

CHAYIM PERL

In the Shade of the Trees, in the Shadow of the Flames

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Jerusalem, 2012/5772

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On the cover: wood carvings by the author,
capturing the landscapes of his childhood.

Illustrations: Rafi Perl-Treves

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Jerusalem 2012/5772

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Translated from Hebrew by Judith Moller
Copyeditor: Esther Singer
Cover Design & Typesetting: David Yehoshua

ISBN: 978-965-91874-0-9

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in Israel

To My Beloved Wife

Silvana

of the Treves Family
of the Italian Diaspora

In the merit of whose good and pleasant deeds
the cloud has rested on the tent-our home day and night.
She gathered and brought together bone to bone
from the Valley of Death, she cloaked them with skin and
breathed life into them.

With gratitude to

Judith Moller

(nee Grossman-Binet)

who translated this book from Hebrew

As a talented teacher and a person of learning, she perceived the depth of meaning of the words and brought alive the characters of the vanished world that was my world, to be forever remembered. May this work be a memorial for the martyrs of the Grossman-Binet-Bernfeld families who also perished in that conflagration.

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Foreword

Chayim Perl and I came from the same region and we lived through, though separately, the journey that led to the places where all Man's illusions came to an end. This is the root of the emotional turmoil that seized me, as I read his memoirs, years ago. This same emotion increased seven fold when I read "In the shadow of the trees, in the shade of the flames", which lies before me on the table. It is a moving document written not out of despair but from a determination to overcome despair. What is unique in the memoirs of Chayim Perl? Superficially all survivors' stories resemble each other. They all begin with 'before' and end with 'afterwards' – and they all sound like an alarm on the one hand, and the voice of comfort on the other. Nevertheless, every person has his own destiny, his own style and even his own narrative. The process is similar but its components derive from different and varied regions of the memory, from rich or poor childhood years, from prayers and hopes. The reader who becomes absorbed into Chayim Perl's book will discover a vanished world as well as a new-ancient dawn, which a young generation built with its dreams and sacrifices. I recommend these memoirs from the bottom of my heart. I am confident that they will find their way to tens of thousands of readers near and far.

Elie Wiesel
Recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize

Preface

This book has two parts. The first describes Schiff, the author's native village, where he lived and was educated before the Holocaust and its dreaded events. The second describes his experiences and tribulations during his deportation from his warm home, his life in the various extermination camps, where he fought courageously the battle for survival, until the Holy One blessed be He, in his graciousness, saved him from the inferno, lifted him by the tufts of his hair and brought him up from the depths to life and growth. This book can only be read with bated breath and great emotion. We learn about simple, innocent Jews; we live through the experiences of the author, we suffer with him and are choked with tears as we read the dramatic descriptions of his experiences at the hands of the Nazis. The clarity of his vision as a youth, who had no adolescence to speak of, is astounding. He passed straight from childhood to adulthood, with all that that implies, with its responsibilities for each passing day and worries for the next.

The author is endowed with wonderful observational skills together with recall of the minutest details and an unusual narrative skill. The events which held him by the scruff of his neck, together with all the Jews of Marmarosh, brought about traumatic loss of identity and life, but these never dimmed his vision nor made him abandon his image of G-d. On the contrary, there are descriptions in the book of terrifying moments from which he emerges as the victor: he was victorious over death, victorious over suffering, and remained a human being in the fullest sense of the word.

The atmosphere of his Jewish home, his time spent learning in Yeshiva but above all his high moral sensitivity which contributed

to this achievement. Galileo said 'all the same it (the earth) shall move'. The author and many like him said: 'all the same , we shall live', and thus remained human beings with all that is good and fine in the human spirit. Our heart aches for all those who did not survive or escape from the inferno of the crematoria, who could not reach the safety of the Holy Land. They were victims of wickedness, but until the last moment they continued to hope and had the will to live. This is the most meaningful 'Heroica' symphony that people 'played' as they went up to heaven in the whirlwind. It is a testament for generations to come that pleads "continue, continue to live.."

May it be the will of the Holy One blessed be He that He shall grant the author strength to withstand the pressure of his memories and to continue his activities to bequeath all that we went through to the coming generations, in the hope that such human situations will no longer be our inheritance, nor the inheritance of any living soul.

Prof. Yaa'kov Rand
Winner of the Israel Prize for Education

Introduction

Máramaros (Maramures, in Romanian) is a large county currently in Romania that was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. At the end of World War I it was divided between Czechoslovakia and Romania. The border passed through the Tisa River, at Sighet-Slatphine. The townships of Tatesh, Chust and Bushtina and their villages belonged to Czechoslovakia while the other part of Sighet, Visha Barsha and their associated villages came under Romanian rule.

The tall Carpathian Mountains surrounded most of the area. The peaks of Prislop and Petros could be seen from a great distance and you could hear the murmur of the streams which fed many rivers. Thick forests grew there, springs gushed out, copper and gold mines and other natural resources were waiting to be developed. Roads and railway lines were developing at a snail's pace. The population, Jews and gentiles, cultivated field crops and mainly sheep, cattle, fruit orchards, corn and grain. The forests were a source of income. Pine trees, beech, box trees, oaks and walnut trees were felled and set afloat along the Tisa, the Iseh and Schitu to the railway stations and from there to the great sawmills. Bearded Jews adorned with flying fringes, launched rafts of wood with callused hands and Chasidic fervor.

According to tradition, as noted by Reb Yekutiel Yehuda Greenwald (1889-1955), the historian of Marmarosh Jewry, Jews escaped from Poland in the 1640s, during the *Chmelnitzki* pogroms of Tach-Tat (1648-1649) and reached Marmarosh. About two generations after those pogroms, 50 Jewish families were recorded in the district. Many Galician Jews reached Marmarosh and settled there. In 1940 Hungary occupied Marmarosh and the Czech and

the Romanian parts were united again under Hungarian rule. In March 1944 the German tanks arrived. About 100,000 Jews, from 164 communities, were trapped in the Nazi net. In April of that year the ghettos were created and from the middle of the month of May, the trains with the cattle trucks started to speed full steam ahead to their final destination of Auschwitz.

The one wish of the deportees was that we should tell their stories, in those moments of helplessness and the concealment of G-d's face. The description of their characters, the life and death of the villagers of Schiff, are the letters flying up to heaven off the burning scrolls as written in the Gemara: "The parchments are consumed and the letters fly up to heaven"(Avoda Zara, 18a).

Today there is growing concern that forgetfulness, deliberate blurring or attempts to cover up may darken these memories. It is a holy duty, incumbent on the survivors, to tenth of the tenth who still live in our midst, to speak as eye witnesses. To tell. Not to remain silent. Not to forget. To endeavor to write down, as testimony, not only the torments of the camps and the miracle of survival, but to describe their way of life and the heroism of the martyrs and community life before the troubles.

The Jewish community of Marmarosh was unique in the history of the Diaspora, since these Jews built their country houses with their own hands, they hewed stones, cleared forests and established communities and vibrant centers of learning and work. There were scholars who were also experts in bee-keeping, in market-gardening, merchants and builders. The people of Marmarosh earned their living by the sweat of their brows as artisans, shoemakers and blacksmiths. There were farmers who tilled their fields and their orchards in partnership with their Gentile neighbors.

The writer of these lines does not presume to be a historian or a researcher. With great trepidation I describe the lifestyle of one little village as it is in my memory and remains etched in my mind from the time of my childhood and youth. The Jews of Marmarosh were fortunate to live in a remote corner, far from centers of authority.

Their hard life in remote villages in the Carpathian Mountains left them no time and strength to engage in politics. They were the first who were led to the fire, in profound silence. They, of all others, the peasants and the farmers, with large families, supporting themselves by their own labor, were sent to Auschwitz because they were "non-productive" according to depositions at the Eichmann trial. These wonderful communities established palaces of faith at the edge of forests and on the banks of rivers. They cut down forests, cleared stones from fields and opened up paths in hidden valleys, places where no human feet had trodden. In the dark alleyways of the villages, Jews lit up the dark nights; to the light of paraffin and tar lamps they recited psalms and studied the Talmud before setting out for their daily work. In the summer, kashrut supervisors lived in shepherds' huts and were busy with milking and the production of the Brinze and Orde cheeses. When the Gentile shepherds went to the pasture, the Jewish shepherd donned his prayer shawl and phylacteries and turned to the fields to commune with his Maker. The wooden fence that separated the Gentile's and the Jew's yards was a protective shield. Mixing without mingling. On one side there was instruction and action, ploughing and study, and on the other side there was mundane life, plowing and sowing, gorging and drinking.

The boundaries were clear. Each turned along the path paved by the preceding generations; the Jew to the house of study and the Gentile to the hunt. The six days of the week were, for the Gentile peasant, a preparation for Sunday, when the public houses were open and drinking was the order of the day. The six days of work for the Jew were preparation for the Sabbath day, six days of preparation to welcome the Sabbath Queen.

These were simple Jews, with innocent-perfect faith, who worked the land and loved nature. They were woven into the tapestry of local life among their Gentile neighbors; nevertheless, they were outstanding in their Judaism. A house next to another house, a yard bordering a yard, a field next to a field, joint flocks of sheep.

Joint planning of tree and field crops, joint troubles caused by floods and drought, an out-and-out war on the crows alighting on the fields of corn, the maintenance of flour mills and the breaking up of the ice in the frozen rivers in winter so that the stream could turn the wheels of the mill: all these were joint activities shared by the Jew and his Gentile neighbor. Nevertheless the Jew was different in his dress, in his food and mainly in his inner being, in his secret, hidden yearnings, the festivals, the Sabbath, the days of counting (*Sefira*) the *Omer* and *Bein-Hazemanim* (the days between seasons of study), Ecclesiastes (*Kohelet*) with its futility of futilities and the Song of Songs with its yearnings gave a special flavor to the days of work. The blossoming of the trees in spring, the fields covered with mantles of snow, the stars that glittered in the long frozen winter nights, the fast flowing rivers with the melting snows and the rosy crocus buds spurred everyone to action, to times of weeping and times of sowing and joyful singing with the reaping. These simple Jews had an inner fervor. At dawn, they would rise to feed the livestock and milk the cows. Immediately afterwards they would smear they boots with tar, remove their threadbare coats and run to immerse themselves in the ritual bath (*mikveh*).

The village synagogue, supported on worm eaten, perforated oak beams, was firmer and more stable than that church which stood on high with its golden tin roof and its wooden slats, decorated with carvings, with its chiseled foundation stones and big copper bells. The screeching doors of the house of study with its rusty hinges, the handiwork of the Jewish blacksmith, imparted a sense of security as strong as an ancient fortress, a protective wall of safety.

