall before he harmed us. This was not a desire for vengeance, but was a remark based on a saying in *Pirkei Avos*,* "Because you drowned others, you drowned."

I stayed on my job, but had no peace. Every few weeks I was warned that I would be sent away. That criminal in NKVD did not rest. I was finally reconciled to the idea that my days in the hospital would end. Summer passed, and all I wanted was to remain until after the Holy Days. On the second day of *Rosh Chodesh** *Elul,* the secretary came running to tell me that the *natchalnik* of the Third Section was on the way to the hospital.

I do not know how the director found out, but she sent word that the *natchalnik* wanted to arrange that I should be the one to ask to be discharged from the hospital. It followed that he would probably act very friendly and even make promises. Just as the secretary left, I was summoned to the guard office. The *natchalnik* was there. He greeted me most cordially, calling me by name, like an old friend. I did not answer. He asked me to sit, but I did not thank him. I said that years ago a man like him had asked me most cordially to sit, and I have not been able to get up since . . . He laughed as though he appreciated the humor.

"You alone are responsible for your troubles. Had you admitted your guilt at the outset, you might have avoided not only the second ten years, but you could have been done with the first sentence long ago and would have been living free like all Soviet citizens. We are prepared to allow you to be

religious, but we cannot permit you to influence others, especially children. You taught them the Jewish religion illegally, imparted reactionary concepts to them, and this is contrary to the laws of the Soviet Union.

"Believe me, I did not initiate the second trial that brought you another ten years. I was ordered by the Ministry in Moscow that, so long as you denied the charges of 1937, you would not be released from camp. I wanted your benefit only. Had you signed the bill we presented to you, we would have made efforts to get you a lighter sentence. We would have left you in the hospital and trained you to be a medic, instead of assigning you to hard labor. But now it's too late for all that. Now we have to arrange for conditions that will enable you to get out of here alive and return to your family. According to regulations, after the trial you cannot remain in the same camp."

Then he showed me an order from the chief *natchalnik* of camps, directing them to send me to another camp immediately. "I want to give you a chance, even though it was not easy to do this. I've arranged to have you sent to your old camp where they know you to be a skilled bookkeeper. You can work at that and keep your rest days as your religion dictates.

"You are wondering why my attitude towards you has changed so?" he asked sanctimoniously. "I'll tell you the secret. When I was in Moscow, a local rabbi called on me asking about you. I must say I tried to avoid him, but the rabbi insisted that he knew there was a Jew in my camp who refused to bend on religious matters. He begged me to promise not to force you to violate your religion and not to impose heavy labor on you. I couldn't resist him so I promised to help you. Now do you understand?"

He took out a prepared plea, written in my name, that I was to sign. It read, "Since I am now healthy and wish to be of service to our country, I ask to be transferred to my previous camp and assigned the work of bookkeeping." I took the pen he handed me, but instead of signing, I wrote that while I was

grateful for the proposal of being bookkeeper, I did not yet feel cured and my illness required constant medical supervision.

As soon as he saw this, his whole demeanor changed. His cordial smile disappeared, his eyes became blood-filled, and he shouted in fury, "You will regret this! No one ever beat the NKVD yet. You're an old prisoner. You know that to get rid of you we don't have to send you away. Right here, right in the hospital, an 'accident' could happen, and no one would ever know why you died . . ." He paused a long while. "Still, I give you time to consider this. I'll tell you the truth. I'm not thinking of your welfare alone. You're lucky my mother-in-law latched onto your case, and I just want a little peace and quiet at home." I said nothing and returned to my barrack.

A few days later the secretary told me the *natchalnik* of the Third Section ordered that I be given no food products, but be made to eat from the common kitchen. The director signed the order with a heavy heart. She did not want to aggravate relations with him. It became a personal vendetta for him. She warned me to be cautious, especially during the Holy Days.

It was hard to do my work with the portion of bread alone. I had endured hunger and deprivation in camp before and was accustomed to it, but my resiliency was much lower. After a few weeks I was enfeebled, and *Rosh Hashana* was coming.

A week before the Holy Days, Nikolai, the photographer, came with a message from a Jew who had been with me in camp some years before. He sent a parcel of foodstuffs. For a pack of cigarettes, I obtained a metal box to keep the food in and hid it in a closet in the secretary's office. I thanked G-d that I did not have to ask anyone for a piece of bread here in this camp, which was filled with hunger and suffering.

Rosh Hashana was Thursday and Friday. Combined with *Shabbos*, I had to be off of work for three days. I requested the secretary to ask the director to free the medic for those days to replace me. I paid the medic for his work — a half kilo of sugar from my little store. My *Rosh Hashana* was peaceful. I *davened* warmly, and though I was not particularly cheerful,

neither was I melancholy nor discouraged. I could see the hand of Divine Providence saving me from all danger. This gave me the courage to endure everything.

Prior to *Succos* I became worried because there were two consecutive periods of three day festivals one week after another. Again the secretary came to my rescue. Every medic was allowed a week's vacation annually. She arranged that my medic get his vacation during the week of *Succos*, and from there on it was in my hands. I took care of the matter, with the help of the food my friend had sent. I celebrated these Holy Days alone. I was afraid even to call on the Hungarian Jew in the bakery.

A week after *Succos* the secretary came with bad news again. The *natchalnik* had succeeded in getting an order from Moscow to send me to *Kolima*, and the director wanted to talk over this terribly serious matter. She was in a most agitated mood. "Now I am afraid I cannot save you. The order sending you on the transport will be signed by the *natchalnik* of the medical section and he will not resist the NKVD *natchalnik*. What can we do?" she asked, half to herself, as she paced the room. Then she stopped for a while, thinking hard, and cried out, "I've got an idea — anyway you have nothing to lose. Today, just like every Saturday, the *natchalnik* of the medical section comes to the hospital to bathe. Catch him at the entrance to the bath and simply ask him to appoint a commission of doctors to examine you and determine whether you are in condition to go on the transport. For my part, as soon as I hear they are preparing the transport, I'll have you put in a hospital bed."

I left at once, and as soon as the *natchalnik* went into the bath, before he could lock the door, I went in. At first he was frightened that this might be an attack. But when he recognized the "attacker", he was reassured and even asked about my health. So I went right into my business.

"You know my health is very poor. Nevertheless, I do hard labor and live on a piece of dry bread. If that's not enough, the Third Section *natchalnik* keeps on persecuting

me. But that has stopped bothering me because that's his job — persecuting people. But I am bothered about you. You are intelligent, cultured, and your medical calling is to save lives, so how can you sign my death warrant? Your signature means they can send me on the transport to *Kolima*. You know I cannot survive the transport. That alone takes six months, and it is during the winter too."

He stood there stunned for a moment. "You place me in a predicament. Believe me. I did everything possible more than once to save you from his clutches, but now I don't think it's going to work. He's betting on this card and if I know him, he'll use every means to reach his goal. If I don't sign, he'll find a doctor from another camp who will, and then it will be worse for you and for me. The only thing I can do for you is to note on the report that all through the journey you are to be kept in the medical wagon. Then you will be under a doctor's supervision and you will receive white bread, butter, and sugar. This is something of an assurance that you will arrive safely in *Kolima*."

I thanked him and remarked that this would not help me much. "You know that they send people to *Kolima* to be killed. I have another idea and this is what I'm asking. According to regulations, you have the authority to appoint a medical commission to examine all prisoners sent on a transport. All that you have to do to help me is this: when you receive the commission report, hold back the part that pertains to me until the last moment, so that scoundrel *natchalnik* will not have an opportunity to countermand the commission."

He pondered this a long time. I felt he was considering it seriously.

"You know that I am suffering because I am religious and I refuse to deny my faith. In our holy books it is written that whoever saves a life is considered as having saved the whole world. I do not believe you will permit them to send me to my death." With these words I left the room.

On Monday the secretary took me to the hospital where I was given a bed, and a few hours later the commission of three doctors came. They examined my X-rays and case history. I

understood from their remarks that they had determined that I needed an immediate operation on my stomach. They wrote a report in several copies. One was given to the nurse for the hospital director, and the others were for the medical section *natchalnik.* When they left, the secretary said that the director had purposely stayed away, so that no one could charge that she had influenced the commission in its report.

Later that week, Friday night after I *davened,* the secretary came, terrified, to tell me that the Third Section *natchalnik* had sent for the director. "I have a foreboding that this is a bad sign because it happened right after the transport left."

I did not sleep that night but recited Psalms and prayed that G-d protect that good Jewish woman who had sacrificed herself for another Jew. After interminable hours, morning came, but the director did not appear. On Monday I finally learned that she had been discharged and was not permitted to return to the hospital to say good-bye to her colleagues. One of the doctors was temporarily appointed as her replacement.

I went back to my work, harmful as it was to my health. Two months passed and I still waited in vain for word from my protector. She was no longer young and none too robust. If she was sent to a distant camp, no one would know her fate. I was pained by the knowledge that this happened to her because of me.

On Monday, 7 *Shvat,* December 30, 1946, a new director arrived, a Russian woman with the rank of an officer. Two days later the secretary came to tell me that the director had just discharged me from the hospital to the disposition of the Third Section. "Now you can get ready for the transport," she said. The next day the *natchalnik* told me that in one hour I would be sent back to the camp I had come from.

I went to the new director, and although she had never seen me, she knew who I was. "Are you a doctor?" I demanded. "How could you sign a decision about a person you never even bothered to see and examine?"

She jumped up in anger. "Are you teaching me medical ethics? I've been a doctor and a Communist for dozens of years and I know my duties. Your rotten tricks, the ones you

made with your Jewish protector, are over. You are an enemy of the Soviet Union; you were tried three times on Paragraph 58 and you have to take your punishment. Then you won't have any appetite for your counter-revolutionary activities. In your next camp, you might come to realize that things were a little too good for you here."

CHAPTER 33
Surprise Encounter

The *natchalnik* came to the hospital with a soldier and led me to the camp I had come from. I looked up Nikolai, my friend the photographer, who had some influence with the camp administration. I told him what was in store for me and he went to find out what he could. His news was not heartening. "The transport will be a long and difficult one, at least six weeks or more. Now we have to arrange that you don't freeze on the way."

He went to the clothing store for prisoners and brought me warm clothes — a good fur coat and woolen boots. He sewed patches on these things so that thieves would not care to steal them. He also gave me three banknotes of thirty rubles each. I sewed two of them into the fur coat and kept the third in my trousers pocket, ready for use on the way. Then he took me to the bookkeeping officer, where they gave me the book recording all the prisoners' possessions. Our farewell was a warm one.

At eleven that night a soldier took me out of the camp. The night was incredibly cold. We came to the camp railway spur, where a single wagon stood. We got in and he ordered me to sit — if I attempted to stand he would shoot at once. Four hours passed, and though I was dressed warmly, I was stiff by then. The poor soldier was less fortunate, for he did not have warm clothes. After a while he put his rifle aside and jumped around beating himself to generate a bit of warmth. All the while he eloquently cursed the entire universe and all of its inhabitants for mistreating soldiers and prisoners.

The door suddenly opened and a person came in, his head enveloped by a large hood. I was terrified and the soldier was even more so. The soldier grabbed his rifle and bellowed, "Get out of here or I'll shoot!" The man removed his hood — it was the hospital secretary. She took out two packages of candy and gave each of us one. "I brought these for this wonderful man, who was with us in camp for so long and who is now being driven away, so sick, on such a distant transport."

The soldier tried to argue. "Take it away. It's forbidden."

"Don't be an idiot," she replied softly. "There isn't a living soul anywhere near this wagon. No one saw and no one will ever know. It will be useful on the trip, especially for him." She seemed to want to add something as she left, but she burst into tears and was gone.

"What kind of creature was that?" the soldier asked in wonder. The whole incident took only a moment and was so unexpected, that he was still not quite in command of himself. "She must be out of her mind. She risked her life for some candy. Why, I could have shot her."

"She is a nurse in the camp hospital where I was a patient. I am seriously ill and they wanted to operate. Today I gave her some money to buy me some sweets. I guess when she came back to the hospital I was gone so she went to the camp to find me, and when she was told I'd been sent on the transport, she brought the candy here. You can tell, she is an honest child."

This satisfied the soldier as I hoped it would, and that was why I concocted the story, but I was not satisfied. She would not have been so foolhardy for some candies. I searched through my package and found some stiff paper — my X-rays and diagnosis. It was dark — the soldier did not see any of this, so I put the precious papers in my back pocket.

The hours dragged on, and our wagon was hooked onto a locomotive. We started to move, but after two hours we stopped again. Two soldiers came in and ordered me out. One stayed with me while the other arranged the formalities of transferring me, getting a packet of documents — sealed and marked on the cover with a large red 58. I had no doubt that each of these soldiers had relations or friends arrested in 1937

under this paragraph. It was clear to me that they understood they were not dealing with a criminal.

Near the railroad there was a prison where they took me. One guarded me while the other went into the office to arrange certain formalities. My guard ordered me to sit in the snow, as per regulations. It was before dawn, the coldest time imaginable. I was still stiff with cold, and so was the soldier, who did not even have a fur coat. Finally his buddy returned with the news that there was no room for me in the prison. We went back to the railroad station to wait for a train. On this line, most of the trains had special wagons for prisoners being transferred from one prison to another.

The soldiers sympathized with me, being driven from place to place in such cold weather. In the meantime they were roundly cursing the fate that forced them to carry out this terrible mission. The train eventually came and they handed me over to the new convoy. Again I was the only passenger in my wagon. We travelled all day, naturally without getting food. In the evening we arrived at the station of a large town. We walked about five kilometers to the prison where they were pleased to accept me.

First I was sent to the bath and then to a large room filled with people. My new associates attacked me at once, stealing my fur coat and boots. They immediately ripped open the lining and found the two 30 ruble notes, which they took, and then returned the coat and boots. The room was overcrowded, but since they had stolen money from me, I was treated like a privileged character and given a place by the oven.

A few hours later, I was called to the prison office. There I was told that I was accepted by mistake. This prison was designated for prisoners in the process of investigation before trial. "But you are lucky," they said, "because we shall not keep you long and you will get to your assigned place sooner." I showed them my papers stating my illness and advised them of the constant danger of an attack, which would necessitate an operation. They advised me to keep quiet about this. Meanwhile, they promised to give me 400 grams of white bread and 10 grams of butter daily.

"How about today's ration then? I haven't tasted food for over a day." They said that the convoy that brought me recorded that I received 600 grams of bread and 25 of sugar, so I had to wait until the morning. This would make three full days of fasting. Back in the room the thieves attacked me again and made another thorough search. They figured that in the office I must have received the money I had brought from camp. These gentlemen wanted to be partners.

They banked the oven fire at night, and though I wore the furcoat and boots, I trembled with cold all night. Still, I was exhausted enough from the trip to sleep. At dawn, they awakened us and chased us out into the yard. More than one hundred men had to take care of their needs and wash within a few minutes. At the door of the room a guard gave each man a portion of bread and sugar. The first ones in line were the band of thugs who formed a gauntlet right inside the door, in full view of the guard. As each prisoner came in, they grabbed their bread and sugar ration at once, unless he was one of their own. When I saw what was happening I took the last place in line. As soon as I got my portion I made a *bracha* and gobbled the whole thing at once, so they did not even see what I had received.

The door closed. The band of thugs, some twenty men, had a hundred rations. The *batko*, chief of the band, announced that whoever would give his hidden money would get his portion of bread. Over twenty prisoners used broken glass to rip open their coat linings took out the last few *kopecks* that they had succeeded in hiding from the NKVD's many searches. They gave the money to the robbers, who were pleased with their little scheme and returned some of the bread. They gave these tragic, starving wretches their meager morsel. A boiling kettle was brought and the fortunate ones had bread with water. The others, more than 60 in number, who had already been robbed of their last *kopecks* had to content themselves with hot water.

In the afternoon, the window in the door opened and a guard gave every prisoner an aluminum plate and spoon. The leader of the robbers took the plates from the prisoners and

handed them to the guard on the other side of the door. He poured the *balanda*, a soup of salt fish and sauerkraut, into each plate, with some potatoes and a piece of meat. The meat went only into the first 20 plates, the robbers', and the rest received saltwater with some rotten sauerkraut floating around. At night there was more hot water. That was supposed to be nourishment for a day.

This was my menu for four days. Oh yes, the butter they promised me? Somehow they forgot about that. In the middle of the fourth night they woke me, told me to get my things, and then two soldiers took me to the railroad, shoved me into a convict-wagon, and I was on the transport to my new camp. The wagon was in six sections, all separated by bars. In the last section there were two young Russian women. All of the other sections were for male prisoners. On both sides of each section there were three rows of bunks, and officially each prisoner had an assigned bunk. However, they loaded the wagon with more people than the number of bunks. In the overfilled wagon, prisoners seized places and piled on top of each other. Despite the bars and the special locks at each section, every door had a guard to prevent escapes. In addition, guards patrolled the train corridors and every evening the prisoners lay on the floor, heads towards the bars, for a count.

On the first day each one received two portions of bread and a herring. We were all famished, and the food was consumed instantly. Now we were thirsty . . . and water was given only once a day. No one slept that night because of the agonizing thirst and the screams of "Water! Water!" No one took the cries to heart. In the morning the soldiers brought two buckets of water and poured each man a cupful. We received no bread at all since we had been given a double portion the first day. The bread from the day before was a faint memory by now, so we were both hungry and thirsty. Again came the cries of, "Bread! Water! Bread! Water!" After a few hours of this, the *natchalnik* of the guards informed us that if there was not silence immediately we would be placed in chains for the duration of the journey. It was a remarkably persuasive announcement. It was quiet. No one screamed.

Towards evening the corridor guard opened the bar to the women's section and ordered one of them to wash the corridor. As she approached the guard at the door, she asked him to step aside so she might scrub the floor where he was standing. As soon as he moved, she swiftly opened the door and jumped out of the train. The soldier started shooting and signalled for the train to stop. It was dark and we were already into the forest. The *natchalnik* came running nervously with some soldiers. They counted us to see whether there were any others missing. "We shall remain on the road until all escapees are found. Anyone who tries to escape or even raises his voice will be shot."

The train moved on to the nearest station, where our wagon was unhooked. The rest of the train moved on and we stayed there for three full days, without receiving any food.

They could not capture the fugitive. The air was tense and, though we suffered from hunger, no one dared murmur a complaint. It was clear they were really ready to shoot us all. On the third day, when I was faint with hunger, I remembered that I had some sugar hidden away. I took it out and shared it with the prisoner next to me.

On the fourth day the *natchalnik* announced that the fugitive was captured and that she was in a nearby prison where she would be tried for attempted escape. The veteran prisoners amongst us understood that he was lying because, invariably, captured prisoners were brought back dead or alive to show the others that attempts at escape were foredoomed. Since she was not brought to us, she was obviously not caught. But we were happy the affair was finally over and that we were moving on. The next morning we stopped at a station and were ordered out of the wagon. Apparently it was a sizable town. We marched off to the prison.

On Wednesday, January 8, 1947, 16 *Teves* 5707, the temperature was 40 below zero. In front of the prison we had to sit in the snow, surrounded by soldiers with cocked rifles that were aimed at us.

Criminals frequently used false names, but since they were often tattooed, these marks were recorded in their documents

as identification. Before entering prison, the officials wanted to verify the prisoners' identification, so they had to undress and have their tattoos compared to those in the records. This took several hours, while we sat freezing in the snow. Finally the records were checked and we went into the bath. The experience, as it always had been, was harrowing.

We were then put into a room designated to accomodate fifty men. There were seventy of us. We demanded from the prison officials that we be given the threedays' bread ration that was withheld from us during the journey. They showed us the report stating that we had received full rations every day, even the day we had arrived at the prison. We would receive our first food the next morning.

It was clear to me that I had better be on good terms with the muscle-men. I knocked on the door and handed the guard a 30 ruble note, asking him to get me a package of cigarettes and some butter. In a half hour he was back with my things. I gave the tobacco to the leader of the criminals in our group, and I was given a place near the stove.

The next morning we were awakened before dawn and driven out to the yard in our underclothes, despite the terrible cold. They proceeded to search us for knives, cards, money, and other articles forbidden to prisoners. Everything was carried out of the room and we were told to choose our belongings. When we had all chosen our things, there were several expensive suits and coats left. The *natchalnik* asked whose they were and, when no one responded, he announced that these must have been stolen from prisoners by the criminals who had continued on the transport. Therefore the things were confiscated and twenty of the criminals received three days in the dungeon.

The rest of us were not displeased because we would have at least three days without being abused by the muscle-men. I had bought myself their good graces with the tobacco, but that same night they robbed me of my butter, arguing that I should have shared it with them at once, and then I would have had a share too. But since I did not deal honorably with them, they gave me nothing.

In three days the thugs returned, but they did not look like they had endured the rigors of the dungeon. It was a particularly cold day and most of the prisoners did not take the fifteen minute stroll permitted, but I went out with the *batko*. During the exercise period he told me the whole story: They were not in the dungeon for the three days, but in a special room where they received white bread, butter, wurst, and even whiskey. This was in return for the clothes the officials had confiscated.

"Naturally, they didn't give us a tenth of what they got for the clothes, but what can we do? They are officials and we are prisoners. If we didn't take the good clothes from the prisoners, they wouldn't have anything to sell, but we wouldn't get anything either. This way we received plenty to eat for three days and had a little nip or two . . ."

After experiencing hunger so long, my stomach made itself known. I signed for sick call because of intense pains. After I walked into the prison infirmary, I stood there stunned. The doctor was the director of the hospital I had been driven from, the same Jewish lady who was discharged because of me. She acted as though she had never seen me, prescribed a medicine for me to the nurse, and told me to wait in the next room. She told the soldier to bring my things from the room because I was going into the hospital.

The nurse registered the articles the soldier brought and asked me to sign. I then went to the doctor's office, where she felt free to greet me at last. In answer to her torrent of questions, I told her all about my adventures on the transport. She said nothing about herself. Suddenly she took the telephone and asked for the prisoner in the special room to be sent in. Putting down the receiver, she asked, "Would you like to see your very best friend, the *natchalnik* of the Third Section of the camp NKVD?" Before I could answer, the door opened and a man came in. However, I could not see him since the door was behind me. Standing at the door, the man answered the doctor's question saying he did not feel well, that his heart hurt, and he needed sleeping pills. His voice was familiar, but I could not quite place it.

The doctor cried out, "And when you wanted to hurl me into camp for another fifteen years didn't your heart hurt then? And when you gave this man sitting here a second ten-year sentence, didn't your heart hurt then?"

Turning to me she asked ironically, "Don't you even want to say hello to your guardian protector, the *natchalnik* of the NKVD Third Section?" All this happened so swiftly that I did not fully comprehend that this man was really that scoundrel. He still wore his NKVD uniform, but without epaulets or rank insignia. He barely resembled the tyrant I knew in camp. He stood, head bowed, face blackened, unable to look me in the eyes.

The doctor spoke. "You don't act like old friends at all. Say, how many years did you get?"

"Fifteen years," he mumbled in a broken voice, his head still bent.

"G-d is punishing you for this man's suffering and for your persecution of innocent people. Why don't you say anything to him?" she asked me. "He won't curse you out now. Look how pathetic he is. Just like an innocent child."

"A Jew is forbidden to take revenge," I told her. "I don't want to humiliate him further. He has already received G-d's punishment. I hope that in camp he'll have enough time to consider his evil doings. He might regret the evil he did to others and change."

The doctor gave him medicine for his heart and also some sleeping pills. "Take care of your health," she cautioned him. "You have a hard life ahead of you. Being a prisoner in camp is not exactly the same as being *natchalnik*. But maybe you really will repent and become a decent man." She called the guard and asked that he be taken back to his room. When he left, the doctor told me this story.

"As soon as the documents were prepared, stating that you must not be sent on a distant transport, this outlaw became insanely angry. He called me to the NKVD and drew up a horrifying bill of accusations against me. He charged that I had refused to accept seriously ill prisoners into the

hospital and thus caused the deaths of hundreds. Another thing was that I supposedly concentrated all ambulances at the central hospital. To every telephone request for an ambulance, I always said that all ambulances were taken, so in effect I denied all camp hospitals ambulance service. He claimed my purpose was to show that the administration persecuted prisoners to death. This way I would hurt the Soviet Union and arouse dissension among the prisoners. The next main charge was a contradiction of the first — they said that I kept prisoners in the hospital for months to keep them from working. This way they received good food, and this of course caused incalculable harm to the camp and to the Soviet Union.

"This dull scoundrel had the audacity to demand that I confess to these absurdities, and more. He demanded that I write them myself as an act of contrition. When I absolutely refused, he arrested me and had me put in a cold room in a deep cellar. Fortunately the medic came several times and through him I sent a message to the medical *natchalnik*, warning him that if he permitted me to die, then his life and the lives of all the doctors would never be secure. In the name of professional solidarity of doctors who are pledged to save human lives, I appealed to him to conduct a thorough investigation to prove the falseness of the allegations against me.

"He did this without the knowledge of the NKVD, of course, and appointed a commission of doctors, who used documents to assemble evidence that all through my tenure as director, there was never an incident where a sick prisoner was not accepted. Based on the records of individual prisoners, it was established that no one stayed in the hospital longer than one month.

"Just at the time that this bandit had sent his accusations to the chief prosecutor, the medical *natchalnik* sent the commission report to the same prosecutor. Now the prosecutor had to investigate the whole matter thoroughly. When he saw there was no evidence against me, he set me free.

"But he wasn't tried because of me. In fact, after that fiasco he didn't stop, because for the first time in his criminal

career, a person he had accused was declared innocent. He protested to Moscow that both of us could not be in one camp because this undermined his authority. The order came from Moscow to discharge me as hospital director, but considering that I am a recognized specialist, they sent me to the *Ata* prison as director of medical services.

"You are probably curious why he received a sentence of fifteen years. I had a chance to see his record. He was accused of destroying innocent men, but whom and how many, I have no idea.

I told her about the six officers who had amputated their own fingers. This criminal *natchalnik* had refused to let them have medical attention. His representative sent a report on this to Moscow and he may have been tried for this.

"You know," she remarked after pondering a while, "I am almost as believing as you are. How else can you explain this except as an act of G-d? Here he wanted to destroy me and suddenly he is a prisoner and in the prison where I am doctor. Here you are dragged from prison to prison and you end up here where I can help you . . .

"Well, enough philosophy. Let's get down to practical matters. I'll keep you here in the hospital for a few weeks so I can treat your stomach and you will get some strength back — you will need all your strength for the rest of the journey to the camp. And . . . maybe . . .? I'll tell you a secret. I have definite information that they will shortly release a number of prisoners with certain illnesses. I even have a list of the illnesses they will consider, and yours is on the list. I don't know whether they will also consider the paragraph under which the sentence was given. As far as I am concerned there has been some action on my own sentence. I have about a year to go on my sentence and one fine day I may be freed. That's why I must hurry to arrange your matter. First thing in the morning, I shall prepare documentation on your illness and ask a commission of doctors to verify it."

I thanked her and suggested it might not be worthwhile for her again to risk so much on my behalf after she had suffered

so much in camp. I hoped that she would be released shortly, since she only had a year left. As for me, I was confident that just as G-d had cared for me through other dangers, He would watch over me now.

I shared the hospital room with twenty patients. It was too small for that many people, so we had to lie on top of each other. The air was fetid, but they could not open a window because the bitter cold would harm the patients. Every morning the nurse took me into the medical office, where I could *daven* undisturbed. As soon as I arrived in the hospital, I sent a letter home through the doctor who used the offices of a free nurse. My reply came within two weeks in the form of a parcel of food products. Meanwhile, the doctor busily arranged for the medical commission to examine me. They reported that I was seriously ill, which was unfortunately an accurate report. They prepared a written report and I began to live in the hope of being freed.

An order soon arrived concerning the doctor. In recognition of her record of unsullied service in camp, she was granted freedom for the last year of her sentence. She called me to share the happy news that this day she was to be released. While I was delighted, she regretted that now she could not witness my liberation. The day after this Jewish doctor was freed, I was discharged from the hospital and returned to my old room.The following morning I was called to the prison headquarters. A judge sat there studying my file.

"According to your medical record of illness, you should be freed. However, since you have twice been sentenced for major terms of ten years each, that indicates you are a most dangerous element for the Soviet society. You must serve your full sentence." Now there were no doubts about the next ten years of my life.

The room kept becoming more crowded. There were about a hundred men now. We lay jammed against each other, but the cold was still as bitter as outside. I felt better though, because I had spent two weeks in the hospital. New prisoners came with every new transport. Amongst them was a tall,

young, husky sailor whom even the bullies among the criminals respected. They decided that I should relinquish my place at the stove for him. He soon told me his story.

His father was a priest, but early in life he became enamored with communism. He entered officers' school and served as a naval officer. He was ashamed of his pedigree and did not record in his file that his father was a priest. The father, incidentally, had died in a labor camp. One day an old acquaintance visited the sailor's ship and told the officials his father's occupation. He was arrested at once and naturally the bill of charges depicted him as having all but scuttled the Soviet fleet. He insisted, "I readily admitted that my father was a priest and died in labor camp, but I served the Soviet faithfully."

They tortured the poor fellow until he lost his mind. He had no idea of what was in the confession they placed before him to sign. He was given ten years. Now they had diagnosed that he was not normal and he was en route to a camp for the insane.

He told me that he did have sporadic attacks of mental illness. "Terrible things can happen," he confided to me. "I usually get these attacks at night when it's dark in the room, after the lights are out. Last night I strangled the prisoner who was lying next to me. In the morning, when I saw he was dead, I was scared — I couldn't believe I had killed him. Maybe this is another trumped-up charge against me," he mused aloud.

He had indeed strangled the man. The official report said that he died of a heart attack, because the truth would have meant an investigation proving that they were housing an insane man among other prisoners. The thugs in my room were aware of this and that was why they put him next to me. When they heard him tell me his story, they watched for my reaction, certain that I would jump off the bunk and be afraid to sleep there.

I listened to the sailor patiently and then I told him that I'd had years of experience in prisons and I'd seen worse cases than this. G-d saved me and would continue to care for me. I

thanked him for telling me the full truth about his history, so now I could protect myself from his attacks. I assured him that the instant I sensed he was moving, I would shove him off the high bunk so he would fall to his death. If he wanted to live, I advised him either to stay awake all night and remember not to kill, or to sleep quietly.

Quite early the next morning I awoke to find him with wide-open eyes, struggling against sleep. I calmed him — it was light already, so I told him he was out of danger of an attack and could go to sleep. Later in the morning, when we went out to wash, the others looked at me in wonder. My reply was an ironic smile. I did not have to use words to be understood, but one of them could not contain his curiosity, and asked, "Weren't you afraid to sleep next to him all night?"

"I have a mystic formula that protects me from all harm."

The fools took my answer seriously and asked the sailor if it was true. To my surprise he answered, "He told me something that calmed me and I'm not afraid of the dark." That day the sailor was taken elsewhere but my prestige remained.

A new transport came that night. Among the prisoners brought to our room were two Jews in their seventies, both from Poland. They had fled Poland in 1939 when the war broke out. Until then, they were active in the Jewish community of their town, and when they fled they took the official Jewish community seal with them. In 1946, when repatriation of Poles began, many did not have the documentation of their Polish citizenship which was a prerequisite for repatriation. These two men used the seal for documentation for several people from their town. When the police received several similar documents, they sent them on to the NKVD. The two were arrested and charged with carrying on hostile propaganda among Polish Jews to persuade them to leave the Soviet Union. In addition, they had issued false documents to enable people to leave the Soviet.

"It is true," the two declared. "We issued documents to Jews from towns other than our own, but they were Polish

Jews who could not prove their nationality, and we made it possible for them to return home. These documents, then, were not false at all." Their arguments were useless and their "trial" ended with a verdict of ten years each.

These Jews were not dismayed. They bubbled over with faith. "The Nazis slaughtered our families. We've lived out our years. What can they do to us now? We hope to G-d we will live to be freed and returned home." They told me that when they saw a Jew with beard and *payos* who had already endured over ten years of prison without tasting non-*kosher* food or working *Shabbos*, they were greatly encouraged. They blessed me, saying that I should be freed soon and return to my true home. I wished them the same.

It was a warm farewell the next morning. We were without tears and proud of our Jewishness.

I went on the next transport with dozens of prisoners. The officer called each by name. I was taken to a special room where I had to undress while they searched everything thoroughly. They found a photo of my mother of blessed memory, which they ripped in front of my eyes. They left the X-rays and diagnosis. Then we were driven out to the prison yard, where we stood for a long time until finally we were driven at a running pace to the railroad station.

Exhausted, we entered special prison-cars. We each received a portion of bread and salty fish. A day later we arrived at the station of a large town and we were transferred to a prison-bus. At midnight we were at the prison.

I was lucky — it was not my correct destination. The *natchalnik* checked my papers and ordered me to be taken to a transit prison. He began calling on the telephone, but it appeared that there were neither vehicles nor guards to escort me there. I was not displeased, because this meant that there was a chance I would be sent on with less delay to my permanent camp.

The prison *natchalnik* was not delighted with his guest. He had no place for me, so he put me in the "box." This device was something like a kennel, with a tiny door you crawled through, with a pallet to lie on, but all too small to sit in. I was

tired from the journey, so I fell asleep at once. My morning ration was cooked water with sugar — no bread. I had been given, they informed me, bread for two days at the last prison. Only that night did I get 200 grams of bread.

I was fortunate though, because this *natchalnik* was not totally devoid of humanity. He examined my papers and learned that I had a stomach ailment. "I can transfer you to our prison hospital, but that would not be much of a favor for you. You would not get out of there very fast and you could spend a good while here. If you are in the 'box', you have better chances of getting to your camp sooner. I shall order food for you and your diet."

In a half hour I had a bowl of *kasha* and water cooked with sugar. I returned the *kasha*, explaining that I was a religious Jew and did not eat from the general kitchen. I asked for a piece of butter, and soon I had 10 grams of it. I received the same food during the three days I spent there.

Saturday night, just as I finished *havdala*, the *natchalnik* told me that early the next morning there was a transport to my permanent camp.

On Sunday morning a soldier escorted me to the railroad station and handed me over to the convoy for the prisoners' car. The following day, February 17, 1947, 27 *Shvat*, we came to the station and from there I went by foot to the camp.

Ten more years of suffering awaited me.

CHAPTER 34
The New Camp

On the first day of the Hebrew month of *Adar*, February 21, 1947, I arrived in the distant camp. Behind me were ten years in camps and long weeks of painful wandering in the transports. We prisoners were brought to a wasteland. As far as the eye could reach, all we saw was the unbroken whiteness of endless snow. The temperature reached 35 below zero. We were stiff with cold.

The guards' shouts cracked the air. Armed with rifles and accompanied by dogs, they drove us into a large area surrounded by a wall five meters high and topped with barbed wire. High observation towers loomed over the wall, manned by armed guards in thick furcoats and thick fur caps. Deep inside the area were three barracks. A sign hung over the entrance to the area, which read "Transfer Point."

This was the central assembly point of the camp administration. All new victims of the transports were brought here from the farthest reaches of the vast Soviet Union. Here the prisoners were classified and sent off to the different camps that stretched over dozens of kilometers to the north.

As soon as we entered the enclosed area, we were ordered to sit absolutely still on the ground. We sat motionless in the snow for several hours. Finally a group of NKVD officers arrived. They went into one of the barracks, and then we were summoned by rows.

Eventually it was my turn. It took all my strength to take a single step. I was almost completely numb from sitting in the snow. In the barrack the camp commander and five officers of varying ranks sat around a table. Across from them, sitting alone, was a man in civilian clothes. One of the officers examined my file; then the commander asked about my occupation on the outside. When I replied that I had been a bookkeeper for many years, he told me to go to the civilian. I later learned that he was the chief bookkeeper in the camps. He asked me many technical questions about bookkeeping, noted something on his pad, and told me to leave. It may have been the sudden change in temperature from the frigid outdoors to the heated barrack, or it may have been the accumulated weariness from the hardships of the transport, but as I opened the door to leave, I fell unconscious.

When I regained consciousness, I saw that there were two women in white near me. One gave me an injection while the other examined me with her stethoscope. They gave me something to drink and left. Apparently I was in the infirmary.

The doctor soon returned alone. She was a woman in her middle years, with black eyes and a sympathetic face. She asked me what happened, whether I suffered from some disease, and so on. When I told her that I had served ten years in the camps and instead of sending me back home (in accordance with my sentence) they sent me here for ten more years — tears appeared in her eyes. With deep interest she asked me in detail about my life and about my experiences. At the end she told me she was in charge of the camp hospital. She promised to keep me there as long as possible so that I might regain my strength somewhat, and then she would make every effort to get me light work. She warned me to say nothing about this, because she was an officer and for any display of favoritism towards a prisoner, she could be charged with treason.

The so-called hospital was a huge barrack. Along both long walls there were bunks made of unplaned, filthy boards nailed together. On these naked planks, without mattresses, sheets, or covers, ovr a hundred patients lay, dressed in their regular, dirty prison garb. Some, burning with fever, were obviously about to die. Others, fortunate enough to be admitted for exhaustion, could postpone death. In a corner near the door there was a barrel of water and a basin for washing. One grimy, wet towel served over 100 patients.

Since the sick did not work and needed less food, our rations consisted of 200 grams of white bread and a glass of sweet coffee with milk for breakfast. There was *balanda* for lunch. To be sure, there was meat in the soup once every century. For supper, 200 grams of black bread, and a glass of sweet coffee with milk was the meal.

I enjoyed the bread but declined the coffee and soup because of *kashrus*. Three days passed. On the fourth, a Jewish man called on me, a rather shrivelled-looking person about 55 years old. He introduced himself as Zvi Hershel and told me that when he had heard there was a Jewish patient in the hospital who only ate bread, he surmised that I must be an observant Jew.

He explained that he was employed in the office and

ordered foodstuffs for the kitchen. He promised to arrange for me to receive some milk and sugar daily instead of the soup and coffee, all within the regulation norms prescribed for every prisoner. The next day I started receiving, in addition to the daily 200 grams of white bread and the 200 grams of black bread, a fourth of a cup of pure milk, 10 grams of butter, and 50 grams of sugar. On *Shabbos*, Hershel brought me white *sukhares* and then he started bringing me white *sukhares* every evening in addition to the regular portions I received from the kitchen.

In about three weeks I had regained some strength. Zvi Hershel told me that he would talk to the doctor about discharging me and about making efforts to have me assigned to light work in camp. On *Shabbos*, the first day of the Hebrew month of *Nissan*, March 22, a medical commission headed by my friend the hospital director visited the hospital. They stopped at each patient, questioned him, and decided who would stay on in the hospital and who would return to the labor camp. When they came to me, the doctor asked how I felt and I told her I was better than before. She instructed the other doctors, most of them also prisoners, to record something in Latin and they moved on.

Zvi Hershel came that evening and told me that I was discharged from the hospital and was assigned to the camp which was close to the transfer-point where we were. This was good fortune because this place was central and the work less onerous. The prisoners in this section worked in a closed loft, a factory for children's dolls that were shipped all over the country. The other sections of the camp were situated dozens of kilometers away and the prisoners there did heavy labor like construction and felling forests. In addition to being assigned here, I was given three weeks without work for convalescence.

The next morning I was transferred from the hospital to the camp. The guard handed me over to the *naryadtchik* together with two documents of my personal file. One document was from the earlier camps, where I had been for the past ten years, since 1937, and the other was recorded here since my arrival.

The *naryadtchik* carefully examined my documents, and it appeared that he was already familiar with my case, since he asked whether Zvi Hershel was kin to me. I replied that we were not related but I had met him in camp. He then took me to a barrack, showed me my place, and told me that I was free from regular work duties for three weeks, but I would assist the *dnevalni*. This was a duty assigned prisoners unfit for any sort of labor. The *dnevalni*'s duties were caring for and cleaning the barracks while the other prisoners were at work.

This barrack, I learned at once, was for thieves. It was Sunday, a day off from work, and most of them were lounging around the barrack. The senior prisoner studied me with interest. It was the first time in his many years in camp that he actually saw a prisoner with a beard and *payos*. He soon called me over and asked under what article I was sentenced. When I told him Paragraph 58, he was surprised because generally political prisoners were not placed with ordinary criminals. But when I told him that I already had a background of ten years in camps and was now on my second ten, I could see that my stock rose.

"Now I understand it all," he remarked. "They sent you to my barrack so that we could fix you. Right? Don't worry. Just don't squeal and no one will hurt you here." Then, almost to verify his words, he pointed to a bed near the oven — in the winter the best place in the barrack. He said, "That's yours. That little cupboard is yours too. Keep anything you want there. No one will take anything of yours."

I was grateful and told him so. Then I undressed, hung out my woolens to dry, and lay down on my "bed" to sleep. I did not awaken until morning. My first day in camp began. I received my 600 grams of bread for the day and three coupons for soup from the kitchen. I could have sold them for a respectable figure but I knew I would lose my standing among my thief-neighbors. I gave the coupons to the youngest of the prisoners in the barrack, a boy who was hardly more than a child. The barrack senior was surprised and he asked me why I did not eat the soup or at least sell the coupons. I explained that my religion, for which I had already spent ten years in camp, required me to eat only *kosher* food. For that reason I

had my own utensils, even a pot for cold water, that no one else might ever use.

I could see that this criminal, fluent only in the language of force, was visibly impressed. He called the whole barrack together and announced, "See this new neighbor of ours? He's a Jew who's suffering because of his religion. He's been in camps for ten years already and hasn't tasted anything from the general kitchen. But he would not sell the coupons and instead he gave them to the kid here. Now get this straight — nobody dare touch any of his things, especially not his cooking utensils, even the little pot." Turning to me, he added, "I've lived among Jews. I know these things. I'll help you get some new utensils."

G-d was helping me ease my burdens in the new camp. Late that night Zvi Hershel came, wondering why the *naryadtchik* assigned me to a thieves' barrack, since he had tried to have me sent to the barrack used by the bookkeeping staff. When I told him how the robbers here treated me, he said, "This is also for ultimate good. Passover is coming and it will be easier to keep the holiday here than among the office people. There are a bunch of anti-semites there." Zvi Hershel promised to bring me some new things the next day, including a new pot for water, a spoon, and a tin pot that I could use for some cooking.

The next day Zvi brought me the new utensils and pots. He also told me to go to the store where bread was distributed for the prisoners. There I was given 350 grams of sugar and 800 grams of white bread — a fortune in camp at that time. I put all the foodstuffs in my little cupboard. Each day I ate my regular ration of 600 grams of black bread. I nibbled on the white bread and sugar frugally. None of the thieves so much as touched my "treasure."

On the tenth of *Nissan*, a few days before Passover, I was called to the office of the soldiers who guard the camp. I was taken to a room where an officer sat at a desk. He informed me that a package of food and 100 rubles had been delivered for me. In accordance with camp regulations he opened the package in my presence. The *matzos* he found placed him in a

quandary — "The list of foodstuffs permitted to prisoners does not mention *matzos*. But I know you are a religious Jew and you won't eat any bread on Passover. You could starve to death that way. I'll let you have it on my personal responsibility." He warned me that if I took the *matzos* into the barrack, the thieves might pilfer it all and I would really be stuck then. I thanked him and assured him that I was confident that no one would touch anything of mine.

I was not wrong. When I came in with my *matzos*, one of the inmates brought me a stretch of new paper. I washed out the cupboard, wrapped the *matzos* in the paper and put it in the cupboard. No one's finger touched those *matzos*.

It was my turn to go to the bath and barber the next day. I knew that the one in charge there was Jewish, so I brought him two *matzos*. He was astonished. "Where in the world did you get *matzos*?" He had not seen a *matzo* in years. On the outside he was a Communist and was afraid to think of *matzos*. At least here in camp he had a chance to taste some. He readily consented when I asked him to instruct the barber to cut my hair, but not to touch my beard or *payos*. When the barber had finished, in strode the officer in charge of hygiene and sanitation. As soon as he saw my beard he started yelling and cursing, ordering me to get right back on that chair and have that beard and *payos* cut right off.

I refused. He personally took me to the doctor in charge of the medical section, the one who had given me first aid in the hospital. I explained to her that these past ten years in camp I had been permitted to wear a beard and *payos*, because this was not some whim of mine but a command of G-d that I would not transgress. She heard out the charge of the officer and decided, "I know this man to be meticulous and it's acceptable for him to wear a beard and *payos*." She warned me, though, to be careful about cleanliness.

The officer was most displeased by her decision. When we left, he threatened to write a complaint to the top officials of the camp against me and the doctor.

CHAPTER 35

Passover in the New Camp

Friday was the first night of Passover. Thursday evening the doctor sent for me and inquired whether I had enough food to sustain me, since she knew I would not eat bread. I assured her that I was well stocked, that I had a package of *matzos* and would conduct a *seder* the next evening. She asked me to give her a piece of *matzo*. I brought her several *matzos*, a gift that moved her deeply. She wished me a joyous festival.

On Friday morning Zvi came to ask where I planned to have the *seder*. I didn't have any particular plans yet, but I was sure G-d would show us. Then he told me that he, himself, had already given thought to the matter. It seemed the bookkeeping office had a little room for records, which was seldom visited, and had no windows so no one would know it was being used. It was the perfect spot for a *seder*. He had a new teapot, a cooking pot, some glasses, and even an electric hotplate. Friday afternoon we went there, cooked some tea, and prepared for the *seder*.

For the "Four Cups," we had tea. While softly reciting the *Hagadda*,* I was delighted to learn that Zvi had not forgotten his Hebrew and he read the *Hagadda* from my little *siddur*.* Tears coursed down his cheeks all the while. He recalled his memories of his father's *seder*, when the world was still normal, when festivals brought joy into a home.

After the *seder*, we stealthily left our hiding place. Returning to the barrack, I was greeted by the senior prisoner, who asked when the Jewish Passover fell. He explained that he came from a village in the Ukraine where most of the people were Jews. He had even worked for Jews and declared that they treated him fairly. He remembered Jewish customs,

including the one about eating *matzo* on Passover. His delicate hint (that he would appreciate a taste of *matzo*) did not escape me. I gave him a whole *matzo*, asking him not to show it to anyone because there would not be enough for everyone anyway, and I would be left without food for eight days. He offered to sell my bread ration for me — and for a good price at that. I told him he could take the bread himself, or give it to anyone he liked, because I could not take any money for it since I was forbidden to derive any benefit from bread on Passover.

This impressed him. "You are a real Jew," he called out. "When it comes to your religion you don't give an inch. Well, for that I promise you that I'm gong to help you any way I can. Nobody in this barrack had better bother you. Don't think I was always what I am now. They make criminals out of us. When I was a little kid, I didn't always have food to eat. I used to steal things sometimes. They sent me to camp and from then on I never got out of their hands."

We celebrated the second *seder* until well past midnight, because we were concerned that no one realize that we were going to the records' room so much. This time Zvi brought along potatoes, enough to last all through Passover. That meant I would not go hungry the whole time. Since I did not have to to work the entire time either, I recovered my health and vigor.

CHAPTER 36

The Doll Factory

The camp operated a factory for dolls where the work was not hard. The factory was located in an enclosed building, so the workers did not freeze. There were no armed guards standing over prisoners constantly. The operation was primitive. The dolls were made of paper, painted with a special paint, and then packed in cartons to be shipped all over the Soviet Union. Soviet children playing with these dolls never suspected that the dolls were produced by their enslaved fathers.

A Jewish prisoner, originally an architect-engineer, ran the factory. He was a German Communist, and after Hitler came to power in 1935, he fled to Russia. At first he was treated quite nicely. He worked at his profession, building houses, and had significant achievements to his credit. In 1941 he was arrested and accused of espionage on behalf of Hitler's government. He received a ten year sentence.

Here in camp the engineer spent a half day in the central office doing architectural work and spent the second half of the day organizing the factory production. The camp administration appreciated his exceptional qualifications and were eager to utilize him fully. He was granted unusual privileges. He had a room for his exclusive use, and periodically he travelled to the city to acquire raw materials for doll production and also to supervise the shipment of the finished goods.

After Passover I was sent to the factory, and they assigned me to the nastiest job. My job was to dip the dolls in a nitrolic that fixed the paint and gave it the desired sheen. The work was not difficult, but it was dangerous because inhaling the nitrolic fumes all day ruined the lungs. My predecessors worked two or three weeks and then had to be hospitalized.

Before I arrived at the factory Zvi spoke to the head so that I might be released from work on *Shabbos*. The problem was that the work was by norms. I had to perform my part of the production with all the dolls that were made that day. Because the factory was so primitive, I had to work twelve hours or more each day. And the *Shabbos* norm had to be met besides. The work simply had to be reorganized, and I had to do it.

I developed an invention, a large wheel with pockets to hold several dozen dolls at once. Turning the wheel dipped the dolls into the nitrolic. What had taken two full days could now be done in four or five hours. The quality was also significantly improved.

A Polish woman was in charge of production. She had been a sculptor in the free world. She designed the dolls and gave instructions on the steps in the production process.

Quality was her responsibility. She was pleased with my innovation; in fact she always treated me with respect. When I did not show up the first *Shabbos*, she later remarked that now she had met the first prisoner who was not intimidated by the officials and who persisted in his faith. She regretted my assignment to the harmful job, but unfortunately she could not transfer me, she explained, because the camp administration decided such matters. She advised me to try to get a release from the doctor.

At that time this could not be considered. I was sentenced a second time under Article 58 and that meant I was to be kept under particularly harsh conditions. For someone in my position, getting a factory assignment was a stroke of unexpected good luck. I was even pleased with my situation. Now I had more free time and spent evenings helping Zvi at his bookkeeping work. His work was complicated and time-consuming. Each night Zvi had to make records of every prisoner, noting his bread ration for the day. The ration was determined by the percentage of the norm the prisoner fulfilled the day before. The camp system was designed so that whoever worked at less than full exhaustion was doomed to die of starvation. The norms were set beyond the prisoner's strength, but the wretch who fell short received only 400 grams of bread the next day. Zvi had to be extremely cautious, because if by his error a prisoner received a few grams more than regulations prescribed, then Zvi would be charged with sabotage. At best he would lose his job and would be sent off to a hard labor job. I helped him with this chore. Still, every night we worked until past midnight.

This did not disturb my rest because I could not sleep anyway. The thieves in my barrack played cards all night, hollering all the while. As soon as I would fall asleep, the shouting would awaken me. By morning my head was splitting. This had an adverse affect on my health and I felt weak all the time. Finally Zvi asked the doctor to urge the camp commandant to transfer me to the office staff barrack, where I lived with Zvi.

Five weeks of working with the nitrolic took their toll. Breathing was now difficult for me. When I visited the doctor, she wondered why the Jewish manager of the factory assigned me to a harmful task where everyone invariably became sick from the fumes. She did not want to give the impression, however, that she showed favoritism towards me. Since a medical commission under the chief doctor of the camp was scheduled to come soon, she would see to it that the commission would assign me to some easier job.

The commission arrived four days later, on the day prior to *Shavuos*, May 24, a day that happened to be my birthday. The head doctor heard me out and our doctor added something in Latin terms. The doctor wrote an order that I be transferred to some easier task and given three days convalescence leave from work. The three days included *Shabbos*, (the day before *Shavuos*) and *Shavuos* proper, on Sunday and Monday.

For *Shavuos* I returned to the thieves' barrack. The bookkeepers' barrack was full of anti-Semitic Ukrainians who collaborated with the Nazis during the war. Many of them were notorious informers, toadying to the NKVD with any tidbit they could find.

The thieves received me like an honored guest. I celebrated the festival in the finest way possible under the circumstances. Naturally, I did not have the traditional dairy meal, but I felt fortunate to have my bread and sugar.

On Tuesday after *Shavuos* I returned to work quite early. The Polish lady who was supervisor of the factory was delighted that I had been relieved from the harmful job, and she had already replaced me. My new job was packing the dolls. "This will be appropriate work for you," she explained, "because now you will be able to observe *Shabbos* without interference. In fact, you will be able to work only half a day on Friday, or none at all if you wish."

The packer had to be careful that the dolls were completely dry before packing, or else the paper stuck to the doll. The production was primitive, as I noted earlier, and since there were no facilities for drying the dolls, it happened that some

days there was no work at all, because all the dolls were still moist. That was how I was able to schedule matters (with the supervisor's consent) so there would be no work to do on *Shabbos* and Friday. Naturally I had to complete my work, because all the dolls produced during the week had to be packed and ready for shipment.

Part of my duty, besides packing, was quality control. The supervisor cautioned me that my predecessor was not overly careful about quality control, and he packed dolls that were not thoroughly dry. This caused many to be rejected by the customers, and several complete shipments were returned. The camp lost a great deal as a result, and the officials even threatened to close down the factory.

Soviet camps operated under a murderous system. Prisoners' lives depended on their productivity. If a man did not produce his quota, or if his production was not satisfactory in quality, he did not receive his bread ration. Starvation loomed. This was the situation in the doll factory. About 100 men worked there, almost all elderly and sick. Closing the factory meant that they would be sent to the woods for hard labor. They would soon be dead.

I understood this, and when I started my new work, I sharpened the control of quality. A large part of each day's production was rejected and had to be done over. The director and supervisor were pleased. The workers were not. Repairing rejects took time and the norms went unfilled. Unfilled norms meant we all received less bread. The resentment was directed entirely at me.

I did not care to be regarded as the prisoners' persecutor, and I did not relish the idea of their taking revenge against me. I asked the director to assemble the workers and explain to them that this was for their welfare, because otherwise the factory would be closed and they would be sent to hard labor in the forest. I also asked him to falsify the reports for the present until the work became regulated. That way the workers would receive full rations. By the end of the month, when totals were to be reported, I promised we would work harder and produce our full quota.

That was what happened. By the end of the month the work was done properly and the resentment disappeared. In fact, by that time the workers respected me and treated me with real friendship. This was intolerable to the *oper* and his informers.

Oper is the abbreviation of the Russian words *operativni rebotnik.* It was an innocent title that described the job of an officer in the special department of the NKVD who was to keep an eye on the conduct of every prisoner. The *oper* had his quota to fill too. He mainly sought sins among those whose terms were ending, so they could be tried and sentenced to longer terms. To this end, he surrounded himself with informers from among the prisoners. We were not the only ones afraid of the *oper;* many an NKVD officer found himself a prisoner thanks to the *oper's* reports.

One evening the director called me. In strictest secrecy he told me that the *oper* had complained to him: why did he assign me a light job, particularly since I had been sentenced twice under Article 58. Besides, the complaint continued, the director is tolerant of my provocative conduct and permits me to avoid work on *Shabbos.* The *oper* demanded that I be sent back to the nitrolics. The director told me his answer emphasized that it was the medical commission which transferred me from the old job, and as far as *Shabbos* went, I fulfilled my quotas conscientiously, often working through the night. He had no intention of replacing me.

My work, quite honestly, was no vacation. I had to haul large boxes of dolls. The only advantage was that often I had no work to do for an entire day because the dolls had not dried, so it was not so obvious when I did not work on *Shabbos.* I was surprised by the determined stand of the Jewish engineer. When I was first supposed to come to the factory, Zvi asked him to release me from work on *Shabbos.* His answer was that he could not do it on his own, but I could arrange it with the supervisor. Indeed, at that time he felt that this was a caprice on my part, intolerable in camp circumstances. Now he was a completely different person. As we ended our conversation he said, "For many years I was blinded by Communism. Here in Russia I finally saw how

deceived we were. I truly envy your deep faith, your refusal to compromise religious principles, even in the inhuman conditions in camp. You have succeeded in preserving human dignity and that can be an example for everyone. Maybe G-d's hand is in this. Let's hope He protects us both from that vicious *oper.*"

I was moved by his words, but the *oper* was less readily impressed. A 60 year old Jew had recently been brought to our camp, a man who had been a high official outside and here had become a weak invalid. He was assigned, of course, to hard labor, and since he could not fill his quota, his bread ration was cut to 400 grams. This man was doomed.

One evening when I was working late, this man came to me and confided that the *oper* summoned him and proposed that he inform against me, saying that he had heard me agitating the prisoners at the factory to strike and demand shorter hours and better food. The poor old man sobbed, "If they force me to any more hard labor, I shall commit suicide." The *oper* had also offered that if he became an informer, he would be sent to a store where he would do no work and have plenty to eat and drink. The very fact that he came to me with this story (if the *oper* found out it would no doubt cost him his life) showed that this man had high principles. I thanked him and reassured him that with G-d's help we should find some way to help him.

I went to Zvi at once and we decided that the only solution was to get this man out of the camp, into the central hospital some 50 kilometers away. Here in camp the *oper* would be relentless in persecuting him. The next day it happened that the *oper* was out of the camp, so the doctor sent this elderly Jew off to the hospital with the diagnosis that he needed immediate surgery. Naturally the diagnosis was fictitious, but our doctor communicated with the central hospital doctor to keep our man there for several days' hospitalization and then to keep him at that camp doing some light work. We later heard from the old man; he expressed gratitude for our successful efforts in getting him away from the *oper* and thus saving his life.

The camp fare revived my stomach ailment. The doctor

had me X-rayed and it showed that my stomach ulcer had opened again. She advised me not to have surgery. However, I must have at least 200 grams of white bread daily and the bread I would be given in camp must be dried into *sukhares* and eaten after being soaked in hot water. Getting white bread in camp became progressively more difficult. Even Zvi could hardly help me because they had simply stopped ordering white bread, even for the seriously ill.

Around that time they brought in a new prisoner, a Jewish-Romanian artist. In 1940, when Russia "liberated" part of Romania by annexing Bessarabia and Bukovina, he was arrested as a Zionist leader. At first he was sent to hard labor, but he was once caught sketching a portrait and the officer to whom he was brought was struck by the beauty of the sketch. The officer showed it to the *natchalnik.* They decided he was highly talented and could be most useful, especially to the *natchalniks* themselves.

It goes without saying that he was released from all hard labor. Now he even had opportunities to go out of the camp. Since he painted in the homes of the *natchalniks*, he was permitted to go into the city without any guards. He would come to the camp a few times a week to report, so they would know he had not escaped. At these times he would make portraits for others too, and thus he had respectable earnings.

When he learned of my illness, this man started bringing me bread from town and an occasional bottle of milk as well. This was difficult and risky since he was not permitted to bring anything into the camp. At times, the guard was nasty, searching him, confiscating the bread, and reporting him. The artist could easily have sold the bread in camp for an impressive amount, and when I offered to pay him he was insulted. To make me feel self-respecting, he agreed to take exactly what the bread cost him in the store — pennies, a meaningless sum even in camp.

"I consider it a privilege and *mitzvah* to be able to help a fellow Jew, especially a Jew like yourself who has the great strength to keep Jewish life in the awful circumstances of

camp. I was raised in a most observant family, and for several years after my *Bar Mitzvah* I never missed a day of *tefillin.* It was later, when I left home to study in the art conservatory, that I moved a little away from the religious pattern of living. Then when I saw, right here in camp, a Jew with beard and *payos,* I could hardly keep back the tears. I remembered my father and my home. I shall do all I can to help you," he promised. He kept his word.

Shortly after this he told me that he worked in the camp *natchalnik*'s home, and that, of all things, the *natchalnik* was a Jew. While painting his wife's portrait, the artist told her about me, a *kosher* Jew in camp who suffered from a serious stomach disorder because of eating only black bread for over ten years. He asked her to intervene with her husband to issue an order that I be provided with raw foods so that I might cook them as I wish, for otherwise I was threatened with death through starvation.

The wife seeemed to be truly sympathetic, but she could not propose such a thing to her husband because that would arouse suspicion that one Jew was helping another, especially since this Jew had been sentenced for "clericalism". She suggested that the camp doctor write a report to her husband, recommending that I needed a special diet since I could not eat regular camp food. Then her husband could issue the orders without any chance of being suspect.

I went right to the doctor and told her the full truth, asking for the report. But she was also afraid. She did promise to take care of this through the medical commission, however, so that she would not be suspected of favoring religious Jews. A week later the commission came, headed by the chief camp doctor. I formally asked the commission to affirm that my illness called for a special diet, and showed them prints of my latest X-rays.

In two weeks I was called to the camp administration, and when I was handed the document, I could not believe what I read. I was to receive weekly rations of dry products in quantities authorized for the hospitalized, and there was no termination date. I showed Zvi the document and he jumped

in happiness. It was his job to issue the foods to me. The norm included meat, and Zvi advised me to take it though I would not eat it, since I could sell it for a most satisfying price. I declined. First of all I did not want to derive any benefit from it. Besides, everyone in camp knew I did not eat meat, and there were swarms of informers who would rush to the *oper* to tell him. He was always receptive to any excuse for persecuting me.

Now I was a wealthy man. I had fish, 800 grams of oil, barley, and other foods. It wasn't so easy to protect a hoard like this in camp. On the job I had access to an iron box that I used to store my foods, to protect them from thieves and from mice. Every day I would discreetly take the day's food and cook it over a fire of woodchips I gathered. My stomach pains almost disappeared after a while on this diet. I could feel the improvement every day.

CHAPTER 37
Oncoming High Holidays

The autumn Holy Days were getting closer and this caused me some concern. In barely three weeks I would be away from work for a total of seven full days. I decided to discuss the problem with the manager. She was extremely cordial.

"It is a privilege for me to help a man like yourself, ready to sacrifice so much for his faith. Don't you worry. I will arrange the work schedule so that you will finish and send off all the production before the Holy Days, and then when the Holy Days fall, there will be no dolls dry and ready for shipment. That way no one will realize that you are not on the job." Then, noting the precise dates in her notebook, she added, "Don't worry. Everything will be in order. If necessary I will help you pack any backlog."

The day before *Rosh Hashana*, September 16, 1947, I went to the thieves' barrack and confided to the senior prisoner that this evening the Holy Days began and I wanted to spend the

time in his barrack, where no one would disturb me. He received me pleasantly and remarked that he remembered his childhood when he lived among Jews, and he knew that these days were the holiest ones for Jews. He would help me in any way necessary. Every barrack had a small room for drying clothes. He gave me full use of the room and instructed his men to make a key for me. No one was to bother me during these days. I asked how I could thank him and he dismissed this with a wave of the hand. "Forget it. I'm not afraid of the officials. They can't do anything to me anyway, so it's no sacrifice for me to help you. But a man like you is worth helping."

I asked Zvi to draw up a list of all the Jews in camp so we could let them know the date of *Yom Kippur*. If we could not gather for a *minyan*, then they could at least try to get out of work that day. Zvi knew the location of every Jew and he informed each one about *Yom Kippur*. We decided that for reasons of safety we would fast individually, but would gather for the breaking of the fast in the archives. Zvi spent the week gathering an appropriate supply of provisions such as bread, herring, tea, and sugar.

Zvi gave me the key to the archives for *Yom Kippur*. I said *Kol Nidre* there and the next day Zvi came and we *davened* together. That evening for *Ne'ila** the engineer in charge of the doll factory came, together with the artist and two Jewish prisoners who worked in the camp administration office. Some could not *daven*, but they all listened attentively to the *davening*. After *Yom Kippur* we all enjoyed the feast Zvi had prepared.

Everyone was so pleased with our post-*Yom Kippur* meal that we decided to celebrate *Succos* together too. Every evening we assembled in the archives, each man bringing whatever he could. The food was pooled and we shared a common meal. For *Simchas Torah*, the engineer had a great surprise for us — a bottle of whiskey, a rarity in camp, as it was strictly prohibited. I said *Kiddush* and each man said *Lechayim*.* We sat up late that night, recalling our homes and

our families, wishing each other to meet again "outside" and to celebrate joyous occasions with our families.

The next evening the engineer invited me to his room. I had the impression that he simply had a need to talk about something. "You know, I feel like I was converted. For the first time in my life I fasted on *Yom Kippur*, and for the first time I celebrated *Simchas Torah.* I am from a Reform Jewish home. Judaism consisted of circumcision, putting on *tefillin* once at *Bar Mitzvah*,* and if you married a Jewish girl the rabbi would come to officiate. I abandoned even that little bit because I became a communist when I was very young.

"Since I met you, I keep thinking about you with amazement. If I were not a witness myself, I would never believe it possible to keep *Shabbos* and keep *kashrus* in the dreadful conditions of our camp. And you've been doing this for over ten years... You can do this only with faith." He paused thoughtfully. "From observing you here in camp, I've come to the conclusion that only thanks to deep faith and only by profound observance of the religious customs were the Jewish people able to survive. Without that we would have long ago stopped existing as a nation."

I was deeply moved by his words. Our conversation lasted deep into the night. "I swear to you, as long as I am with you I will help you with everything possible so that you might keep all the *mitzvos*. And if I am ever so fortunate as to be freed, then I, too, will keep the Jewish laws. It is possible that I had to suffer so much in camp so that I could shake off communism and return to the Jewish people."

CHAPTER 38

Battle With the "Oper"

This rest was short-lived, as I faced new tribulations. Shortly after *Succos*, Zvi's ten-year term was to end and he longingly anticipated his reunion with his wife and daughter.

Instead of releasing him, they summoned him late one night to the *Spec-tchast* (special division) of the camp. This was the secret section of NKVD dedicated to seeking out fresh sins of the prisoners. Anyone who fell into their paws was pretty well doomed.

Zvi returned shattered, sobbing like a child. At the *Spec-tchast* he was informed that instead of going home he would be sent for ten years to Siberia. I tried to console him that he might not be sent to Siberia but to Kazakhstan, where he could have his family join him and arrange some sort of life until G-d granted that he be freed. I consoled him, realizing that it was nothing more than consolation.

A few days later he was pulled out of bed and escorted by two soldiers out of camp. Since he was forbidden to write to me, I had asked him to write to the chief bookkeeper. That way I would be informed of his situation. A few weeks later a letter did, in fact, come from a small town in Kazakhstan, where Zvi was working as a bookkeeper. At this point he was not in a permanent place, and Heaven only knew where he might be exiled to from there, so he did not yet send for his family to join him.

Some four weeks after they took Zvi away, the *naryadtchik** woke me one morning to tell me that, at the *oper*'s order, he was taking me off the job in the doll factory and sending me to the *vikatkes** brigade. This brigade boasted the healthiest and strongest prisoners. Their work was pulling out heavy logs from the river with ropes, hauling them up the bank, and later laying them in straight, high stacks. The *naryadtchik* apologized, "I don't know why the *oper* is sending a sick, weak man like you to such hard labor. You won't be able to take it very long. The *oper* hasn't left yet. I'd advise you to go to him right now and ask him to let you out of this work and return you to the doll factory."

I knew the methods of the NKVD and of this *oper* especially. When they wanted to break a prisoner and get some false accusations from him against another prisoner or a confession about himself, they would switch him from some

Vikatkes (Rus.): Hauling boards from river onto river-banks.

light job to the roughest one available. When the prisoner despaired, he signed anything placed before him. This was not the first time I readied myself for a struggle. I told the *naryadtchik* that I had nothing to request of the *oper.* Since I was a prisoner I must fulfill any duties assigned to me by the administration.

This conversation took place at five in the morning. An hour later I was standing at the gate ready to march out to the job with my new brigade. When I looked around at the company around me, my heart sank. There were some thirty prisoners here, the worst criminals in the camp. Every last one of them had committed more than one murder, and everyone was young and strong.

Several kilometers from camp we reached the river. It was clogged with massive logs. We clambered up the steep bank and from there we hauled the logs out of the river and stacked them. At the river down below, two ropes were attached to the log and then two men pulled it up the bank. My partner was a powerful young robber who really pulled hard, but no matter how hard I pulled I could not budge the log. We were in danger of not meeting our norm and that meant that instead of 800 grams of bread we would get 400. The bread ration in camp was literally a matter of life and death.

Concern for that bread made my partner do my work too. When he got his end up, he took my rope and thus did the work of two. This was even beyond his strength. Sweat poured down his body as he strained at the ropes. I could see his anger mount, but I was helpless.

At five that afternoon, as we finished work, he said to me with unearthly calmness, "Do you think I'm going to work for you while you sit with the rope in your hand? I can't work for two and because of you I'll lose my ration of bread and die of hunger. If I have to do your work tomorrow I'm going to lay you out dead on the spot. I have nothing to lose anyway. I've killed a dozen guys so you'll be number thirteen. There's one thing for you to do," he raised his voice here so the whole brigade could hear. "Ask the brigadier to transfer you to another job and to give me a new partner."

Back in camp the *naryadtchik* told me that the brigadier reported that all day I did no work. "It's not your Sabbath, is it? How come you didn't work? Don't you know what it means to sabotage the work?"

I answered that I intended no sabotage, in fact I did not even refuse to go out with the brigade as the *oper* ordered, but the work was simply beyond my strength. The only thing to do was to send me to a medical commission to decide if I was capable of hauling the logs.

"I have no authority to send you to a medical commission. That's up to the *oper.* I advise you," he continued with an ambiguous smile, "to go to him. A mere trifle is involved and you will be assured an easy job. Your place in the factory is not yet taken. Anybody in your position would do the same thing. It'll be easier for you and I won't have any headaches with the brigade because of you."

Now it was clear to me that the *oper* wanted me to inform for him. If I made one false step and betrayed the slightest fear of him, I was through. I did not go to the *oper.* The next day the *naryadtchik* sent me to the same job, adding a warning that if I played yesterday's game and failed to fill my norm, the men of the brigade would find some way of getting rid of me. When he saw that his warning did not have the intended effect he added, "It's not too late. The *oper* hasn't left yet." I had no intention of going to the *oper,* so I told the *naryadtchik* that I went to whatever job I was assigned. On the way, my partner of the day before informed me, in a friendly but factual way, that I would not work with him that day and to ask the brigadier to send me to another place.

In reply to my request, the brigadier said that he had an easier job for me, but a dangerous one. In fact they had to cast lots each time for this job because it was easy to get killed. This job was arranging the stacks. The brigadier offered to send the man who "won" the lottery to my old job and to give me his work. I agreed.

The logs hauled out of the river were arranged in stacks of twenty logs in a row, eighteen rows high. The logs were smeared with some lubricant to make them easier to haul.

Since the logs were not uniform — some were thicker on one end than the other — it would happen that when the top layers were being placed, a lower log would slide out of place and the whole works would come crashing down. The man on top? A bloody mess was all that remained.

Before I started, the brigadier warned me and showed me what to do in case of danger. "As soon as you feel something give, jump as hard and as far as you can, but get away from the stack." I went to work with my new partner, a young criminal convict. At first it seemed all right — the work was not particularly exhausting and everything went smoothly. About noon, after we had made several stacks, I suddenly felt something move. My partner shouted and we both jumped. It was not high, no more than four or five meters, but my foot tangled with a log that slipped off the stack, and I fell. The pain was so bad that I lost consciousness.

When I came to, I was lying on the ground and they were reviving me with water. All I could feel was the intense pain in my side and I could not keep back the screams. Even these criminals, and there were murderers among them, were shaken by my accident. The whole brigade stopped working, and they asked the soldiers who guarded us to permit them to end the day's work then so they could carry me to the camp hospital. "You can see that this man can die if he's not treated immediately," they pleaded.