These were not "Shalom Aleichem" Jews with their joys and sorrows, with their degenerate poverty, cut off from real working life; they were not the Jews of "Mendele, the Book-Seller" with their ugliness and exaggerated deformities; they were not ascetics or enfeebled porters, neither were they wealthy, smug occupiers of the (Eastern) front seats with the poor, bent over the footstools

at their feet. They were not silken yeshiva students and scholars vying against apprenticed shoemakers and tailors. Rather, the Marmarosh Jewish community, and especially the country folk among them, were of one piece. The blacksmith, the shepherd, the *Melamed* (*Cheder* teacher), the ritual slaughterer, the apple merchant, the grocer, the rag and bone man, the wagon driver, the Rabbi, the woodcutter, the cantor and the beggar all had a common root of Torah scholarship and *derech-eretz* (good conduct).

Many had studied in religious academies and were familiar with Talmudic disputation. The slaughterer was also a bee-keeper and an expert in sheering angora rabbits, (a special breed of rabbits bred to sell their luxuriant wool, as added income), the rag-man hummed verses of psalms from memory and the carpenter was a participant in the *mishnayot* society. Reb David Aarons would sing and chant the liturgical poetry of the Days of Awe while harvesting the corn and gathering the grain crop; Reb Leizer, the grocer, gave a lesson in Gemara, while Reb Shlomo-Yossel, the Melamed, would find the time to chop firewood for a needy widow. They were deeply rooted in their villages. Their wooden huts were surrounded by fruit trees, a vegetable garden, a small cowshed, chickens and a herd of geese. There was plenty of water: the well in the yard provided water for drinking and cooking, and the river that crossed the village provided fish for the Sabbath. In the forests they cut timber for firewood and for building.

Their main wealth was good health. The distances between the fields and the home, the changing of the seasons, the rains and snows all toughened the body. The daily anxiety to pay for schooling, clothing and shoes, a dowry for their daughters, were accompanied by firm faith, as though the hour of redemption and deliverance was close at hand.

It was well known that of the ten measures of poverty that came into the world, nine were the lot of the Jews of Marmarosh. But by the grace of the Allocator, the region was blessed with measures of health and appetite, of joy and hope. The proximity to nature, to

the fruit trees, the pure waters, heartened the spirit in the twilight hours. The Marmarosh man had two facets: his heavily wrinkled face, drawn forehead and sad eyes, reflecting daily worries, contrasted with the cheerful countenance of a man happy with his lot, whose efforts are rewarded. The spirit of the Sabbath prevailed over the weekday spirit, which explains the survival of the community for hundreds of years, in spite of the difficult conditions. The Sabbath inspired these villages with an atmosphere of yearning for the Sanctuary. Elia, the blacksmith, sooty, with gnarled iron and steel muscles, who toiled all the days of the week shoeing horses, was a changed man when hurrying back from the *mikveh*. Clad in his caftan, the *shtreimel* on his head, he was stripped of all that is mundane, workaday...Who could compare to Reb Aaron Matityahu when sitting in his decorated succah, its walls made of cobs of corn bound together and the scent of plums on the floor of the house, the dried clover under the roof of the barn – in the hours of yearning for rain and for plentiful crops and for a succah made of the skin of the Leviathan.

The beauty of the mother and grandmother, busy from sunrise till there was no paraffin left in the lamp, who walked most of the summer barefoot, became noticeable when they put on their Sabbath scarf, facing the polished brass candlesticks. The candles twinkled and the flames mingled with the tears of prayers which smoothed their worried, wrinkled faces even after they grew old. The houses too changed their appearance on the eve of the Sabbath and festivals: the wooden doors shone with oil, the floor sparkled with cleanliness and on the table, next to the *challas* (Sabbath loaves), covered with their embroidered cloth, the Sabbath candles glittered, one for each member of the household. The faces, which gave out a hidden light, lit up to see the table laid with a starched white tablecloth and the plated challas which were sometimes made of whole meal flour. The housewife was in her Sabbath dress with an embroidered apron over it, the children around her, waiting for the return of the master of the house from the synagogue.

With him entered the Sabbath angels of peace, accompanying him and the Sabbath Queen. As if by a wave of a magic wand, the hut of the beggar-king of the weekdays was transformed into a royal palace.

Just as the poverty of the needy of the village was of concern to the whole community, so was their joy. When there was a wedding in the village, everyone put on their festive clothes and felt that they were kin. The whole village was decked out and without an invitation, as a matter of course, they all came to bring joy to bride and groom.

In the remotest communities there were practical communal arrangements. The head of the community and the honorary officers knew the real situation of each individual, his needs and how he could be helped and supported: who needs challas and candles for the Sabbath, who could not afford to pay school fees, who could be sent food openly and who needed anonymous support. Starting on Wednesday, one of the householders would join the head of the community or the ritual slaughterer, and together they would go from house to house to collect what was required by the needy. Gently, with a cheerful countenance and smiling eyes, they approached all those of means. Those who were short of cash would bring out flour, pulses, dried fruits or goose fat and hand it over to the communal representatives. All was done with the joy of carrying out the commandment of charity, and with participation in the sadness of the needy. When a woman was, G-d forbid, widowed, the whole village ensured that the orphans should lack nothing. Each person felt as though he were the representative of the Father of orphans and the Adjudicator of widows, and wanted to participate in the good deed, especially by paying school fees. If, G-d forbid, there was a disaster – floods, diseases and other serious troubles, rain storms and snowstorms – the whole community volunteered and girded its loins to help ease the burden. On the balcony of Reb Azriel-Anshel's, his wife Chantche would put

out milk and cream jugs and whoever was needy would come and take some home.

In March 1944, German soldiers entered Hungary and in April the Jews were crowded into the ghettos. Like a forest which is uprooted together with lumps of earth between the roots, so they were uprooted with their community leaders, teachers with their infant pupils, their Rabbis with their flocks. There is a holy duty, incumbent upon any one who is capable of it, to cherish the memory of these people, to recite their stories, to kindle a memorial candle for them. Many of the village Jews of Marmarosh sought their fortune and their livelihood in the town of Sighet. There they lived in the anonymity and simplicity of their ways, as wagon drivers and porters and kindergarten teachers. There they longed for nature and for family, for the rustle of the trees and the barking of the dogs at night. All of them together reached Mengele's ramp in 1944. There, the chain of their good deeds was broken. Their suffering, in their final moments, is wrapped in the bundle of those who remained alive. The marker on the burial place of the gathered ashes of the roughly164 communities that were in Marmarosh is a memorial to a vengeful, jealous G-d ...who is abounding in mercy.

Editor's Note on Place Names

Place names reflect the names of localities at the time of the events. The chart below lists the current names of main towns and cities in several languages to facilitate map searches.

Transliteration	Hungarian	Romanian	Ruthenian	Yiddish
Bereznik	Bereznek	Bereznik		בערעזניק
Bicskof	Nagybocskó	Bocicoiul Mare	Veliky Bockov	ביטשקוף
Birsanif	Barcánfalva	Bârsana		בירסאניף
Butiza	Batiza	Botiza		בוטיזה
Dragomirest	Drágomérfalva	Dragomiresti		דראגמירשט
Kretsnif	Karácsonyfalva; Tiszakarácsonyfalva	Crãciunesti		קרעטשעניף
Kechniye	Izakonyha	Cuhca		קעכניא
Masif	Majszin	Moiseu		מאסיף
Mitel Visho	Középvisó	Viseul de Mijloc		מיטל-ווישווה
Ober Visho	Felsővisó	Viseul de Sus		אויבר-ווישווה
Polien-Glod	Sajómező	Poienile Glodului		פאליען-גלאד
Rezavlia	Rosália	Rozavlea		ריזאוולייה
Sighet	Máramarossziget	Sighetul Marmatiei		סיגט
Spinka	Szaplonca	Sãpânta		ספינקא
Strimtere	Szurdok	Srâmtura		סטרימטרה
Volovo	Ökörmező		Volove	וואלאווע

Source: Yizkor Book Project: www.Jewishgen.org

Part I

In the Shade of the Trees

Chapter 1

EARLY CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

I was about four years old in 1929, when we moved from the town of Visho to the small village of Schiff. Here I discovered country life for the first time. Grandma Sarale, my father's mother, had a large house built of logs, like most of the village houses. On the inside it was plastered and whitewashed, but on the outside the wooden logs remained in their natural state. In my mind's eye, the rounded logs became a wall of waves. I imagined that this was just how the waters looked at the parting of the Red Sea: like the walls of the country houses. The roof of the house was covered with *dranitsis* – wooden shingles. We went up a wooden staircase from the spacious courtyard to a roofed gallery and from there to a corridor. The door on the right led to a large room with large oldfashioned beds piled with down-filled quilts and pillows. The beds were covered with reddish, cotton blankets embroidered with strange animal figures in a variety of colors. In the center was a wide oak table which could be extended to accommodate the number of diners. There were large chairs around the table. Later, I became acquainted with the cracks and scratches that scored the table and I would discover a whole universe there.

A cast iron oven connected to the chimney stack stood ready for cooking. In the corner of the room, to the north, was a brick stove that was used for baking bread for the week and challas for the Sabbath. Every Friday at dawn the stove was stoked for baking the challas. Preparing the kindling was a skilled job, one which my mother, town bred and born, learned from her mother-in-law, grandma Sarale, née Stern. Every housewife tried to stoke the stove with dry wood which burned with a large flame and left glowing

embers that make the best bread. The crackling of the burning wood, the pleasant warmth and the special fragrance of the bread filled the house. We children loved to wake up early and watch the wood burning. Grandma Sarale, who had been widowed about fifteen years earlier, moved delicately over the wooden floor and helped mother acclimatize to village life.

In the summer the women prepared fruit for drying in the stove after the bread had been baked. We loved the *malayna flitshontes* – the corn biscuits grandma used to make, the soft, white homemade cheese and the foaming milk which we drank right after milking. Everything was new and wonderful.