The soldiers did not want to hear of this. "We have our orders. Prisoners who go out to work at seven in the morning are not to return to camp before six in the evening. It doesn't matter if there are accidents or even deaths." The brigadier, himself a thief, was infuriated by this brutal attitude. He told the guards that the entire brigade would stop work until I was taken to the hospital. The soldiers were adamant. "The only result of this action will be that instead of 800 grams you will receive 300, because we just won't go back to camp before the specified time."

This warning did not move the prisoners. No one stirred to work. For the first time in over ten years in camp, I was

witness to a collective protest. I lay there in terrible pain until five o'clock. The men contrived a litter of branches and twigs, placed me on it, and carried me to camp. I was taken directly to the hospital and the doctor was summoned. She examined me and stated that I seemed to have two broken ribs, but an X-ray was needed. She gave me some medicine to ease the pain.

The pains, however, did not diminish. I could not sleep all night. Early in the morning the doctor gave me a more thorough examination and said that the situation was not as serious as she feared. A cast would not be necessary. She bandaged me and predicted that the fractures would soon mend. Some while later she returned and I could tell she was deeply troubled. She accused me, "You have done a terrible thing to yourself and to me. I never imagined that a person like you could do such a foolish thing. This is how you repay me for the way I treated you..." Then she finally explained.

"Two weeks ago we received an order to appoint a medical commission to prepare a list of seriously ill prisoners, incurables who are incapable of working under camp conditions. Those verified by a special camp court would be freed. I used this opportunity and sent your file to the commission, suggesting that you be released. Now imagine, yesterday after your accident, I had to write another report contradicting the first. First I wrote that you are incapable of doing any work and then it appears that you were engaged in the most difficult jobs. I had to write the second report because the whole brigade failed to work a half day and they would have been tried for sabotage and that could have cost several lives.

"Naturally they won't take into consideration whether you were compelled to do the work or not. They will compare both reports and determine that the first is false. You must not forget that besides being a doctor I am an officer in NKVD. For this sort of conduct I can be demoted and even tried and given ten years camp. That will be my reward for my good treatment towards you," she said resentfully.

"Why didn't you come to me when they sent you to that

job? I would have freed you, regardless of the *oper*'s order because he has no right to do that. Now you made trouble for yourself and for me." She had tears in her eyes.

I reassured her that both reports were doubtless still in the possession of the chief doctor of the camp, who was a decent man. The thing to do was to contact him at once. Only then did I explain why I did not come to her to be freed from the work. The *naryadtchik* had kept stressing that the order had come from the *oper* and kept urging me to go directly to him to plead for a release — it was clear that the *oper* was interested in getting me to inform against another prisoner. It was possible that the *oper*'s target was Zvi, since we had not heard from him in several weeks. "In that case, I had to risk my life not to endanger another Jew, especially one who had helped me so much. Please forgive me for having caused you anguish, but you must have faith that G-d will not permit someone to stumble after having done another person a favor."

She smiled. "You certainly are an unusual man. I've never met your like," she said and left. While I reassured her, I was troubled myself. My only hope was a miracle to protect this good and gentle woman from suffering on my behalf. Later that night she brought the good news that after our conversation she had gone to the chief doctor and told him the whole truth. He gave her back the first report with the recommendation that I be listed among the gravely ill. He explained that there was no chance for its success anyway, since the *oper* had to pass on all names and he certainly would not clear me. On the other hand, the accident report would be a club over his head. The chief was going to send the report to Moscow to show the calibre of man empowered to be *oper* in our camp — a man capable of sending a prisoner in my condition to perform the hardest labor and nearly getting killed at it. "Get ready for a real battle with that scoundrel," she concluded.

CHAPTER 39

The "Oper's Plot to Frame Zvi Hershel

In two weeks I was better. My broken ribs healed, and I began thinking about the future. At midnight, a soldier came and ordered me to the *oper*. The doctor was not there, and I could not resist since the soldier had chains in his hands.

The *oper* sat at the end of a long table in a huge room. I was to sit at the other end. To show him that I was not broken, I decided to go on the offensive at once. When he told me to sit I retorted, "Twelve years ago an investigator asked me to sit, and I'm still sitting. I would rather stand and hear what you want from me."

The *oper* gave me an angry look. "In your situation I wouldn't joke. You forget that it can cost you your life."

"Depends on how a man feels. I feel I have been innocent and need ask no one for forgiveness because I have committed no crime. I have been sitting in prison for twelve years for no reason. I am still hoping for clarifiction of the wild, insane mistake and outrage perpetrated against me."

Not being interested in pursuing this any further, the *oper* asked, "Do you still get your food and dry products?"

"No. But why do you ask? You know all about it. In the office I was told that you ordered that I be given no more raw foods and that I eat from the regular kitchen like everyone else. And you also know that I will not eat from the kitchen because my religion forbids me."

He looked at me with a mixture of anger and contempt. "You are peculiar. True, I gave those orders, and I have every right to, because as long as you are in camp you have to eat just like all the prisoners, from the kitchen. Naturally," he added with a smile, "things can be arranged. In your case, for example, there's a report about your stomach ailment, even though it's really a sickness of fanaticism for your religion. But we can overlook that and arrange a compromise, but compromises must be mutual. You are a hard man. You want to enjoy everything, everyone must help you, but you refuse to help us with the smallest trifle. That's why I called you, to talk like adults. I warn you that your very life is in your hands. You can start this very day on an easy job, even at bookkeeping. You can start receiving your ration of food and dry products and you can live in camp in conditions no worse than outside."

He searched through a briefcase of documents. Finally he took out an investigation report.

"Do you know a man named Zvi Hershel?"

"Yes. He was here in camp with us."

"Is it true that he provided you with bread and sugar which he took away from others in the kitchen, and that he helped you get an easy job and dry foods?"

Not waiting for my answer, he proceeded right to the next question. I interrupted and asked him to record my answer as negative. He gave me a quick look of annoyance for disturbing him in his work and, quite ignoring my words, he went to the third and most important question.

"We know that you were friends with Zvi Hershel, and that he confided in you about his past. Amongst other things, he told you about his dealings with our Minister Beria. He told you that years ago when he, Zvi, was a high official in Moscow, he came out with a sharp criticism of Beria. Then, when Beria became a member of the Politburo and Interior Minister, Beria took revenge by sending Zvi to camp and is now exiling him."

The *oper* continued to read from the report while I stood there, blood pounding in my head from suppressed anger. "Zvi also told you that since Beria destroyed his life, he was determined to avenge himself of Beria. Now that he is no longer in camp but is in exile, he will escape to Moscow and murder Minister Beria."

The room was dead quiet for a while. The *oper* continued. "You know that you, too, can be tried for this according to Paragraph 58-12, for concealing information about a plot to attack a member of the Soviet government. You did not report this to the appropriate organs. But, as I said, with a mutual understanding, you will serve only the eight years you have left in camp and I will assure you of the best living conditions."

Assuming he had finished with me, he stood, came over to me, and handed over the document to be signed.

"I do not sign false documents," I announced.

He went back to the table and took a written investigation report from the drawer and handed it to me. "See that? Zvi Hershel has already confessed to everything I read to you. You recognize his signature, don't you?"

It was Zvi's signature, but what was written in the report I did not know, because I had no chance to read it. Besides, I was not interested. I saw that this whole business was simply another of his provocations.

"I'll tell you another thing," he said. "Three co-workers of Zvi's from the bookkeeping office verified that he told them the same thing."

"If that's the case, why do you want my declaration?"

"That's our concern," he answered a bit nervously. I was silent.

"What are you thinking?" the *oper* called out.

"I'm thinking that you're not a very good interrogator. NKVD has better. Your elementary duty before questioning me was to study my records. You would have learned that in

all the earlier interrogations in all the past years no one ever forced me to sign a false declaration. Better interrogators than you have failed. Your efforts are a waste."

Now he jumped up in uncontrollable fury. "You are ruining yourself. Zvi is receiving 25 years anyway. I only wanted to help you. If you don't care for yourself you will die like a dog. You won't escape from my hands alive. No one ever permitted himself that kind of insolence. You are going to pay for this."

The next day the *naryadtchik* told me that by the *oper*'s order I had a new job — cleaning latrines. "It's not so pleasant, especially not for you, I guess, but you know the old saying — if you have no brains you don't need years either." He looked at me sympathetically. "I thought you were a smart man, but I guess over eleven years of camp didn't teach you much. You want to fight the *oper*? Stronger men than you, and not only prisoners, even NKVD officers, couldn't lick him. You could have had an easy life, and now..." He didn't finish the sentence, and then rather defensively he added, "Don't blame me. I'm only a *naryadtchik*. I follow orders. I just can't fight everybody."

"I have nothing against you, but believe me, it's more honorable for me to clean latrines than to be on good terms with the *oper* at the price of lying against innocent men. Meanwhile, I'm not going to do this work. Since the *oper* does not honor a declaration from the medical commission that I am to have light work, I'm going to my old job at the logs."

"The brigade has already gone out to work today. Tomorrow we'll see. But I still can't understand what kind of joys you're expecting with the brigade."

I went to the doctor, told her all the details, and asked her advice and help. She gave me a release from work for the day and contacted the chief doctor by telephone. He answered that this was not simply a matter of a prisoner. It also concerned the prestige of the camp's medical staff and could not be ignored.

Next morning the *naryadtchik* told me he was called by the *Spec-Tchast*.* In compliance with the orders of the medical commission, he was to assign me only to light work. He wanted to atone for my suffering and proposed that I work in the kitchen. This was considered a plum in camp — the work was not onerous, was indoors instead of in the snow, frost, and rain, and most important, you received enough to eat. The *naryadtchik* was really distressed and could not understand when I declined the job. "Send me back to the brigade to haul logs," I told him.

I did not work again that day. That evening the *naryadtchik* said, "I guess you are no fool after all. There's an order that you may work at your profession — bookkeeping — with the condition that the chief bookkeeper vouches for your skill and agrees to employ you in his office."

I went right to the bookkeeper, who was familiar with my qualifications from when I had assisted Zvi in his work. He expressed his readiness to take me on at once. "What about Saturdays?" he asked. "I would prefer that you work Sundays instead. I need a man that day. The prisoners don't work then and they come to the office to clarify their various affairs. But the *oper* won't permit it."

I told him I was in no hurry since I might be in the hospital for some time. I knew the year was almost over and he would have to prepare the balance for the year. Since he had no qualified bookkeepers, he had no choice about me.

The doctor accepted me as a patient in the hospital, but I was afraid of losing the job as bookkeeper if they happened to find someone else and appointed him. I asked the doctor to arrange with the bookkeeper that I start working for him unofficially. I would help him with his annual balance, and in the records I would be listed as a hospital patient.

The bookkeeper accepted this proposal as a gift from Heaven. In the hospital, I was given a room with a gravely ill patient, also from that office. I was to sleep in the hospital and work in the archives room.

Spec-Tchast (Rus.): Special section.

I was pleased. First the problem of *Shabbos* was solved because hospital patients did not have to work at all. Besides, every day I received my food ration from the hospital in the form of raw foods — bread, a glass of milk, some sugar, and occasionally some potatoes as well.

At first he gave me work for a day at a time. As he saw how I performed, he began giving me work for a whole week. I started out on the annual balance. This went on through November and December.

CHAPTER 40
Revenge of the "Oper"

After these two months' work, the chief bookkeeper was convinced of my skills. I always tried to complete my work with the utmost precision. The rest of the staff were not trained bookkeepers. They picked up what knowledge they had here in camp, so they made numerous errors that had to be corrected. It was probably not out of friendship for me, although he always treated me correctly, that the chief expressed his satisfaction with my work. He had the burden of preparing the balance. Severe consequences threatened him if the balance was tardy, so he was grateful for my work.

On January 6, 1948, the chief informed me that he had arranged with the camp administration that I be officially assigned to the bookkeeping office. For the while, I might eat and sleep in the hospital. We shared one office and together we worked on the balance sheet for 1947. I spared no efforts and frequently worked late into the night. I strove to please him so that it would be in his interest to keep me in his office. That way I would have no problems with *Shabbos* and Holy Days.

This pleasant situation was not destined to last. On Wednesday, 10 *Shvat*, January 21, the doctor sent for me and in strictest confidence told me news that stunned me.

In our camp there were a great many German war criminals who were sentenced in 1945-1946 for what they had done in the occupied territories. Most of them had death sentences which were commuted to 25 years in camp. They were sent to a special camp in the far north. Some, who had fallen sick, were detained and stayed in our camp. A special commission arrived the week before from Moscow to examine the records of all the Germans. They compiled a list of over 1,000 men who would be sent in the next two weeks with a transport to a particularly severe labor camp for German war criminals.

"Imagine how I felt when I looked over the list of names and found yours among them! I was horrified. How is it possible that they plan to send you with these Nazi Jew-killers that murdered your people? This is the *oper*'s revenge. He handed the folders for the Germans to the commission and slipped yours in among them. Unfortunately, I cannot do anything because the list has been signed by the Moscow commission. The only one who can help is the Director of the camp. He can contact the commission at once and explain that a dreadful mistake was made because how does a Jew belong among this crew of anti-Semites? But I plead with you — no one must learn that you heard of this through me. Remember that I am an officer. I must confess that your life is in danger because you cannot survive. And on top of that, to die among those Nazis . . . I wouldn't have told you anything if it was not for that. But don't be discouraged. You must work hard and fast."

I reassured her and promised that even if it cost me my life, I would not save myself by endangering another, especially not her. "You seem to be the messenger to save my life. I hope that G-d, who saved me from so many perils during my years in camp, will rescue me this time as well, and this will not bring you any harm."

Tossing with worry, I did not sleep that night. I desperately sought some way out without revealing that I knew about the list. When I came to work the next morning, it

was obvious I had not slept. The chief asked, "What's the matter with you? You look different somehow. Are you sick again?"

A wild idea occurred to me at that instant. "I may not be sick, but I had the most awful dream that gave me no rest."

He gave me a funny look. "I can understand that you are religious, but do you believe in dreams too?"

"Don't joke about it," I cautioned him. "Let me tell you an experience and you will agree I'm not so naive. A year and a half ago, when my first ten year term was ending, I prepared myself to return home. My mother came to me in a dream. 'Son, a hard day is facing you tomorrow. Instead of leaving to return home, you will be sentenced for another ten years in camp. Don't break. I will pray that G-d protects your life and returns you to your family.' Imagine when, on the next day, they started a new trial and gave me ten more years. That's the term I am serving now.

"Now how do you think I should feel," I continued my little tale, "when I dreamt again of my mother last night. She warned me, 'Son, you are in terrible danger. They want to send you on a transport with terrible criminals. You must do everything not to be packed in with them because you will not survive.' "

The chief laughed. "I'm surprised that such an educated and intelligent man should believe in such fairy tales. Anyway, I have not heard that any transports are being prepared from here."

"You see," I interrupted him, "you are not well informed. The talk among the prisoners is that they're getting the Germans ready for a transport to the far north."

"What have you got to do with the Germans!" he protested. "You are a Jew and they are murderers of Jews. They have committed dreadful crimes and were sentenced to 20 or 25 years. You will probably be released from your sentence soon. After all, there is really no hard evidence against you and you are innocent. In our office, there are two

Ukrainians who served the Germans by killing people, so they received 25 years. How can it be that they won't send them and will send you? You are talking foolishness."

"This is not foolishness. It's an act of revenge by the *oper*," I insisted.

"How do you know?" I told him all about his efforts to get me to sign a false accusation against Zvi.

"I don't care what you think about me, but I cannot work under these new conditions. I'm going back to the hospital today. Maybe I'll be able to avoid the catastrophe there ..."

Now the chief took me seriously. He was quite upset. "This is sheer cruelty!" he cried out. "To send you with the Germans. But — you go to work quietly. I have an idea how to find out whether your fears are real. I'm going right to the *Speciodyel* (Special Section) and tell them that I heard they are readying a transport and I want to check whether any bookkeepers are included, so that I will have enough time to get replacements and have my annual report ready on time. They are required to let me know."

It was late afternoon when he returned, unnerved and beaten. "Yes, you are right. I'm beginning to believe in dreams. Your mother must have been a holy woman. Your information is correct. The two Ukrainians in my office are on the list and . . ." he paused awhile, apparently struggling to continue, "so are you. I argued with them. I told them it's a dirty shame to send you with the Germans. They told me secretly that they can't do anything about it. I was told that I have to intervene with the *oper* because this is his personal order.

"Well, I went to the *oper* and do you know what he said? I get the impression that you created this trouble for yourself. I can understand your refusing to sign a false accusation, but why did you have to display such contempt for the *oper*? He resents this bitterly. He told me plainly that because you permitted yourself to mock him, he swore not to let you rest. He is determined that you will not stay in this camp and he is using this opportunity of sending you on the transport.

"The only thing I could do for you is to postpone it a bit. There are to be two transports, one in a week and the other in three weeks. You were assigned to the first group but I persuaded him to let you be in the second. I told him that without you I cannot finish the balance and there will be an uproar. Moscow might well become involved then. Well, we've earned three weeks. Maybe you'll be able to think up something to save yourself," he concluded.

I did not reply. Our conversation ended without a conclusion. I continued to work hard, knowing that the chief would do me no harm, and he might well help me if only in gratitude for my work.

The only thought in my mind was how to get out of my predicament. I thought of the Jewish artist who had access to the homes of the officials. His work had become a real camp industry that enriched the officials considerably. One of the rooms in the doll factory was set aside as a studio, where five talented artists painted portraits not only for officials of our camp but also for exhibition in Moscow, where they brought fine prices. It was understood that the proceeds flowed into the coffers of the officals in our camp.

I told my artist acquaintance about my deadly situation and he reacted with horror. "Do you know, I happen to be painting a portrait in the home of the Director of our camp. He is a Jew, after all. Or maybe I can do something through his wife. She is decent. I'll try to persuade her to influence her husband to take you off that list."

Now I had a spark of hope, but as the days passed it appeared that the bookkeeping chief was right about the transports. The first was gone, and I still had no word. I was impatient to hear something, so one evening I went to the watchtower, hoping to catch the artist returning from work in the city. He was there, but as soon as I greeted him he told me that unfortunately he had no encouragement for me.

"I spoke to the Director's wife. She was distressed right from the start. She said it would be a disgrace to send a Jew like you with the Nazis. She was convinced that her husband

was unaware of the whole affair and would set it right as soon as he found out. But the next day she spoke a different language. She argued that we must not forget that we are Jews and that I know what is happening lately to Jews. Her husband is becoming afraid of his own shadow. He might be discharged any day and even tried. He ranks higher than the *oper* offically, but in the present situation the *oper* can convert him from Director to prisoner in a stroke, especially when the Director is accused of intervening on behalf of a Jew. She told me that her husband would be glad to help but he is powerless."

This disappointing news discouraged me even more. Another hope disappeared. I was depressed, unable to work properly, and kept thinking, "G-d, do not bring me to a test or to humiliation. Will I be tested by suffering among Nazis?" I prayed for G-d's help and worked as hard as I could on the balance sheets, hoping this might persuade them not to send me on that accursed transport.

One evening several days later, a juvenile prisoner, an errand boy, told me breathlessly that I was to go to the office of the doll-factory director where they were waiting for me. I was to drop the work I was doing.

As I opened the door, an elegantly dressed young girl greeted me. I had spent years in camp, seeing only prisoners or people in uniform, so she looked like a princess. Her clothes and her face indicated that hers was not a life of hardship. She seemed to be about 18 or 19 years old. She greeted me in Russian, and without giving her hand, asked me to sit.

"I know all about you, even that your name is on the list of the transport with the Germans. I want to help you avoid the suffering but I need precise information about your biography."

I was shaken by this most unexpected meeting. Who was this mysterious young lady? It was obvious that she came from the free world. How did she get in? Who sent her? Who gave her my name and told her about me? She might be NKVD, but for what purpose? Might she be my redeeming

angel? I decided to be cautious and tell her only what was recorded in my file. She seemed to understand my thoughts.

"Don't be upset by my questions. I know I am taking liberties, but I must in order to save you. Please answer me exactly. I promise that whatever you say will remain between us. Tell me, during the time of your imprisonment, was the camp you were in ever occupied by the Germans, even for a day, an hour?"

"My child, I don't know who you are. Let me tell you that if my camp had been occupied by the Germans for an instant, we would not be talking now. They would have murdered me just as they did all the Jews. Besides, this can be established by checking my records."

"If that's the case then I understand everything clearly now." She pondered a while, then called out. "*Rebbe*! Give me your blessing that I might succeed. I am determined to do everything to save you even at the highest cost. But swear to me that no one learns I was here."

I wished her that G-d bless her endeavors and promised to keep the secret. It made no sense to ask her who she was, not in this situation. I was more cheerful. Even here in "Sodom" there were people who wanted to help me.

I returned to my work at the office. A week passed with no word or sign from her. Exactly eight days later the messenger boy came again — I was to go to the same room of the doll-factory director.

The girl sat there, but I hardly recognized her. Her face had lost its freshness, and her cheeks were sunken and pale, but her smile was triumphant. "Congratulations! You are off that cursed list. You won't go with those Nazis. I'll tell you all the details but first please get me a glass of tea and a bite of food from the painter, because I'm about to collapse from hunger."

Now I was really mystified. I went to the painters for a bit of food for the young lady. The painters never lacked for food because the officials reaped a prosperous harvest from their work, so they saw to it that the painters lacked nothing. I had

never asked them for anything, and they were surprised by my visit. But they graciously gave me tea and sugar and a packet of biscuits.

My guest threw herself at the snack. She was obviously starved. I sat there watching her, wondering at the change in her. She finished her snack, caught her breath, and started.

"Are you puzzled about my conduct? Well, I can finally tell you everything. First, though, let me introduce myself. I am the daughter of the camp Director. Two weeks before I first saw you, the Jewish painter was at our home. He made a magnificent fresco on our salon wall. My mother was in the room while he worked, constantly offering him tidbits to eat, because she felt compassion for an innocent man imprisoned and working without compensation. This time they spoke in Yiddish, and I could not follow the conversation. However, I did not need an interpreter to tell me when both of them wept and when my mother said words of solace to him.

"Late that evening my mother had a long argument with Father, and he kept answering, 'No. No. I cannot.' Then they threw in a great many Yiddish words, apparently so that I would not understand.

"I was intrigued and rather upset by this business. In our home, a child simply does not mix into parents' matters. I understood that my parents' argument was a continuation of the conversation with the painter. When he came the next morning I tried to overhear their conversation. Again they had tears in their eyes and Mother kept repeating, 'No. It's impossible,' and expressions like that.

"When the painter left, I confessed to Mother that I happened to overhear their talk, and I presumed it was a matter of money that the painter needed to send to his family. 'If you can't help him,' I offered to mother, 'I have saved some 400 rubles that you can let him have.'

"Mother broke into tears at this. It was not money, she explained, and said I was too young to get involved in this affair. Besides, there was nothing I could do to help. No matter how I pleaded, she refused to say anything about the matter. I

did not believe her, so the next day when Mother happened to go out marketing, I went into the salon with my 400 rubles and said to the painter that I had the impression that he was in a financial predicament, so I wanted to lend him my savings and he might repay me some day.

"The painter was moved by this, but he explained that there was no money problem. Just like Mother, he refused to tell me anything, with the excuse that I could not help anyway. I was stubborn and refused to accept this and he finally told me about you. He said that you had spent over twelve years in the camps and were guilty only of being religious and faithfully observing Jewish precepts. The Administration was going to send you to a camp for Nazi war-criminals.

"Weeping, he told me this and then he urged me, 'If you are a Jewish daughter with a Jewish heart, you must persuade your father to save this Jew, because sending him to that camp is a death sentence for him. Maybe I should not tell you, but your father signed the order to send him on that transport and only your father can countermand the order.' He added that if I ever revealed to anyone that he spoke to me of this, then he too would be in deadly peril.

"This had a terrible effect on me and I was determined to talk to Father about it. Let me say first that I don't know what people think of him. It's possible that the prisoners consider him harsh because he is, after all, the camp *natchalnik*. But I assure you he is an honorable man. I have never detected any falseness in him. He never told me a lie, and if he cannot explain something, he just refuses to discuss it.

"Almost every night Father comes to my room to say good-night, and we have a chance to discuss my studies, books I have read, and so on. That evening, I told Father at once that I knew all about you. 'How could you sign an order condemning an innocent man to certain death, especially a man like that!' I demanded of him. 'You are a Jew too, even if not as religious. You have one choice — either you withdraw your signature and arrange for him to stay in this camp or you will lose your only daughter.'

"At first Father was angry. 'What do you mean — I will lose you? What do you plan to do?'

" 'I shall declare a hunger strike,' I told him, determined to carry out my threat. 'I shall not taste food until you cancel the order sending that man with those cursed Nazis.'

"Father sprang up. 'Are you insane? Do you realize what you are assuming? And did it occur to you that you might lose your father?' He sat down and when he regained control of himself, he spoke to me patiently.

" 'I have never told you about my work, but since it's gone this far I will tell you the whole truth. You are old enough and should know. If you are ready to defend this Jew against abuse, then remember that I too am a Jew, and the situation of Jews today is extremely delicate. I only signed the order to send the Jew with the German transport, but the initiator was the operations officer of NKVD. I am the official *natchalnik* of the camp but the actual boss is the *oper.* I grant that it is an illegal step he took, but the fact is that if I provoke a fight over this matter, then he will convert me from a *natchalnik* to a prisoner. It is not out of the question that it might cost me my life.'

"For a long time I could not find an answer to his arguments. Then I realized that my father was in tragic circumstances. I started to cry. 'But you yourself said it's illegal. What right do you have to secure your life at the cost of this innocent Jew? Besides, if the *oper* is that kind of anti-Semite and bandit, he won't spare you anyway. The sooner you defy him the more respect he will have for you. The more you give in, the more he'll stamp on you. In any case, you have not convinced me. Today I'm starting to fast and I will continue until you arrange for that man to stay here in camp. I don't care if I die trying.'

"Father became very angry. He stalked out of the room without even saying good night.

"The next day was the first of my hunger-strike. I ate nothing. Mother cried all day long. At night she tried to persuade me. 'You won't help that Jew in any way, but you

will succeed in destroying Father and yourself. This is a time of persecution for Jews. They are just looking for a pretext to make a trial. All they need is to learn of your hunger-strike, or that you are at all familiar with what goes on in camp, and Father goes on trial.'

"It hurt to see Mother suffer. Then, too, I was hungry — for the first time in my life. I felt that if I got into a discussion with Mother I would break, so I told her that her words were useless, that I had made my decision. She cried hysterically and left my room.

"I was weak by the third day. My head seemed to swing in circles. At night Father looked in on me in my room and then left without uttering a word. He returned a while later with a Jewish professor, a friend. The professor examined me, and I did not resist. I asked the professor not to force me to eat. I threatened that if they tried force-feeding, I would scream loud enough to arouse the neighbors. I could not hear what the professor told my parents, but his gestures showed that he considered my condition to be serious.

"The professor returned the next morning, the fourth day of my fast. My father was not home that late. He examined me again and tried to persuade me at least to drink some milk, otherwise I was in danger of dying. I was too weak to answer, but I motioned with my hand that I refused. He and Mother left the room, apparently to telephone Father, who came at once from work.

"I had never before seen my father cry. He begged me to taste some milk at least, and he promised that he would talk to the *oper* that very day and he might succeed in cancelling the order about you.

"I was alert enough to realize that victory was at hand. Father tried to force some milk into my mouth but I clenched my teeth and it all spilled.

"Father left and returned late that night. As he walked into my room he called out. 'Daughter, you've won! Now you can quit this crazy business. I have struck that Jew's name from the list.'

"Father felt insulted when I did not believe him at once. 'I give you my word. In his place we assigned a German engineer we had earlier considered keeping here because he is a specialist with talents we need.'

"I must tell you that it was the first time in my life that I did not believe my father, but when he gave me his word I apologized. Father agreed that as soon as I was able to go, he would take me to his office and show me the list with your name missing. He kept his word. Today I was finally able to get about, and Father drove me here. I spoke to a dependable colleague of my father from the *Spec-Tchast*, who verified that you are off the list and the German engineer is on. That engineer, by the way, has plenty of Jewish lives on his conscience. So, I came right over to share the good news with you."

Hearing this remarkable account from the girl, I did not realize that all this time tears were pouring down my cheeks. I just sat there engrossed and did not interrupt with a single word. Now that she finished I could not utter a word. How was it possible that such a child, raised in a home devoid of *Yiddishkeit*, could have the capacity for such self-sacrifice to save a Jew, especially one she had never seen. For me this was a miracle.

The room was silent until she spoke in a tone of thoughtful gentleness. "Well *Rebbe*, now you need not cry any more." Only then did I come to my full senses, like awakening from a dream. I thanked her as warmly as I could and expressed my hope that G-d would reward her for her deed and keep her from harm always.

"I have a question to ask. What is the meaning of the word *Olam Haba**? When my parents were arguing about you, Mother repeated this word several times. I understand that it is a Yiddish word but I don't know what it means."

I described the obligation of every Jew to keep the commandments of the *Torah*, that for violating the Commandments there was *Gehinnom.** *Gan Eden** awaited those who performed good deeds.

Olam Haba (Heb.): World to Come, Paradise.

"Oh *Rebbe*, I am sure that *Gan Eden* awaits you, because you have the power to keep the Commandments here in camp, like not working *Shabbos*, not eating non-*kosher* food. I'm probably going to have *Gehinnom* because in our home we eat non-*kosher*, we don't keep *Shabbos*, and I haven't even the vaguest notion about how to *daven*."

Here I interrupted her. "Our holy Torah teaches that whoever preserves a life of a Jew is like one who saves the whole world. Saving one Jew is like saving the world. My child, you have performed the greatest *mitzvah*; one I have not been privileged to perform. Your *Gan Eden* is infinitely greater than mine."

"You are extraordinary! I've never met anyone like you. I want to assure you that as much as possible, I will live like a devoted Jewish daughter. I want so much to prove that to you. You must promise me that when you are freed you will visit me. For me, and I'm sure for my parents too, you will always be a most welcome guest." To show that the invitation was not merely a formal gesture she added, "Do you know, lately they've been taking Jews off all responsible positions. My father is smart. He won't wait until he is fired and maybe even jailed. He decided to resign and has even obtained a home for us in another city where we have relatives. I will give you the address and you must promise that when you are released — and I'm certain that day will come — you will visit us."

"Child, by Jewish law I cannot make such a promise. But I do hope that when I am freed and happen to be in your city, I can call on you. I hope that by then, with G-d's help, you will be married to a young Jewish man and will have children of your own."

She looked at me and suddenly tears appeared. "I don't know whether we will ever meet again. Give me your blessing that your words be fulfilled." I did as she asked. She went into the painters' room as she did at her last visit, because she came with the pretext of calling on the painters. This was acceptable because the families of the administration frequently came to pose for portraits. She wanted to avoid the possibility of

anyone suspecting that she met with a prisoner in camp, for this could have terrible consequences for her father, particularly in these tense times.

The next morning a Jew came to my barrack, and as I greeted him he burst into sobbing. "Reb Avraham, you know who I am? David. I have worked as an agronomist in camp for eight years, in charge of the farm. Compared to camp standards, I lived a reasonably confortable life. But now they have sent me to the transfer camp, and from here I am to be sent to another 'special camp' for serious criminal convicts. They say that no one has yet returned from that camp alive. I only have a year and some months left to my sentence. I have lost one eye and the other is going blind. Please bless me to return from that camp to my family with a healthy eye."

"*Reb* David, you think that because you are clever you had a soft job for eight years. You're wrong. Remember, *Reb* David, that there is a *Ribono Shel Olam.** He made the world and He conducts the world. He gave you an easy life for eight years in camp. Now you are going to another camp. *Reb* David, the *Ribono Shel Olam* is in that camp too. He will provide you with a decent life there and He will return you to your family in good health. With that eye you will see your family and you will be privileged to see the land of Israel. The main thing, *Reb* David, is to keep your faith in the A-lmighty and not to forget that He will redeem us from all our sufferings here.

"You will see that He will bring us back to our families and our homeland." Upon hearing this, *Reb* David's tears subsided, and he became full of hope.

"Quick! Move! You must leave now," roared the commander. As we parted, Reb David embraced me, and we said our heartfelt good-byes. His eyes reflected the unspoken sentiment that we both shared.

(Nineteen years later we met again under different circumstances, which I will relate with G-d's help, in another book.)

Ribono Shel Olam (Heb.): "Master of World," G-d.

CHAPTER 41

I Work In The Bookkeeping Department

The next evening I went to the doctor to tell her the good news. When she heard that I was off the list to be sent with the Nazi transport, she exclaimed in delight, "Now I see that there is a G-d!" I had never heard that word from her, though she frequently threw Yiddish terms into our conversations. She was beside herself with happiness and relief. I would be able to remain in the hospital for the time being, she said.

When the German transport left without me, I felt a surge of encouragement at my improved situation. I threw myself energetically into my work, working late into the night, for now my ambition was to complete the annual balance fifteen days before the deadline, by March 1st. Naturally the award for this achievement would go to the chief and not to me, but still my position would be strengthened and my chances for remaining permanently in the bookkeeping office would be much better.

I must admit that the chief treated me properly. The balance was ready on time. I spent several hours reviewing the figures with the chief. He prepared himself for the trip to Moscow the next day. He was so pleased with my work that he showed it to the camp director. He returned with several items of good news for me.

The camp director agreed that my excellent work deserved a reward — 10 kilos of fresh potatoes. This was a treasure and became my first reserves for Passover. Happy as I was with this, the next bit was infinitely more pleasing. The *oper* was leaving camp for Moscow, where he would take a two-year course. After lengthy negotiations, the director agreed that

when the chief returned from Moscow I should be officially assigned to his office. The director also consented "unofficially" that I need not work on *Shabbos* and *Yom tov.* Before he left, the chief said I could relax until he returned.

My first piece of business was to take possession of those potatoes. There was a special store in camp where prisoners could keep their valuables. Two elderly prisoners lived there and kept an eye on the deposits to avoid any thievery. I kept a locked valise there too, and that was where I put my potatoes. Then I went to the hospital to sleep.

The bed next to mine, which had been unoccupied for a long while, now had an occupant. The next morning when I awoke, he was still asleep. I went to a secluded place where I *davened* regularly and on returning, my new neighbor greeted me and introduced himself.

Yosef seemed to be about thirty years old. We had a lot in common. He was from Vilna and when the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, he volunteered for the Red Army. A short while later, when a separate Lithuanian army was organized, he was transferred to the Lithuanian brigade. He served at the front almost until the end of the war. He was wounded three times but always returned to his battle post. Nevertheless, he and the other Jews who served with him did not receive a single citation, while the Lithuanians, including many who hardly fought, were festooned with medals and distinctions.

One night in January 1945, when they were already on German soil, he and some Jewish soldiers sat talking together, naturally about Jewish troubles. He remarked to his friends that any Jews who were privileged to survive the war and Hitler, should go to Palestine. They should organize their own country and never more be subjects of foreign nations in alien lands.

That night he was awakened and taken to the military branch of NKVD. After hours of uninterrupted questioning, he was given a confession to sign. Since he did not understand Russian, he asked them to call another Jew who had served with him to translate.

The first lines were correct, reporting what he had said to his comrades that evening, but then there was a statement attributed to him that he never uttered: "Since they will never let us out of here, we Jews must organize a revolt to overthrow the Soviet Union and restore the Czar, because only then will all the Russian Jews be able to go to Palestine to establish their own country."

Yosef refused to sign such lies. The interrogator called three soldiers who commenced to beat him murderously, breaking his right arm and severing the nerves. Yosef fell unconscious. He regained consciousness in a room by himself. The pain was excruciating so he shouted for a doctor, but no one even opened the door. Several hours later, without having any medical attention, he was taken back for interrogation.