On the Eastern wall stood a *knape* – a sort of chest with a heavy lid that served as a seat, to store garments, and could become a bed when necessary. On another wall, next to the window facing the yard, was a cupboard used to store books, pots and pans, table-clothes and towels. There was a wall bracket on which we kindled the Chanuka lights. From this room two doors opened onto two rooms. We called one of the rooms "the shop". At one time grandma managed a shop and a tavern. The other room was the Succah. The whole year we stored fruit and vegetables there. Before Succoth we removed part of the roof with a *shlak* – a special wheel – so we could put the *schach* – the matting under the open sky. My parents had their bedroom in the second wing of the house. Altogether there were eight people in grandma's house. Grandma Sarale Perl, my father, Shmuel-Ze'ev, my mother Shprintze-Rochel, myself, Chayim-Yisroel, and my younger sisters Elka, Malka, Chaya and Hody-Hadassa.

The most attractive spot in grandma's house was the *boydem* – the attic. There were sacks and chests with old contracts in German and Hungarian concerning land purchases throughout the village from the days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The black hand-written calligraphy on the scrolls still glistened. The contracts bore the images of kings and emperors with crowns on their heads and at the bottom of the page there were rows of odd stamps.There were bags with money of states which had ceased to exist. Hats

full of nickel and copper *kraizelach*-coins of different denominations and sizes. The more I rummaged the more treasures I found. There were wonderfully strange utensils, among them chests of dishware that were Kosher for Passover. I also discovered grandma's hidden treasure – dried pears and prunes stored for Passover, which tasted like paradise even in the middle of the year.

I loved climbing the rungs of the ladder to the attic opening, with each rung my heart pounding because the rungs moved and made screeching sounds like little mice. Through the cracks in the slats I could reach swallow and sparrow nests. From the bedroom window I could see the large garden, the corn patch, the vegetables and the rows of apple and plum trees. I got used to the caress of the cow's tongue and was an expert in discovering where the hens laid their eggs in the barn next to the cowshed. I heard the history of the dog Kudrish, whose doghouse was at the entrance to the garden. Grandma would tell of his exploits and particularly of his 'erudition' and knowledge of Jewish customs: before saying grace after the meal, he would get up from his place under the table, run to the door, stand on his hind legs and open the door handle to go out, since according to *halacha* one may not pray in the presence of an 'unclean' animal. The members of the household used to kick the dog and drive him out when it was time for *mayim acharonim* (symbolic hand washing at the end of a meal, before saying grace). In the course of time the dog had adopted the 'correct conduct' and as soon as the diners had wet their hands, he would run outside. So Kudrish the dog, having died at a ripe old age, could be seen as a reincarnation of a human soul, since he was conversant with the laws of 'unclean animals'.

We arrived in the village at the end of the summer. I saw strange things in the village that I had not seen in Visho. In the center of the large room in the house there was a great mound of husked corn. A paraffin lamp hung from the ceiling; there was no electricity in the village. The light was dim and shadows moved with the movements of the lamp. There was something mysterious and hidden in the light. People moved about with wind-lanterns

or burning candles in their hands. Grandma took a lantern, went to the chicken coop and returned with fresh eggs for scrambled eggs. We went out with her to the cowshed to see how the cow was milked into the wooden *dunitze*, and a thin stream of milk splashed into the swelling white foam, as grandma gripped the cow's udders. We stroked the cow with our hands. We watched how a newly born calf was hand-fed. We touched the chicks, just hatched, from under the brooding hen. It was wonderful. There was a special, amazing taste to the porridge made of corn mamaliga, mixed with fresh cream and fried in melted Brinza cheese.

On the first night, when we arrived in a wagon hitched to two horses and sat down to eat in the dim light of the paraffin lamp, Alte-Malka and grandma Hinda, the wife and the mother-in-law of our neighbor Chane the cobbler, came to visit. Grandma greeted us with a likable, noisy, traditional: "*Mit lieb un gezunt zallen zain di guest...*": "Let the guest not lack love and health". I received a warm, motherly kiss from I don't know who. While she was kissing me, Poliye, the wife of the Melamed Reb Shlomo-Yossel came in; a heavy-set woman who was silent but curious with a smile at the corners of her mouth. She too wished "Love and health for the guests..." She stroked me and my sisters and promised me that her husband, the Melamed, would teach me much Torah, G-d willing... Meanwhile Chane the cobbler also came in, with a broad smile, girded with an apron shiny with stains of tar and shoemakers' glue, with his crooked hammer in his hand. He came to call his wife and in passing observed the neighbor's guests, while stroking and straightening his sparse beard. Undoubtedly he was hoping to have more good customers for his shoes and boots. Together with him came David'l or Duvid'l, his shy, spoiled youngest. His mother, Alte-Malka, took him by the hand and presented him to me: "Duvid'l will be your friend when you go together to *cheder*". I summoned my courage, drew him out and in the darkness I asked him: "Tell me, are you Duvid'l?" When he answered with a hesitant affirmative "yes", I held out my hand to him and said to him: "We will be friends".

I became closely attached to Duvid'l. We spent many a winter night, snow and storm, frost and rain, nights of howling, hungry dogs and drunk, singing Gentiles, walking home together from the *cheder*. We held storm-lanterns at night to give us light so we would not slip on the ice, and in the summer we held hands so that we would not fall off the *klatke* – a narrow bridge – into the river. During the *bein-hazemanim* (vacation between periods of Yeshiva study), we used to go to the mountains and woods to pick blackberries, raspberries and hazelnuts.

My mother, though she was town bred, learned to distinguish between a she-goat and a he-goat, enjoyed weeding the vegetable beds without uprooting the seedlings, liked to stroke the cow and milk her without fear. With her capable hands, the country house became a sort of imaginary palace. She tended everything with love. She even rubbed down the lintels of the house and tended the garden paths with care. She was impressed by the simple tools and the forthright manners of the villagers, Jews and Gentiles. The house was always open for advice and conversation. Friday was always a day of joy and preparation for the Sabbath. She polished the copper candlesticks and placed them next to the silver candlesticks she had brought from her father's house. The Sabbath and festival tables shone and radiated with "the light of the seven days of creation".

She would get up at dawn to stroll through the paths of the orchard. She loved the whisper of the apple and plum tree branches. She would gather the fruit that had dropped overnight on the carpet of grass. With her delicate fingers she stroked the dew drops that moistened the fruit. It was a special surprise for us children, when we opened our eyes after a night's sleep and felt the touch of her hands with a bunch of wild flowers in them.

She was full of excitement at the special pattern of village life: the corn harvest and husking done collectively; the preparation of the plums for the *pubidil* that cooked in a special pot on a fire that burned all night long, the baking of matzos for Passover, the cleaning of the house and kashering of the utensils, the embroidery of

tableclothes and cushion covers, the good neighborliness between the Jews and the Gentiles, the sight of the dazzling snow in winter and the budding and blossoming of the trees in the spring, the rushing river after the melting of the snows. Our Gentile neighbors were also moved by the swift integration of my mother into the life and ways of the village.

My father, Shmuel-Ze'ev, son of Chayim-Yisroel Perl, was a native of the village of Schiff. My father's grandfather, Asher-Anshel, went to Israel, to Safed, when he was very old. According to family tradition, he took a substantial pouch of gold coins with him. He lived to be one hundred and four and was buried there. He left three sons in Schiff: my grandfather Chayim-Yisroel and his two brothers, Shmuel-Dovid and Azriel. My father was seventeen when my grandfather, Chayim-Yisroel, experienced chest pains and it was decided that he should travel to Vienna, the capital of the Empire, to be examined by a specialist. He agreed to travel there on condition that no family member would accompany him. He was stubborn and forceful, a strong willed countryman, well to do and confident. He travelled to the city of Sighet by wagon and from there by train to Vienna. His eldest son, Ya'acov and one of his daughters travelled after him, without his knowledge. When they got to the waiting room of the clinic they found him dead. He died on the twelfth day of the month of Tamuz in 1916, far from his beloved village. About eighty years later, a family relation discovered his grave in the old cemetery of Vienna. On the tombstone the following words are still inscribed: "Here lies buried Chayim-Yisroel son of Asher-Anshel Perl of Schiff... forty four years old... devoted all his days to Torah study... shared his bread with the poor..."

My father, Shemuel-Ze'ev, began taking on his share of the burden of earning a living by looking after the fields, the shop and the tavern. My grandma Sarale was left with two sons and four daughters. My father was greatly involved in the life of the community; he was active and popular. He was a scholar and reader of the weekly portion, with a good sense of humour and a pleasant

nature. As a born countryman, he was familiar with every path and valley in the region. Our Gentile neighbors used to come to consult him about their conflicts and disputes over boundaries of fields and inherited parcels of land. Grandma Sara passed away in 1935. About three years later my mother, Shprintse-Rochel, passed away; she was thirty six at the time of her death, which took place about five years before the Holocaust. She was buried in the village cemetery, next to Grandma Sarale. My father was away from the village at the time. He worked at that time as a private tutor in Sasregen and was urgently summoned home. My mother left five children behind. I was about thirteen (it was two months after my Bar-Mitzva), and my four sisters were aged four to twelve.

The second calamity befell us in the summer of 1939: my father fell ill and on doctor's orders he was promptly taken to the hospital in Sighet. Our old uncle travelled with him to help him during his illness. Dr. Berko performed the operation. I learned about his illness while I was in the Yeshiva in Strimtara. A family relative visited me and with a sad countenance that spoke volumes, asked me to go to Sighet. I found my father on his sickbed. Apparently he was suffering from post operational complications. He was weak, pale and very worried. He kept asking: "What will become of the little orphans?" Old uncle Azriel sat by his side, holding the book of Psalms whose pages were suffused with his tears. The next day his funeral took place in the Sighet cemetery. Uncle and I returned to the village sad and forlorn. Our expression told the sad news. Our warm nest had fallen apart.

About five years later each of us reached the valley of Hell of Auschwitz separately. My sister Malka and I came from the ghetto of Dragomirest; my sister Elka from the ghetto of Bocicoiul-Mare, together with the family of my aunt, Malka, and her husband, Mordechai Gantz. My sister Chaya who was about twelve, together with the family of my aunt Rivka and her husband Berel Gantz from the Visho ghetto. My little sister Hadassa remained on the other side of the border, in Romania, and thus was saved.

Chapter 2

INSTITUTIONS

The Cheder

The institution which left its unique Jewish mark on each child in the village was undoubtedly the "*Talmud Torah*", the *Cheder* which writers of all the generations have described, some benevolently and others with condemnation, some with rage and others with a smile, some with painful recollections and others with nostalgia. The outstanding personality all children encountered from the age of four was the *Melamed*, or the *Rebbe*, as the children put it. He was the artist, the potter, and the child was like clay in his hands. In the summer, children spent most of the hours of the day in the Cheder, and in the winter even part of the night. It was in the Cheder that they would play their first childhood games, and it was in the Cheder that they would think of their future as scholars. It was in the Cheder that they dreamed their daydreams. There children experienced joys and sorrows. On his Melamed's rickety bench the young boy longed for his mother's warmth, and there he shed tears on his separation from her. At the age of four he experienced "foreignness" and "exile" when the whole forest of simple letters and final letters jumped in front of his eyes, causing confusion and dizziness. The *Cheder* was a source of pride and hope for parents: it was a yardstick and a crucible. Here was the springboard to the next stages: it was the *Melamed* who noticed those children who had a good, open, receptive head, and those who were "blockheads" as the saying in Yiddish goes.

There were two Cheders in Schiff which complemented each other: Reb Shlomo-Yoseph Ovitch's Cheder and the Cheder for

older boys of Reb Moshe Aarons Wachs. These two teachers were impressive, striking figures adorned with beard and sidelocks. They were institutions in their own right. For decades they toiled, labored, reared and guided the young and the older village children. In winter we sat around the large table, scored with scratches, in the light of paraffin lamps and candles. The stove gave out enormous heat. Studies began at dawn, at five in the morning and continued till evening, interrupted in the middle by studies at the general school. There were breaks for prayers and eating. In the summer, in the caressing warmth and the rustling of the acacia and pine, the apple and the cherry trees, or in winter, with the rain knocking on the wooden slats, we sat and listened, open-mouthed. The teachers toiled and taught the village children Torah and *hochma* (wisdom), ethics and knowledge, tirelessly, out of a sense of mission.

The division was natural: Reb Shlomo-Yossel welcomed youngsters at the age of four and instructed them until the age fit for the study of *Gemara*, then the youths moved on to Reb Moshe-Aarons and studied there until they attained the maturity needed for Yeshiva study.

The age at which to start Yeshiva study was not fixed. As soon as Reb Moshe-Aarons decided and uttered the long awaited words, in his hoarse, quiet and deep voice: "This student has nothing more to do here...", the boy felt specially important: he started to feel like a fledgling who was growing wings for flight and was awaiting its mother's nudge. The busy, hardworking parents did not hide their happy smiles. Joyful tears glittered in their eyes and in their imagination they were already accompanying him to the Yeshiva for the upcoming *zeman* (term of study).

There were students who stayed with Reb Shlomo-Yossel to a ripe old age, even to the age of fifteen. Generally these were hopeless students who were destined to take on the burden of work and earning a living. Reb Shlomo-Yossel had a special method to help the children learn Hebrew *(ivri)*, i.e. the reading of *Leshon*



Hakodesh, the holy tongue. He would welcome the four year old *tachshit* (imp) with a serious face. His thick beard was combed out, his sidelocks curled and were arranged in locks, his glasses framed on his nose: in every sense he was ready for the welcome. The mother, who accompanied the child on the first day, would glance out of the corner of her eye to see how things would unfold and when the child would burst into tears. The Melamed would conceal a smile: his eyes looked angry but his cheeks smiled. His thick eyebrows stood out like a predatory eagle, but his gaze watched carefully so that the child would not start to cry.

Very slowly he would bring out his *Aleph-Beth* board, printed with enormous letters, pitch black and large, like strange beasts, looking like that angel with myriads of eyes mentioned in the legends of the Talmud. The moment the *Rebbe* noticed that the child's lips were starting to tremble, he would take the child on his knees, give him a fatherly pat, take out the *teitel* – the pointer, touch the board with it and exchange glances with the mother who was immensely gratified by her child, altogether hypnotized by the occa-

sion, and the Rebbe, in his deep voice would begin the first lesson: "Well, look here and say Aleph. Aalleph".

The Rebbe would not let go until the child would utter loudly a shaky "Aleph", without an outburst of tears. Rebbe Shlomo-Yossel did not tire or get excited; again and again he ploughed with his pointer the black rows of the Aleph-Beth, until the little boy had almost wet himself. The Rebbe would not let go and began describing the letters: The poor Aleph is carrying a heavy stone on its back. The *Beth* looks like a snow sleigh and the *Gimmel* looks like a lame person whose leg was cut off by a large, axe wielding Gentile and his leg is hanging by a thread... and when the child was about to burst out crying due to his own distress and the distress of the wounded Gimmel – it was then that moon shaped sweets in various colours fell onto the Aleph-Beth board and covered the blackboard with a mantle of sweetness.

The Rebbe would interrupt his teaching for a moment and gather his young charges, arrange them in a circle around the young beginner and would proclaim: "So shall be done to the child who likes to learn... An angel of the L-rd showers on him sweets from heaven...". He would then tell the mother to go home and leave the child, since from that moment on "infancy had come to an end, and this infant shall grow to be great..." Next to the board was positioned his eternal, flat, onion shaped watch, covered with glass as yellow with age as an ancient parchment. Under the glass lay a clock-face with Roman numerals, with one pointer showing the hours. Except for the Rebbe himself, not one of the Cheder children could puzzle out the riddle of the correct hour.

Girls also studied in Rebbe Shlomo-Yossel's Cheder. The girls usually started to learn at about the age of nine or ten. When they had learned to read and write, mainly by reading the prayer book and *Tze'nah Ur'enah* they had finished their course of religious studies.

The Rebbe arranged his pupils in groups. The first, known as the Aleph-Beth group, was for the beginners. The second group

was the *unterzagers* (the whisperers): the pupils spoke in a whisper, or the Rebbe himself would whisper "*Qamatz Aleph*" and the child had to finish the "aa" (אָ) of aleph aloud. When they reached the level of learning syllables, they would whisper the syllable and finish aloud the complete syllable. The third group learned *Chumash* (Torah, the Five Books of Moses) and Rashi. They were followed by the top group who learned easy *Mishnayot*, the Ethics of the Fathers, *Barchi Nafshi* and *sugiot* (problems) in Gemara, mostly *Elu Metziot* or *Ha'Mafkid*. This group was simply called "the big ones". How great was their prestige in the eyes of the youngsters when the cry was heard: "The big ones to their lesson..." Generally, when the Rebbe was teaching one group another group would be revising their lesson loudly, to a melodious tune. From time to time a child would ask the Rebbe's permission to relieve himself, explaining whether it was "number one" or "number two". At times the Rebbe permitted a break in the revision to go out and just play.

The prayer book and the weekly portion served as texts for young and old alike, each child according to his capability and grasp. Books like *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch,* selected Chapters from the prayer book, Aramaic prayers such as *ke'gavna* and selected Chapters from the *machzor* for the festivals served as additions for widening one's knowledge. Even the beginners who had not yet learned to read studied the highlights of the weekly portion with the Rebbe. Those grown-ups who pinched cheeks would pester the little ones with odd questions like: "Who is "*Toldoth*" ["Progeny"], a Jew or a Gentile? Perhaps he is "*gallach*"? (A priest was called a 'gallach', shaven), as opposed to a Rabbi who was always bearded). Generally the Rebbe attempted to teach the whole portion by Wednesday. On Thursday the material was reviewed, together or individually, and in the afternoon there was a *farher* (a test). Whoever did not prepare and revise properly would receive an extention until Friday morning.

Thursday, which was close to the Sabbath, already had a festive feeling, and the fragrance of the challas and the special Sabbath

dishes was already in the air. After the test, the pupils would walk around haughtily, with a sense of having stuffed themselves with knowledge. Thursday was a day of Biblical stories interwoven with legends of the Sages. The Rebbe, using his creative imagination, would add images of his own and would describe the events as though they had just taken place. In addition to the weekly portion we also learned the *megillot* and *haftarot* (reading from the prophets).

In the summer we generally walked barefoot, enjoying the warm touch of the earth. During the winter, when snow covered the village paths and ice clung to the window panes with crisscross drawings, we would crowd around the table and the Rebbe would melt the ice with the vapor of his breath, while describing the events of the weekly portion and the legends accompanying them. I remember the joy of the fifth day of the week. The Rebbe's narrative talent and his capacity for describing the events were then at their peak. After the sun started setting in the west and after the anxiety of the weekly test, we prepared the table and the benches in anticipation of the story of the weekly portion. The fast ones among us brought a pail of pure water from the well in the yard, and sprinkled water on the floor. Poliye, the Rebbe's wife, would hand us a broom made of twigs, to help sweep away the dust.

We would tiptoe, each child to his place, striving to be near the Rebbe, so as not to miss a word. The few girls would settle onto the back benches.The Rebbe would remove his outer coat, wipe his glasses, take out his "onion" watch with the brass chain, take the pointer, and silence prevailed. We tried our best not to breathe out loud. Our eyes were riveted to the yellow, fringed garment and to the face of the Rebbe. His face was serene and shining. He would open the *chumash* and at that moment he seemed to us to be the High Priest as he enters the Sanctuary to offer incense.

The Rebbe glanced to the side, and gave the pupils a fatherly glance, unlike the stern teacher's look of the usual weekdays, unbuttoned his waistcoat and took out his snuff box from his top

right pocket. His *arba-kanfoth*, with the fringes which came to rest on his knees, were the shade of the parchment of a Torah scroll. The Rebbe's perspiration used to attract the flies, but we only noticed a sort of sweet scent of ancient books. The buzz of the flies and the restrained breathing heralded the start of the story. The Rebbe would take a pinch of scented snuff and insert it into his big nostrils. After the first sneeze we knew the story was coming. The contents of the portion were studded with parables from *Sefer HaYashar* and the *Midrash* (Talmudic legends). Jacob and his sons became close, familiar and real. We had pity on old Jacob when he was informed: "Joseph had been devoured by wild beasts" we almost wanted to reveal the secret to him. We smiled when Shimon felt the fists of Menashe and Ephraim during his detention, and said in the holy tongue to his brothers *Bruderlech, ich fiel de foisten fun dem heim....*(Dear brothers, I can feel a fist from father's home on my back...). We heard the violin of Serach, daughter of Asher, playing under grandpa Jacob's window: "My uncle Joseph lives, my uncle Joseph lives..." and the Rebbe would accompany the sentence with a special tune ("*Der feter Yoseph lebt, der feter Yoseph lebt*". The story of Bil'am and his ass was like a sort of clay in the hands of his potter's imagination. We were familiar with horses and had not seen donkeys, and imagined Bil'am's ass to resemble the thin horse of Yassili, the village waggoner, a horse that heard words of chastisement when it strained to carry its load up Mount Bukovel on the way to Visho.