He was in agony, but the interrogator smiled and said, "I guess you won't sign the confession with your right hand. That's too bad. But I have a great idea for you. Sign with your left hand. If you insist on being stubborn, I'm afraid you won't be able to do that either. But let's be serious." He seemed to think his humor was hilarious. "Sign and we send you right to the hospital. You will be cured and then discharged, from the Army and from prison too."

Yosef was terrified. He had no doubt that the interrogator would do exactly as he threatened, and being a cripple without hands was worse than dying. Yosef signed. He was taken to the hospital, as promised, but he was given no treatment. He lay there for several weeks. The swelling subsided but his right arm atrophied and hung limp. After several months of prison, the military court sentenced him to ten years' camp.

He spent several moderately tolerable years in his first camp. He worked in the kitchen where the work was not hard and there was enough food. But then the fad of the moment dictated that Zionism was the worst sin. Orders came for his transfer to a camp where he received particularly severe discipline.

For two long months of a harsh winter, his transport dragged its way from prison to prison. He fell ill en route with high fever, so he had been brought to the transfer point of our

camp. The doctor examined him there and ordered that he be sent directly to the hospital. He was seriously ill by this time.

When he saw me he was astonished, never expecting to meet a Jew with beard and *payos* in camp. His morale was as weak as his body. While still in the army, he was in Vilna and found that all of his large family and many friends had been murdered by the Nazis. He poured out his grief to me. "Why do our people suffer so?"

Attempting to comfort and encourage him, I told him about my experiences in thirteen years of labor camps. "Do you know where I found the strength to live through all this? In our religion, you have to look at whatever happens with more than the dry mind, but as part of G-d's Providence. In these 2,000 years of exile we endured more than many nations, but G-d did not abandon us. We outlived our enemies and are still His people." Yosef was ignorant of anything happening in the world. I told him about reconstructed European Jewish communities, and more important, that *after* the Holocaust the Jewish state was built up in Israel.

Slowly he began to regain his balance and his faith. My words helped him. The doctor played a major role, providing him with the finest medications available in camp and with proper and adequate food. He was a new man in two weeks. He stood erect now, and his values were radically different. For years he had been alienated from Judaism and now he began saying daily blessings and he used my *siddur* daily to *daven*. Naturally we were most cautious about all this since the deadly charge of Zionism hung over him.

I started making efforts to have Yosef remain in our camp, because I was now in a position to arrange for him to be assigned to light work. The doctor agreed to verify in writing that he was a complete invalid, a valid statement. This document would qualify him for light work. The director of the doll factory, the Jewish engineer from Germany, agreed to hire Yosef at the factory. He also gave him a place in the factory workers' barrack where conditions were better than among the criminals.

Yosef soon learned to manage on the job with his left

hand, and when he started reaching his norm he was given the normal ration of bread and sugar. We met together every Saturday night. I taught him the Five Books of Moses, the Prophets, and the Writings by memory. He became a man infused with faith strong enough to help him survive the bitter years.

My situation changed radically too. The chief bookkeeper returned from Moscow highly satisfied with my work since he had received an award for it. A few days before this, a new Director for the camp arrived to replace the Jew who was discharged. The chief told me that he had arranged with the new Director that I would be the chief's official representative. I would share his room and would be authorized to sign documents in his absence. He was frequently away on visits to the different divisions of the camp to check their finances. The bank, of course, would not honor a prisoner's signature. I suggested that in such cases one of the duty officers could sign. I would be quartered in the bookkeepers' barrack.

The next day I was summoned to the new Director with my chief. He impressed me from the start as a liberal person, a rarity among camp directors. He did not address me from the lofty heights of a Director deigning to talk to a lowly prisoner. He asked me to sit, studied me a while, and then began.

"So you are the religious Jew that makes so much trouble with his conduct. The main problem is your beard and *payos*. I even have a report on that. I know you won't surrender, and besides I have no intention of being the one to force you. But I do want to resolve this matter formally. I don't want the officer in charge of regulation conformity to come pestering me about this all the time. Now I suggest that you request the head of the sanitary division, the doctor, to give you official permission to wear a beard and *payos* and to declare that, from the standpoint of hygiene, she has no reservations."

After this introduction he began defining my duties and functions. The director already knew that I did not work on *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov*. He had no objections as long as I fulfilled my duties the other days. Then he imposed a distasteful duty on me.

Officers came to the office frequently with requests to authorize payment of money to them or for requisitions from the store, for which they are not entitled. "You understand," the Director explained to me, "I can't keep squabbling with them all the time. I'm not required to go checking into all the little details anyway. Therefore I shall issue orders to the storekeeper and the cashier that without your signature, they are to ignore my signature. If the request is not according to regulations, it is your responsibility not to sign. I know that the officers will curse you and threaten you, but I won't permit anyone to abuse you on this account," he reassured me.

This cozy arrangement was nothing new to me. I had enough experience in bookkeeping offices of Soviet undertakings. It was a convenient way for the big shots to deflect the resentment of the underlings to some subordinate official. In this case it was particularly attractive because the subordinate was a prisoner.

I thanked him and declared that since he demonstrated so much understanding and friendship, I would spare no efforts and time in discharging my responsibilities according to his instructions.

The chief bookkeeper was not a bad person, but like so many Russians he had a fondness for drinking. Under the pretext of a trip to check camp finances, he could go off for several days on a drinking bout with his buddies. I, of course, finished everything promptly. He appreciated this and kept his part of our bargain. He was always in the office on Friday and Saturday so that my absence would not be noticeable. Our relationship was pleasant for both of us.

On April 10, I received a package of *matzos* from my wife. With those 10 kilos of potatoes, I was now assured of a decent Passover. I repacked the *matzos* in a fresh sheet and took them to the bookkeeping archives where I was now boss. Another parcel came several days later, with tea, nuts, and sugar. There was enough to feed me and Yosef throughout Passover. I contacted Yosef and explained the seriousness of eating *chometz* on Passover and convinced him he should eat with me and join me for a *seder*. He agreed to the *seder* at once, but he had reservations about sharing my food.

I taught him the *Torah* principle that "All Israel (Jews) are responsible for one another." My wife sent the parcels, but she could not have done that alone. Many Jews helped her. We belonged to a community that helped each other.

I mentioned an example — my fight with the officer who was determined that I shave off my beard and *payos*. He waged a war of nerves, but when I did not crack, G-d sent the doctor who verified that my beard was clean and I was not required to shave it off. A man was always presented with tests, but when he succeeded in overcoming them, he realized how foolish it would have been to submit and surrender.

Ten years in camp constantly taught me that I would have succumbed long ago had I lost faith, even in the severest cicumstances. My strength was the hope that G-d would help us become free and return us to Israel where we should live as free Jews.

The day before Passover was a Friday. My chief kept his word, assuring me that I might celebrate without fear but warned me to be careful that no one should realize what was happening. That afternoon I went to the archives, where I had long ago prepared new utensils. I found the little electric hotplate hidden away since the last year, when I had celebrated Passover with Zvi. I tidied up the little room and cooked up some potatoes and tea. That evening Yosef came. We *davened* and sat down to the *seder*.

When we reached the "Fourth Cup" of tea, Yosef broke down in tears. "I'm 31 years old. I haven't been at a *seder* since I was a boy of thirteen. Since then I've been completely torn away from Judaism. Now, after all these years, I'm at a *seder* again, and where — in a Soviet prison camp!"

We stayed at the *seder* until midnight, when we returned to our quarters. I gave him some baked potatoes for breakfast and arranged for him to come to the archives for lunch. I would prepare *matzos* and potatoes so he would not have to eat any *chometz*.

Yosef stood by his decision and ate no *chometz* all eight days. That first day he came for lunch. In the evening we

cooked potatoes and tea and had the second *seder*. We ended very late so we spent the night in the archives. The next day was Sunday and he did not have to go to work, so we *davened* and had a delightful *Yom Tov*.

That evening I went to the office to catch up on the work missed because of Passover. I prepared food for both of us. Yosef and I would meet in the archives for breakfast and supper each day.

The last days of Passover were Friday and *Shabbos*. It occurred to me to try to get Yosef freed from work these days. He agreed, although he did not think my chances for success were very high. I went to the supervisor, the Polish sculptress in the doll factory. I tried to concoct some sort of excuse for Yosef, but she interrupted, "I know that you have Passover now. From the bottom of my heart I wish you a joyous holiday. But just beware of the informers or else we can all get into terrible trouble."

Thursday evening Yosef and I prepared a meal in the archives. After we *davened* and had our festival repast, I told him about the miracle of the Red Sea. The miracle of the sea's parting was a demonstration that man is capable of resisting the flood currents. Evil often threatens to drown us, overwhelm us, but with our faith we can stand firm against the current and remain committed Jews and honorable men. Even in our strict camp, the two of us Jews celebrated the *seder*, observed our Holy Days, ate no *chometz*, and none of our enemies could interfere.

We hardly set foot outside the archives for two days, keeping out of the sight of the officials so they would not notice that we were not working. We spoke endlessly about world affairs. Yosef admitted that before arriving in the camp he was disillusioned with everyone and everything. He had been at the brink of suicide. Now he was beginning to realize that you just do not live spontaneously. Things do not just roll along. There is Someone in charge, G-d, whose Providence guides the world, and there are laws we are to obey.

On Friday night, we *davened*, ate our *Shabbos-Yom Tov*

meal, and sang songs . We decided to spend the night in the archives. The next day, after *davening* and the *Shabbos* meal, I taught him *Shabbos* laws. We did not notice how rapidly the day passed. We *davened Mincha* and *Maariv* and chanted *Havdala.* These days we spent together left us feeling that we were not in the accursed camp. We were free men. We decided to meet every Friday evening, to spend time in the way Jews are supposed to spend *Shabbos.* But . . . it was not to be.

Two days after Passover the doctor sent for me to tell me, confidentially, that a commission had arrived to select a certain number of sick and infirm prisoners to be sent to a farming camp in Kazakhstan. The climate was milder, the camp regime less severe, and the work less demanding.

"It is true," she granted, "that at the moment your situation is much improved here, but who can foretell what tomorrow will bring. Right now I am here and I can help you, but one bright and sunny day they can decide to transfer me. If you would like, I can arrange for you to appear before the commission and have you sent to Kazakhstan."

I thanked her and explained that I did not select camps. I left that decision to G-d's providence. We decided she would make no particular efforts and whatever the commission determined would be acceptable.

The next day several thousand prisoners, including myself, appeared before the commission. The first question concerned my occupation. When I answered that I worked in the bookkeeping office, they said that my specialized skills were needed where I was. Since I did not work in the forest, and many years had acclimatized me to the weather conditions, they felt I was in no particular danger.

That night a gleeful Yosef told me that he was being sent to Kazakhstan. He suffered terribly from the cold. The only drawback for him was being separated from me.

It was not very easy for me either, I must confess, but I comforted him that G-d was everywhere, Kazakhstan too. The important consideration was the better conditions in that

camp, where the work was lighter, and chances were better for release. A few days later we said good-bye. I obtained some *sukhares* to give him for the trip. He was gone and I was alone again. Yosef had been like a brother.

CHAPTER 42
Escape From Under the Knife

Conditions were better, but my workload was heavy. The chief would leave me with full responsibility for weeks at a time. All day long I was busy with his duties. At night I had my bookkeeping to complete.

Shavuos fell on Sunday and Monday, June 13 and 14, so that I could not work for three consecutive days. The chief had no objections. I could spend all three days in the archive, *davening*, reading Psalms, and simply resting. After the holiday, we had to rush to prepare the semi-annual balance for submission by August 1.

I met the deadline, but my health deteriorated. Besides the swelling in my abdomen, I was blessed with a new malady — hemorrhoids. They made my life a misery. I lost a great deal of blood, and none of the medicine the doctor prescribed gave any relief. The real cause was the black, pasty bread I ate, but that bread was my only nourishment. I could not take any of the non-*kosher* food from the kitchen and other bread was not to be found.

The doctor recommended surgery, otherwise my life was in peril. She assured me that the head of the central camp hospital was a decent Jew and a good surgeon, so she would send me to him and ask him to operate on me for the hemorrhoids and the swelling. She promised me that in two months I would be fully recovered and able to eat even that black bread.

I discussed this with my chief and arranged that he assume

my duties for the period of my hospital stay. I obtained a white shirt from which I made a white *yarmulka** and a special *talis-katan* that looked like a shirt. The *tzitzis* were tucked in. I knew they would not permit me to wear my regular *talis-katan*.

One day an auto came to carry me to the camp's central hospital. I was sent to the bathhouse and was given fresh underclothes. In the bath they said I must shave off my beard and *payos* or I could not be admitted into the hospital. That sickened me. I saw through the window that the car had not yet left, so I asked them to give me my clothes back — I was returning to camp. Under no conditions would I permit them to touch my beard and *payos*. They called a doctor who, of course, verified that I must shave. I told him categorically that I declined the operation and would not permit the shaving of my beard and *payos*.

He left and a nurse appeared shortly. She whispered to the bathhouse attendant, and from his gesticulations it seemed that after an argument he agreed with her. As she left he said to me, "Why didn't you say at once that you are a Jewish Rabbi? We won't bother your beard in that case."

The doctor who received incoming patients studied my papers, examined me, and said, "We'll perform both operations at the same time. Don't worry. Everything will be just fine," he added reassuringly when he saw that I was a bit perturbed. This doctor obviously was a Gentile. I was upset about my own doctor — had she deceived me when she promised that the head doctor, the surgeon who would operate, was Jewish? I didn't answer about the two operations and I was then taken to a room and shown my bed.

The same nurse reappeared, the one who had intervened in the shaving business. She was clearly Jewish, and I asked her point-blank about my fears.

"Your doctor was well informed, but that doctor left two days ago for Moscow and this surgeon is his substitute. He is a *Vlasovietz*, an anti-Semite. I wouldn't advise you to undergo two operations at once, especially not the stomach operation.

Yarmulka (Heb.): Skull cap, worn by observant Jews.

That's a delicate one." (Vlasov was a Soviet general, commanding a large army in the Ukraine. Early in the Second World War he went over to the Germans, his army donning German uniforms, fighting alongside the Nazis against the Red Army. The *Vlasovtzes* distinguished themselves by their diligence in murdering Jews in territories occupied by the Nazis in Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, White Russia, and so on. When Germany fell, Vlasov and a large part of his army were captured by the Russians, and naturally, tried. This surgeon was one of Vlasov's men and was serving ten years.)

We decided that I should ask for only the hemorrhoid operation now. This operation was less complicated and my request could be justified since it would stop the bleeding. This, we calculated, might last long enough for the Jewish surgeon to return. The nurse remarked that it was good I brought a white *yarmulka,* because the doctor would probably not permit an ordinary one. But she could not understand why I wore two shirts. When I explained that the second was a *talis katan* she warned me to hide the *tzitzis,* for otherwise the *Vlasovietz* would order it removed, claiming it violated sanitary regulations.

The problem of eating came next. My condition demanded that I eat cooked food daily, but I could not take food from the non-*kosher* kitchen. Since I had a little money, she bought me some farina barley. "I have an electric hotplate in my room to sterilize needles. Every morning at 11:00, after the doctor's call, come to my room. I'll get you some milk and you'll cook some *kasha* every day."

Several days passed while I became a bit stronger and they prepared me for surgery. It went well. The operation was not very difficult. For five days afterwards, I tasted nothing but milk and tea. On the sixth day, the doctor examined me and permitted me to start eating *kasha* and white bread. By the seventh day after the operation I had not had a bowel movement. I had intense pains that worsened by the day. Fortunately a Jewish doctor from a nearby camp happened to visit our hospital and he called on me. I told him about my problem with the movements and he seemed most perturbed, hurrying off to fetch the surgeon.

Both examined me and found that a dressing placed on the large intestine should have been removed after a day, but was not. The *Vlasovietz* acted innocent, calling for the nurse and accusing her of neglecting to follow his instructions about removing the dressing. The poor woman took his abuse in silence, afraid to reply especially in the presence of another doctor. Later she swore to me that he never told her a word about the dressing. Now he gave instructions for baths and medications. They were effective. I was able to relieve myself within a few hours. The pains disappeared.

On my account, the Jewish doctor stayed overnight, and visited me the next day. He was pleased with my appearance. "You have luck. Another day or two and you could have had complications. It is impossible for an experienced physician like that Vlasovietz to do such a thing unintentionally. He knew what he was doing."

When I remarked that I was scheduled for another operation on my intestines, he cried out, "*Rebbe*! Don't you dare! Don't let him do it."

That was easy to say, but they did not ask the prisoner in camp for his consent, even when he was sick. There was only one way out of this — escape. But where? How?

Into a cotton garment I had secretly sewn 100 rubles for some emergency need. I asked the nurse to get the garment from the storeroom so that I could get the money. There was a *naryadtchik* at the hospital whose job was transferring recovered patients to their camps. There being no exceptions to the principle that everyone takes money, I decided to make a transaction with the *naryadtchik*.

I asked the nurse to inform the *naryadtchik* that I was prepared to pay him 100 rubles, a most significant sum in camp, if he placed my name on the discharge list to return to my camp. The next afternoon, the *naryadtchik* told me that six patients were to be discharged that evening, all going to my camp. He could add my name to the list. He warned me that I would have to cover the journey of some 50 kilometers on foot.

I gave no thought to the danger and immediately agreed to go. They brought my clothes and that evening, when the doctor was long gone, I set out with the other six on the long and hazardous trip. After five kilometers I felt weak, and could feel blood from my wound, which must have opened. I could not proceed, so I asked the two soldiers convoying us to stop and let me rest.

The soldier asked what happened. I told him I was just operated on and he was frightened by that. "Why did they sign you out in that condition?" I confessed that they did not sign me out, but I was afraid of going under the *Vlasovietz*'s knife. This gained the soldiers' sympathy, for they despised the *Vlasovietzes* as traitors.

I sat in a field. A peasant came by on a wagon. The soldiers stopped him, put me on, and ordered him to ride with us to the camp. The peasant tried to resist, but they showed him a rifle. "You can ride with us or else get off and we'll ride without you." An eloquent flow of impressive imprecations issued from the peasant and off we rode. All night we dragged on and arrived at dawn. I did not have the strength to climb down myself. They carried me into the hospital and set me down in a corridor.

In about two hours the doctor came, and in surprise called out, "What in the world happened to you?"

She listened attentively as I described my adventures. "You are a fortunate man. You can thank G-d He saved you from death." They carried me to a room, put me in a bed, and the doctor examined me.

"You're in no danger. Just lie here a while and the wound will heal. I'll prescribe a special diet for the meantime. You might be able to avoid that stomach operation."

The next day she told me that she had gone the previous evening to the chief doctor of the camp, just to tell him about my case. He telephoned at once to the Jewish doctor who was involved and he verified the facts. The chief doctor immediately ordered that the *Vlasovietz* be forbidden to perform any operations. The other doctor was appointed in his place until the chief surgeon returned from Moscow.

CHAPTER 43

Order: Shave Beard And "Payos"

In three weeks I was strong enough to be discharged from the hospital and return to my work. A moment's glance and I could see that the work was totally neglected because the chief had been on one continuous binge. In the Soviet system, the entire industry is dependent on the bookkeeping office, so camp operations were now in a woeful state. There was no money to buy food for the prisoners, or to pay the staff.

The *natchalnik* sent all complainers to the office. The chief had not set foot there all week, so I had the pleasure of explaining to unpaid officers that the coffers were empty. All their resentment converged on my head. My position deteriorated daily.

Until I was sick, the chief had kept up his part of our bargain. He might have been away from the office all week long, but he did not fail to appear on time Friday to permit me to observe my *Shabbos*. This week he did not show up. It was almost noon, my regular Friday quitting time. I telephoned his home and his wife told me that he was not at home. I asked her to find him and inform him that if he did not come immediately to the office, I would stop working for him and return to the hospital. I would not return to the bookkeeping office.

I guess he was at home after all. His wife promised that he would come right away. At two o'clock, with *Shabbos* rapidly approaching, he was still not there. I had no alternative but to fight him openly.

Off I went to the camp *natchalnik* and declared, "I don't know what will happen to me. I might be tried for refusal to work. I know that I am a puny prisoner. But I'm here to tell

you that I shall not work any longer in the bookkeeping office. You were witness to our agreement that from Friday noon until Sunday I am to be free from work. I have discharged all my duties faithfully. I was a sick man when I left the hospital to do the work that he neglected and he does not keep his word. It's almost *Shabbos* and he has not come yet. That's because he's afraid of the officers who come to demand their pay. Our treasury is empty because of him."

I anticipated a sharp reaction. Instead, he tried to placate me. This was really unexpected. He was probably not as much concerned with my self-respect as with learning the true causes for the critical financial situation of the camp.

I explained that several transports of prisoners had left our camp provisioned with our clothing and food and that we had covered the expenses of the transports. This cost some 2,000,000 rubles that were supposed to be collected. Since the chief failed to send bills for this money, we were now broke.

The *natchalnik* heard me out attentively and then, instead of ordering, he actually asked me, almost pleaded with me, to return to the office, promising that within minutes the chief would be there. I returned and in twenty minutes a car arrived with my boss, in a drunken stupor, beyond all communication. I laid him out on a table in the office and told the guard to let no one in, to say that the chief was not well and could not receive anyone. I hoped that he would sober up overnight and at least be on the job in the morning. I felt that he ought to spend just one day explaining to everyone why they were not being paid.

When I showed up on Sunday, he acted as though nothing had happened. I thought it was possible that he really didn't remember anything after being drunk a full week. I was not interested in aggravating the tension between us, so I also ignored what had happened. This was prudent for me, the prisoner, but it was obvious that this was not going to be a permanent job.

I had to work very hard until late at night. I had to prepare all documents and all debt accounts. It took several days until I

had all these papers arranged and sent to the central office of the camps in NKVD's offices in Moscow. I also sent a telegram saying that because of the debts, we had no funds to meet our payroll. Shortly after, we were informed by the bank that a sizable sum of money had been deposited to our account by Moscow.

Only now did the chief realize that I had literally saved him and he made efforts to improve our relationship. Without informing me beforehand, he wrote to the camp *natchalnik* that I had left the hospital prematurely because I was needed in the office. He added that I worked intensively and was instrumental in liquidating the camp's financial crisis. He requested that the least reward I should receive was a month's provision of raw foods. He explained that because of my health I was on a diet and could not eat camp fare.

Raw foods, especially for someone on a diet, were a treasure. It meant getting the fully authorized quota of food. Normally, through the usual kitchen procedures, the prisoner received half and the rest was stolen. The day after the report, to my surprise, I received the foods.

Rosh Hashana 1948 was approaching, with new troubles for me. Saturday night, the day before, *Rosh Hashana*, I was suddenly called to the disciplinary officer. As soon as I entered, he read an order that I shave off my beard and *payos*. When I asked who signed the order, he answered that he was not required to tell every prisoner who signed every order; it was simply his duty to see that orders were carried out.

I told him I refused to obey. He called the commander of the guard. They tied my hands and feet and I was now ready for the shave. The barber was one of those thieves in whose barrack I had lived some while. When he saw that he was called to shave me and that I was tied, he refused to follow the order. "I know this man. He wears that beard because of his religion. You're not supposed to shave him."

The officer was infuriated. He cursed us both and threatened that we would pay dearly for this. They threw out the barber, untied my feet, and ordered a soldier to take me to

the dungeon with bound arms. This was in violation of regulations, because an order for incarceration in the dungeon must be sanctioned by the camp commander.

Some of my criminal friends were in the dungeon just then. When I told them why I was being punished, they bitterly cursed the disciplinary officer whom they already hated for his brutality. One of the men found a piece of sharp metal and laboriously worked with the rope until he freed my arms.

I was due at work the next morning. Because I did not appear, the chief checked to find out what had happened. When he learned I was in the dungeon, he went to the *natchalnik*, who knew nothing of the whole matter, and he immediately ordered my release. He sent for me that day. "You see that I look after you. I can understand that you are religious and your religion forbids you to work on Saturday, so I consented that you be free those days. But the beard and *payos* — that's just a fancy of yours, and besides it is so obvious. Why, everyone who comes asks why I permit such violation of regulations. You must remember where you are. I keep getting reports from officers about you and I must consider them. The disciplinary officer treated you brutally yesterday. I do not want you to be abused. You are a good bookkeeper and we are pleased with your work. But this simply cannot go on. Listen, I am giving you a week to think it over. Life means compromises. I hope that you will shave yourself so we will not have to employ force."

That evening I went to the bookkeeping archives where I spent both days of *Rosh Hashana.* This time I *davened* alone. I felt lonely and thought a lot about my situation. The cause of my troubles, I concluded, was envy. I was working too long in the office. This annoyed the anti-Semites. Some of the workers who had to follow my instructions were convicted thieves. They could make deals with officers, and I was an obstacle. They needed some way of eliminating me and doubtless had instigated the fight with the disciplinary officer. I decided to get out of that office as soon as possible, and I had good prospects for doing so.

CHAPTER 44

The Construction Project

There was a construction enterprise in camp mainly occupied with renovating camp buildings, but also concerning itself with houses belonging to the camp, but situated outside the fence. There was some construction of new buildings too. One of the staff was more an economist than a bookkeeper. His task was assembling the calculations for the various completed projects. The financial success of the enterprise, indeed its existence, and the earnings of the workers, were dependent on these figures, perhaps even more than on the construction itself.

The director of the enterprise was a clever, efficient Georgian, who was looking for someone to take the bookkeeper's job. He had proposed some while ago that I work for him, promising that I would be free on *Shabbos* and Holy Days. No one would bother me because I would be by myself and no one would care whether or not I worked. The only condition was that my work be done.

I looked up the Georgian and told him that if he could arrange my transfer with the camp *natchalnik*, I was ready to work for him. The Georgian was delighted. "You sure hit the right moment. I'm remodeling the *natchalnik*'s home. You know, we have to make the calculations to have the government cover the bill. He's in my hands now and he won't refuse."

The next day the *natchalnik* sent for me and explained that since the construction people have no planner, this could ruin the plans of the enterprise. He wanted to transfer me there for about three months.

"I am a mere prisoner and must follow all orders," I replied. That day I said good-bye to the bookkeeping office and went to my new work.

In the Soviet system, the construction work had official, precise, current prices with calculations specifying the type and quantity of materials to be used, man-hours needed, and the quality of work. On the basis of these figures, they calculated workers' wages, the enterprise's earnings, and the charge the customer paid. However, these prices were so designed that they had built-in opportunities for graft, a perfectly accepted phenomenon, because everyone, from the menial to the highest ranks, benefited from it. It was universally tolerated until, of course, a show-trial was staged...

The fundamental problem was the dismal wage scale. In addition, working conditions in construction in the far north were harsh, while productivity was low. The enterprise employed not only prisoners, but also a great many free men, especially craftsmen like bricklayers, carpenters, locksmiths, and plumbers. These men had to be guaranteed a minimum wage to attract them to the work, because the projects were consistently short-handed.

The only way this could be done was by recording twice as much work as was performed. Thus the workers were regarded as "shock workers," performing 200 percent of the norm. Naturally, to justify jobs never done, they had to dispose of the unused materials. The "surplus" materials were sold by the master-workers, engineers, and *natchalniks* for lucrative prices on the free market or used in private remodeling, and the money was divided among them. A large part of the economized material was used in renovating the private homes of *natchalniks* and officers of the camp.

The enterprises were always short anyway. To obtain funds for payrolls and for materials they had to present, to the bank, accounts of buildings far from completion. For example, when I took over the job, I had to rush to present to the bank, by November 1, accountings for buildings to be completed at the earliest by the end of March of the next year.

When the Georgian initiated me into these mysteries, I was frightened. I told him that I would not be able to handle all of this. He looked astonished. "Impossible! A Jew, especially one as smart as you are, who can't do these things! Look, memory

is the most important. You must always remember when, what, and how much to record. You must not get confused and assign more than we received. It'll probably be a little hard at first, but I promise you that you will master it and it will be simple for you. The main thing is that the figures must coincide."

I worked hard for a few days to master the arcane art of dealing with fictitious figures. Besides, *Yom Kippur* and *Succos* happened to fall on these days and I missed getting the records ready on time. I made a huge effort and on Sunday, October 31, I gave my new boss all the necessary figures and waited impatiently to learn whether the bank would accept them.

The Georgian looked pleased the next evening. Not one figure was rejected by the bank, an unusual accomplishment. The plan was "concluded" by year's end and the enterprise received the funds. "Now," he told me, "you can take a little rest."

But there was no time to rest. Within a few days he brought me work with a tight deadline, enough to require three men. It called for an adding machine, which was unavailable in camp. I put in eighteen hours every day. By now I was receiving no dry foods, so I sustained myself on the normal bread and sugar rations. I felt myself collapsing.

Leaving this job was out of the question because I had no options. My position at the bookkeeping office was already taken. The crooks there were glad to be rid of me. Besides, it would mean capitulation on my part; they would feel free to shave off my beard and *payos*. I thought of the Spanish boy and decided to try to obtain him as an assistant.

When I returned to the hospital from my operation, I had found a boy of sixteen nicknamed "the Spaniard." His father had died in the Spanish Civil War, and in 1939 he and his mother were sent to the Soviet Union with a group of Spanish revolutionaries.

His mother worked hard while he went to school. He was intelligent and gifted in mathematics and the humanities. In

1946, as an eighth grade student, he wrote an article for the school newspaper in which he criticized the educational system for not teaching about Western culture. He asserted that there were developments in the Western culture from which we could learn, and since Soviet culture was superior, fears of competition were foolish.

Disregarding the fact that the writer was every bit of fourteen years old, they arrested him and subjected him to a severe questioning, demanding that he sign a statement that his mother had persuaded him and helped him to write the article and furthermore, that his mother was an agent of imperialism and ridiculed the Soviet culture. They beat the child and tortured him, throwing him into a rat-infested dungeon until he broke and signed the statement against his mother. They were both tried and sentenced to ten years of prison camp. He had no idea where his mother was nor did she know her child's whereabouts.

He came to our camp embittered and decided to write directly to Stalin. In his letter to the "Father of the Nations" he wrote that it was inconceivable that in the Soviet order someone as young and innocent as he could be sent to camp. In his naivety he observed that such was possible under the Czar or in Fascist Spain. He also noted that he was compelled to sign a false statement against himself, and worse, against his own mother.

He was confident that as a result of this letter he would be released and reunited with his mother. Some while passed and instead of being freed, he was taken for a new investigation. They demanded he tell who had persuaded him to write the letter and who helped in the writing.

By now he was experienced and refused to sign to any lies. They patiently tortured him and beat him mercilessly until, at one of the sessions, he lost consciousness. They carried him to the hospital where they learned that his lung had collapsed. To top it off, the *oper* ordered the doctor not to treat him. The child was to die in pain.

That was his condition when I met him in the hospital. I

spoke to the doctor about the horrendous crime she would have on her conscience for neglecting the boy, but she was terrified of the *oper.* We decided he should be put in my room. She gave me the medicines he needed and I took care of him. No one else knew.

It was such a delight to chat with him. He surprised me with his maturity and intelligence. I grew attached to him and he regarded me as his only protector. Gradually he recovered somewhat. After I left the hospital, informers notified the *oper* that he was well and that vicious scoundrel ordered the boy sent to hard labor. The *naryadtchik* came to order him to work as a porter in the camp stores. On the very first day, while carrying a load of sacks weighing over 100 kilos he crumpled under the burden and was carried back to the hospital.

Confident that he could do the work even faster than I could, I told the young Spaniard that I would bring the papers to him in the hospital. I was right. With his help it took only a few weeks to finish all the calculations until the end of the year. Everyone was pleased.

However, there was more bad news for me. Beginning January 1st, the Georgian was transferred to construction work in another camp and his replacement was an anti-Semitic *Vlasovietz.* Fortunately, the Georgian told him that if he wanted to avoid headaches with the books, he had better not bother me. "He's a Jew, but he sure knows how to handle those figures."

He briefed me, in turn, about my new boss. He was a dedicated drunkard, and to insure my job it would be judicious to present him occasionally with a token of appreciation — whiskey. This sounded less complicated than it actually was. Liquor was to be found only outside the camp and a bottle cost 25 rubles. But, "G-d sends the cure before the plague."

One day the chief bookkeeper, who had continued to maintain cordial relations with me, proposed that I bind the records of the past year for a fee per piece. I agreed. The work was not difficult and I could do it rapidly, earning a ruble a book.

Every day, after work at the construction job, I went to the

bookkeeping archives and in two weeks I completed 25 books. I spent my first earnings on that bottle of whiskey. My *Vlasovietz* boss was overjoyed with the gift and thanked me profusely. I got the impression he was pleased with the gift itself, and even more so with the knowledge that he was dealing with an "understanding" man.

My life was quieter now. The office work took five or six hours a day. No one bothered me and no one had any idea whether or not I worked on *Shabbos*. The only thing that mattered was that the accounts were ready on time. I had enough time to take care of binding the bookkeeping documents and could use the proceeds for my boss's delectation. This idyll was short-lived. The *oper* remembered me.

One day the *Vlasovietz* asked me why the *oper* hated me so. "I figured you to be a smart Jew. A smart man knows where he is. I wouldn't want to lose you. I like your work and I have no worries because you are prompt. I don't care what you do on Saturdays. No one knows yet and no one will find out. But why are you so stubborn about your beard and *payos*? Is it really all that important? You are in camp and they won't stand for that. The *oper* insisted that it's a political issue and he ordered me to fire you."

I was not interested in starting the whole discussion from the beginning, but it was clear that my career in the construction industry was over. Two days later the *naryadtchik* came with an order transferring me back to the doll factory.

CHAPTER 45

Alexander: My Partner In Hardship

The Polish sculptress in charge of the work at the doll factory greeted me warmly, reassuring me that I would be free on *Shabbos* and Holy Days. I was grateful and our old routine was re-established smoothly.

I learned a few days later that a new group of prisoners had arrived at the transfer-point, among them a young Jew who was asking for me. I went there at once and met the newcomer, who introduced himself as Alexander. He was about 30. He was serving a five-year term and had less than two years to go. In his old camp he had had a light job and was hoping to be released early. However, the *oper* kept after him to become an informer, which Alexander refused to consider, so the *oper* had him transferred here for hard labor. A Jew in his former camp gave him my name, with the hope that I might help arrange a decent job for him.

I encouraged the young man with my confidence in G-d's care. For the first few days, naturally, he would have to do hard physical labor. Tall and broad-shouldered, he was strong so he would not be harmed. The first necessity was warm clothes and felt boots, because without them he would not survive the bitter cold. I figured that if he were assigned to construction work, he would be issued warm clothes and would have prospects of getting light work after a short while.

The *naryadtchik* was receptive to my suggestion, which I submitted along with a half-kilo of sugar (my month's ration), that Alexander be sent to the construction brigade. The next day a warmly dressed Alexander marched out with the construction brigade.

I warned him to work like a Trojan for a few days to earn the brigade's respect, critically important to his "career." A week later, with some effort, I managed to obtain a bottle of whiskey and the two of us paid a visit to the construction boss, my old *Vlasovietz*. He greeted me like an old buddy, especially when he saw the bottle which we placed on his table with a flourish. He had just a wee bit. Then I proceeded to describe Alexander to him as a veteran director of large commercial enterprises in the free world, knowledgeable in bookkeeping, and well acquainted with building materials — the perfect choice for a warehouseman. I pointed out that since he was a short term prisoner, there should be no problem in getting a permit for him to leave the camp grounds. Here was a dependable man.

The *Vlasovietz* promised to take care of the matter within a few days, since he had to clear it with the officials. On March 31, 1949, Alexander brought me the happy news that he was now in the camp store, and he was cleared to go without a guard outside the camp, to the area between the camp, and to the street in front of the store. Modest as it was, it was a contact with the free world, so Alexander was soon someone special among the prisoners. After the first watch, he brought the documents. I helped him prepare the first accounts.