We loved Thursdays because in addition to the enjoyable stories, we were getting nearer to Friday. The schedule on the eve of the Sabbath was very short. After morning prayers we learned the cantillation of theTorah reading and reviewed a number of verses or passages. We called this "To pass the portion" (*Ma'avir zein de Sidra*). During the morning hours, after completing the obligatory hours of study in the Gentile school, we would run home joyfully, to skate on the frozen river in winter, or catch fish for the Sabbath in the summer.

In addition to teaching Torah, which was the Rebbe's main occupation, he was also a sort of "Western Wall" for good advice and for tried and tested medicine. The Melamed had vast knowledge of treatment for all sorts of aches and pains: children's stomach aches, tooth ache, head and throat aches. He easily pulled a tooth and in winter concocted potions for ear aches. When necessary he would also cut hair with a hand machine and he was also a *ba'al menagen* – a music maker, composing tunes for Sabbath melodies (*zemiroth*). Generally he would sing the composition during the third meal, (*seudah shlishith)* at Reb Azriel Anshel's, when we were served gefilte fish or Shabbath pie.

In the month of Iyar 1944, when we were imprisoned in the ghetto of Dragomirest just before the final liquidation of the ghetto, I peeped through a small window into the basement of one of the houses. I was shocked to see my dear Melamed, Rebbe Shlomo-Yossel and his wife Poliye in their great misery, their loneliness and wretchedness. Both of them were sitting on the floor, on a pile of straw covered with a faded blanket. The Rabbi's face was wrapped with a scarf to hide the shame of his shorn beard. Berel, his only son, was far away and nothing was known of his fate. Two days later, he and his wife were put into the cattle trucks. Starved and exhausted they too stood on the ramp, on the 26th of Iyar and waited to be pushed into the showers of Auschwitz; there they were released from their suffering.

Reb Moshe's Cheder

The pupils in Melamed Reb Shlomo-Yossel cheder graduated to Rabbi Moshe-Aharons' cheder. Here the pupils had greater independence and Reb Moshe treated them like young men. There the lad felt he was no longer a fluffy chick but had reached the status of a winged, flying creature. Reb Moshe was a tall, sturdy man with a dignified appearance. His white beard had snowy curls, like foamy waves, and his eyebrows were like fleece, curly

and arched. His eyes were elongated like large almonds. He had a gentle, pleasant look, but he displayed seriousness and exactitude. During the meal or during the weekday prayers, he wore a round hat in the Satmar Chasidic style, but when he was teaching his pupils he wore a faded black yarmulke that was shiny against his light colored eyes. A moustache, beard and sidelocks adorned his pleasant face. In spite of his permanently hoarse voice, he served as a regular cantor for the *musaf* (additional) prayers for the Days of Awe, as his powerful, deep voice, full of supplication and yearning, would penetrate to the very fibers of the soul.

Reb Moshe had enormous influence on his pupils. Every utterance was a holy command. His conduct was that of a teacher to his mature students, whom he had to prepare to become self-sufficient, responsible craftsmen and tradesmen. His sharp wit served him well in the teaching of Torah. He was proficient in *Tanach* (Bible studies), the Aramaic language and various liturgical poems. Likewise he was a great literary scholar (*Safra Rabba*), and taught us the literature of liturgy and how to express ourselves in writing. His *Grizelech* (*Grisse* in Yiddish, passages from texts we used as writing exercises, to become proficient in calligraphy and letter writing), became renowned; they excelled in breadth of imagination and were drawn from various spheres of life: the cattle trade, land leases, overseas trade and Chasidic tales of their Rebbes. Before the festival of Purim, he would bring down a small straw case from his attic containing the "great treasure": dozens of compositions, Purim plays, (*Purim spiel*) which Reb Moshe had composed in his youth. He was aware of the special talents of all his pupils and handed out the roles so that they could rehearse their parts as Purim actors. When the day came they would entertain the village people, in the traditional way of the day, by dressing up, in pairs, to cheerfully deliver the *mishloach manot*, the Purim gift baskets.

The timetable at Reb Moshe's was full from morning till night. In addition to religious instruction he also taught arithmetic and

geometry as a continuation of the four mathematical operations we learned with our first Melamed. From the week of the portion of *Chaye Sara* to the week of the portion of *Teruma,* (most of the winter season) we also studied in the evenings after davening *Mincha* and *Ma'ariv,* to the light of paraffin candles. We would bring firewood from home to stoke the stove in the middle of the room. Mothers and grandmothers would prepare warm clothing, including white wool knitted mittens. Winter equipment included a storm lantern and a sheepskin cap as protection against the intense cold. The cheder pupils would carry a thick stick with a metal tip in their hands to fend off roaming dogs and avoid slipping on the snow and ice.

In addition to the two Melamdim, there were other scholarly householders who earned a living by teaching. Rebbe Moshe's son, Mordechai, taught in a community outside the village. In times of hardship and financial difficulties, my father also served as a private tutor in Sasregen for a short period. The sons of Moshe-Dovid and Hades Fried, who were diligent Yeshiva students, taught school children and contributed to the family income.

The work period of the Melamdim was divided into two periods: from the end of the festivals of *Tishrei* (the holidays of *Rosh Ha Shana, Yom Kippur, Succot,* in October) until the middle of *Adar* (February-March), and from after Passover until the middle of *Elul* (September). There were no fixed hours for the teacher. The Melamed attempted to toil with all his might, according to the definition of the *Rambam* (Maimonides). On weekdays, from five in the morning until eight in the evening, with a break for prayers and eating, his time was devoted to imparting Torah and ethics. Even on the Sabbath, during the prayers and during the Reading of the Law, during *Kedusha* and *Barchu,* the Rebbe felt duty-bound to keep a watchful eye on his pupils. On Sabbath afternoons he would gather his pupils for an hour and learn *Barchi Nafshi* in the winter and the Ethics of the Fathers in the summer with them. The Melamdim were truly kind and saw their profession as an

opportunity to fulfill an important commandment which would stand the whole community in good stead. This made it easier to accept that their income was low and they had to teach the children of the poor for free.

The Rabbi of Rozavlea

The village of Schiff was part of the district of Rozavlea. Rabbi Moshe Kizelnik was the Rabbi of Rozavlea and the district. The villages under his authority were Rozavlea, Schiff, Batize and others.The distance from Rozavlea to Schiff was about 2 kilometers. In all matters of Torah law, questions of prohibitions and permission, or just advice, people went on foot to ask the Rabbi. Once or twice a year the Rabbi would come to us on a courtesy visit, to keep in touch with his flock. The village Jews were fond of him, and considered it a great honor to meet him. With great deference, dressed in their Sabbath garments, they came to shake his hand warmly with a hearty greeting of *Shalom Aleichem* ("peace be with you"). The householders and the field owners, the artisans and the poor, as well as the leaders of the community, would leave their day to day activities and gather in the synagogue, and listened with open mouths and bated breath to the discourse: the words of Torah and sermons.

Although his wages were low, the satisfaction was great. The flocks were pleased with their shepherd and the shepherd viewed his rabbinic duty as a holy mission, with his reward yet to come. The round seal "President of the Rabbinic court, Rabbi Moshe son of Rabbi Shemuel Shemelke Kizelnik of the holy community of Rozavlea and district, may his Maker guard and protect him", evoked authority and reverence. The last Rabbi of Rozavlea and the district was a handsome man, tall, familiar with *hasidut* (Jewish mysticism) a man of fine character and modest needs. His face was illuminated with the light of the Torah, his home was open wide, day and night. He was deported with his family to the Dragomirest

ghetto and from there to Auschwitz. He perished along with his community in Iyar (1944).

The Synagogue

It is impossible to describe the Jewish community in Marmarosh without the building known as the synagogue. Just as "the Day", with the definite article, is the Day of Atonement,

"The" building, the synagogue, was the hub of the village or the township, the center of life and activity. The people of the village met there. There they implored heaven and made their requests for the world to come and for this world. There, everyone felt at home, and a man of worth. Prayer seats were fixed. The *shtat* (the assigned seat, inherited from one's forefathers), was his fortress and his refuge from his daily toil. Only in case of extreme hardship was a seat sold. Generally, the eldest son would inherit his father's seat.

There the members of the congregation stood wrapped in their prayer shawls and confessed all their deeds, even those sins committed in their inner thoughts. Adorned with their prayer shawls and philacteries the rich could not be distinguished from the poor. Twice a day they would come, almost all the men of the village, to pray and pour out their hearts together. Should a man be absent, all knew something was wrong and tried to find out why. The news that arrived with the waggoners who returned from provincial cities, as well as old news still being discussed among the elders of the village were rehashed, as were the ways of this world and the ways of the world to come, the needs of the living and the needs of the dead – all were discussed and settled in the synagogue.

This was the meeting place for all the activities of the community. All the joyous occasions – circumcision, Bar-Mitzva, a bridegroom called up to the Reading of the Law, the marriage ceremony (*chupah*) – all took place in the synagogue and its courtyard. It was from the synagogue that each individual took his leave when his time came to pass on to his eternal resting place. Yankel, the

Shammash (beadle), would climb up to the attic *palush* (a small passage into the attic) in the synagogue to bring down the bier, the cleansing (*tohora*) and burial gear, and from there the burial procession set out to the cemetery.

The synagogue of Schiff was made of rounded logs on the outside, smoothed down on the inside and covered with cement. Most of the villages were surrounded by woods and the logs served as the building material for all the village houses. The roof was made of wooden slats (*dranitzes*). The yard was surrounded by a fence made of wide wooden beams. There was no toilet. People crossed the narrow road and went to the toilet at Reb Alter Shmuel David's' house and used it as a matter of course. The synagogue was elevated, with six or seven long, narrow, oakwood steps leading up to it. There were two pinewood doors on both sides of the passage (*palish*). On the left side there was a barrel full of water for washing hands before prayers, and on the right side the door opened to the synagogue hall. The attic served as storage space for the burial gear, in addition to being the space for keeping the *shemoth*, the torn, unfit holy texts. In the synagogue hall there were rows of benches and *shtenders* – prayer stands made of pine or boxwood. Some were painted brown. A stove with a chimney was to the west. The *bimah* (platform) was situated in the center. The lectern was on the bimah and next to it was a bench for the *Hagbahah* (the lifting of the Torah). The Western wall was covered with bookcases of *Shas* (the Babylonian Talmud), Torah text books, books of homiletics and exegesis and long tables for study and for religious ceremonial meals. The Ark was situated in the middle of the Eastern wall. It was carved by a peasant artist or a carpenter with artistic flair, and was hidden by an embroidered curtain (*parochet*), with the names of those who donated it. On the same wall, between the two windows, there hung a thick Matzah, the Matzah which marked the *eruv-chatzerot* (symbolic communal arrangement that permits Jews to carry objects on the Sabbath between their properties) which was replaced every Passover eve. The children

would fight to get a *kezayit* (an olive sized morsel) of the matzah before the burning of the *chametz*. Despite the dust, the sun, the spider webs all around, we found the taste of the dried, one year old dough to be almost like manna.

On this side of the Ark, on the empty wall between the windows, there were plaques such as those for the Mishnayot society with the *yartzeits* – memorial days of deceased members of the community, the verse "Praise the L-rd for He is good", *Kegavna* (a prayer from the Zohar), "*Vayehi binsoa*" ("And it was when the Ark journeyed"), *Modim de'Rabanan* (prayer of personal thanks to G-d) and "*Brich-Shemeh*" ("praised is the Name"). From the low ceiling, brass and tin lamps hung on iron chains. They were carved with a variety of engravings around the rims, all of them the handywork of Reb Zalman-Leib, the man of a thousand skills – the tinsmith-bookbinder-watchmaker-glazier, who knew how to do everything.

A wooden wall and a wide closed door separated the ladies' section from the men's. Narrow windows covered with embroidered curtains, the work of generous ladies, separated the two sections; there were no prayer stands in the ladies' section. Each woman held her "*Ma'aneh Loshon*" prayer book in one hand and in the other she held a kerchief to wipe her eyes, moist from tears of joy and happiness, or tears of sorrow and calamity.

With the passage of years, grass grew and wilted on the roof. The roof was also used as a playground for the Jewish village children. One game was to throw a ball which rolled down slowly and whoever was quick enough to catch it got an extra throw. The roof required urgent repair and was a topic of incessant arguments and suggestions. The decision was always to postpone work until after the rains, "Next year G-d willing...". During the intermediary days of Passover, we played games of "odds or even" with carob seeds in the synagogue courtyard.

The synagogue courtyard was used for wedding ceremonies. The custom was to arrange the *chupah* (wedding canopy) on Fridays and when the Sabbath ended, the wedding feast took place

with rounds of drinking. During the summer months the ladies' section was emptied, as it was there that the klezmers of the Ovitz-Shlomovitz family from Rozavlea ("The Shugerenies") set up their instruments. They played violins, drum, bass and flute. The girls danced the *chardash* (a Hungarian dance) or the *hora,* and during the *chupah* and the marriage ceremony, youngsters would shoot salutes with Purim cap guns.

In the morning there were two *minyanim* (quorums) for public prayers and in the evening there was only one. That was the time people returned from the fields and other places of work. Everyone made an effort to join in the services. After the morning service, during the folding of the prayer shawl and the phylacteries, the men would sit down for a short while (so as not to be taken for children playing hookey), and chat about this and that. Earning a decent living was hard. In every household there were mouths to feed, sons and daughters who had to be decently clad, there were educational fees to be paid and a good *shidduch* (match) to be made, in addition to other necessities. After breakfast everyone set out for their daily work, taking on the struggle of making a living until evening. Then they would return like war heroes as though garlanded with victory. With their heavy boots, their worn-out clothes, they entered their homes joyful and content with their lot. They washed their hands from the pail that had just been drawn from the well, made a blessing and sat down to eat in peace.

On *Hosha'na Rabba* night, representatives of the community were elected for the coming year: two *Gaboim,* the synagogue wardens, the president of the community and *hevra kadisha* (burial society). An allocation was made for the purchase of firewood for the *mikve* (ritual bath), and then, in a sort of auction, the most desired turns for dancing with the Torah scrolls (*hakafot*) on Simcha Torah immediately following Sukkot, were allocated. Likewise, on the same night, between the recitation of passages from the Bible and the psalms, it was decided whose turn it was to prepare the dead for burial in the coming year. There was a custom in Schiff that no

professional workers were hired to dig graves. Only during the winter months, when the ground was frozen and difficult to dig, would they make use of "the hands of Esau" (gentile workers). The tending of the dead, "true loving kindness," was done voluntarily, out of a desire to perform a *mitzva* (a good deed).

During the last years before the Holocaust, the duties of president of the community were held by my father's uncle, Reb Azriel son of Reb Ascher Anschel Perl, who was one of the rich men of the community, owned much land, and was held in high esteem even by the Gentiles. Reb Azriel Perl and his wife Chantche were childless and very generous. Both of them supported the needy of the village generously. Whoever was in need came and took a milk jug, flour or corn or other agricultural produce. For many years Reb Azriel was also the honorary officer of the burial society who saw to the saying of the *vidui* (confession) at the time of death, ensured a quorum of *tehilim* (psalms) sayers, the registration in the communal record books, and all the burial needs. For decades a *seuda shlishit* (third Shabbath meal) took place in Reb Azriel's house with



about 15 participants. Auntie Chantche would prepare pots with roasts, pies and stuffed intestines. For many of the participants this was a "royal feast" they looked forward to from one Sabbath to the next.

The Mikveh and *Hirsch-der-beder*

The mikveh was located in a narrow alley, a short distance from the center of town. In contrast to the synagogue which was all study, prayer and sanctity, the mikveh, which was situated in one large room, in addition to being a place of purification and immersion, served as a sort of meeting place for mundane conversation. Hirsch, the bath attendant, lived with his mother in a side room where he had a sewing workshop for peasant garments; on the other side of the wall he kept the firewood. He would chop the wood himself, and sometimes his elderly mother, who was about eighty, would help him in her tried and tested manner. Almost every Motzei Sabbath, after Ma'ariv, Hirsch would go up the lectern, bang twice heavily on the table and declare "there is no more firewood"! He would then state that if he didn't get a raise, he would no longer heat the mikveh. Naturally, the community did not increase his salary, as they had no extra funds. Meanwhile, Hirsch and his mother continued to attend to the firewood, chop the wood with a blunt axe and with callused hands, and heat the mikveh to serve its purpose: to remove the ritual impurity from the daughters of Israel and remove the dirt and the perspiration from the children of Israel.

Hirsch-der-beder (Hirsch the bath attendant) had the face of an ascetic. He had deep-set eyes, short sidelocks and a black beard shot with grey. He was always busy and anxious to satisfy the wishes of the respected householders, the *balei botim*. Among the Gentile peasants he was known as "Hirsch the Stitcher". He had a large sewing machine with which he would sew trousers and coats made of thick woolen material for winter. The Gentiles would bring him a bolt of home-made cloth, and with the expert eye of

a Talmud scholar he would calculate how many pairs of trousers and coats could be made from it. All was done by agreement and trust. The measurements were taken roughly, by estimate, but everything fit perfectly. Never did a peasant say "the trousers are too tight for me". When the Gentile came to pick up his goods and all was happily concluded, Hirsch would place his coins in his old mother's kerchief and she would bundle it away. Then Hirsch would accompany the Gentile out and tell him: "You should know that the trousers are sewn with special thread, really iron and steel thread..." Hirsch's fingers were bent to the size of the crooked upholstery needle he had bought in the city. He sewed trousers for Jewish children too, for Passover, for those who did not manage to go to Leibovitz, "the tailor of Rozavlea", the expert in making suits.

Inside the cistern of the Mikveh there was a special stove to heat the water with chopped wood. Four wooden steps led to the dipping cistern. Benches were arrangd along the wall, for garments and under them were wooden pails with twig-brooms. Three large tubs, made of fir, were always ready for the use of the community. The wealthy villagers ordered a warm bath in which there was room to place a child or two as well. Hirsch would draw warm water from the Mikveh and fill the bath according to what the bather wanted. When the wealthy person emerged from the bath and went to dip in the Mikveh, two or three lads would jump into the bath, settle down comfortably and get a taste of what it was like to be a wealthy man. Ordinary people would be satisfied with a few pails of hot water and a bunch of twigs. While sitting, stories and news from the wide world flowed, from the Argentine to America and from Siberia to Poland.

Zalman-Leib was a well-known Mikveh figure, a master of many skills who fit the saying "*a sach meloch's un venig broch's*" (many jobs and few rewards). He had persuasive powers and a talent to tell stories from memory. He had a whole host of stories from the great wide world. Events that occurred years and ages ago became topical as though they occurred just yesterday. When

Hirsch wanted to hurry a youth along, he would mutter into his beard "I hear these stories every Friday...", and he would go out to add a stitch in the trousers waiting in his enormous sewing machine, or chop wood to add to the boiler, plug a leaking tub, and more importantly make sure that no one could sneak out without paying, or at least promise that they would pay.

With the onset of the Sabbath, Reb Hirsch would change his wet garments, smooth his beard and sidelocks, take out his kaftan and shtreimel, and run to shul to join the congregation to get ready for the Shabbath rest and forget his worries until the holy Sabbath came to its close.

Chapter 3

SHOPS AND SHOPKEEPERS

The Grocers

There were five grocers in Schiff. The most famous and largest shop was owned by Reb Leizer Yakov and his wife Rechel Ovitz. His country house stood proudly by the open space near the synagogue. The house was made of pinewood beams and had five or six rooms. The two big rooms served as a shop and a tavern. Generally you could find goods of every kind and description, including food and drink, kosher wine for Jews and non-kosher wine for Gentiles, spirits and *shlibovitz* (plum liquor), clothing and footwear, tools and kitchen utensils, haberdashery and spices, needles and thread for sewing and embroidery, grain and flour, paraffin and pitch, nails and leather for shoemakers, writing implements, cigarettes and tobacco, sweets and dried fruits: raisins, dates and figs for the "fifteen" (*Tu Bishvat*, the "new year of the trees", the 15th of Shevat), and carobs and nuts for Passover.

Rechel, Reb Leizer's wife was industrious and devoted. By the time her husband had returned from the synagogue, she would have attended to the Gentile customers and she did not shy away from kicking the drunks out to the open space in front of the tavern to sober up. She sat in the front row of the ladies' gallery and displayed her knowledge of the prayer book and the order of the reading of the weekly portions. She was a sort of *forzaggern* – showing the place and guiding the women who were not so familiar with the tiny letters. Their two sons, Hirschel and Mordechai, helped their parents and expanded the business to include trade and export of apples to faraway places. Their only daughter,

Esther, married a well to do, well-born man Reb Zundel Fogel from the village of Sitschel. He "sat" in the house of Reb Leizer and ate "caste"; in other words, he learned and ate to credit all the members of the household who supported him with the mitzvah of the study of Torah. They all perished.