On April 10, 11 *Nissan*, I was informed that a parcel arrived for me, no doubt for Passover. I provided myself with several long sheets of clean paper and went to the post office to claim my parcel. There were new people working there and they questioned the legality of giving me the *matzos*. Off I went to the doctor, who gave me a note stating that I needed the *matzos* because of diet restrictions caused by stomach ailments.

Now I had the problem of a place to go for the *seder*. I could not use the archives any longer because I was afraid the bookkeepers might inform on me. I carried off my *matzo* treasures to the store where the prisoners kept their belongings under the charge of two elderly White Russian prisoners. They were quartered there to keep a constant watch on the storehouse. They were decent men who had lived for many years among Jews and were familiar with Jewish practices. When they saw the *matzos* and heard of my careful search for a separate and clean place for the *matzos*, they asked about the date of Passover and remarked about the *seder*. These men, I decided, could be of help to me now.

They had a small room at the store designated for them to sleep in, but since it was cold, they slept in the store proper. I asked them to permit me and a friend to use the room during Passover. Naturally I presented them with two *matzos* and promised to give them some potatoes later. They briefly considered my request and agreed, with the condition that we come and go either late at night or very early in the morning, so that no one would be aware of us. I tidied up the room at once and brought in the potatoes from the bookkeeping

archives where I had kept them, and also new kosher-for Passover utensils that I had arranged beforehand.

When Alexander showed up, I told him that Passover was all prepared, and we could celebrate the *seder* together. He beamed as he told me that he had not been at a *seder* in a "pile of years." "The last time," he recalled, "was at my father's table when I was a little boy. I can't read Hebrew so I won't even be able to say the *Hagadda*."

I reassured him that somehow we would solve that problem. If he wanted, I would teach him to *daven*, and we could also study texts.

Passover fell on Wednesday night. It was pitch dark as we made our way to our little room. The potatoes were cooked already, and tea was made for the "Four Cups". At the first *seder* I read the *Hagadda* slowly. Alexander repeated it word for word. I explained the significance of the Holy Day. We left at midnight, planning to return before sunrise to eat some potatoes and *matzo* leftovers so we would avoid *chometz*. Alexander assured me that since he went outside the camp, he had no problem in obtaining potatoes and baking them, and that would keep him going until night, the second *seder*.

At the second *seder* we did things a bit differently. This time I translated constantly into Russian so Alexander could follow the thoughts of the *Hagadda*. I told him about the Splitting of the Sea and its message that a Jew must never despair. Whoever has faith is never abandoned by G-d, as trying as the situation may be. I pointed out that in the midst of the camp terror, we were celebrating the *seder*, our Feast of Liberation. The redemption from Egypt was an imperfect one because it was followed by the destruction of the Temple and Exile, but the *Torah* promises, "I will take you out; I will redeem; I will take; I will rescue." This means that G-d saves the Jewish people, and we believe that when The Messiah comes, we shall have the final and perfect Redemption. G-d will take us to the land of Israel where we will live as a free people in our own land and serve G-d without hindrance. All the nations will then come to us and declare that G-d does indeed rule the world.

This Holy Day that we celebrated together deeply moved Alexander. He now could say a *bracha* and he expressed a desire to learn Hebrew so he could *daven*. I wrote out the Hebrew letters for him, and then whole verses from the prayers, transliterating them in Russian as well as providing a translation. In a few weeks he could *daven* by heart. Whenever possible, we spent *Shabbos* together and studied the *Torah* portion of the week.

It was very late Saturday night, April 30, when I was roused from a deep sleep by an NKVD official who ordered me to follow him. He led me to the dungeon, by now so full that only by shoving could I get in. I looked around to see who my colleagues here were, and most were under Paragraph 58 sentences, political prisoners, This was apparently by the initiative of our *oper*, to isolate us so that we should not, Heaven forfend, disturb the festivities of the Festival of Liberation, May 1. We were released late that night, exhausted and famished.

A new surprise awaited me at work the next morning. The Polish supervisor told me that, to her regret, she must send me to work at the nitrolic upon the orders of the *oper*. She was able to wring out one concession and that was to have two men assigned to the nitrolic, so that every other day I would work at packing dolls. She devised special masks to wear at work. She whispered to me that my documents clearly stated that, by doctor's orders, I was not to be assigned to this work. She advised me to refuse to follow this order of the *oper*, and to lodge charges against him with the doctor.

I understood that this was part of the new *oper*'s scheming and concluded that since I had no chances of winning, it was not worth starting a battle over the issue. I went to my old "new" job. I tried on the mask and found it was even worse because it was heavy and almost airproof. I threw it away and worked without a mask.

My partner was young and healthy looking, but he was affected just like I and choked from the nitrolic fumes. He had committed some sort of "sin", just as I had, and we were both sentenced by the *oper*'s temper. I worked at the nitrolic

Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, while my partner worked Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays.

A month passed and I kept getting sick. The nitrolic brought on a constant, hacking cough and my stomach pains returned. Meantime *Shavuos* was approaching on Friday and *Shabbos*. I asked my partner to take my Friday and I would make up the day for him, adding a month's sugar ration to sweeten the arrangement. He accepted.

I rested *Shavuos*. Alexander had learned how to *daven* and we *davened* together. We relaxed together that evening and I explained the meaning of *Shavuos*, the holiday of the Giving of the Torah.

Weeks passed with my health constantly worsening. Breathing was so difficult that I thought of asking the doctor to admit me into the hospital. Just then a tragedy occurred that shocked the whole camp. When I came to work, I learned that the day before, my partner had collapsed while at work at the nitrolic. He was taken to the hospital and pronounced dead on arrival. This scared me so I went directly to the doctor. She told me that an autopsy determined that the nitrolic poisoned him. She and the chief doctor signed an order forbidding further use of nitrolic.

The nitrolic section was temporarily closed, and I was sent back to packing dolls. In a few hours the *oper* came and ordered the nitrolic section opened, and I was to work there. The supervisor refused and showed him the medical directive signed by three doctors with the chief among them. The *oper* said nothing as he left, but he gave the door a mighty slam.

From then on, they used ordinary shellac instead of nitrolic. This was harmless, and I was assigned to this job with two partners. The work was not unpleasant at all, but the raw material was expensive and the productivity was less. Moscow sent an order in two months to close the doll factory because the production was bringing on a deficit. Everyone was certain that this was the *oper*'s revenge.

This happened on 7 *Elul*, September 1, 1949. The next day the *naryadtchik* ordered me to work at plowing up the area outside the camp fence, freshly plowed daily so that an

escapee's tracks would be visible from afar. It was hard work, performed in a primitive fashion, with nothing but a shovel and rake. There was a norm of square meters to fill. This duty was directly under the NKVD, meaning the *oper*.

The *naryadtchik* measured off an area to plow up that day. I was too weak, and by nightfall I had barely done two-thirds. The *oper* himself came — a most unusual matter since he had sufficient flunkies — but this was no doubt in my honor. When he saw my progress he ordered that I remain on the job until completion. It was late when I finished, but the next day all I received was 300 grams of bread, a punishment for not doing my norm. This was the last viciousness of the *oper* to me. The next day I heard that he suffered a heart attack the previous night and was flown to a hospital in Moscow.

This was a Friday. In the afternoon a runner brought me an order to report to the hospital at once. The doctor verified the report about the *oper*. She did not expect him to return very soon. "We must use the time. I prohibited the *naryadtchik* to use you for plowing because of your health. You have a right not to work except at labor consonant with your health and strength."

Regulations provided that if a prisoner did not work because of the *naryadtchik*'s fault, the *naryadtchik* was fined 20 rubles for each wasted day. He did not delay in sending for me and suggested I select a job so he would not be punished.

I was in no pressing hurry this time. The doctor told me that a commission was in camp checking the bookkeeping office and found sheer turmoil there. The chief had not been sober in the recent past and his workers created utter confusion, either because of lack of skill or purposely to cover traces of their thievery. In any case, the inspectors from Moscow wrote a report to the chief camp *natchalnik* demanding a re-ordering of the bookkeeping department by a certain date, so the balance could be prepared on time.

The doctor had heard rumors, and I expected that they would plead with me to return to the bookkeeping office. That is what happened. The *naryadtchik* came the next day telling me to go to the chief bookkeeper.

CHAPTER 46

Back To The Bookkeeping Department

I was received like an old friend by the chief bookkeeper. He tried so hard all through our first conversation to convince me that he was sincere. "Getting you fired was revenge for the *oper*, not only against you but against me too," he began. "When he got rid of you, he filled the office with his crew — robbers who deliberately messed up the accounts to destroy my authority and maybe even have me tried. Now that we are rid of the *oper*, we must waste no time in getting rid of his people too.

"I've spoken to the camp chief and he has agreed to appoint you my representative. You ought to forget the abuse you suffered. The important thing is to organize new personnel without delay before a new *oper* comes. That's how we can avoid trouble later. I've obtained permission from the chief even to employ politicals, as long as they are trained. We can get the balance prepared in time."

He did not wait for my consent and started discussing practical matters directly. "This evening the *naryadtchik* will bring me a list of prisoners. We shall choose six or seven, and they will start work tomorrow with you. I don't want that pack of thieves here any longer."

It worked out that way. The *naryadtchik*'s list had about six men with bookkeeping qualifications whom we selected to work with us. Again I was working until all hours of the night, the most difficult job being to check through all the year's documents. Many of them were not recorded and were not official because they lacked the required signatures.

Two weeks later the chief bookkeeper assembled the full staff. From the progress evaluation, it was clear that we were well on the way to resolving the crisis. Our chief was delighted and promised that if we finished the quarterly balance on time, by October 15, then each of us would get a reward of 10 kilos of potatoes. He kept his word.

The Holy Days came. I saw Alexander frequently now. We spent *Rosh Hashana* together — he was able to *daven* by himself already. On the day before *Yom Kippur,* all the Jews in camp gathered in the little room of the storehouse where we had our pre-fast meal of bread and tea and then said *Kol Nidre.* We came together again *Yom Kippur* night to say *Ne'ila* and *Maariv* and to break the fast with bread and potatoes. We fervently wished each other to be released soon and return to our homes and families.

The work at the bookkeeping office was strained with the pressure to complete the balance for 1949 on time because we lacked qualified staff. The camp administration gave us the right to have a representative at the transfer point to check every incoming transport for qualified bookkeepers. The chief bookkeeper was always too busy for this, so he assigned me to this duty.

Early in January 1950 a transport arrived. I sat there at my table, busy with prisoners claiming to be bookkeepers. I noticed a young man among the prisoners, with black hair and eyes, in an officer's uniform — without rank insignia of course. It was obvious that he was Jewish. I beckoned to him and asked what his qualifications were . He answered that he was an army officer and his qualifications were a military secret. All this was in Russian. Then I shifted to a whisper in Yiddish, "Mark the questionnaire that you are a bookkeeper. Don't go away. I'll call for you later. I'll take care of the rest. Otherwise you will receive hard labor and you will not last long at that. Stay out of sight of the commission meanwhile."

I purposely worked slowly. It happened that several prisoners described themselves as bookkeepers, so I tested them right there. Not one was qualified. I did not take on any

of them but all this took plenty of time, and when it was the young Jewish officer's turn, the rest of the commission had left for the day.

His questionnaire showed he was 35, sentenced to ten years under Paragraph 58, the same Paragraph I was convicted under for treason to the Soviet Union. I acted like I was examining him and he told me about the "crimes" he had committed . . .

He was an orphan raised in a Soviet children home, and barely knew any Yiddish. In the War he volunteered for the Red Army and was promoted to officer's rank. When the State of Israel was declared, he wrote his superiors a request for permission to enlist in the Israeli army to help in their war against the Arabs.

He was arrested the next day. He was tortured and administered severe interrogations for over six months. It was inconceivable to them that he would write on his own initiative, so they inisisted he reveal who enlisted him in imperialistic espionage. He defended himself, arguing that the Soviet representative had just voted for the establishement of the State. They argued that he was reared in the Soviet and was a Communist (he was a Party member). They could not see how it was possible that he wanted to betray his Soviet Fatherland and fight for a capitalistic-imperialistic country.

All this time he was in a military prison, forbidden to see his wife or to write or receive mail from her. Finally he was informed that he was sentenced by a *troika,* a commission of three officers, to ten years for betrayal of the Fatherland. He was to serve his sentence in a camp with a strict regime of hard physical labor. I was hardly confident I would be able to keep him, but I was determined to try. I suggested that he claim illness and insist on seeing a doctor. Then I left.

Back in camp I headed straight for the doctor and told her the whole story and asked her to save this man. Within a few hours he was a patient in our camp hospital. I learned that he had mastered the art of feigning high temperature.

The next morning I told my chief about him and asked that

he be employed in our office. My chief had learned from experience and he was generally compliant when I had a request of him. He did not refuse me this time either. The same day he was at the central camp office, where he arranged the matter with the provision that I be responsible for his work. I thanked my chief and in two days the young man enjoyed a full recovery from his ailment. I made a place for him in the bookkeepers' barrack. He was intelligent and educated and had little difficulty in mastering the work I assigned him.

His luck was short-lived. The NKVD remembered him after three weeks and we received an order to send him to a special camp. Our hearts were bitter when we said good-bye, and all I could advise him was to make every effort in his new camp to get to the central camp's hospital. Then our doctor would possibly be able to help after a while, to have him stay there at some light work.

He was not the only one sentenced at that time for wanting to go to Israel. A few weeks later, while I was checking a new transport, the commission leader sent a young Jew, about 25, to my table. He introduced himself as a bookkeeper. He recognized me at once and told me that he had requested permission to go to Israel to be with his family. He was promptly arrested. His story was like the last one. He was tortured to sign a confession about his membership in an organization dedicated to anti-Soviet activities and to encouraging Jews to emigrate to Israel. He, too, was eventually presented with ten years for treason, under Paragraph 58.

Our experience with the officer convinced me we would not succeed in keeping him here, so I decided to try another tactic this time. I advised him to go to the special camp where they sent him, and after a few days' work to simulate an internal sickness. If this worked, he would be sent to the central hospital. There I told him to look up the nurse or doctor, mention my name, and they would arrange that after his discharge from the hospital, he should be sent to us.

After almost two months, the young man came. I spoke to the *naryadtchik* to make him a nightwatchman, where the work was not hard and one received a normal bread ration.

When he was free during the day, he came to my office, where I taught him bookkeeping.

A few weeks later the position of *utchatchik* in a factory at camp became vacant. The *utchatchik* was the one who recorded each person's daily production. I spoke to the factory director, a prisoner-engineer, who was happy to take on the young man. He remained at that job for a long time.

During January and February of 1950 I put in tremendous effort. Every one of the bookkeepers worked until late every night preparing the balance, and by March, fifteen days ahead of schedule, we were done. The chief bookkeeper was most pleased because an achievement like this would win him a considerable reward. He took the balance to Moscow, leaving me a few weeks of rest.

Alexander had become a man of status in camp by now. He had permission to go outside the camp precincts and this enabled him to meet free people and purchase things. He came to the office almost daily and we spent many evenings together. He could *daven* and learn *Chumash* (Five Books of Moses) by now. A free Jewish engineer he had met gave him a *Chumash,* and Alexander often came with questions when something was not clear to him. I was pleased with Alexander and he was no less happy to have met me. He once remarked, "Maybe my sufferings in camp were necessary so I might meet you here and so you would have the opportunity to bring me to a life filled with *mitzvos.*"

Passover would be particularly difficult to celebrate this year. Beginning in early April, in cold weather on a Saturday night, it meant leaving work for three and a half consecutive days. Alexander exploited his opportunities outside the camp and each day he brought several kilos of potatoes which we stored. We still did not know where to have the *sedorim.* The little room from the year before was not very comfortable. We could not go there during daylight and had to wait until dark when eveyone was asleep or indoors. Having the *seder* there would mean preparing everything Saturday night so we could not start the *seder* until past midnight. That left us the

archives of the bookkeeping office. Meanwhile, the chief returned from Moscow. I informed him on Wednesday that I would be out from Friday afternoon until Tuesday because of the Holy Days. To my surprise he responded, "Don't you have too many Holy Days?"

I resented this, and I was frank with him. "I worked extremely hard preparing the balance and that brought you a reward. You just came back from Moscow and probably brought gifts for your wife and children. But you forgot us. I'm not the only one involved, there are the others too. And now you tell me we have too many Holy Days! You know very well that if it costs my life I won't work on my Holy Days."

It was dead quiet for some while and then he ashamedly admitted that I was right. "I will order meat and barley for the whole staff, but since you don't eat meat I shall order barley and potatoes for you."

"Can he pick winners!" I thought to myself. "Barley for Passover." I patiently explained that barley was not allowed and I had plenty of potatoes already, although I could use carrots and sugar. The next day I had 10 kilos of carrots and 2 kilos of hard sugar. He wished me a happy holiday and I thanked him.

Friday I went to the archives in time to prepare for the *seder*, and cooked all our food. Alexander came Saturday night and we celebrated the *seder* together. I no longer had to coach him with the *Hagadda* reading. Now he could read and even explain it himself. We spent every evening of Passover together, *davening* and learning. It was the first time in years that Alexander avoided *chometz* throughout Passover, and he achieved this feat . . . in camp.

Alexander told me that he had been born to a farming family in a community in the southern Ukraine, where there were many Jewish families working the land. Alexander had four brothers and two sisters. The family was successful and in the years 1928-1929, they already had three horses, two cows, and many chickens which they thought of as part of the

family. They worked the farmstead themselves and did not hire workers. In the winter of 1929, the NKVD came and sent many families to Siberia, including Alexander's family . But Alexander, who was only five, was not with his parents at the time, but with his uncle in the city. His uncle had a large family and hardly earned enough wages to feed his own family, so he sent Alexander to a government orphanage.

Alexander went to school and later joined the army. After the war, he left the army and found a job as the administrator of a large storehouse of building material. Because he had not studied in a Hebrew school (the government closed all the Hebrew schools), he did not know even the Hebrew alphabet; he only remembered the religious customs of his parents' families. But his memories were vague; only now that he was learning with me did he recall the feelings of sanctity for *Shabbos* and Passover. As he learned, he began to feel the sanctity of all the *mitzvos*. He was very happy and felt as if he had been reborn. He decided that, after he was released from the prison-camp, he would begin the life of a religious Jew and fulfil all the *mitzvos* possible in a country like Soviet Russia.

CHAPTER 47
My Wife's Visit

The freezing weather did not ease after Passover. We had no firewood, and the office was frigid. I developed severe chest pains and high fever, so the doctor permitted me to stay in bed.

Early in the morning on April 26, a prisoner woke me to report that my wife was waiting just beyond the watchtower. I figured he was teasing so I scolded him for making this tasteless joke when I was a sick man. My wife, I well knew, was several thousand kilometers away, without a penny for fare. Besides, just two weeks ago I had received a air mail letter from her that arrived within six days of her writing, with no hint of a visit.

Another prisoner came an hour later. This man was a water-carrier and had permission to go past the watchtower. He brought me the same report. He described her to me — and it matched her. I hurriedly dressed and asked the prisoner to go back to the tower with his barrel and to wait for a while at the tower. I stood at the other side of the tower and when they opened the gate I saw my wife for the first time in ten years. I could not signal to her.

I looked up Alexander, who had the right to go outside the camp. He took a message to her. I had to write a request to the chief *natchalnik* of the camp to grant me permission to visit. I understood that she would have no place for lodging, so I sent her the address of the person who delivered mail to the camp. He lived near the camp and from the decent way he treated us, I knew he would not refuse her a night's lodging.

Next morning Alexander went to find out what had happened. He returned with terrible news. The *natchalnik* refused to permit a visit on the grounds that I was a serious criminal with no rights to see my family. My heart shriveled. I had not seen my wife since 1940, ten bitter years before, and then only for a mere fifteen minutes. Now she had made such a difficult journey and spent so much for expenses. We were so close, yet a million miles apart.

I wrote to the camp head that since my wife came such a long distance, I was requesting permission to see her for at least two hours. I sent the note to the officer in charge of the camp guards, according to regulations. This officer was an accessible man so I asked him to give in my request among the other documents submitted to the head for his signature. This way he would not pay special attention to my letter.

He probably never realized what he was signing and in three hours I was summoned. following regulations, I was brought into the room from one door and my wife from another. It was a tiny room. A soldier sat between us. He warned us to speak only Russian.

At first we both sat mute, wordless, tears pouring down our cheeks. I said little to her and without realizing it the time was up. I told her not to leave because I would attempt to

arrange another meeting. I did not sleep that night. All I could think of was how to obtain that second meeting. Quite early I went directly to the *natchalnik.* I thanked him for his graciousness in permitting me to see my wife. I noted how this was our first visit in ten years, and we did not have a chance to talk much. Therefore I asked for permission to see my wife another time. Fortunately I caught him at a good moment and he answered "Okay, okay." I waited impatiently for several hours until I was called again.

This was a brief meeting. The watch changed and the officer ordered us to stop after a half hour, promising that we would have the other hour and a half the next day. Before my wife left the room, an NKVD strode in, dressed in civilian clothes, and in the presence of my wife and the soldier ordered me to strip naked. He searched through my clothes with painstaking care, even ripping off the soles of my shoes. He was searching for the passport my wife allegedly brought me so I could escape. "You are a dangerous criminal," he screamed. "You have tried to escape already."

This brutal attack had a shocking effect on me, but one far worse on my wife. The officer, however, kept his word and the next day he permitted us to have our next hour and a half together. My wife told me that before this meeting she told the officer that if she had known that her visit would cause me such trouble, she would never have come, though we had not met for ten years. She was shattered after seeing what I must endure.

The officer picked up her last words. "Did your husband tell you that he is abused?"

She told him that I had told her nothing, but she witnessed it herself. Then she told him about the search made in her presence. The officer was embarrassed and argued that the guard did not make the search but the NKVD, adding that this was his right and duty since I had attempted one escape. But, probably in "atonement," the surveillance during this visit was not as strict. The soldier was not as sharp and we even managed to throw in an occasional Yiddish expression.

I told my wife about the attempt a year ago to send me to the camp with the Germans and about the Jewish girl who had risked her life to save me. I urged my wife to call on her and thank her, and conveyed indirectly that she would get the address from Alexander.

Our time ran out rapidly. We said goodby as she sobbed. I took her by the hand and led her to the door, comforting her with the thought that I would soon be home and we would be together.

It was possible that the NKVD official was eavesdropping. Just at that moment he threw the door open and came in shouting, "Where is the passport she brought you? I just heard you arrange to meet!"

I was not particularly cheerful at that moment, but I could not hold back my laughter. The NKVD was confused but recovered at once and began to beat me.

I tried hard to keep control of myself and told him, "We Jews believe Messiah will come and redeem us. This can happen any day. Then there will be no camps and you won't have to guard me. Then I will return home, to my home..."

The soldiers on duty watched all this and burst out laughing. The NKVD official was humiliated. All he could do was spit in anger, and without another word he stormed out.

Three days later the postman came with word from my wife. She was on her way home, and he had a letter from her. She had seen the girl, who received her most cordially.

CHAPTER 48

My First Rest In Captivity

We worked hard and the balance for the first quarter of 1950 was ready on time, May 15. The chief bookkeeper was pleased. The whole bookkeeping staff was invited to the office of the camp *natchalnik*, and in our presence our chief reported

that the balance was prepared correctly and promptly, thanks to our devoted labors. He asked that, as a reward, we each be given a week's vacation.

This must have been arranged in advance, for the *natchalnik* consented at once. He wrote an order that in recognition of our devoted and honest labors we each would have a week's vacation, from May 17 to 24. This "vacation" had no practical meaning for us because we still had to do our work, but I did have a benefit. Monday and Tuesday, the 22 and 23 of May, were *Shavuos*.

Now, for the first time in my years in camp, I had a chance to rest and could celebrate *Yom Tov* without fear or interference.

Alexander and I had a *Yom Tov* like never before. He obtained some butter, and we had a dairy meal. We *davened*, and I explained the significance of *Shavuos*, the Festival of the Giving of the Torah.

Our good fortune did not last. Two months later, in August 1950, a new director for the camp arrived. He wasn't really "new," because we knew him quite well as the old *oper*, the one who had persecuted me relentlessly. Two years ago he went to Moscow for a course and now he returned "educated." This was a promotion and personal satisfaction for him. It boded no good for me.

My chief called me a few days later. The new director had ordered him to present a roster of the full bookkeeping staff. "He was surprised to see your name and categorically ordered that you be fired at once. He said that he could not permit someone who displayed such impudence towards him to be employed as a bookkeeper. He called you a bitter foe of the Soviet Union and he doesn't want to set eyes on you."

The bookkeeper told me that he argued a long time to persuade him that I worked honorably and that I was an unusual specialist. He even described the chaos that developed in my absence and how highly regarded my balances were in Moscow. The director was unmoved. He gave the chief bookkeeper one month to find a replacement for me.

I believed the chief this time. He knew that he was no expert in bookkeeping and that he needed me more that I needed him. But I saw a hard life awaiting me. My hope was that when the time came to prepare the balance, they would have to call on me anyway.

A few days later the chief bookkeeper sent for me and showed me an order from the camp director. Beginning September 1, the next day, the bookkeeping offices would be transferred to the building of the camp director, outside the camp grounds. This meant that everyone working in the office must be authorized to go outside the camp. I clearly could not qualify.

The chief did not conceal his resentment against the *natchalnik* for not discussing this move with him and not even informing him a few days in advance. Then he made an unexpected suggestion.

"If you would agree to come to work on Saturdays, believe me I would convince the *natchalnik* to let you stay on the job and you would receive a pass to go outside the camp. Just between us, you would not have to work at all. It's just a matter of coming officially, so the *natchalnik* will have the satisfaction of feeling he broke your obstinacy. Do you know what that pass means? You would live almost like a free man. On the other hand, who knows what kind of work you might be assigned here."

"I'm really surprised," I told him. "You know my history, so you ought to know that I have been tortured for fourteen years because of my religion. That is my only crime. Do you think I will be impressed now and, after all my suffering, I'm going to submit? With G-d's help I'll get along without the bookkeeping work too."

But I could see that he was truly upset by the prospect of losing me. He was not an evil person and certainly felt compassion for me, but the important consideration was his own welfare. He had more than one opportunity to evaluate my work. I explained the situation as I saw it.

"This new *natchalnik* is a man of wide experience. He was

oper for many years and he just graduated from a special school. His decision to move the accounting office outside the camp grounds involves something far wider than firing me. He could have done that without the whole rigamarole. However he did overlook some considerations. He did not realize the complications he is causing. And in view of these complications I am confident that I will continue to work in your office.

"You know that we have to prepare work cards for each prisoner recording his day's production every evening when the prisoners return from work. If the store does not get the card that same day, then the prisoner receives only 400 grams of bread the next day. Just imagine now, several hundred prisoners who exceeded their norms and are due 800 grams will receive a starvation ration of only 400 grams. This still happens now, but in isolated incidents the prisoner comes right to our office and we can explain or correct the card immediately. Can't you just picture several hundred prisoners in this predicament who can't even get near the office because they can't go outside camp grounds? You will have unbelievable chaos, with hundreds of prisoners refusing to go out to work, and an uproar and scandal.

"Look, winter is coming soon. We shall have to authorize distribution of winter clothes, again by the cards. Remember, each prisoner gets an outfit once in two years, so we have to know who is entitled and who isn't. The authorization for the clothes must be signed by your office. The prisoner who doesn't receive his clothes doesn't have to go out to work. It's reasonable to expect about 500 such cases at one time. Figure it out. A day's work of one prisoner costs about 20 rubles, or a total of 10,000 rubles, and the camp administration is going to have to carry that load. It will all be the *natchalnik*'s fault for issuing that order.

"He'll come to you then. You will need at least two bookkeepers to handle that job, besides another who is familiar with the matter and is authorized to sign the documents. Do you have anyone besides me who can do this? Listen to me. Carry out his orders and then we shall see what happens. I, for one, have not given up hope."

My arguments convinced my chief. He didn't argue any more with the *natchalnik* but simply followed orders. That day he ordered a truck to move the whole office to the administration building. Of the eight on the staff, five received permission to go outside and two were sent to other brigades the next day. I was in no hurry; I still had a document declaring me to be in poor health and forbidden to do strenuous labor.

This happened on a Friday. I went to my barrack and lay down to sleep. The next day I had the most peaceful *Shabbos* I ever had in camp. No one pestered me. The *naryadtchik* had enough headaches without me. By the second day after the great change, several dozen workers did not go out to work. Some didn't receive their proper bread ration, and others were not issued the required clothing. The chaos was building.

As I expected, the chief bookkeeper called on me Sunday and said that the camp director was furious and even threatened to arrest him for sabotage for permiting such confusion to develop. The chief patiently and quietly explained that he alone was to blame. They finally came to a decision that I and the other two who did not receive passes would work in the old office taking care of the work-cards. I would be responsible for the operation and would sign the documents. Naturally, he also demanded that I do the balances as in the past.

Several tables were brought back to our old office. Now I used the office of the chief bookkeeper. This was deliciously irritating, not so much to the prisoners, but to some of the officers who were not my "clients." I must confess that I took advantage of the opportunities to have my little revenges.

Officers received a regular monthly allocation of foodstuffs. Each officer had his own file and Ministry instructions were precise concerning the allotments. Naturally they all wanted to get more and better products than were authorized. This led to frequent squabbles. As I mentioned earlier, sometimes the *natchalnik* signed documents that I refused to honor because they ran counter to Ministry instructions. The officers bitterly resented the impudence of a prisoner refusing an officer and even ignoring the signature of

the *natchalnik* himself! They had to swallow it, poor fellows, because they knew I was conforming with the rules and protests would do no good.

Another trifle annoyed them no end - there was only one chair in my office, and I sat there. This was a mightly blow to the dignity of the officers who had to stand while waiting, and I, a mere prisoner, sat. I acted simple-minded, carefully scrutinizing every file. Once several officers were standing in my office, and one, a wretch who persecuted me frequently, could not contain himself. "What's going on here? What do you mean sitting while we have to stand for hours, just as though we were your prisoners!"

"It's really quite simple, sir. Bring a chair along from home next time," I answered coldly. Some of the other officers, good natured fellows, roared with laughter. This annoyed my protestor even more. He and several of his supporters started shouting and cursing me for the audacity I had in mocking them. I answered softly, but firmly, that I was not mocking them and I was not the one to issue orders about bringing more chairs into this room. This created still greater an uproar and they went to the *natchalnik*.

But that was nothing compared to what happened the next day. Several officers came in together and were soon complaining for having to wait so long. They shouted, hollered among themselves, and kept smoking. I graciously apologized and asked them to leave the room and come in one at a time, first-come-first served, because I could not work under such conditions. They refused so I refused to sign any more documents.

Now they really went berserk, screaming as if demented. I paid no attention to them, as though it had nothing to do with me. Finally, off they went to the *natchalnik*. By now it was evening, so I locked up and left.

Bright and early, a terrified chief bookkeeper came in wailing, "What in the world did you do? Can you imagine what a furor you created?"

I calmed him soothingly. "The *natchalnik* can't punish me because I did everything according to the book. I must follow Ministry directives and scrupulously check that I allocate each man what is correct. I simply must have the proper working conditions. This is all for their benefit. Besides, I have to be sure to allot only products that are in stock or else back they come with complaints, and they will be right too. The fellow who used to do this was intimidated by their shouting and he wrote whatever they demanded. He succeeded in making a royal mess of the whole thing and then you were held responsible. If you and the *natchalnik* want this business run properly, then those men must conduct themselves like officers and quit that screaming and cursing. Anyway, all this is additional work for me. You threw this on me and you insist that I must make the balance anyway. Suppose you give someone else this job."

The chief saw he was not about to persuade me. He was more successful in convincing the *natchalnik*. They called a meeting of officers. What exactly went on I did not know. The chief told me that the *natchalnik* explained that, while I was indeed a prisoner and a criminal, in this matter I was the expert and was following regulations.

In a few days there were more chairs in the office. The officers came into my room one at a time, in order of arrival. No more curses, no more uproar. Things were easier for me. I worked peacefully with no one bothering me. I was my own boss. On the other hand, the chief was less than overjoyed. He was a bit too close to the *natchalnik* now, and this *natchalnik* was fond of looking over people's shoulders. Now the chief could not permit himself to disappear for a few days at a time with his bottle.

Friday afternoons and *Shabbos* the chief came to the old office in the camp because someone had to be there to sign the documents. He was happy to be able to get out from under the *natchalnik*'s scrutiny at least once a week, and maybe have a little drop too. It was strictly forbidden to drink while on duty, but he could not resist.

On August 15, 1950 I finished the semi-annual balance and explained all the figures to the chief, who then took the papers to the *natchalnik* to sign. The phone soon rang — the *natchalnik* was in his office on camp grounds and wanted me to come at once.

I found the chief with him. The *natchalnik* asked me to sit. He was a supremely suspicious man. He trusted no one. From his questions it was apparent that his time was not wasted in the course. He understood the figures and was not satisfied with all the chief's explanations. The chief had to admit that he could not explain each figure precisely because I was the one who actually prepared the balance. Though the *natchalnik* hated me cordially, and even expressed his desire to the chief never to see my face, he overlooked this because he wanted to be certain about every figure which he signed.

I explained every figure exactly. I could tell that he was pleased with my work, though he tried to hide his pleasure. In fact, at the end he said, "Well, for the first time I can verify this balance. But I want you to know that I understand procedures and next time I want you to make it more clear."

I did not want him to have the last word on this subject. "Everything in this world can be improved. This depends largely on the attitudes of the officials to the workers." For the first time in the whole conversation he looked up and our eyes met; I did not flinch. I stood up and asked whether he permitted me to leave. He nodded "yes" and I left.

Rosh Hashana, a Tuesday and Wednesday, approached. I informed my chief, in advance, to be sure to come to the camp office those days. To help him fight off tedium, I gave him a flask of whiskey.

Alexander and I decided to spend *Yom Tov* in the archive. I *davened* from my *siddur* and Alexander *davened* from the sheets of paper on which he had written the prayers in longhand. He read well now and *davened* with deep fervor. Tears flowed during the *davening*. We had our holiday meal of potatoes, bread, and sweet tea very late at night.

We spent the holiday evenings together, talking mainly about our worries and our hopes. Alexander told me that on *Rosh Hashana* he pledged to keep *kosher* and to take nothing from the kitchen. Especially since he had a pass to leave camp grounds, he could occasionally buy some milk and even butter. He hoped to be able to endure. He had begun thinking about the holiness of *Shabbos*. Anyway, he did not write on *Rosh Hashana* even though he officially had to be at work. He put all documents to a side and we worked on them after *Yom Tov*.

We discussed which activities were especially grave and must not be performed on *Shabbos* under any conditions, and which were less severe. He mentioned that the construction work would be ending soon and he should start thinking about some other job. We decided the ideal solution was a night watchman's post. That way he would not actually perform any labor.

I reassured him that since he was starting to keep *kosher*, G-d would surely help him. I cited the Talmud: "Man is led on the path he wishes to go. Man's will is critical, and then G-d helps man succeed."

Yom Kippur fell on Thursday and I informed two other Jews in the camp. Right after work on Wednesday they came to the archives where we had our pre-fast meal, lit a candle which Alexander had obtained on the outside, and then, very late at night when the camp was sound asleep, we softly chanted *Kol Nidre* together. We all felt the real meaning of *teshuvah*,* (repentance, return). We asked G-d to forgive the sins we had committed under compulsion, out of terror, and out of pain in camp conditions.

I davened alone *Yom Kippur* day since the others were forced to go to work. But they promised to avoid working and eating. That evening they returned, we *davened Maariv* together, and broke our fast. Many tears were shed that night again, and we wished each other to be free from this dreadful camp and from this cruel land.

We did not spend much time together, but the time we did spend had deepened our sense of a common fate and the bonds of friendship. So we decided to assemble in the archives during each of the four evenings of *Succos* to daven together and share our one dependable meal — potatoes and tea. For *Simchas Torah* we also had a bottle of liquor, courtesy of Alexander. We were truly happy on *Simchas Torah* night — four Jewish prisoners in that strictly guarded prison camp. We were real free men whom the vicious *natchalniks* and brutal guards could not dominate.

About mid-October the chief *natchalnik* telephoned me to come at once to the central bookkeeping office. Of course he did not give me permission to leave camp grounds and instead, sent a soldier who escorted me with a cocked rifle.

The chief bookkeeper told me that since the balance deadline was close, the *natchalnik* agreed that I should work in the central office several times a week. A room was set aside for me and a guard was assigned to stand at my door all day long to guard me and to escort me to and from the office.

When I returned that day, I found Alexander waiting for me. A seriously sick Jew had been brought to the hospital that day — he might need some help. Generally prisoners were not permitted to make hospital visits, but I had a special permit since I made periodic checks of the hospital provisions documents.

I went at once. The patient was about sixty, suffering from high blood pressure and intense headaches. He told me that he was held for severe interrogation in jail for over a year and then was sentenced to 25 years in camp. He did not tell me what crime he committed to earn such an extreme punishment, but I figured it was some economic crime. He told me he was rich, and while he was in prison his wife and daughter sent him parcels and money. He received none of these. He asked me to try to send a telegram to his wife.

He gave me her address. The only way I could think of to send the telegram was through the postal worker who brought

us our packages. My wife had paid him generously for the several days that she had stayed at his home, while she was visiting me.

I hoped he would not refuse me, especially since I assured him the lady was wealthy and would certainly pay him well. I gave him her address, and I gave him money for the wire. He kept his word. A few days later Alexander told me that when he entered the camp he noticed two women, one older and the other young, apparently the Jewish patient's family. They asked for permission to visit him. Such permission was not readily granted. They were put off until the next day. By then the poor fellow was dead. He was buried immediately in the prisoners' cemetery.

Monday morning, when I was brought to work, the chief bookkeeper came in. "The wife and daughter of that prisoner who died two days ago are here. They claim they sent him 1000 rubles that he never received and they want their money back. Please check the receipts and papers to see whether we received the money and then write a ticket authorizing payment." Then he ordered "my" soldier to permit the ladies into my room so that I might check their papers.

Two red-eyed women came in. Apparently they had precise information about me because, without any preliminaries, the older woman began, "It is a miracle we met you. We are not that concerned about the 1000 rubles. We have a request of you. You are a religious Jew and you must not refuse us. I want to carry the remains of my dead husband away from here and bring him to Jewish burial in our town. I shall spare no effort or expense to carry this out. I have permission from the hygiene authorities and a metal casket. Everything is ready but they will not tell me the number of his grave."

I promised that I would search the post box for that 1000 rubles until I learned the grave number. I also told them that I doubted I would be successful. The authorities might not continue to bring me here to work. We agreed they would return the next day to demand their money.

Evidence about prisoners, living and dead, was in the *Spec-Tchast,* the special department. This was NKVD and they did not give out information. Then I thought of a certain girl who might help. She had worked in the bookkeeping office, but was thoroughly incompetent. The chief was finally so exasperated by her errors that he fired her.

She was an orphan whose parents were killed in the war. She came sobbing to me that she was in danger of dying from hunger since no other office would give her work and she was physically incapable of doing hard labor. Her situation was truly touching. On my responsibility, I told her to keep coming to the office. I hoped that the chief would quiet down eventually and then I might persuade him to give her the usual references so she could get some other job.

Before I had a chance to talk to him, he happened to walk in and find her in the office. In reply to his inquiry about what she was doing here, she said that I told her to keep on working. Later the chief sent for me with a serious complaint. "Who's boss here? Who authorized you to change my orders? You are assuming altogether too much authority and mixing into staff business."

He was not a cruel man, that I knew. I apologized and explained that I had no intention of changing his orders. I took the liberty of having her continue to work until I had a chance to discuss the matter with him, the chief, but had had no opportunity yet. "She is an orphan and if you kick her out this way, she won't receive any bread. What will happen to her?"

This dispelled his anger. It is possible that he did not want me, a Jew, to stick up for a Russian girl. "She cannot work here, of course," I continued, "but she is an honest child, quiet, loyal to the Soviet Union. Why just throw her out? You might be able to have her transferred to another section where special qualifications are not needed."

He looked convinced and he agreed. It happened that they needed another person in the files of the *Spec-tchast* and in two weeks she was working there.

When the matter of locating the Jewish prisoner's grave

arose, she had been there for two months already and had merely been hanging around the bookkeeping office for about a month. Since she had been fired a month before receiving her new job, she was on no payroll for that month.

I thought of this situation now. Under the pretext of settling the problem of her missing a month's pay, I telephoned her new job and asked her to come to my office to answer some questions.

She came at once, delighted at the prospect of finally receiving the few rubles. I assured her I would take care of it in the next few days, but the real reason for calling her was that I needed a favor from her.

"I'll do anything I can for you," she cried. I told her about the prisoner who died. "In these cases," I explained, "they write a document and in the deceased's file they note the cause of death and the number of the grave." I told her the name and asked her to get the grave number.

"Is this in line with regulations?" she asked.

"No. It is contrary to regulations. No one must know about this. I give you my word that I will keep the secret under every circumstance. You must also keep this in mind and you will be in no danger. In any case, it's no serious violation. It concerns a dead man anyway, and he died a natural death. I need the information right away."

In less than an hour she gave me the grave number. Before she walked out the chief walked in. "What's she doing here?"

The girl became all confused, so before she could say anything I answered, "She came to demand her month's pay. The truth is that I told her to stay on the job here against your instructions, so it's my responsibility. But I'm a prisoner. I have no money to pay her."

I sensed that he was in a cheerful mood so I handed him a prepared paper authorizing payment for that month. He smiled at the girl, waved his hand, and called out, "O.K. I'll finally be rid of this business." He signed the order and handed it to the girl, who left quite happy.

That afternoon the widow and her daughter came, ostensibly to collect their money. I had not yet found the post office receipt. I asked them to wait, reassuring them that I would find the receipt. I indeed found it, and wrote an authorization for them to collect the money. While explaining eveything to them, I repeatedly mentioned the grave number. They thanked me and left. I learned several days later that on that same night they had exhumed the body and left the next day.

Some two months later the *oper* sent for me. This was disturbing, since he had not sent for me even once before. I felt a new provocation brewing.

He received me with forced cordiality, offered me a seat, and showered me with compliments. "I heard from the chief bookkeeper and even from the *natchalnik* that you are a man with many qualities. They are pleased with your work. I decided that you might be able to help me in clarifying a matter."

You hit the bulls-eye, I thought to myself as he continued. "You probably heard about the family of the Jewish prisoner who died a while ago. They carried off his body. They really did it quite legally, but it was done against our will. We don't intend to make a big issue of the matter. A corpse does not have any particular significance to us. The only question is how they knew exactly which was his grave. Might you be able to help me in clarifying this?"

I answered Jewish style, question for question, "Why did you select me, of all people, for this? You must know that if ever I set foot outside the camp it is with the guard who escorts me everywhere and stands at the door where I work. What have I to do with this matter?"

He glared at me. "If you insist, you do have something to do with this matter. I know the women were here to see you. And that's not all we know. We know where you pray and who prays with you. We know everything, even when we don't react. Everything is precisely in your folder, and when the time comes that we need it, we shall remind you of every detail.

"Right now I'm letting you go. The whole matter isn't of much account to us. I do want you to know that we have excellent eyes and ears. Depend on us. When I ask you a question, answer directly, not like this time, trying to twist your way out."

What happened was simply that the foreman of the cemetery workers had become drunk and babbled about the huge sum of money he had received for digging up the Jew. There was no investigation because they were afraid of compromising themselves. They had acted improperly because they should have told the widow the precise location of her husband's grave.

A week later Alexander came with exciting news — he was being released ahead of his time. He had written a plea a year ago stating that his sentence was not far from ending anyway, and his conviction was not for political causes but "speculation," which consisted of buying some bread for his own use on the black market.

Our last meeting was moving. I was extremely happy that he was being freed, and hoped that, G-d willing, he would settle down properly, and perhaps have a family. But then, too, I was losing a devoted friend, the only person with whom I shared my suffering. I do believe he felt this even more than I did. We embraced. He was too choked up for words and left weeping.

The loneliness was hard now. It was the worst on *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov*, even though conditions were better than before. Now, whenever some danger threatened, the chief bookkeeper warned me and did whatever he could to help me.

One day he told me that he spoke to the *natchalnik* to give me standing permission to go out to work in the central bookkeeping office without an escort. The request was denied. "I'm not looking to bother him, but I cannot permit a man like that to go outside the camp without supervision."

I thought that he would not tolerate me for long, and I wondered whether it might be worthwhile getting transferred to the central hospital, where they happened to be looking for a bookkeeper. I discussed this with the doctor, the only person

left in whom I could confide. "As long as the *natchalnik* is friendly with your chief, you have no worries," she commented. "They care about your work. The new *oper* isn't the worst one. He doesn't bother you, though he knows that you don't work on *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov* and you *daven* and all that. We have a new *oper* at the central hospital and there's no telling what tomorrow will be like."

I decided she was right. No need to overplan and call the wolves from the forest. Depend on G-d a little too.

My gums began bleeding badly in September 1951, a renewal of my old *tzinga* sickness from lack of vitamins.

Officers and guards were afflicted too. The doctor decided my condition was serious and I went into the hospital, where I lay for three months. This did not bother me much. The period included *Rosh Hashana* and *Succos*, and in the hospital I had no problem about keeping *Yom Tov*.

I was discharged in January 1952, when the work on the balance was most intense. The chief was pleased to have me back and he ordered extra rations of potatoes and sugar, not a whole lot but enough so I would not collapse. I wondered whether it was compassion or concern that I had completed the job, I received rations in any case.

In August of 1952 the doctor sent for me. She had learned that an order had been issued to send me to a special camp with a strict regime, a camp with those German murderers. "All may not be lost," she tried to console me. "The chief doctor of the central hospital still has to come. We might think of something meanwhile."

We were not so fortunate this time.

CHAPTER 49

On An Island With Nazi Murderers

On August 20, 1952, at about one in the morning, I was awakened and told to get dressed. Outside the barrack, two NKVD men in civilian clothes were waiting. They did not

introduce themselves or ask my name. They showed me an order to go with them. "Where?" I asked.

"You will find out later. You have been in camps long enough to know that prisoners ask no questions. Do you have anything in your barrack?" Without waiting for my reply they handed me a sack. "Put all your stuff in this sack and come right out."

When I returned one asked, "Anything else?"

"A valise in the deposit room." They accompanied me there. We awoke the two watchmen. I claimed my winter clothing, cotton trousers, the warm coat, some trifles like a pot and spoon. I put the rest of my belongings in the valise, locked it and wanted to leave it there. "For whom are you leaving the valise?" the NKVD asked.

"I haven't got the strength to carry it."

"When you are told to take your things, don't answer impudently," he interrupted me and told me to walk ahead of them. At the gate they showed the guard a document with my name. They signed one copy and left it with the guard. Out we went.

It was the first time, since I had come to this camp years ago, that I walked in the streets of the city and even now I had no idea of our whereabouts. The city was enveloped in darkness. After an hour we reached a river where there was a small boat at the bank. They told me to board and followed me. One man cast us off and then started the motor.

That river trip lasted an eternity for me; I have no idea how long it actually was. They did not utter a single word all the time. I knew neither our destination nor the purpose of the trip. As the horizon began to brighten, we approached the banks of a small island. I saw three barracks and a larger wooden building on the other side. A fence surrounded the buildings, which were topped with several rows of barbed wire. Watchtowers were strategically spaced and silhouettes of armed soldiers were visible in the faint light. Now I knew where I was.

We disembarked directly at the gate of the camp. Two soldiers and an officer manned the guardroom at the gate and

they recorded my name. My escorts signed and left, and I was now alone with my new masters.

The officer told me to empty the sack and he searched everything carefully, locking the valise afterward. Handing me the key, he said they would keep my things until I received permission to claim them. If permission was not received, the things would be placed in the deposit room until I was freed. As he said the word "freed," his face was a study of sarcasm. The two soldiers laughed out loud. This left little doubt that for me, there were little hopes of ever leaving this camp. It was interesting that he let me have my *siddur*, warning me that no one else might use it.

The waiting room was a one-room hut. The officer told me to sit at one side and he used the telephone, apparently to call the camp *natchalnik*. I could only catch snatches of the conversation, but enough to orient myself to my new surroundings. He gave my name and reported that the two men who brought me here did not bring my personal documents.

He listened attentively to the answer on the telephone, keeping a constant and watchful eye on me. The room was perfectly silent, and I caught several words — "serious political criminal," "harmful person," and "absolute isolation."

"Very good," the officer replied. "I understand perfectly. Strict regime. Yes, sir." Replacing the receiver, he studied me with curiosity. "Get undressed," he ordered.

I knew I would now undergo the humiliating personal search I had already endured several times. I figured it made no sense to resist, so I obeyed. He called the two soldiers who meticulously examined my clothes, checked the pockets, and even ripped the soles off my shoes. Then he told me to turn around and bend over. Before I could comply, one of the soldiers grabbed me by the neck and pushed my head down to the floor while the other, using a lamp, peered into my rectum, obviously seeking the counterrevolution which I might have, perish the thought, brought into the camp.

This procedure took a long time, until he finally told me to get dressed, warning me, "This is a strict regime camp. We won't stand for any of your rotten tricks. Any slightest violation of discipline will be severly punished. You won't escape from here either because from here you can escape only to heaven. And even though you are very religious," he added with a sneer, "I don't believe you are in a hurry to go there." Then he ordered a soldier to take me to the *naryadtchik*.

The soldier led me to one of the buildings and told me to report there. The *naryadtchik*, as in all camps, was a prisoner himself. He asked me to sit, asked my name, and rifled through the file of folders on his desk. "I don't even have your form. How long did you collaborate with the Germans?"

I was stunned by this question and thrown off-balance. "What do you mean collaborate?" I shouted. "I've been in camp over 17 years. What could I have had to do with the cursed Germans!"

Now he was the stunned one. "I don't understand. What's going on here?" He asked me to step out of the room. He went with me and told me to wait at the barrack while he went to the guardhouse. Some while later he returned, stood there contemplating me thoughtfully, and then he nodded, "Now I finally understand."

We returned to the room. He impressed me as a decent person. "I'll tell you the truth. Your situation is really bad. I'm from White Russia myself, raised among Jews and worked with Jews all my life. When I saw you, a Jew with beard and *payos*, I could not understand why they sent you here. You must have committed some awful crime. this is a camp with an extremely strict regime. The worst war criminals are here: SS men, high Gestapo officers. These men have thousands of lives on their consciences. The worst part is that these men murdered several hundred thousands of Jews in the ghettos of Poland, Ukraine, and White Russia. Almost every last one was sentenced to execution and then had it commuted to life imprisonment or 25 years. How come they send you to such a community?"

I interrupted him. "Believe me, I committed no crime. I can't even be considered a political criminal because I never did carry on any activities against the Soviet Union. My only crime is that I am a Jew, I believe in G-d and keep the teachings of our *Torah*. They want to break me, but they shall not succeed. They have used all kinds of techniques for over 17 years, but it won't work. For my faith — I'll die if I must. They just can't understand this."

"I don't want to make you feel bad but from what the officer told me, it seems you are going to have worse conditions than the Nazis. They can hardly employ you at any work and that means you will receive only 400 grams of bread. You are religious, so you won't eat from the kitchen. You are just going to starve to death.

"I'd be happy to use you here with me. You are an educated person and I have a lot of office work, but they won't permit it. You are considered a dangerous enemy who must never be trusted, and I have the personal files of the prisoners. I'm not even allowed to let you into this room. Then there's another problem.

"These bandits are vicious anti-Semites. If you sleep in their barrack, you will be in danger of being strangled or having your throat slit one night, and no one will ever even know who did it. The Nazis are desperados — they have nothing to lose. They know they are sentenced to spend the rest of their lives on this island and they cannot be given any more serious punishment. So they will let out their anger on another Jew.

"I have an idea. Since you haven't been assigned any job yet, I will arrange with the barrack attendant to let you sleep there during the day, and in the evening, when the Germans return, you will leave. You will have to hide somewhere because no one is allowed on the camp grounds from 10:00 P.M. until 5:00 A.M. The guards shoot. This will be terribly difficult for you but I see no alternative. I would let you sleep in my office, but you can understand . . ."

We went out together and he took me to a barrack. The

attendant was a Ukrainian, rather elderly, and he could not understand what the *naryadtchik* meant about letting me sleep in the barrack during the day and my leaving before the Germans returned, since I would not stay in the barrack at night. He showed me a cot I might use and the *naryadtchik* left. I thanked him, lay down, and from exhaustion, fell asleep at once.

I was awakened by the attendant banging on the door at five in the afternoon. He brought me my 400 grams bread ration, explaining that he had orders to bring me my food — since I did not eat from the camp kitchen I was forbidden to enter there. "Let me bring you a little hot water," he said, obviously in an attempt to show sympathy for my plight.

I was famished, so I washed at once for my meal. The old Ukrainian sat facing me, his face filled with compassion. Finally he could contain himself no longer. "Excuse me for meddling into your private affairs. You look Jewish, right? What crime could you have committed to be treated worse than the Germans who murdered us, especially Jews? You know, they don't overwork in the factory here. They receive at least 800 grams of bread, and many of them are given 1200 grams. Besides, they receive 50-80 rubles a month, and they can go to the commissary to buy tobacco, cigarettes, sugar, and jam. They told me you are forbidden all this. I don't envy you if you live in 400 grams of bread a day."

I was in no mood to explain all over again, but then I thought to myself that much would depend on this barrack attendant and I must not denigrate his friendship. I repeated what I had told the *naryadtchik*, that my only sin was being Jewish and my determination to live as a Jew. All the draconic measures utilized against me were designed to break my resolve.

After eating, I went to the *naryadtchik* and asked him to help me get my warm clothes, since I would have to be outdoors and the nights were already cold. I told him that the guards took my warm clothes, saying I would get them back when I was freed. I remarked about their laughter when they

mentioned my being "freed." The *naryadtchik* was infuriated. "Why, they are no better than the Nazis!"

Then he returned to my immediate problem — the warm clothes. "You realize that I don't carry much weight with the officials, but I have an idea. We don't have a regular doctor here, but there is an infirmary with three cots for special cases. Once a month a doctor from your old camp calls here. Sometimes it's the head of the medical section, a fine and decent woman. You must know her. Well, the doctor is due any day now, so I will have you called as a patient, and when the doctor gives you a note, they are required to give you your clothes."

Before I could tell him that the doctor was my friend, prisoners began to come in. I did not want anyone to know that the *naryadtchik* and I were at all friendly, so I just said, "Thank you," and left.

I felt a bit better about the future now. My situation was still grave, but G-d sends the cure before the plague. I could not tell what the *naryadtchik*'s feelings were about Jews, but he despised the Germans and the petty camp tyrants, and he clearly showed deep sympathy for me from the first moment.

I returned to the barrack to straighten out the few things I had in my sack. Before I realized what was happening, the Germans came in from work, vigorous, strong, and free of any of the signs of exhaustion characteristic of all prisoners in Soviet camps.

At first none of them said a word. They simply examined me with curiosity tinged with anger. One of them, the brigadier as I later learned, a highranking SS officer during the war, called out in German, apparently confident I would not understand, "Looks like we did not properly fulfill the Feuhrer's orders if they still found this kind of Jew. They sent him to our barrack so we could have some amusement." The whole crew roared with laughter.

"He's going to stink up the place with garlic," another shouted.

"Don't worry. We'll figure something out. He won't stink up the place for long," the brigadier replied.

I sauntered out of the barrack, to all purposes oblivious to the pleasant exchange. I spent that night under the open sky, huddled behind the corner of a barrack, teeth chattering with cold, afraid to stand or even budge, lest a guard spy me and shoot. Before dawn the cold turned quite bitter, and, shivering, I waited for that blessed signal, roll call.

The Germans woke up, hurried to the kitchen for breakfast, and then went off to work. Only then did I return to the barrack. The *dnevalni* looked at me with compassion and went about his work of cleaning the barrack. I washed, *davened,* ate my feast of 400 grams of brad, and lay down to sleep.

At about four that afternoon the *dnevalni* woke me and told me to hurry to the *naryadtchik*. When I came into his office, he jumped up and said, "Oh, do you have good luck! Imagine, the lady doctor came. Why didn't you tell me you are such good friends? When I told her your name she was surprised — how did they send you here without her knowledge? She's waiting for you at the infirmary."

The doctor was quite upset. "How did it happen that you didn't even tell me they are sending you here?" I told her the whole story and described my situation, my being condemned to a diet of 400 grams of bread a day. Even if I managed to locate some potatoes, that would do no good since my cooking utensils and other things — even the spoon — were all in my valise, all confiscated together with my warm clothes. I repeated the conversation of the Nazis, my forced barrack neighbors, and how, because of them, I spent the night outdoors, all but dying from cold. I asked her to arrange for me to recover my cooking things and warm clothes.

She said she would see the *natchalnik* soon. "He's no saint, but I do know him so I'll try to persuade him to give you the things. Wait here until I return. Then we'll see what I can do for you."

She returned in an hour, saying that I would have my belongings that day. She gave me a note calling for a strict diet so I could get a minimum of raw foods, and medicine to relieve my stomach pains. We could not talk longer because German prisoners were arriving. I thanked her warmly and left. That

evening I received my things. I went to the barrack, where I put on the warm clothes. The rest of my things, with the valise, I gave to the *dnevalni,* who locked them away in his room.

It was a pleasure that night. The winter clothes kept me snug and warm. Again I huddled away under a barrack and even dozed a while. When the Nazis went to work in the morning I went to the barrack, washed, *davened,* ate my whole portion of bread as usual, and went to sleep. Several days passed that way. Friday I awoke earlier. I had saved that day's ration of bread for the evening to use for *kiddush.* Around six o'clock, as I was getting ready for *Kabbalas Shabbos,** the *naryadtchik* came to say that the camp *natchalnik* wanted me at once.

He accompanied me to the office of the camp administration on the other side of the island. On the way he told me the *natchalnik* was a colonel, educated, a strict disciplinarian, and I should be very careful about every word I uttered. "He acts cordial, speaks gently, but don't reveal every thought to him. It doesn't mean much to him to execute someone." He took me right to the commandant's door and left.

The commandant was, in fact, most cordial to me, asking me to sit, and when I remained standing he said, "You may sit. Relax. I don't intend you any harm. I just studied your folder and I wanted to meet you personally. I wonder why they sent you to this camp on the island. You probably know that these prisoners should all have been sent to the coming world. They are fascist murderers who destroyed hundreds of thousands of people, mainly Jews in fact. But the Soviet Union has a humane attitude even to such killers and commuted their death sentences to 25 years. Even here we treat them humanely, though they don't deserve it. How did you ever get into such company?"

The room was deathly silent for a long while. He studied my face, waiting for an answer. I decided to keep silent, so he began with questions. "I have a report here that says that since

Kabbalas Shabbos (Heb.): First part of Friday Evening prayers.

your arrival over a week ago you have had no food from the kitchen except bread. Let me assure you that I have personally checked more than once to ensure our kitchen is spotless and the food is always fresh. Even an invaliud may eat our food.

"I also have a note from the doctor stating that you suffer from a severe stomach ailment and must keep a strict diet. However, I cannot comply with her request to give you raw foods. I have ordered that they cook special meat and barley for you according to your diet. You will also receive a portion of butter daily."

I thanked him and explained that my not eating was not because of lack of cleanliness or finicky tastes, but because it was contrary to my faith. "You see that I wear beard and *peyos* because I am observant. Our religion teaches that a Jew may not eat meat not properly slaughtered, we may not eat from utensils used for meat and dairy, and so on. If you cannot issue me raw foods, I will be compelled to continue to live on my ration of dry bread. I cannot partake of the diet you were good enough to order for me."

"But you must remember that you still have years to serve," he interrupted. "You won't last long on a dry crust of bread. It is our duty to insure that the convicted be punished in accordance with Soviet law and to rehabilitate him to become a full and worthy citizen. We don't want to drive anyone to death, not even the Germans, and certainly not a Soviet citizen."

I could not stomach any more of this hypocritical chant. "As for the term of my punishment, I am confident I will not be here long, because in all my life I never committed a crime. I hope they will soon re-examine my case and they will certainly conclude that I am innocent and free me."

Something like a smile distorted his face into an angry grimace. He pondered me thoughtfully for a few minutes. I wondered whether his expression meant anger or curiosity or contempt. Finally he spoke.

"I look at you but I can't understand. You are a peculiar man. The doctor said you are educated and intelligent. The

natchalnik of your old camp agrees. He told me you did efficient and honest work as a bookkeeper. Tell me, why are you piling all these troubles upon yourself?

"Your trial? I have the impression you are laboring under a misapprehension. Here in the Soviet Union, innocent people are not in jail. Let me tell you another thing — the order to send you to this island came directly from Moscow. I am sure they have adequate reason for this.

"But nevertheless, I am prepared to help you. We have an office here and we happen to need someone with your qualifications. Naturally you will have better conditions than other prisoners, especially with the doctor's recommendation for a special diet. We shall find a place for you so you won't be in the barrack with the Germans. I can even arrange to have a cot and fresh linen placed in a room in the office. There is only one condition; you will finally have to start acting normal, shave off that beard and *payos*, and eat like everyone — from the kitchen. Moscow must see that you learned something in your years of rehabilitation in camp. This will no doubt speed up your release date."

Again — dead silence. He knew what I was thinking. "No, I'm not asking for an immediate answer. You must consider this. We'll wait a few days."

"I have nothing to consider," I answered. "I am a disciplined man and I am prepared to follow all orders except those that do violence to my religion. I am prepared to work honestly in the bookkeeping office, but under no conditions will I consent to shave off my beard and *payos* or eat non-*kosher* food or work on *Shabbos*. I am grateful for your concern for me, but since I trust in G-d, I hope He will protect me from harm."

"I'm only thinking of your welfare," he protested with a bit of temper. "Everyone is master of his own life. Your fate is in your hands. Think about this seriously, because no good will come from your attitude. Remember where you are. We shall arrange no special regime for you." He stood, indicating that our meeting was over. I stood too and asked whether I might leave. He nodded and I went out.

The *naryadtchik,* who was waiting for me, walked me back to the barrack. When I recounted the conversation with the commandant, he simply could not understand why the commandant treated me so courteously. "You have some unusual luck. This is the first time I ever heard of a talk with the commandant that did not end with curses and shouting." But he really could not understand my refusal of the commandant's offer to have such fine work in the office. "Do you realize what an opportunity you are passing up?" His look showed he thought I had lost my mind. He spat and exclaimed, "I don't understand anything anymore!" And off he went.

Autumn was coming and my situation worsened. The nights were turning colder and even my winter clothes were insufficient for a full night under the stars. Rainy nights were still worse. There was a hut near the food storehouse, apparently for a watchman, but unoccupied. I transformed the hut into my "apartment." It was especially useful on *Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Succos* and *Simchas Torah.* I could *daven* there undisturbed.

But then came the frosts. Sitting in one position meant being frozen stiff. Since movement on the grounds was forbidden from ten until five in the morning, I suffered severely. But, as usual, G-d sends the cure before the plague.

During one of these nights I moved around a little in the shadow of a barrack, being careful not to be spotted by a guard. The barrack housed the bath and laundry. I happened to meet a prisoner just then, a Ukrainian in charge of the bath and laundry. He had gone out to check whether the pipes were freezing. "What are you guarding here?" he asked me.

"My life," I told him, explaining why I could not sleep in the Germans' barrack. He invited me in, and the warmth revived me. He invited me to come in every night from one until four o'clock when he was there alone.

This chance meeting developed into a true friendship. When he had been arrested, he was already a high-ranking member of the Communist Party and a government official. His crime was having expressed criticism back in 1939 of the

Hitler-Stalin accord in partitioning Poland. The criticism was made in a family setting at that. A bloody war took place meanwhile, and he had completely forgotten that trifling incident. It happened that a brother-in-law, who occupied an important position in the economy, defrauded the government of 100,000 rubles. To avoid the threatened severe punishment, he became an informer for the NKVD. His test was to point out an "enemy" of the Soviet Union.

The brother-in-law thought long and hard until, presto! He remembered the critical remarks made before the war. NKVD, honorable men all, kept their word and released the informer and arrested my Ukrainian friend. The investigation lasted a year and a half and his sentence was ten years.

He was a graduate of a radio technology school and presented himself, upon arriving in camp, as an expert in radio repair. The officials badly needed these skills for their personal benefit. He was appointed supervisor of the bath, but actually was kept busy repairing the officers' radio sets.

I enjoyed another plus from this friendship. He arranged his work so that he always had a set in his room. Now, besides having a warm room to hide in during those icy nights, I could listen to radio broadcasts as well.

While testing a set one night in December 1952, he happened to pick up Moscow announcing the arrests of the Jewish doctors. The lengthy broadcast described the "crimes of the murderers in white coats" who plotted to kill the leaders of the Soviets.

This news frightened me and I suspected that my exile to this island had some connection with this dreadful affair. I recalled a meeting a few days earlier that I suddenly associated with the announcement.

At five one afternoon, when I was going to receive my bread ration, I met the *oper* of my old camp. He acted surprised to see me here, as though he had not known until now. "How did you get here?" he asked wondering.

"By boat," I mimicked his tone of voice.

He was so very sympathetic, even figuring out that I must feel pretty bad among the Germans. "Besides, I'm sure you realize that you are in mortal danger. Why, these killers might kill you and no one would know when it happened. If you would like, I will talk to the camp commandant to write to Moscow that sending you here among the Germans was an error. Why should you suffer so much?"

I explained, after thanking him, that life taught me not to believe in man's graciousness but in G-d's kindness. Since I was a believer, I believed that G-d would help me to be released from this camp and to arrive where I belonged. He threw me a glance of contempt and sarcasm.

"Everybody thinks you are intelligent but I don't see it. I have the impression that you are out of your mind. Your troubles must have unbalanced you. But it's not too late. I'm leaving right away and I can arrange that you be sent back to your old camp today."

I did not reply and he walked away. It was clear that the meeting with the *oper* and his offer were not casual. Every member of the NKVD had his method of cracking prisoners. This particular *oper* invariably began with honeyed words and promises of all kinds of delights. That convinced me that more troubles were in the offing.

Hearing the broadcast about the Jewish doctors, it occurred to me that this innocent meeting might be connected with the anti-Jewish provocations in Moscow. I was not wrong.

A few days later the barrack attendant told me to report to the *naryadtchik*'s office at once. An NKVD officer was there, a major. It was evident from the first glance that he was a Jew. He asked the *naryadtchik* to step out of the room and he got down to business promptly. He began with a routine examination of my documents, and then, apparently to gain my confidence, he asked me in Yiddish, "How did it happen that they sent you here with the butchers of our people?"

Then he shifted to Russian, "We learned in Moscow that you endure terrible conditions here, that a real crime has been

committed against you, and that you are literally in danger of your life. I came especially from Moscow to check and to help you as much as possible. But you must tell me everything that's going on."

He waited. I said nothing. He repeated his question, adding, "Didn't you understand what I said to you?"

"I understood your questions very well. It is my opinion that if you are really interested in my situation, if, as you tell me, that in Moscow they know I am in deadly danger and that I have been badly mistreated, the easiest and most correct procedure would be to issue an order to send me back to the old camp and let me work as bookkeeper as I did without any complaints. Why did you have to waste government money to make this special trip here?"

"I don't know why you answer me so sharply when I am really trying to help you. You may be frank with me. I will be frank with you too. In Moscow, word came that you were in a camp captured by the Germans for some time and that's why you were sent here. It sounded suspicious, though, so as soon as I arrived, I checked your documents and determined the report is a lie. But I want you to realize that it is up to you to help me get you out of here."

He studied me carefully after this, as though he was trying to divine my thoughts, then he shifted to another subject. He asked about my health, whether there were more Jews on the island, whether I had an opportunity to hear the radio or read an occasional newspaper, if I was up on world affairs in general. My suspicions about his intentions were now confirmed by these leading questions. I answered that as an NKVD man he must know that this island was isolated from the outside world, and that I personally had not heard a radio or seen a newspaper in years. Therefore I really had no notion about what went on in the world and would indeed be grateful for any enlightenment on the subject he might offer.

Again he suddenly shifted gears, ignoring all we had discussed so far. "Did you ever by chance hear of Shlomo Mikhoels? He was a great Jewish artist, a major figure in

Yiddish-Soviet culture. He was a true Soviet patriot and even Stalin respected him. During the war he was in America on a Soviet mission, collecting huge sums of money from Jews there for Jewish purposes in the USSR, especially homes for Jewish orphans whose parents fell in the struggle against Hitler. They are preparing a major book in Moscow about Mikhoels. If you have any memoirs about him, do record them and I will arrange to have them published in this book. This might even help to get you released earlier."

The pieces were falling into place. It was a miracle, I thought then, that I happened to hear that broadcast from Moscow. The doctors' plot, they announced, was concocted with the cooperation of Mikhoels, who, together with the writer Itzik Feffer, were described as American espionage agents. This treachery was carried on in cooperation with the American Joint Committee. I decided to continue to play the role of naive innocence.

"You know that I have been imprisoned for 17 years now, totally isolated from the world. I didn't even know that during the war there was a delegation of Jews in America. I heard Mikhoels' name years ago — he was director of the Yiddish theater in Moscow. I don't even know if he's still alive. But you know that I am a religious man. I've never set foot in a theater and I never set eyes on Mikhoels. How do you expect me to write memoirs about him?"

"But you did hear of the Jewish organization called 'Joint,' didn't you? There were times that they gave vital aid to Soviet Jews, especially in establishing Jewish *kolkhozes* in Crimea." At this point he just could not restrain himself and the NKVD investigator in him took charge. "I have the impression that you have been to see the 'Joint' leaders in Moscow a number of times."

"Please tell me what kind of word is this 'Joint', I asked him, mangling the English word. "I don't know what it means and what sort of organization it is. And above all, could you tell me what has all this to do with me?"

Here he finally lost patience. "It really was a waste of time

and money for me to come here. I warn you — the Soviet Union can lift a man to the stars, or it can crush him like a worm. It all depends on the person. I'll tell you the simple truth — you are going to die here on this island and no one will know where your bones are. But it's not too late." Here he was screaming in a frenzy. "I'm leaving you my Moscow NKVD address. When you write, and you know what to write, you will be transferred back to your old camp to your old job, and it's quite possible that you will be freed."

Now I spoke in Yiddish. "Young man! Stronger people than you failed to break me. If you were ever a Jew then you should know that I don't depend on you but on G-d's kindness."

He walked out of the room and, shortly after, left the island. Pondering his threats, I decided they were not empty words and that new troubles were awaiting me. My only strength was my faith in G-d; that He would eventually get me out of their claws and bring me home.

It did not take long. In March 1953 we heard the glad tidings that the "Father of Nations," Stalin, may his name be blotted out, had died. We did not really expect his death to bring radical changes in our lives, but it did bring us some solace and encouragement. We were happy that this vicious killer was finally gone and we hoped our liberation would not be long in coming.