Opposite Reb Leizer's store was the tavern of Reb Zevi Hirsch (Herschel) and his wife Esther Moshkowitz. He was a short gentle man, who had a pleasing voice. He was a cheerful, lively person and a gifted *ba'al tefilah* (leader in prayer). Esther was the daughter of cattle traders and orchard owners. She managed the small shop and the tavern. On Sundays the peasants would gather with their wives to drink *l'chaim*. As they became merry with the spirits and the wine, she would go around like a policewoman, establishing order and exacting payment. When the Gentiles started singing their tunes, with shaking heads and flashing eyes, Hirschel would leave for the synagogue and Esther managed matters very well indeed.

They had two sons and a daughter. Their son, Ya'akov, learned in the cheder of Rebbe Shelomo-Yossel; he was known as "Yankele the violinist". He learned to play the violin from the peasants and the gypsies who played in the tavern. He played folk and Chasidic tunes. The day after the selection, only Ya'akov remained. He was about seventeen. He was liberated from Bergen-Belsen and reached Sweden through the Red Cross. From there he immigrated to America and started a family there.

Reize Mendel Werzberger's shop

A beautiful country house stood proudly opposite the house of my uncle Reb Ezriel Anschel: the house of Reb Mendel Werzberger. His wife, Reize, was the daughter of Rochel-Leah and the Alter Berkovitz, and was known as "Reize Mendel's". The shop mainly sold Kosher wines for Kiddush and the four cups (for the Passover Seder) as well as all sorts of haberdashery and artificial sweeteners.

This latter item was kept out of sight from the evil eye of the treasury inspectors. Reize's husband had gone years earlier to America to earn his living as a *keli kodesh* (a religious functionary of some sort) in one of the communities. He left his wife Reize and their six children behind: Itzik,Wolf, Zeidel, little Miriam and two more daughters whose names I do not remember. Reize, a short woman, suffered from a variety of ill-defined ailments and diseases. She was always sitting on the bed covered with pillows and quilts. From there, she supervised the running of the shop. She had a round face, flushed cheeks and laugh-lines around her lips. The boys studied in Yeshivot and the girls managed the shop and the household. Before the festivals, especially before Passover, there was great activity in the shop, since almost all the village people bought their Kosher wine there.

More than once I went, at my parents' request, to get the wine for the "four cups" and I remember the special preparations we had to make. I had to change out of my *Chometz* garments, rinse my hands well, and check that no crumbs remained in any of my pockets. I wrapped the giant bottle with a sparklingly clean "Kosher for Passover" towel, and recited the whole way: "My father wants five liters of red Kosher for Passover wine". With confident steps I climbed the wide steps in front of Reize-Mendel's shop and opened the wooden door inlaid with squares of colored glass. When the door opened a copper bell rang and announced: "Here comes a customer".

Reize's voice was heard in a whisper through the door dividing the room from the shop: "Come in, come in sweet child...". Reize pulled herself together, straightened the pillows and started quizzing me: who do I study with, what am I learning and how is everyone at home. With a motherly smile she took out a Kosher for Passover sweet and handed it to me. Here a "danger" lurked for me: would I be able to control myself and make the blessing first, or would I, G-d forbid, stumble, and "gobble like Esau", as the Melamed explained: "and he ate" without making *Ha'Moitz*i (the

blessing over bread) , "and he drank" – without making *Shehakol* (the blessing over water)... Then, Reize instructed her son Zeidel to pour the wine for me and to send a note with the price written on it.

Mendel Werzburger's family was considered a prosperous family, since Reb Mendel would occasionally send "mamash" letters; in other words, letters with "contents", containing "tollars" (dollars). When Peter, the Gentile postman would come from Rozavlea with the mail, and the cheder children would help him distribute it (the postman could neither read nor write), they would have already identified Reb Mendel's ornate handwriting, the American stamp, and through sense of touch they knew that "there was something in it", and they would run to be the first to inform Reize. Every few years R. Mendel would come from overseas to visit his wife. I remember the anticipation for these visits and the festive atmosphere that surrounded them all. All the people in the village put on clean attire and set out to welcome Reb Mendel. At the upper end of Schiff, on the main road between Sighet and Bisteritz, opposite the cross (the *tzelem* in Yiddish), they waited for his arrival. Generally, he would appear in a carriage from the guest house of Hnateche in Sighet, and he was moved by the welcome. The horses' bells accompanied the murmur of the psalms and the heartbeats. The neighing of the horses announced his arrival. Reb Mendel would descend serenely and all the men would extend a warm hand for *shalom aleichem*. From there to the steps of his house they accompanied him with singing. The poor of the village and the community figures showed their gratitude for his efforts as an emissary on their behalf who elicited contributions from the Jews of America for the needy. Reize and her daughters would wait at the entrance to the house. She would wear her Shabbath scarf. The children were in festive attire with their hair combed, to welcome the guest. During Passover of 1941, about three years before the Holocaust engulfed Hungary, Reb Mendel visited the village and did not know that on this occasion he was parting from them all forever. Reb Mendel

returned to America, but Reize his wife and all the members of his household were taken to the Dragomirest ghetto immediately after Passover in 1944.

Wolf and the youngest daughter, Miriam survived Mengele's ramp. I saw her on the night of May 10, 1944, after the selection, her curly hair shaven and her large eyes straining with fear. Our eyes met. She had a pained smile – a mixture of despair and hope. During those very moments her mother Reize's soul was rising in the conflagration, hoping that Mendel would undoubtedly look after the family. After my liberation from Bergen-Belsen in 1945, I wrote a letter to the "Federation of Marmarosh Jews" in America, in which I asked them to send me religious items (*tashmishe kedusha*) for daily use during prayers. The first pair of philacteries I was privileged to put on after the camps was a large second hand pair which Reb Mendel Werzburger sent me from overseas.

Reb Alter Perl's shop

The nearest neighbor to the synagogue was Reb Alter Shemuel David's Perl. He had a little shop full with all kinds of merchandise. He was a frightened Jew, with a delicate, innocent soul; he was the only one who was afraid to sell alcohol, for two reasons: he was afraid of the tax collectors who were looking for contraband drinks, and he loathed the obscene language of the intoxicated Gentiles and their quarrels. He sold to Jews and Gentiles alike on credit. He was always murmuring verses of the psalms and did not haggle. He and his wife Necha raised six children. All matters pertaining to the authorities, the council and the inspections of the gendarmerie were arranged by Necha who had inexhaustible energy. Her husband Alter would accompany her in silent prayer. Reb Alter, or as he was nicknamed "*Alter-der-Mozhdar*" hardly ever left the village. He was afraid of danger on the roads and the barking dogs that chased after wagons and horses. Once he joined a group of Spinka Hasidim who travelled to the Rebbe. They spent

the Sabbath in Visho where a mishap occurred: Alter forgot to write down the name of one of his children on the *quitel* (ticket) at the Rebbe's. His clownish friends laughed and teased him the whole way, but they promised not to tell Necha, his wife. Two sons of this family survived: the eldest, Shemuel-Dovid, who came back from the forced labor camp of the Hungarian army, and his younger brother Zeidel-Moshe Perl, who was liberated from Dura-Nordhausen.

Zelig Sheintze's store

Zelig's corner store was in the midst of the sorrowful landscape of the wretched and the ill-starred who were barely making a living. He was single, and leaned on two bent sticks, with his back stooped like a taut bow. You could see him waddling along the path to the synagogue and back, because his feet, joined from birth, dragged on the ground, his head faced downward. His sister, Sheintze, would cook his food and wash his worn clothes. He would sit in a wickerwork chair with his face turned towards his interlocutor. His pointed beard was the color of rust, his cheeks full and swollen, his beard interlaced with his frizzy earlocks. His shiny eyes radiated good heartedness and acceptance of his lot. Sheitze the widow and her only daughter Binah saw to the cleaning of the poor house, with its two rooms and corridor. There was a brick bread oven in the large room, a tin stove for cooking and heating, Zelig's chair and the bench-bed (*bank-betl*). Behind the table was a shelf, representing the totality of the "the shop".

On the way home, the cheder children would stop at Eliya the blacksmith, opposite Zelig's house. He would take his two sticks, arrange and position them in his palms, clutch the bend in the sticks and begin to drag his feet cautiously. Partially walking, partially crawling, he would lift his face to search for a pupil willing to chat with him. The crux of every conversation was always related to the purchase of a lamb for the Sabbath, its slaughter and skinning,

the sale of part of the meat for a good profit and the quality of the dishes which Sheintze had prepared for the Shabbath.

He had a wish and strong urge to trade and therefore the community leaders took the trouble and did all they could to enable him to earn his living with his own limited abilities. They imposed a special tax, based on a rule they introduced, which was that Sabbath candles and yeast for baking bread and challas should be bought only from Zelig. As children we were certain that if a Jew bought candles for the Sabbath or yeast for baking in some other place, such as from Gentiles, he would be violating the severe prohibition of *treifa* (non-kosher food). In addition, Sheintze would bake challa in the middle of the week as well and sell them to the peasants who brought firewood from the forests of Batize, and would come to shoe their horses at Eliah's, the blacksmith. In between they would go up to Sheintze's balcony, fill their pipes with rough tobacco and munch on fresh challa that they bought from Zelig. On Sundays, the peasants would come down with their families to the village center, to go to church or to drink in the taverns. Zelig would prepare his merchandise and urge Sheintze to light the oven once more, to provide all the customers with challa. Sheintze's daughter Binah survived, went to Israel and established a family in Jerusalem.

Jewish Blacksmiths

There were two blacksmiths in Schiff: Eliya the blacksmith (Ovitch), known as Eliya Reitze's (Eliya of Reitze or Reize), and Boruch-Mendel Batya's (of Batya). Both were tough, tall men with big biceps that would swell as they lifted the sledgehammer. By shoeing and bending the iron for the hooves of the horses, their muscles had literally turned into sinews of steel and sparks flew in every direction. Eliya would bite his beard, holding it between his teeth while smiting with his hammer with the one hand and in the other holding the special pliers made to grip the white-hot

iron which changed from blazing yellow to blackish grey. The children were delighted when Eliya allowed them to press the bellows and set the glowing coals ablaze. We had many a satisfying time on our way back from cheder after the evening prayers. Then he would fold his arms and watch us youngsters with delight. He allowed us to collect the cut down nails from the horseshoes and we would hover upwards together with the flashing sparks, rising higher and higher and disappearing somewhere under the sooty ceiling of the smithy.