A few nights later I heard the radio broadcast in the bathhouse attendant's room. The Soviet government had declared an amnesty. We were gleeful at the certainty of being released, but a day later we learned the details of the amnesty. We were not included. Common criminals, robbers, and murderers would be freed, but those convicted of political crimes would remain in the camps.

But there was improvement. On Tuesday, the first day of the Hebrew month of *Nissan* 5713, March 17, 1953, the *naryadtchik* smiled and told me to pack up my things because the guards were waiting to return me to my old camp. Three hours later I was at the gate of the camp I had left a half year

ago. The officers of the guard welcomed me like an old friend. "You sure were born in a silk shirt. To last a whole winter of such frosts on that island — for that you need luck. You came at a good time too, because a parcel came for you yesterday."

I was surprised by the cordial reception and I thanked them for their kind words. They told me the chief bookkeeper asked me to come to him at once. He too received me warmly. He jumped up when I came in and met me excitedly, "You came at the right time." He didn't seem to want to discuss my hardships on the island for he quickly got down to business. "You probably don't know that a fancy piece of work is waiting for you. Just imagine, Moscow returned our balance for last year and we have to make a lot of revisions."

He looked at me with sympathy and friendliness. "I know you are exhausted by your troubles and hardships. But we better not talk about that. I've given it some thought and arranged with the camp *natchalnik* to give you invalid's rations so you will be able to recover your strength a bit. You will be quartered, so far, in the bookkeeping archive so that no one will bother you, and you can do your own cooking. I believe you will get started on the job without delay."

He gave me the archive keys and I went to the post office to claim my parcel. As I expected it contained *matzos*, which I locked away in the iron box in the archive. I was pleased to have my Passover needs provided.

I worked hard all week, from early in the morning until late at night. I had to rewrite almost the whole balance, but I gave it to the chief before the deadline. He hurried off to get the commandant's signature before sending the balance to Moscow. Two hours later a soldier summoned me to the commandant's office. He greeted me decently and asked me to explain certain material and figures, especially the cause of the deficit the balance showed.

Now I could not control myself and decided to have my little revenge for the abuses I endured. "Commandant! I am not responsible for things done in my absence. To explain everything, I would have to start from the beginning and there

is no time for that. You will just have to sign the balance as it is. That's the price you will pay for the injustice done me. What did I ever do to deserve the punishment of being sent to that island with those German murderers who killed my people?"

My chief, who witnessed this exchange, turned red with terror. I was taken aback by my own audacity and I just knew it would not end simply. The commandant, though, began apologizing. "It was a mistake. Besides, it was not my fault. The orders to send you came direct from Moscow."

Again I could not control my anger. "That's not true. I know that the night they took me to the island you were the chief of this camp and you gave that order. And still, as soon as I returned, I worked day and night to fix whatever I could. Don't complain to me. You owe me thanks."

This was beyond endurance. He called the soldier to take me back to camp and did not even reply to my "Good-bye."

Soon my chief came into the office, wailing. "I never imagined you to be so irresponsible, and to yourself at that. You absolutely forgot that you are still a prisoner. I understand that you suffered a lot and it hurts you. But your conduct only complicates things all the more. Can you imagine how angry the commandant is now? He's ready to ship you off to another camp where you will have it even worse. I tried to calm him and defend you, but I'm not sure it did any good."

I thanked him sincerely. "I guess I did go a bit too far but I had to tell him the truth. Let him know I am aware of his hypocritical game. I had to show him I deal honestly. Then he will treat me with respect."

Again the chief thanked me for doing the balance over. "There's a new job for you. Because of the amnesty, a great many robbers and murderers will be released. There is an order that they get new clothes. Some of these crooks have already claimed two or three new suits. This can cause us a deficit that we won't be able to overlook later. If you take over control of authorizing new suits for a few weeks, I know it will all work out well."

I replied that since he treated me so decently I could not refuse, but the next Tuesday and Wednesday were Passover, as were the following Monday and Tuesday. He would have to come to the office those days.

These new duties were a lot of work. It was not easy to spend days on end dealing with hundreds of criminals, especially since they were particularly impudent in anticipation of their impending release. An officer came in one evening, mysteriously closing the door, and indicated that he wanted to confide some great secret.

"Please authorize a full prisoner's outfit for me. You wonder why? I'll tell you the truth. The freed convicts are a wild bunch. They attack us officers on the way out of camp. Why, they have even stripped officers naked, robbed them, and beat them. We have orders not to use firearms because that would lead to more serious incidents. The only way out is to change at the watchtower from our uniform to prisoner's clothes."

I promptly fulfilled his request, adding the little joke about the population in the Soviet Union being divided into three categories: those who were in prison, those who are in prison, and those who will be in prison. "Perhaps this suit will help accustom you to the future."

He laughed, commenting that he knew I did not say this in earnest but in jest. He thanked me for the "gift" and left. The next day I learned that he was not my only client. That day I wrote out six full prisoner's outfits for camp officers. I understood this was not done on their initiative, but with a wink from above.

Just as I came in to work the next morning, my chief came in accompanied by an NKVD major. To my surprise, the major put out his hand as a gesture of greeting. Of course I shook hands with him, though it was contrary to regulations for a prisoner to greet an officer like an equal. My chief explained that this officer was just sent from Moscow to assume charge of the *Tchiss*. Would I be so good as to acquaint him with the problems of this department? The

major was just discharged from the army and was unfamiliar with camp conditions.

The new major impressed me favorably. I put aside my work and took him on a tour of the camp storehouses, familiarizing him with food and clothing rations due each prisoner in accordance with achieved work-norms. Then we went to the office to study Ministry instructions. I gave him some tips in writing and even told him about some of the underhanded tricks he would doubtless encounter. He was pleased. When taking leave, he wished me to be freed soon, but if I was fated to serve longer and ever came to a camp where he was in charge, he would treat me like his own father.

I was grateful for these words and said that I believed in G-d, who would have mercy on me and free me soon from camp. And when I was freed, I declared, he would always be a welcomed and honored guest in my home.

"You treat me decently," I told him, "and this is the first time I have been treated so by the NKVD during the 18 years I have spent in camps. So please permit me to speak frankly. I hope that in your new duties you do not lose your humane approach to prisoners. There are prisoners who are morally superior to their camp-masters. They deserve to be honored. Ease their terrible burdens."

He heard me out thoughtfully and then gave me his hand saying, "I thank you for your frank and wise words. I promise that I will not forget. As far as I can I intend to act as you have said."

He left. I did not know how soon I was to meet him again.

CHAPTER 50

Back To The Central Hospital

It was a rather melancholy and lonely Passover that year with no one to share the *seder*. Alexander was gone and the Jew I placed in the factory job was still too intimidated by the investigation to associate with me. Then summer came, a week after *Shavuos*, and the chief informed me that in two weeks he was leaving for a position with the central administration of the camps. His replacement was to be the former comptroller, a cruel Communist.

I calculated that he would make trouble for me on account of *Shabbos*, so I decided to obtain admission to the central hospital and then perhaps eventually stay there on a job. I went to talk this over with the doctor but learned to my dismay that she was off on a trip. Her return was unknown. My plan was impossible to carry out.

In mid-July the chief bookkeeper came with his replacement, introduced him, and told me that he was taking over the job and I was to follow all his orders. I answered that I was a mere prisoner and carried out all orders as long as they did not conflict with my religious convictions. These last words did not particularly please my new boss, but he did not react.

The reaction was not long in coming. The next morning he told me that since I did not work on *Shabbos*, I could not be his representative. He had no intention of coming in to replace me on these days as his predecessor had done. "After all," he said plainly, "you are my representative and not the reverse." He appointed another bookkeeper to my job. His job was to authorize clothes for the prisoners and I took his duties.

The change did not displease me. Less responsibilities meant less worries. This work, however, held more troubles. There were frequent squabbles with the prisoners, who were ready to offer bribes to exchange a torn garment for a new one. It had one advantage, however. Now the new chief did not pester me about *Shabbos.* It was reasonably peaceful as the summer passed. I *davened* on *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur* in the archive. Although the engineer in the doll factory avoided me, I made a point of looking him up in his barrack before *Yom Kippur* and begged him to promise that he would come to me the next night to have the pre-fast meal and, if he liked, to come after *Yom Kippur* to break the fast. He promised to fast, though he was still afraid to come to me, especially on *Yom Kippur.* He did say he would come spend *Simchas Torah* evening with me.

He kept his word, and we celebrated *Simchas Torah* together. I told him about my new boss. I explained that he was an anti-Semite who, if he found a Jew lucky enough to have an easy job and heard that that Jew's crime was a desire to emigrate to Israel, he would probably fire him at once.

I suggested that if this happened, he should make every effort to be admitted into the hospital and try his hardest to be transferred to the central hospital from there. I hoped soon to achieve admission to the central hospital on a rather permanent basis so I might be able to help him stay there too. He thanked me and we parted warm friends.

On Sunday, 25 *Tishrei* 5714, October 4, 1953, a soldier came for me with orders from the chief to escort me to the main bookkeeping office outside the camp grounds. I learned that I would be working there for a protracted period of time preparing the balance.

On Thursday, October 8, my escort brought me to work at 7:00 A.M. As usual, I was alone, since the free workers and prisoners with passes came at 8:00 A.M. Suddenly, the major commanding the camp guards rushed in, ordering me to take pencil and paper and to accompany him on an urgent duty. The escort soldier who stood at my door did not react when he

saw me leave in the company of an officer of high rank. The major led me to his office in the armory.

"You are going to have a dandy piece of work. You'll enjoy it." Rather skeptical about enjoying any job in camp, I did not answer. But then I learned that he was not altogether off the mark.

The major and I sat at a table. He handed me a paper and a copy and told me to write a record about destroying the photos of Beria . . .

At first I was astonished — did I understand him correctly? Beria was Minister of the Interior. All camp offices were adorned with his photograph right next to Stalin's . Now an order to destroy Beria's photos? The major repeated his order adding, "I told you that you would enjoy this job."

We started with his office. The two soldiers he called were even more surprised than I was when he told them to remove the huge portrait of their Minister from the wall, to take it out of the frame, and then, when I recorded the price to rip it up and throw the scraps on the floor. Then they went to the other rooms and returned with dozens of photos that were removed from the inventory. Afterwards, the major, the two soldiers, and I signed the record as witnesses that the photos were burned. Then I was taken back to the bookkeeping office.

The job took about two hours. The chief complained about my leaving work without his knowledge. To my explanation that I was ordered by the major, he shouted, "You are my subordinate. If the major needs you he is to come to me, not to you. Anyway, tell me, what was so urgent?"

"I have the feeling that the same job will be done here very soon. I made a record about liquidating all photos of Comrade Minister Beria." I stressed the words "Comrade Minister."

Now he was convinced that I was completely insane. He stood there without a word, not knowing how to react. Just then the major came in handing him the record we had just made. Glancing at the record, he was so confused that he forgot that I, a prisoner, was in the room and was a witness to their conversation.

"At five this morning a radio telegram came from Moscow that Beria was arrested as an enemy of the people," the major explained. "It seems he was a camouflaged agent of imperialism. We have an order that all his pictures are to be removed promptly from all our institutions, and erased from the inventory."

Only after the major had gone did the chief realize that I heard all they said. He resented the fact that I, a prisoner, was privy to the news, while he, a member of the Party and chief bookkeeper of the camp, was not informed at once. For this indignity he lashed out at me.

"I'll make the balance myself," he stormed. "You go back to your old place. People are waiting there to be assigned clothes." He called for the soldier and ordered me back to the camp. This time I went eagerly. My heart was singing. The master butcher Stalin was dead. That outlaw Beria was gone. And personally I was out from under the carping supervision of the anti-Semitic chief bookkeeper.

On November 1, there were orders for a thorough inventory of prisoners' clothing. I was responsible for this. I was to organize a sizable group of bookkeepers to check camp storehouses, record present clothing stocks, and record the quantity and condition of clothes in the possession of each prisoner. The job was to be completed by December 1. On that day I gave the chief bookkeeper the entire documentation of the completed job.

A few hours later, a soldier came to escort me to the camp commandant's office. He received me pleasantly and acknowledged the quality and promptness of the inventory. Then he asked me to sit down.

"I have a little job for you. At one time we had to issue several officers four pairs of felt boots and warm fur outfits. Then these officers were transferred to another camp, and since this was during the winter, they could not return these garments to the stockroom. The garments are recorded on the storehouse accounts, under the responsibility of the director there, a prisoner by the way. Now it is necessary that these

four complete outfits be deleted from the inventory. You are a bookkeeper and I believe you will know how to arrange this," he ended smiling.

I leaned over closer to him and whispered conspiratorially, "When it comes to food products like flour, sugar, barley, and even bread, we carry an extra half percent for loss in transport and the like. That's why with these articles we can usually handle a discrepancy. But with clothing there are no such possibilities. I can delete the four outfits from the inventory only by your written orders and even then, I am required to send an immediate report to the Ministry."

He did not reply. He picked up the phone and ordered the soldier to take me back to camp. I had barely returned to work when the chief bookkeeper arrived. He was sputtering with fury but did not say an extra word to me. I was ordered to immediately transfer all my work and documents to his representative, the one who had taken that job from me. This clearly meant that I was through in the bookkeeping office and could expect a transfer to another camp.

That prospect did not dismay me. Since that anti-Semite became chief, my life had been none too pleasant. I understood that since I refused to help the *natchalnik* in his petty little robbery scheme, I could anticipate few joys here. What bothered me was that all this was happening during the winter. Who knew where they could chase me in temperatures that hit 30 degrees below zero.

By noon I had given everything over and went to my barrack to pack, certain that I would be on the road soon. That is what happened, but not as I expected.

The *naryadtchik* came in excitedly. "You really do have more luck than brains. Or maybe it is your brains? Imagine — you're going to the central hospital. When the *natchalnik* asked me to give him your papers, I knew you were in for more trouble somewhere. Instead, he gave me a note sending you to the hospital. By the date it looks like the doctor wrote it out months ago. I don't know why they remembered it just now. There's a truck of patients leaving today. Otherwise you

would have to go by foot with a convoy, which would take a few days in the frost. Hurry up and pack," he urged me and left.

My "luck" consisted in riding in an open truck with the other patients, freezing all night in the bitter cold. When we arrived we were all stiff with cold. Medics had to carry us into the bathhouse. We thawed out in the baths. Then we dressed in hospital pajamas and went to our respective departments. I was assigned to internal medicine. The doctor on duty that week was a Dr. Sergei, who knew me from his days in my old camp. He was cordial to me, asking how he might help me.

I asked him to keep me in the hospital for at least a week at this time. I simply needed the rest. Then we would think about the future.

A few days later, I learned that the *natchalnik* of this camp was the officer whom I had introduced to his new work in camp. He had promised me all kinds of wondeful things if I would ever be in a camp under his charge. This was the time to test those promises.

I asked the doctor to discharge me so I could work. Then, in accordance with regulations, I presented myself to the *naryadtchik*, explaining that in my earlier camp I was a bookkeeper. He assigned me quarters in the barrack for elderly prisoners, those unable to work. The barrack was cold, wet, and dark. This was Thursday night.

Friday morning he took me to work, telling me to dig up the stretch of land just outside the camp. I worked at that until noon. When the sun started to set and *Shabbos* was near, I threw away the tools and went to the barrack. Naturally I did not go to work on *Shabbos*. The *naryadtchik* came in for his regular barrack check because other prisoners stayed away from work too, but with the doctor's permission. When he came to me, I explained that I did not work on *Shabbos* for religious reasons.

He told me to follow him to the *natchalnik*'s office. When we came into the office, I saw that the *natchalnik* was indeed the major who I had instructed in camp life and its problems.

He greeted me with, "Oh, you are here, in my camp? When did they bring you here?" The *naryadtchik,* poor fellow, could not understand what was happening. He did not mention my not working. All he said was, "This prisoner came from the hospital yesterday and said that in his old camp he worked as bookkeeper, so I brought him to you to decide where he is to work."

The major asked me to sit and dismissed the *naryadtchik.* Then he asked how I had arrived here. I told him the commandant had fired me for refusing to sign a false report about clothes some officers had taken illegally. "But I was lucky. They sent me to the hospital and here I learned that you are camp *natchalnik.* I recalled your promise so I tried to contact to you."

"Don't worry. I remember what I said to you and I intend to do just what I said. You will work in the bookkeeping office independently. No one will bother you on *Shabbos* and holy days. You will keep your religious teachings. You may always come to me like to a friend, not like a convict. But please keep this confidential. Offically, when others are present, I will treat you like every other prisoner."

I thanked him gratefully and assured him that I knew how to act and would not abuse his graciusness. I had 18 years' experience behind me. He promised me a place in the bookkeepers' barrack, cleaner and better than my present quarters. I explained why I could not eat from the camp, kitchen and asked him to authorize raw foods for me, emphasizing that this was legal inasmuch as I was truly sick with an ulcer. In the other camp, the doctor authorized these foods, though her orders were not always honored by the camp administration.

He picked up the telephone and called the hospital director. Characteristically, he called the director by his title, "Professor," although he was a prisoner. He said that a prisoner had requested authorization for rations of raw foods because he suffered from stomach ailments.

I gathered from the conversation that the director had

reservations. Finally the major said, "Correct. But I believe that this will be concluded positively." Turning to me, he continued, "The professor said that to avoid any complications he prefers to handle this formally. He will request your documents, including the diagnosis, and he assured me he would arrange the matter satisfactorily. This will take a few days. In the meantime we will figure out some way to keep you from starving." Before I left, he told me to come by tomorrow to arrange my work assignment.

When I arrived the next morning, the bookkeeping chief was there already. The major introduced me as an experienced bookkeeper, and in my presence he repeated the incident with the *natchalnik* and my refusal to sign an inauthentic report. "I am a camp *natchalnik* myself, but I must confess that a prisoner who has the courage to act this way deserves full confidence. That's the kind of man we need for the new duties in your office."

These new duties, the chief explained, consisted of the following. The camp had a number of enterprises like a furniture factory, construction work, service industries, and so on. Until now, the books of all these businesses were kept together and it was never clear which were profitable and which were deficit producing. My job was to see that the accounts of each enterprise were recorded in separate ledgers. At the end of the month I was to make a reckoning that would portray the economic status of each unit.

I set to work at once. A few days later, the hospital called to report to the professor about my request for raw foods. I knew the professor from my hospital stay. He had a reputation as an honorable man and a specialist in his field. In Moscow, he had been a foremost surgeon.

The professor greeted me pleasantly, which rather surprised me. I indicated that I knew that the camp *natchalnik* asked that I be given raw foods and that he, the professor, had delayed this. He pondered me for a while and then spoke.

"I'll tell you the truth. I received my first ten year sentence because of a Jew. My interrogator was a Jew. You will

understand that this did not engender a special love for Jews. But when I met you I began feeling some respect for Jews and decided that every nation has its different kinds. You are the first prisoner I have ever met that the camp administration could not break. In camp you keep all your religious laws. Believe me, I will do nothing to hurt you. On the contrary, I wanted the history of your illness because I really intend to treat you.

"Besides, it's not wise to expose the *natchalnik* to the risk of a review that will lead to accusations of favoritism. He is a decent man after all, the kind you seldom find in this position. That's why I wanted everything to be formal and in proper order. Rest assured, if the other camp had not sent your diagnosis, I would have prescribed the diet."

He wrote an authorization for several rations for my illness and we continued our conversation. He told me it was good fortune to be sent to this camp where the *natchalnik* and chief bookkeeper were decent men, even though they were Communists"But you never know what tomorrow will bring. If you feel sick, or if some danger threatens you, you can always come to me at the hospital. First of all, I'll keep you for some time for treatment. It's not out of the question to give you work in the hospital office. They always need someone skilled in bookkeeping."

I thanked him and took the authorization to the *natchalnik* for his signature, then went to the storehouse to receive potatoes, barley, sugar, and butter. I now had a fortune . . . and I hid it away in the iron cabinet in the office. After prolonged hunger I could finally eat to satiety.

The month was not an easy one for me. The work was unfamiliar and I worked very hard to do it well and on time. My satisfaction was in giving the chief the month's accounts for January and hearing his sincere thanks.

On February 10, I went to the camp *natchalnik* to sign my permission for special rations for my diet like the last month's. To my dismay the *natchalnik* did not speak in clear terms. He was in some sort of dilemma. Finally he blurted out, "I'm truly

sorry to have to tell you, but at this time I cannot sign this document. I realize that this is a question of life for you, but you understand.

"I'll tell you. It's the *oper*. Since early January, as soon as he learned you receive raw foods, he came to me arguing that I tolerate insubordination and give rewards for refusal to work. He was refering to your not working Saturdays. It's his opinion that I am supporting clericalism. But don't be too worried. We'll find some way out. I hope you will soon begin receiving raw foods again, but meanwhile . . ."

No one said a word for a while. I cannot describe my feelings of bitterness. The specter of hunger faced me again. The *natchalnik* looked at me, his expression a plea for forgiveness for his declining to sign because of duress. He seemed to want to justify himself or to assuage his conscience and he bared his heart for me. He too, I learned, was a victim of the brutal system that he had served with faith and loyalty all his life.

"Take my word for it, it's not even the *oper*'s fault. *It's the system*," he said, carefully stressing every syllable. "I am convinced by my own life's experience.

"I was born and raised in a village in a peasant family that was called middle-class. We had a horse, two cows, and several hectares of land. I was one of several sons and we all worked hard, so we were not poor.

"During the war with Poland in 1920, I volunteered to go to the front. I was twenty. I guess I had some abilities because they sent me to officers' school. I stayed in the Red Army and became a Party member.

"My military position was excellent and that's possibly the reason I lost contact with the reality of life in our country. During the war with Germany, I commanded a regiment and was wounded twice. Toward the end of the war, when I was an invalid because of my wounds, they transferred me to the army staff on the western front. I worked there for a few years after the war too. There I learned what men are capable of doing and what you can do with people who are terrorized.

"A while ago I was sent to a most prestigious military institute, where I ran into an officer of my rank from my own village. We were about the same age and were good friends. His father was a well-to-do peasant and during collectivization he was exiled as a *Kulak.** Believe me, I never even thought about informing on him. What sense would it make anyway now, after such a horrifying war, with every vestige of our village destroyed, the people murdered, and the pitifully few survivors scattered all over Russia.

"But he was afraid and I guess it was this fear that drove him to write a slander against me, that I am a *Kulak*'s son. Of course that did not agree with the biography I had written any number of times over the years. They kept dragging me to interrogations in the special military investigation section. Unfortunately, I could not find a single person from my village who could testify in my favor. And since he wrote first, they believed him."

This major was lucky. The investigation dragged on and meanwhile Stalin died. He arrived in camp, not as a prisoner but as commandant. But he learned much from this investigation.

"I lived in a special kind of world for years. I never saw what was happening around me. I faithfully served the Soviet Union and lived a quiet life with my wife and children. My friends were primarily military people and I was convinced that everyone was honest and forthright; that whatever they published was true. Now I have met camp people . . ."

He stopped in the middle of the sentence, sort of afraid to utter the word. He lit a cigarette and changed the subject.

"Don't lose hope. I know it's hard for you, but I will help you in any way possible. You realize I can't start a conflict with the *oper*. But he's still young. I'm sure that he will be convinced of your honesty, and we shall be able to order your raw foods."

I thanked him and we parted in a friendly mood. After 18 years in a world of almost unrelieved cruelty, I finished this conversation encouraged. Even among camp commandants

Kulak (Rus.): Member of peasant class living in country villages and possessing their own farms. They were fiercely persecuted as "bourgeois" by Soviet regime.

you can find a humane person; there can be situations where the oppressor and the victim are both scapegoats for the accursed system.

But things were not easier for me on that account. I was condemned to live on a piece of dry black bread. I was hungry and the work was demanding, keeping me up late into the night. It was important to me to carry out all my duties well, because I wanted to maintain good relations with the *natchalnik*. I was grateful that he treated me like a friend, not like a prisoner, and had even opened his heart to me. Then my ulcer became worse. The pains became stronger all the time until I had to be admitted to the hospital.

Professor Ivan Pietrov examined me and declared that if my condition did not improve I would need surgery. Meanwhile, he placed me under his charge in the surgical department. After two weeks of special treatment including larger portions of white bread, milk, butter, and prescribed medicines, my condition improved and an X-ray indicated to the professor that an operation was not necessary at this time. I was discharged and went back to work.

At the end of March, the chief bookkeeper was pleased with my work and treated me with great respect. But, still I did not have raw food. I was receiving white bread and a larger ration, which was an improvement. The *oper* had no control over this. I went to the commandant to ask whether there was any hope of the *oper*'s changing his stand.

"I think of you. I even tried to persuade the *oper* by using other people too, but unfortunately have had no results yet. They are all afraid of being accused of supporting clerical prejudices . . .

"Say, do you know? It would be a good idea if you could have a few rubles of your own. Then we could probably arrange that you might buy some food." I told him that in the old camp I once did some work binding documents at the bookkeeping office and had received a ruble a volume. He promised to take care of this with the chief and try to obtain the same work for me.

A few days later the chief proposed that I do this work. In the first two weeks I earned twenty rubles.

A number of free men worked in the camp at specialized jobs, including an engineer and an agronomist, whom I knew. Naturally these free men were strictly forbidden to have any contact with prisoners, but I knew them to be honorable and trustworthy. I told them about my predicament. I asked them to buy food for me from time to time and to bring it in small quantities when they came to my office.

That way I obtained a little butter, farina, barley, sugar, and an occasional loaf of bread. It was harder with potatoes and vegetables. Because of their bulk, they could not easily be smuggled into camp. In any case, I was now able to quiet some of the hunger pangs.

Passover was coming. My wife sent *matzos* as she did every year, but one cannot subsist on a parcel of *matzos* for eight days. I simply had to find some potatoes. I told the *natchalnik* that in the other camp, whenever I finished the balance, I received an award of ten kilos of potatoes. He liked this idea. He informed the chief that if I participated in preparing the quarterly balance due on April 11, 1954, and concluded in time, I would be considered a "shock worker" and would receive an award.

It was hard work, but on Friday, April 9, I presented the chief with the balance. He was delighted and I received my ten kilos.

This was a particularly melancholy Passover for me. I felt very lonely on this festival when I had to have the *seder* by myself. It was more difficult than having the fall holidays alone. I was quite depressed, especially since it was a long time since I had heard from my wife.

When Stalin died, a new policy was instituted, officially designed for the prisoners' benefit but actually a device to tranquilize them. Now, if a prisoner performed 120 percent of his daily norm, he would have credit for 1½ days camp. For 150 percent, he was credited with two days. This meant that the release date could be advanced.

This was simple for production workers, but service workers like bookkeepers, kitchen, laundry, storekeepers, and the like could be abused more easily now. You see, a commission was convened every three months to evaluate the worker's quality during this period. The commission included the camp *natchalnik*, the chief bookkeeper, and the head of the plans section. If the chief of the particular worker's department, in my case the chief bookkeeper, graded the worker "good," he received an extra half-month for each month; a "very good" grade was worth double time, meaning three months of "very good" work meant a half-year off the sentence.

After the first three months, I asked the chief how much time I earned. To my surprise he said I had been given credit for only half, stressing that it was not his fault. He had marked me "very good," and pointed out to the commission that I had received a reward for helping to prepare the balance before schedule, and the *natchalnik* supported him in his arguments. But the *oper* was stubborn and insisted I must not get the highest reward because I refused to work on *Shabbos.*

A co-worker in my office was a prisoner-engineer whose duties were to calculate and record how much of the norm each individual and each brigade produced that day. This man was a notorious alcoholic. To celebrate the holiday of May First he became so drunk that he could not come to work for three days. Then the head of the plans section, his boss, came to me, pleading that I temporarily do his work. If the reports were not submitted on time, the prisoners would not get their daily bread rations and the results could be calamitous.

I generally tried to get along with everybody I came into contact with in the course of my work. I took the engineer's place, though it took a world of time and I worked way into the night. I could not understand why the plans section head should so passionately protect a drunkard convict who causes so much trouble, and not for the first time.

When he returned to work sober, he apologized profusely and thanked me for having covered for him during his

indisposition. I warned him that I would not do it another time. He bitterly accused those reponsible for his drinking, the construction foremen. These were free men who paid him regularly and brought him liquor for accepting and recording phony reports about completed projects they never performed. I immediately understood that the solicitous plans section head had his snout in the trough too.

We eventually worked out a gentlemen's agreement: I would cover for him when he was inebriated, and he would cover for me on *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov*. That way my absence would not be so irritatingly obvious to my enemies. The first time I had any significant benefit from this arrangement was for the days of *Shavuos*.

Right after that, the plans section head proposed an addition to my duties. The plans section made a daily report on all camp enterprises and a general report monthly on progress made during that month. A girl was employed at this task, but she was inaccurate and made frequent mistakes that elicited criticism of the section head from Moscow. The new job I was offered was to check these reports and make sure there were no discrepancies.

This was not easy, especially since this was added to my regular duties in the bookkeeping office. After considering it I did accept, for two reasons. First, the plans section head sat on the commission that determined time granted prisoners for good work, and having him favorably disposed to me could result in an earlier release. Second, and more important, Professor Ivan Pietrov had told me orders had come from Moscow that prisoners who could not work, and who had a short term to serve, might be released ahead of time. A medical commission decided who was eligible, and at the head of this commission was a doctor, the wife of the plans section head. He could intervene with her on my behalf.

Several days later Pietrov told me that he had submitted my documents to the commission proposing that I be released, adding that according to all the instructions from Moscow, I deserve to be freed. The doctor refused to sign. She was quite

blunt in delcaring that she refused to sign a release for that bearded Jew who did not work on *Shabbos* and was so insolent to the Soviet Union.

Professor Pietrov was not renowned for his love of Israel, but he could not tolerate such gross injustice. "Why, this is wild anti-Semitism," he protested. "Why don't you talk to her husband to influence her? You had better hurry because it is possible that I will be released under this new program, and with me gone it will be harder for you."

Besides my stomach ailment, I began having serious problems with my feet. Years ago my toes were frozen, and now the blood did not circulate all the way to the sole of my right foot. There was a danger of gangrene and amputation. The professor assured me that if I was released before he left, he would take me to Moscow with him to a specialist who could save me from this terrible eventuality.

One evening the following week, the plans section head came to my office with the July report and asked me to finish it two days early. "My reward depends on it, and if I receive a reward you will be able to have a nip."

He was not thoroughly sober himself just then, and he intimated that he would enable me to take bribes, just like the engineer. I answered that I could not drink because of my ulcer, but I would do as he asked though it would cost me three nights' sleep. But if he truly wanted to reciprocate, I asked him to talk to his wife and persuade her to sign my release papers on the grounds of my poor health.

We had not finished all of our business when his wife walked in. I decided to use this opportunity and addressed her directly. "Please, I ask of you, do not act contrary to regulations. You can familiarize yourself with the details of my illness through all my years in camp. I have the X-rays from my old camp, and you are a doctor so you can examine me personally. I am sick and have spent 18 years in camp. And I did not commit a crime in the first place. My only fault is that I am religious."

I was confident that even if she did not help me, she would

at least not be as implacably opposed to me, but I was wrong. She had a rottenness that was unusual even among NKVD satraps. She did not pretend to refer to regulations or assume a pose of cordiality. She answered cynically and cruelly, "Under no conditions will I sign an order for your release."

I asked why she was so tough in her stand. "The instructions are to release a prisoner if his ulcer bleeds, when blood pours from his throat. You are not yet in that condition. Besides, you have a light job and are in no danger."

Her answer unbalanced me. It was obvious that I could hope for nothing good from her, so I decided I would get my feelings off my chest. "I know of factual cases when you personally signed release papers for prisoners without bleeding ulcers. These were men who served two or three years out of a 25 year sentence and even that was a commutation of execution. You signed these papers. But those men were not sentenced, as I was, for religious convictions but for collaborating with Hitler in killing Jews."

She turned red with anger. Without a word she stalked out of the room, slamming the door behind her. Her husband stood there, momentarily confused by this unfortunate exchange. Then he opened the door and called to her. She did not even turn around. He ran out after her. I could see his rather unsteady steps as he stumbled out, apparently a bit drunk.

In my barrack there was a prisoner who had permission to go outside the camp. He was a servant in this doctor's house and often spent the night there. The day after the "interview" he told me that there was an uproar in their house and her husband even beat her. The neighbors heard it all. But in Russia there is a custom that when a man beats his wife, neighbors stay out of it. This is an internal family matter.

This was clearly another act in the drama I put into motion. I did not know yet how her husband, the plans section head, was going to act. When he arrived the following day, he apologized, "Because of you I had a fight with my wife. Believe me, I would be happy to help you, but I can not do a

thing. You must have done something terrible to make her so furious."

I acknowledged his good will and assured him that his wife could have no personal resentment against me because in all the time I have been in camp, that evening was the first time I ever saw her. He pleaded that I not allow the incident to influence my work for him, promising to make every effort to help me. I worked all summer at the two jobs. Often, when the engineer was drunk, I did his work too.

I concluded that as long as that woman was head of the medical department,I had no hopes for an early release.

On the first day of *Cheshvan* 5715, October 28, 1954, all prisoners were driven out of their barracks and ordered to assemble in the camp square. We found a platform there. Eventually the *natchalnik*, accompanied by several officers, arrived and mounted the platform. He opened the meeting, announcing that the colonel of the central camps administration in Moscow came especially to discuss information about current national problems. "Please pay careful attention and later you will be able to ask questions. You will receive answers," he assured us.

The colonel spoke over an hour on one theme. A miracle had occurred that an enemy of the people had been unmasked, none other than Lavrenti Beria, a criminal, a Hitler spy who had conveyed priceless secrets to Germany, who caused those early horrendous losses in the war which cost the Soviet Union millions of lives. Now, after Stalin's death, Beria attempted to seize power, eliminate the Leninist-Marxist leadership, and to restore the bourgeois regime to Russia. The colonel told us that the criminal had admitted his guilt. He had been tried, sentenced, and executed.

The speaker and the others on the platform began applauding, expecting the prisoners to applaud the address too. But few hands clapped. The officials were in a dilemma until the *natchalnik* thanked the guest and called out, "Please, any questions?"

Quiet. Silence. Not a murmur. Finally a lad of about

fifteen stood up. "I have a question." The suspense built as we waited to hear.

"The honorable speaker informed us that Beria was an enemy. He is the one who exiled and destroyed countless innocent people in the camps. Did he do this alone? You, citizen colonel, did you not kill people in the camps? Why, tell us, were you and the others not associated with the guilt?"

On the officials' faces was consternation. No one expected such audacity on the boy's part. The colonel left the platform immediately and the others followed. They hurried to their autos and left.

We had something to talk about now. We all felt light-hearted. Stalin's death brought radical changes, but we could not know whether that daring boy's words might cause vengeance and exact a terrible toll from us.

The end of November came. As usual, my partner was drunk and missed work for several days. I had to take the reports from the brigadiers and determine the percentages of filled norms. I generally avoided quarrels with them. If they recorded more than was actually performed, I acted like I did not realize it and I verified the reports. I figured that I took his place only on occasions, so why look for unnecessary troubles.

A youth came in that day, probably about 17 or 18, medium height, husky, and handsome. He made a highly favorable impression this first time I saw him. He introduced himself as a brigadier and handed me the brigade report on their work in the woods. The report claimed twice as much accomplished as they actually did. I had already received a report from the one who picked up the lumber they had chopped, and that report noted exactly half of the young man's claim. I told him I could not verify his report.

He gave me a funny look, a worldly-wise smile on his face. "Oh, you can't sign this, eh? What do you expect me to do? I didn't become brigadier yesterday. It's my job to see to it that my men receive their kilo of bread a day, and especially that they are granted their time discount for beating their norms. How do you think I will look if you don't sign the report?"

He didn't wait for my answer but suddenly shifted to Yiddish. "*Reb Yid*, where are you from?" When I told him my hometown he cried out, "I could tell by your accent that we are neighbors," and he told me his birthplace. His Yiddish was in fact precisely the same as in my region. Now I was mixed up. I never expected to meet a Jewish child here in camp, one with such a gentle appearance, and a brigadier of criminals besides. It was significant that throughout our conversation he did not utter a single oath, though swearing was normal speech in camp.

Well, in the course of our conversation, as I tried to explain that with all my good intentions toward him, I was unable to verify his report, the "gentle" youth took a knife from his pocket. Addressing me in *Yiddish* quietly and slowly, stressing each word deliberately, he announced, "You see this knife? Mustn't play with it. It cuts. My friends on the outside are waiting for me. I have a five year sentence. I've done three. A year and a half off for extra work, and the last six months I've got to do in three. You want to extend my term? Don't you understand that you are risking your life?"

All this in gentle, patient tones, but grimly serious. I was even more surprised when he told me that he was sentenced under article 59.3 — armed robbery.

He was the son of an engineer who was known to deal with large-scale construction all over the USSR. His mother died when he was a child, and when his father remarried, he could not get along with his stepmother, so he ran away. At the age of fifteen he joined a gang of juvenile criminals and became leader. He was highly intelligent, and in a conversation one would never imagine that this refined youth could be so corrupt. He shared the common thieves' psychology, and his band had an original theory besides.

This band of young hoodlums stole only from the wealthy, not out of gallantry or concern for the less endowed as we shall see. Their modus operandi was to break into the home with guns, but only for threats, never intended for use. They treated their clients respectfully, requesting money, gold, and jewelry, disdaining to take anything else.

"You understand, here in the Soviet Union it's hard to make a decent living honestly. A hunk of dried bread. So how did these people get so much cash and gold? They robbed the government. So we relieved them of their ill-gotten gains and sort of equalized accounts. Now tell me how are we any less respectable than the *natchalniks* who swindled and stole from the USSR?

"And now that we have discussed the whole business Jew to Jew, I want you to know that a thief always remembers a favor and he never forgets a hurt. Now, I ask you, please sign the report just as I handed it to you."

I had no choice so I told him I would sign for the first and the last time. I advised him in the future to coordinate with the one who picks up the lumber so the figures agreed. He replied, with that same cynical smile, "Don't fret. It will all agree..."

I later learned from the robbers that this stripling was their boss. At that time he was nineteen; his criminal career had begun at fifteen.

He was typical in another way. All common criminals regarded the politicals as enemies to be avoided. He came to the office every evening after that with brigade reports, but he would not get into another conversation. "You are a political, that means you are against the Soviet. I am for the Soviet, so I can't have any dealings with you. It might harm my career."

This was the standard attitude of all the ordinary criminals. They always tried to isolate themselves from the politicals, whom they seriously regarded as fascist enemies of the nation.

On *Shabbos* night, January 7, 1955, I received an urgent message from Professor Ivan Pietrov. A few days ago, a Jew, a critically ill man of some sixty years with high blood pressure and suffering an emotional collapse, was admitted into the hospital. He received fine parcels from home and good food from the kitchen, but had not tasted food in two days. "Since he's a Jew, I felt I must tell you. You might have some influence on him. You must learn the cause of his emotional state and then try to calm him. It's most important that he eat because he's in terrible shape."

I went directly to the hospital and recognized him as soon as I came into the room. This was the man I had met at the transfer point when I was selecting bookkeepers. I had helped his stay until he received the two parcels from home that were still on the way to him. Then he was sent to a camp and I lost track of him. He recognized me too, calling out, "Good evening, *Rebbe*. How did you get here?"

I told him I was in the camp working as bookkeeper, and when I heard he was here I came to visit. "I have connections. If you need something, I might be of help," I offered.

"How can you help me?" he groaned. "I receive good parcels from home and good food. I have a different problem. I'm just plain terrified and it's so bad I can't live." He broke down in tears telling me his story.

From the transfer point he was sent to a strict regime camp of recidivist criminals. There his job was checking production norms. They reported two and three times their production, and when he was afraid to sign the false reports they threatened him with knives. They once tried to use knives, but the soldiers saved him from death. The unrelenting terror brought on high blood pressure. He finally collapsed at work, and the frightened doctor sent him to the central hospital.

"I can't stand it any longer. I have 25 years, with 23 still to go. They won't reduce it. Now they will send me back to the bandits. Why must I suffer until they murder me? Why should I afflict my family, troubling them with all the packages they keep sending? I would rather die here quietly!"

I started to console him, telling him that a man must never despair, never give up hope in G-d. I told him I was sentenced to 20 years and with G-d's help would soon be freed. Especially now, after Stalin's death, the chances were better. His sentence might be reduced for production, and that meant real prospects for release in a few years and return to the family.

Besides, I told him, there was a Torah law about suicide, the worst part being that there was no opportunity for repentance. I scolded him for even thinking about it. I promised to try to have him kept at the central camp. "I'll try

to arrange for you to work with me in the office. I have only a few months to go, so you will inherit my job. The chief and *natchalnik* are both decent men. With your parcels from home, you will get along well until you are released, with G-d's help."

Without waiting for his consent, I said good-bye. "Get ready. I'll probably have you out of here first thing in the morning. I'll come get you."

At once, I told Professor Pietrov all that he had told me and my suggestion about discharging him from the hospital. He agreed that a discharge would greatly improve his condition. The new job and new atmosphere would help calm his nerves and lower his blood pressure.

Early the next morning, I asked the *natchalnik* to allow this man to be employed in the bookkeeping office, explaining that the Professor would agree to carry him on the sick list so no special permission would be necessary. Since I was soon to be released, I urged, the *natchalnik* would have a good bookkeeper and an honest man to replace me. The chief also agreed eagerly, especially since this meant another hand without pay. He started working that very day. To keep him from having to go to the hospital every night, I scrounged around and found a bed and put it in my barrack. These new arrangements actually rescued the poor fellow from destruction. He kept improving in attitude. His parcels kept coming. My own work was easier.

On 2 *Shvat* 5715, January 25, 1955 came another test. A commission came from that infamous labor camp in the far north, kolima, authorizing them by the central office in Moscow to find expert bookkeepers in othe camps and take them on a transport to Kolima. They checked the files of all the prisoners and naturally they selected me as a candidate. The *naryadtchik* who brought me the news added that this was another bit of work by the *oper* who had long been seeking a way to be rid of me.

This was a terrible situation. The work Kolima terrified all citizens of the Soviet. It had a reputation as a synonym for suffering and pain. Besides, the transport alone took three or

four months. This would include Passover, and since I would have no *matzos*, that meant fasting for over a week. I seriously doubted that I could survive. Besides my ulcer, my legs pained me more all the time. Here in camp I had pain. With relieving medications, I could live a reasonably normal life; that is, one normal for a Soviet labor camp. All this took place a few months before my anticipated release from camp, after twenty years of suffering.

I asked the head of the plans section to intervene with his wife, who was head of the medical department, to verify that my health forbade any distant transport, particularly since I had only a few months left to my sentence. But her cruelty was boundless. Ironically, she chose a profession of healing and helping and used her position to demonstrate her bitter hatred for Jews. Here she had an opportunity to get rid of the *zhid*, the quaint Russian insult for Jews. "Even if he dies on the road," she declared, "it would be a minor tragedy. So there will be one less."

I spoke to the camp *natchalnik*, trying to play on his pride, telling him the whole story, including the doctor's answer. I added, "Are the real decision makers here people like the *oper* and that doctor?" The hint did not pass him by. It may be that he really did not want this injustice on his conscience, but he told me to go back to work. "Don't worry. You are not going anywhere. You will be released from here."

That afternoon, the *naryadtchik* came in all excited, "Oh, do you have luck! Would you believe it! The *natchalnik* signed an order for you to stay in this camp and not to go on the transport. That's real luck. Do you realize that the commission was considering releasing Professor Pietrov early because of his health. The *oper* categorically opposed it on the grounds that the Professor is a serious political criminal and must suffer his full punishment. And you received a favorable decision. That's what I call luck."

On February 1, the chief explained that he must present the balance for the past year by March 1, so I should put aside my other work and devote myself to this task. If it was done in time, he promised, I would get my traditional reward of ten

kilos of potatoes. I assured him that everything would be ready on time, especially since the other man was helping me in the office.

On March 1, the balance was ready and so were the potatoes. I treated them like a treasure, storing them carefully in the iron cabinet. Half of Passover was now assured. Early in April, as usual, I received a parcel of *matzos*. I called my co-worker, showed him the fortune I had questered in the cabinet, and declared that now we could celebrate Passover.

"What? Here in in camp you celebrate Passover?" He looked at me in astonishment and disbelief.

"Not I, but we, both of us together, will celebrate Passover and have a *seder*. Don't you worry. The potatoes and *matzos* will suffice for both of us."

We had a private room for the *seder*, the bookkeeping archive, where no one disturbed us. My partner, I was delighted to learn, was as fluent in the *Hagadda* as I was, knowing the meaning of the *Hagadda* and prayers too. He told me at the *seder* that his mother lived with them, so they had a *kosher* home and he conducted a *seder* every year. Naturally, this was all done in absolute secrecy — no neighbor dare know because he had a sensitive position.

"But I never imagined that right in camp, in these circumstances, I would be able to have a *seder*, to sit with a Jew like you and to speak about Torah." His emotions overwhelmed him, and he wept. "But this is going to be my last *seder*. You will be freed soon and I still have 23 years. Just think — 23 years for a man my age in my state of health. I'll never see my family again, never taste freedom again . . ."

I did not know whether my attempt to comfort him did any good, but he calmed down somewhat. We spent that holiday in an exalted mood of longing.

With Passover behind me, I started to count the days to freedom. According to the chief bookkeeper, my release day was May 7, 1955. He asked me to prepare my friend as replacement to take over my functions. I promised he would do no worse than I, and I asked him to treat him with special

consideration, taking into account his health and the condition of his nerves.

On an April evening I had a visitor, the young Jewish brigadier of the thieves. Since he was to be discharged in another day he felt obligated to say good-bye to me. He truly wanted to apologize for threatening me with the knife. "I never in my life harmed anyone physically, and I certainly had no intention of doing any harm to you. But you understand," again that cynical smile, "in camp, if you want to live, and if you're a brigadier besides, you have to use any means you can. I am grateful for your help." And with a final farewell he left.

Joy at being freed was tempered with worries and danger too. The seventh of May just happened to fall on *Shabbos* and regulations required that the released prisoner leave camp that morning. Then he had to go to the administration office for his documents, and this office was a long walk from camp, far too much for my tortured feet. There were more complications. At each step of the formalities one had to sign. In short, I simply could not be freed on *Shabbos*, so I had to devise a scheme to be released earlier.

I went to the plans head with this calculation: if he wanted the monthly report to be ready on time, i.e. by May 4, then I must work on May 1 and 2, national holidays in Russia when even prisoners enjoy a day of rest. According to the "time credit" regulations I earn double time for working these two days, gaining my release four days early, on May 4 instead of May 7. He agreed, and since the *oper* was away from camp, there were no obstacles. The *natchalnik* endorsed the agreement and I was confidently awaiting my release. However, I still had one more unexpected, but grimly serious test to pass.

CHAPTER 51

Judged By The Thieve's Court

Just at this critical juncture, when it was urgent that I complete the monthly report on time to earn an early release, my assistant in the office fell ill and had to be hospitalized. Now I had to work day and night. During one night, about 1:00 A.M. of 26 Nissan, April 18, a 40 year old man walked into the office. He was elegantly dressed in a foreign suit, well shod, with an expensive fur hat on his head. Such dandies were found only among the most privileged thieves.

"I have a request of you. I need a pair of felt boots, the kind you issue to officers. All you have to do is sign the note and the storekeeper will give it to me."

I realized that refusing him would create serious problems, but I had no alternative. I explained that, regretfully, I could not accomodate him since the felt boots were under the exclusive disposition of the chief *natchalnik* and only he was authorized to issue them.

"I think you have been in camps long enough," he drawled menacingly, "to understand that if I come here at this hour that it's something important. I have a meeting with a lady outside the camp tomorrow, someone close to me. I'm going out with the construction brigade. See these shoes?" he lifted a foot. "I can't go around a whole day in these things. My feet will freeze."

I removed my own boots and handed them to him. "Here, take mine. I'm glad to do it for you, because it is the best I can manage. I don't really need them any more. I've only got a few days until I get out. In any case I sit here in the office all day. You may return them tomorrow when you get back."

He was not terribly grateful. "Do you know who you're talking to?" he shouted. "You have the nerve to insult me, telling me to put on your sweaty boots! Do you know what this can cost you?"

Now I was angry. "I don't know what it can cost me. All I know is I have to make difficult accountings, and my release depends on that. I've been here twenty years already. My replacement is in the hospital and you barge in preventing me from doing my work."

He lost all control of himself and tried to beat me. I had experience in camp, and succeeded in grabbing him by the collar. It was no trouble to throw him out. I closed the door behind him and sat back at the table to work. I hadn't quite calmed down yet when I heard knocking. "Who's there?" I called. The answer was from a young boy, a camp runner, whom the thieves constantly used as their messenger.

"Do you know what you did?" his voice betrayed concern. "You insulted our new *batka* and threw him out. You are in terrible danger. The thieves are coming together and in an hour you could be dead. Escape now, if you can."

Now I realized the peril of my situation. I tried to defend myself, explaining to the boy, "I haven't slept in a week. You know how a man feels when he's about to be released after 20 years in prison. I am so tensed up that I can't control myself."

"There's only one thing for you. Run fast to the guardroom and hide there among the guards. You might be able to save your life."

But I couldn't escape. The guardroom was right across from the office, and when I looked out the window I could see a growing band of thieves assembling. My escape route was blocked. A moment later the boy was knocking again, this time as an official messenger, to inform me that I was to be tried before the thieves' court in their barrack.

I telephoned the chief bookkeeper, telling him the whole horrifying story. He said he could not help because he did not want to endanger his life, and he hung up.

I could devise no ruse or scheme. My lips fluttered the *vidui*, the confessional prayers before death. I do not know how long this took. The boy returned. "They are waiting for you. You had better go to the trial, because if they come for you it will be worse."

There was a large table covered with a red cloth dominating the barrack. Three men sat at the table, the *batko* stood at the side. They told me to sit at the table on the chair opposite the three men who were presented as my judges. Two more men approached, one the prosecutor, the other my defense.

It was clear that I had no way out. Even if I could summon the guards on duty, they could not help me, because they carried no weapons within camp grounds, and they would not dare come into the thieves' barracks unarmed. The thieves were well equipped with long knives.

My trial began. The chairman read the accusations, precisely describing the incident with the batko. Then I was asked if I confirmed that this happened. I did.

The prosecutor began with a half-hour oration. "He truly does not deserve execution especially a few days before freedom after 20 years' imprisonment. But we must not tolerate our being humiliated, particularly since we are only a few dozen men, while the fascists (meaning politicals) number around 2,000. If we permit such dealings with us to go unpunished, they will stomp all over us. Since the only punishment that impresses them is death, this sentence must be executed, tonight."

My defense took the floor. His talk was endless, relating all my qualities, that I was an exception among the fascists, that I never had conflicts with the thieves, that I authorized new clothes for them, that I accepted exaggerated work reports from them and never asked any bribe for this as others did. He climaxed the recital of my virtues, "Regardless of all these fine qualities, I must, with heavy heart, agree with the prosecutor that there is no alternative to carrying out the execution sentence, so that others will be afraid."

My "victim" was next. He noted that he had nothing to add to the prosecution and defense. "Everyone agrees that we must employ terror tactics so that everyone knows that whoever besmirches one of us pays with his head."

They asked if I had any questions, and I said no. They did give me the defendant's last word, emphasizing that I had a right to only a few minutes, but in view of my being a decent man who always had fine relations with the thieves, I might speak as long as I wished. The limit was sunrise, because the trial and sentence had to be concluded before morning roll call.

The words kept ringing in my ears... "last words... last words..." One thought filled my mind, that I would live as long as I spoke, but my tongue was paralyzed, mute. No word came.

Suddenly a flash of memory struck me. I stared at my accuser, seeing a faint, foggy picture with him somewhere in it. I strained to associate the picture with time and place. The thieves' eyes were aimed at me like spears. An expectant silence filled in the room. And then I remembered.

More than nineteen years ago, 1935, in the early days of my arrest, I was in a large prison in the city where I lived. The prison was overcrowded. The cells were jammed as was the yard where we were taken daily for a fifteen minute walk. A circle was marked on the ground, and we walked in that circle single-file, careful not to step out. Each cell went by itself. Mine was cell 31, exclusively political prisoners under article 58, and the next cell 32, had common criminals, robbers, and murderers. The size of the prison population made it impossible to take each cell separately, so they teamed two cells, politicals and criminals, and cells 31 and 32 were a team.

One of the criminals caught my attention, scrawny, pale, almost at the point of death. It was a pity. I was receiving parcels from my wife then, so I had butter, sugar, and other products. Sugar was priceless in prison because it could substitute for many other foods. Whenever we went out for our excercise I took a few lumps of sugar and tossed them to this prisoner. This was no doubt vital in keeping him alive.

The more I studied my "humiliated" accuser, the more certain I was of his identity. I knew him and I knew he had committed a grave crime against his fellow prisoners, but I had to be certain beyond doubt. I was finally able to speak. I asked the chairman if I might ask a question although I had declined earlier, because I just remembered a most important fact.

I related the story of the sugar in prison and then asked my accuser, "They say that thieves never forget a wrong done them but neither do they forget a kindness. It is true that I insulted you, but considering that I once saved your life you ought to forgive the humiliation."

The judges, now intrigued, turned to him, and to my delight and relief he substantiated my story and said, "Because you helped me every day with a little sugar and saved me from starving to death, you deserve thanks. But the kind of shame that you caused me, and indirectly all those sitting here, can be washed away only with blood. You cannot be cleared of judgment."

I would have to use my last argument, one I would never employ for any consideration less than life itself. I stood up and declared, "I tell you that your whole judgment is wrong."

"Stop talking foolishness," the chairman called out. "Remember we did not treat you like the other fascists only because you are different from them. You keep your religion and you never mistreated one of our men. That's why we treated you like one of our own and granted you a trial instead of just laying you out. How dare you insult this court now!"

"G-d forbid," I protested. "I have no intention of maligning your court. I meant to say that the judgment is not correct because your chief, who is my accuser, is an NKVD informer who caused the death of several of his comrades."

The barrack all but blew up. My accuser, a moment ago so firm and assured, was now ashen, trembling. Now I spoke firmly. "In the prison we were in 20 years ago, this man had another name. One night he lost a large amount at cards and that caused a quarrel between him and his cellmates. He had to ask the guards for protection. At that time, an escape plot was

about to be carried out, a tunnel dug out after two months' work. They were afraid he might inform on them, so they hurried the job and made their attempt that night. They would have succeeded too, but this man standing here as your leader had already managed to inform the NKVD. They laid a trap and as a result five prisoners were shot on the spot and the rest caught. Let's see him deny this to my face."

The sleazy criminal was so stunned that he did not try to defend himself, standing there immobilized. As I finished I felt an overwhelming exhaustion, a reaction to the tension and nervous strain. I sank to my chair.

The judges went out of the room, and shortly sent for the "hero." I cannot recall how long it took, but it was not very long. They returned and declared me innocent of any guilt. On the contrary, they expressed thanks for helping unmask a traitor who was now having his sentence carried out.

I left the barrack, and though the night was frosty, I was soaked with sweat. Only now did I realize the terrible danger I was in and the miracle that saved my life. I went to the office, pronounced a blessing of thanks, and davened to G-d, who had rescued me from the hands of these gangsters.

CHAPTER 52

Freedom At Last

I was preparing for my release. I finished the monthly report ahead of schedule and on May 2, I handed it to the head of the plans section. He thanked me and apologized for the troubles his wife had caused me. My bookkeeping work was already transferred to may replacement, who was back from the hospital. He gave me his family's address in Moscow, and I promised, G-d willing, to visit them and convey "living regards" from him. The whole business seemed fantastic to me.

That day Professor Ivan Pietrov called me to come. "Go to the Third Ward. There's a Jew in room 6. He's in danger. You might be able to help."

There were six patients in the room but I recognized the Jew at once. He was rapidly pacing the room, despairing, excited, quite abnormal. I greeted him and tried to engage in a conversation but he answered me sharply to leave him alone, because he did not want anybody's help or conversation.

I returned to the professor who suggested I attempt again, after the nurse gave him a morphine injection to quiet him. He might wish to speak when he was less agitated. He had a gangrenous foot and needed an amputation, but he refused to have the operation. He had stopped eating. He kept crying that he was sentenced to life in camp anyway, so he would rather just die now and be done. "You must talk to him. You might persuade him. Tell him about the other Jew who is on your job as bookkeeper," he urged me.

When I went back, I found him in bed, quiet but depressed. He greeted me this time, and told me that he was falsely accused and arrested and had received a long sentence for political crimes. In the forest his feet were frozen. He did not believe he would ever get out of camp. He had no strength and saw no reason for going on. "It would be better that the sooner . . ."

I told him that the next day I would leave camp after twenty years. "If I have this by any merit, it is because I never lost faith, and G-d helped me to survive. Now, especially that Stalin is dead, you must certainly not despair. I have faith that we shall meet as free men in Israel."

He looked at me. We said good-bye and I wished him that the operation be successful. I promised to send him medicine from Moscow, one the professor prescribed that would ease the pain in his legs.

I returned early next morning to the hospital to see the effects of our conversation. I did not find him in his room and the nurse said he had gone for the operation.

I went to the *naryadtchik* who was waiting with a complaint. Why did I not finish the formalities of my release? I must leave at once.

After a farewell to my office colleagues, I went out to the gate where I simply stood a long while, rather afraid to go out, apprehensive about my right to leave. It was hard to grasp that I was truly free and might move about without an armed escort. I made my way to the administration building where I had to fill out some forms and obtain my release papers. A hike of many kilometers to headquarters awaited me. Then there would be more formalities. I had to receive my passport, cash, and a ticket home.

By coincidence, the camp *natchalnik* saw me in the corridor and invited me into his office. During our conversation he remarked that he had to go the central office in town and would be happy to take me in his car.

I went outside and sat in front of the building to wait for the ride, my mind occupied with far away thoughts. But reality came back and frustration with it. My situation was still complicated. The train ride home took four days and passed through Moscow. Even if I obtained a ticket for the next day, I still would be on the train on *Shabbos* and I had no place en route to lodge over *Shabbos*. The money I was to receive would barely cover the most basic travel expenses.

Meanwhile the car arrived. During the ride, I told the *natchalnik* about my problem. "It is certainly difficult to be a Jew like you," he smiled. "But don't worry too much. We'll think of something."

At headquarters he told me to wait in the hall while he went into the offices to take care of my paper work. Later I understood that his only purpose in making the trip was for me. When he came out he reported, "Well, that takes care of the formalities. Now you will pick up the money and your passport. I got you a ticket for Sunday."

"Where will I stay until Sunday?" I interrupted.

"In the hotel. They never accept released prisoners because

it is designated as a hotel for officers and camp officials. But I have friends who have a room with an unoccupied bed. They agreed that you could spend these few days there. You will not have to pay because the camp administration has paid for the room."

I was so grateful that tears sprang to my eyes. When we said good-bye he told me, "I only wanted to prove to you that even in camp administrations, there are men who keep their word."

The next day, Thursday, I picked up my money and bought some food. That *Shabbos* was the first in many years that I had a *Shabbos* rest, with no interference.

Wednesday I arrived in Moscow. I bought fresh underclothes, shoes, and a suit. I went to the bathhouse, where I threw away my old clothes, so representative of the camp years.

I then went to the family of my friend who was still imprisoned. They received me there as if I were their old father whom they had not seen in a long time, but we talked in a whisper because even though this was the family of a professor, they did not have an apartment to themselves. They only had two rooms, and another family lived in the other rooms and they shared the kitchen and entrance. Even when the door was closed, it was possible to hear all that was said outside of their rooms. I told them how their son was, and how he needed food from them. I also mentioned that they should ask the Creator of the World to free him soon from the camp to come home (and after a few years, he returned, broken and shattered, but alive).

I went next to the big Moscow *shul.* After twenty years of *davening* without a *minyan* (group of ten men required for communal prayer), I felt as if I was at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. The prayer was hearty. In the synagogue, there was also fear of the secret police. But I was overjoyed to be in synagogue and, of course, the others felt my joy which I did not hide (because I had not been afraid of the police in the

prison camp, and I was not afraid of them in the synagogue.) I wanted to tell the others not to be afraid and to strengthen themselves because redemption would come from these evil ones who wanted to blot out the Jewish spirit — just as Hitler, may his name be erased, wanted to blot out our bodies. But I restrained myself. From there, I went to the central apothecary of Moscow to buy medicine for the sick Jewish prisoner. I added a letter of thanks to the professor.

After I left the prison-camp, I was in Russia for several more years. Our situation was difficult. I could not work because of my poor health; my legs and my heart were in poor condition. I had only enough money for one week. After three weeks, I did not have enough money to buy food other than bread. But I felt very blessed because I was free in body and in spirit. I prayed and kept all the *mitzvahs.* I could observe *Shabbos* and holidays. But I was pained to see how our neighbors' children hardly knew even the Hebrew alphabet, or anything else of their Judaism. I approached the parents, but they were afraid to let their children learn, lest the secret police take the children from them. But at night, the children came to me and I told them about Judaism.

Finally I received permission to leave Russia and emigrate to Israel. I felt as if I were with the Jews leaving Egypt. For just as the Egyptians acted ruthlessly, so, too, do the Russians. And just as the letters of Egypt, in the Hebrew, have a numerical value of three-hundred and eighty, so too, the letters of U.S.S.R. are equivalent to three-hundred and eighty. And just as the Jews leaving Egypt longed for the land of our fathers, I longed for the holy places. My joy was lessened, though, when I remembered how many Jews remained in Russia. May the Messiah come soon and save us from this exile and bring all Jews to the land of Israel.

GLOSSARY

Alef-Bet (Heb.): Hebrew Alphabet.

Atta Chonantanu (Heb.): Paragraph inserted in Evening prayers following Sabbath and festivals.

Balanda (Rus.): Broth given to prisoners three times daily.

Batko (Rus.): Lit. "Father". Leader of thieves.

Bentch (Yid.): Bless, specifically Grace after Meals.

Buchlat (Rus.): Short overcoat.

Bar Mitzvoh (Heb.): Coming of age at thirteen years old (for boy, or 12 for a girl), when one becomes obligated to fulfill all Torah commands (*mitzvos*).

Bracha (Plural: *Brachos*) (Heb.): Blessing, usually before eating food or doing a *mitzva.*

Chanukah (Heb.): Eight-day festival in early winter commemorating defeat of Greek-Syrians 2000 years ago and victory of true, unadulterated Jewish religion.

Chanukah gelt (Heb & Yid.): Gifts of money customarily given to children on *Chanukah.*

Chazan (Heb.): Leader of congregational prayers in synagogue.

Chits (Rus.): Coupon entitling bearer to receive soup from prison kitchen.

Chol Hamoed (Heb.): Intermediate days of Passover and Succos Festivals — half-festive, half-weekday.

Chometz (Heb.): Leavened bread and food — forbidden on Passover.

Chumash (Heb.): Five Books of Moses.

Daven (Yid.): Pray.

Dnevali (Rus.): Barrack orderly in prison-camp.

Elul (Heb.): Sixth month of Jewish calendar and last month before *Rosh Hashanah* (New Year Festival).

Eretz Yisrael (Heb.): Land of Israel.

Ersatz (Ger. & Yid.): Limitation.

Gan Eden (Heb.): Garden of Eden, Paradise.

Gehinnom (Heb.): Hell, purgatory.

Gemara (Heb.): Talmud, (corpus of Jewish oral law and tradition).

Hagadda (Heb.): Special order of prayers for *seder* on first two nights of Passover.

Havdalah (Heb.): Prayer said over wine or other beverage at conclusion of Shabbath and Festivals.

Izvestia (Rus.): Name of official Soviet government newspaper.

Kabbalas Shabbos (Heb.): First part of Friday Evening prayers.

Kabinka (Rus.): Cabin, hut.

Kalinin: President of Soviet Union after 1917 Revolution.

Kartzer (Rus.): Dark cell for punishing misdemeanors of prisoners in Labor camps.

Kasha (Rus. & Yid.): Cereal made of grain.

Kashrus (Heb.): Careful observance of Kosher dietary laws.

Kehila (Heb.): Community.

Kiddush (Heb.): Blessing to declare sanctification of Shabbath and Festivals, usually made over wine.

Kittel (Yid.): White garment worn by males during prayer on High Holidays.

Kolima: (Rus.): Bitter cold area in Russian Far North with virtually no inhabitants.

Kolkhoz (Rus.): Collective farm, as organized by the Soviet regime.

Kol Nidre (Heb.): Public prayer said at commencement of *Yom Kippur* fast. Usually sung with haunting melody.

Kosher (Heb.):, Ritually "fit" to be eaten according to Jewish law.

Kugel (Yid.): Shabbath pudding, made of either noodles, rice, potatoes or flour.

Kulak (Rus.): Member of peasant class living in country villages and possessing their own farms. They were fiercely persecuted as "bourgeois" by Soviet regime.

Latkes (Yid.): Potato Pancakes.

Lechayim (Heb.): "To Life".

Lekach (Yid.): Honey cake.

Maariv (Heb.): Evening prayer.

Makhorka (Rus.): Cheap tobacco.

Manevrovi (Rus.): A group of soldiers on training maneuvers.

Maror (Heb.): Bitter Herbs eaten on the first and second nights of Passover.

Matzos (Heb.): Unleavened bread eaten on Passover for 8 days.

Melamed (Heb.): Teacher of Judaism.

Melava Malka (Heb.): "Farewell to the (Sabbath) Queen" — special meal eaten on Saturday night after termination of Shabbath.

Mincha (Heb.): Afternoon prayer.

Minyan (Heb.): Statutory quorum of ten Jews for congregational prayers.

Mitzvah (Plural: *Mitzvos)* (Heb.): Commandments of Torah Law, good deeds.

Naryads (Rus.): Work assignment.

Naryadtchik (Rus.): Work supervisor.

Natchalnik (Rus.): Officer.

Ne'ila (Heb.): Closing prayer of Yom Kippur services.

Olam Haba (Heb.): World to Come, Paradise.

Oper (Rus.): High official of N.K.V.D. in charge of discovering new sins' agaist prisoners.

Osobodiel (Rus.): Investigation Section.

Pesach (Heb.): Passover Festival commemorating the Exodus from Egypt.

Peyos (Payos) (Heb.): "Corners" — sideburns which may not be shaven off completely according to Jewish law.

Pirkei Avos (Heb.): "Sayings of our Fathers."

Propusks (Rus.): Special passes allowing the bearer to leave the camp area at certain times.

Purim (Heb.): Festival commemorating rescue of Jews from evil decrees of Haman, a Persian minister (see biblical Book of Esther).

Rebbe (Heb.): Affectionate term for Rabbi, teacher.

Ribono Shel Olam (Heb.): "Master of World," G-d.

Rosh Chodesh (Heb.): First day of the Jewish month.

Rosh Hashana (Heb.): Jewish New Year (in fall). Solemn two-day festival when Shofar (ram's horn) is blown.

Seder (Heb.): "Order" of ritual on first two nights of Passover.

Selkhoz (Rus.): Farming section of prison camp.

Shabbos Chol Hamoed (Heb.): The Sabbath of the middle semi-weekday days of Pesach and Succos Festivals.

Shavuos (Heb.): Festival of "Weeks" lasting two days, in late Spring; commemorates Divine Giving of Torah 3300 years ago.

Shema (Heb.): Three Torah-portions (Deut. vi, 4-9) xi, i-ix, Numbers, xv, 30-34) read daily morning and evening by Jewish men. Also last words said before passing-away.

Shirpotreb (Rus.): Section of production for internal prison use.

Shochet (Heb.): Highly qualified expert authorized to practice ritual slaughter of animals.

Shul (Yid.): Synagogue.

Siddur (Heb.): Prayer book.

Simchas Torah (Heb.): "Rejoicing of Torah" at end of Succos Festival. One of the happiest days in Jewish year.

Slabbo (Rus.): Infirm or sick people.

Spec. Camp (Rus.): Special camp.

Spec-Tchast (Rus.): Special section.

Starosta (Rus.): Senior prisoner.

Subbota, (Plural: *Subotnik*) (Rus.): Keeping the Sabbath Commandments.

Succos (Heb.): Seven day festival in fallduring which Jews live in special temporary huts (Succos) and make blessing on Four species.

Sukhares (Rus.): Candies.

Sushilka (Rus.): Room where laundered clothes are dried out.

Tachrichim (Heb.): Linen shrouds.

Tahara (Heb.): Ritual washing of dead body before burial.

Talaisim (Heb.): Larger version of Talis Katan, worn as cloak over clothes during prayer.

Talis Katan (Heb.): Four-cornered garment with "Tzitzis" (special woolen fringes) on each corner, worn by religious Jews under outer clothing. (Biblical source: Numbers XV, 38,39).

Tchiss (Rus.): Section for food distribution in Labor-camp.

Tefillin (Heb.): Leather boxes containing portions of Torah affixed by straps to head and left arm, worn by Jewish men for daily morning prayers except on Shabbath and Festivals (Exodus xiii, 9, 16).

Tehillim (Heb.): (Book of) Psalms.

Teschuvah (Heb.): Lit. "Return", used in sense of "repentance."

Tzinga (Rus.): Scurvy.

Tzitzis (Heb.): Fringes on *Talis* and *Talis Katan.*

Utchatchik (Rus.): Foreman who records amount of work finished.

Vidui (Heb.): Last prayers recited by pious Jews before death.

Vikatkes (Rus.): Hauling boards from river onto river-banks.

Yarmulka (Heb.): Skull cap, worn by observant Jews.

Yeshiva (Heb.): Jewish school of higher education in Talmud and Rabbinic law.

Yiden (Yid.): Jewish people.

Yiddishkeit (Yid.): Judaism, Jewishness.

Yom Kippur (Heb.): Day of Atonement and fasting (24 hours) — holiest day in Jewish calendar.

Yom(im) Tov(im) (Heb.): Jewish Holiday(s).

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F.K.

This book, which represents the trials and struggles of our past, is presented to

Henrietta and Jesse Siegel

for your kindness and support of our present efforts to return our Russian brethren to our beautiful Jewish heritage, for the greater benefit of all our people and our Holy Land.

CHAMAH, January 1980

About the Author

Born in Russia prior to the Revolution of 1917 into a cultivated and traditionally spirited Jewish family, the author of these memoirs received an intensive Jewish education in the general areas of secular studies. As accountant to a major business enterprise in the early years of the Soviet regime, the author had the opportunity to witness, in daily practice, the fallacies of the Soviet economic program and policies. It was as prisoner of the slave-labor camps and prisons of the Soviet government that his "advanced schooling" in the realities of life under Stalin's rule was completed. Here, the worthlessness of human life in the eyes of the government was made painfully obvious; the sacrifice of victims to the schemes and sadistic pleasures of the N.K.V.D., an inescapable fact of life. It is only by some divine miracle that the writer was able to survive these trials and finally leave the Soviet Union, thirty years after he entered prison. Avraham Netzach immigrated to Israel, where he presently resides.

Jacket design by the late Henoch Lieberman, himself a survivor of the persecutions by the N.K.V.D.

"Subbota" means Sabbath. "Subbota" means he won.