The two blacksmiths attended the synagogue morning and evening. On the Sabbath they wore shtreimels and kaftans. They initiated their sons into the secrets of their profession. Eliya, with the short thick beard saw that his son Aaron was making little progress in his studies. Rebbe Shelmo-Yossel who was his relative, advised him that he would do better shoeing horses than studying, and his advice was accepted. Boruch-Mendel brought his eldest son, Dovid, into the smithy.The two blacksmiths were sucessful, as the local peasants provided them with a great deal of work: they repaired wagons and wheels, rims for wheels, shoed horses, repaired ploughs and all kind of tools for house and field work – everything passed through the smithies of Eliya and Boruch-Mendel. Agricultural produce served as payment in addition to cash.

Wagoners

There were three wagoners in Schiff, whose main livelihood came from carting freight and produce from the village fields to the city, and when the opportunity arose, taking passengers. The transportation of goods and the gathering of field produce were done in wagons harnessed to horses or oxen. In addition to the wagons there was another form of transportation between the city of Sighet and the town of Bistritz in Transylvania: the "Nassadeana" company bus, with 40 seats and a special roof for transporting freight

passed once a day and took passengers from the villages to the city and back.

Yossele the wagoner was a short Jew, as full of jokes as a pomegranate has seeds, his face adorned with a greyish, frizzy beard, his eyes flashing, his boots fitting tightly to his short legs and the whip held under his arm. While tying the reins to the shafts he would chat with his brown mare like a person chats to a friend. He would tell her which township they were headed for, and he would ask her to pull the wagon faithfully. The brown mare would nod her head while swishing away the flies and chewing on corn cobs. His brother Isaac-Mendel Tovel was his neighbor on the other side of the alleyway. He too was a wagoner. He had a large white mare with brown spots on either side of her belly. Isaac-Mendel's white beard would merge with the grey of the horse's tail that waved this way and that to get rid of the irritating flies. Isaac-Mendel was the very reverse of his brother Yossele: he was reserved, quiet and stubborn.

We liked to observe him during prayers, especially during the *ashamnu, bagadnu* confession. He would stoop and groan over his bound *beith yaakov* siddur (prayer book), clench his right hand into a fist, stick out his thumb, and after each word he would smite his chest with great force, as though taking upon himself all the accusations, all the betrayals and the looting of all the generations. Likewise, he was very particular about being "flogged" on the eve of the Day of Atonement with a wide belt, he would groan from the pain and appreciate the ferocity of the lashes as atonement.

The third wagoner, and the youngest, was the son of Boruch-Mendel the blacksmith, Dovid Boruch-Mendel's; he combined the two professions. He helped his father in the smithy and worked in carting. He built himself a new wagon with large wheels of smoothed wood that had three rows of benches for seats. Two brown horses, hitched to leather reins, whose tails were tied with string, their nostrils quivering, waited for the swish of their master's whip.

The wagoners transported goods from the city of Sighet to the village, as agents of the wholesalers. Yeshiva students travelled by wagon to their yeshiva and back fron it. Chasidim used them to get to their Rebbe. When someone became ill and a doctor had to be summoned from Rozavlea, they would pad the wagon with straw and a blanket and rush the patient there. Medication from the pharmacy was brought by wagon.

The wagons were also used in times of joy, for instance at weddings or when it was necessary to transport the in-laws and the entertainer (*marshlek*), all the wagons of the village were made festive, even those of the Gentiles. They decorated the horses' manes with bells, they tied colorful ribbons to the horses' tails and... and off they went, to welcome the bride and groom. The Ovitch-Shlomovitch families, the famous klezmer musicians from Rozavlea, came with their own wagons packed full of all their baggage, the violins, the drums and the rest of the instruments.

The Carpenter and the Midwife

Two professions in one home: the husband was the carpenter known by the name of Ezriel Chane's and his wife, "Grandma-Perle" was known as the Jewish midwife (the *mashe*). Ezriel and his wife Perle lived in a long country house. One wing served as a carpentry workshop, and the other wing served as living quarters. Ezriel was a tall man, thin and slightly stooped, with a shortish beard and frizzy sidelocks waving sideways. The floor of his house was strewn with shavings of boxtrees and oaks. His hands were callused and strong. Most of his clients were peasants who brought him planks of wood from the saw mill, and with his trusty hands these planks became wide tables, huge beds and chests of drawers. His daily routine did not vary. He got up at dawn, went to the synagogue, finished the prayers and returned home. Here, waiting for him, was corn meal mush (*mamalige*), and on the table, corn bread mixed with cheese and onions. He would eat, say a

short grace, wipe the crumbs off his beard, put on his blue apron smeared with paint and carpenter's glue, sharpen the plane tool and the saw and start to work. The furniture would pass from generation to generation; what needed repair, grandpa Ezriel would repair at a price affordable for all. He refurbished and painted the synagogue furniture – the benches and lecterns – as a good deed. In any case they would only promise him a payment, so he would forego it in advance and be content with "the reward of a good deed – is a good deed".

His wife, grandma Perle was the mother of the whole village. She assisted at the birth of hundreds of children, Jews and Gentiles, all without demanding payment. Generally, the Jews showed their gratitude with a modest gift. The peasants would send her the produce of their fields, and she responded to them all with a shy smile. I remember Grandpa Ezriel from the days of the eve of the Holocaust, when I studied with the village ritual slaughterer, Reb Tzvi Sachs, the carpenter's neighbor. In his old age the carpentry tools stood abandoned most of the day, since he had no strength left. He had a disease of the urinary tract and suffered greatly. Since he felt an urgent need "to prepare for the journey", he ordered a block of wood from a peasant and had it laid down in his courtyard. With his ebbing strength he smoothed the wood on its three sides and on the central surface he drew a menorah and a Magen David above which he had inscribed: "here is buried". He also carved his name "Ezriel son of Chana". He left a space for the date and for modest praise such as: "He enjoyed in faith, all his days, the fruits of his labor". He only left the carving of the date of his passing to untrained hands. For many weeks before his passing he sat, bent over the block of wood. In his weak, shaky hands he held a chisel and a mallet, and he carved, letter after letter, while the sweat, mixed with tears, dripped from his face and filled the depressions of the letters, like the cup of tears in the legends of the sages. The beating of the mallet blended with his groaning and his rapid breathing like a runner trying to catch the last train. He was

buried a Jewish grave in the village cemetery, accompanied by his sons and daughters, grandsons and great grandsons. The headstone, his own handiwork, stood upright, erected over the mound of earth. "Grandma Perle" was transported to Auschwitz at the age of 93. There she perished with her children and grandchildren and the rest of the people of the village, in the month of Iyar 1944.

Cobblers

There were two cobblers in the village: Chuna Berkovitch the husband of Alte-Malkah, an expert in making peasant boots, and Leib the Cobbler (Moskovitch), who settled in Schiff after he left his village of Rozavlea. The latter was occupied in repairing the shoes of the peasants. They used a sort of special Roman sandal, like a boat (this type of peasant shoe was called *opinches – postelech* in Yiddish). On both sides of the sandal there were holes through which leather straps were threaded; these were wound around the leg, from the ankle to below the knee. Every peasant lad who was about to be married would order decorated boots made of colorful leather, with high pointed heels, and metal strips around the heel and nails ("mouse heads") inserted around the sole. Under the heel of the boot they would fix a piece of tin which would tap when stepping or dancing.

During the long winter nights the cobblers would sit on a low stool, girt in their aprons, short wooden nails in their mouth, the cobbler's hammer in their right hand, an awl to mark holes in their left hand. A candle or a paraffin lamp was set on the low table on which their work tools were placed: the nails, a jar of glue, a ball of tar to smear on the threads for sewing. The shoemaker's lasts were scattered about the floor, and the sound of the hammer would slice and cut up the darkness and the silence of a country winter night. Before the Hungarians took over the region, Chuna and Alte-Malkah moved with their whole family to another district. Leib

the Cobbler and his family were taken to the Dragomirest ghetto and from there to their final destination – Auschwitz.

Zalman-Leib: The Man of Many Trades

A bookbinder, a watchmaker, a glazier, a tinsmith, a barber, a pot-fixer, all these trades were exercised by one man in Schiff – none other than Zalman-Leib, the hunchback (*der horb*). He was a short man with a hump that stood out on his back like an ant hill. He would walk slowly, lost in thought, with an angry expression in his eyes, the bag with his prayer shawl and philacteries under his armpit. He was proficient and quick at all these trades, but he was desperately poor and always busy. For years he was involved in a religious lawsuit against his wife who left him.Whenever a crock-pot, saturated with oil and with years of making cholent cracked, Zaman-Leib would repair it with his odd tongs, stretching a crisscross of iron wire with his nimble fingers and in about half an hour the pot would be ready and waiting once again to cook the *Tschulent* in honor of the Sabbath Queen.

His busiest days came with the approach of the festival of Purim, as he was an expert in the making of tin whistles for the reading of the Megillah. His whistles would knock out the Hamans of all generations. He bound the prayerbooks of Bar-Mitzvah boys with red leather binding (*shpigel-band*) and would engrave the boy's name artistically on it. He had a hand-held hair cutter to trim children's hair, leaving the sidelocks. In winter he would make special tin and glass storm-lamps to light the snow covered paths for the cheder pupils and for the synagogue attenders. There, in the rustic synagogue, under the wooden ceiling, hung the yartzeit lamps and the special candlesticks, all Zalman Leib's handiwork, decorated beautifully with lattice work, made with an artist's hammer.

For years he did not tire of describing the wonders of the capital Budapest. It was while sitting in the wooden tub in the communal bath house that Zalman-Leib was inspired to tell the stories of the

great magical world he saw in his childhood. There he would relate all that his eyes had seen and that his ears had heard during his visit with his mother to the capital, to consult the professors about the hump on his bent back.

On the eve of the Sabbath and the festivals, Zalman-Leib would go to immerse himself in honor of the festive day. Slowly Zalman-Leib would sink in the warm water. He would position his back and his hump in the curve of the tub, stretch out his long legs, dip his thin hands in soapy water, smooth his beard and his sidelocks, sigh with pleasure and joy – and the stories would start to flow as all ears turned to him. Even when the stories were repeated, to our ears they sounded new, with added color and tone. Just like the Torah verses, that "every day should be as new in your eyes".

Yakov the Stove Builder

Zalman-Leib's neighbor was Yakov (Yankel) the Beadle (*shammes*). He too wore two crowns: *shammes* of the synagogue and builder of stoves. Reb Yankel Wiesel was an expert at constructing baking ovens and chimneys. The village priest relied on him and entrusted him with the repair of various wickets and the belfry of the wooden church in the center of the village. He had special permission from the Rabbi to enter their *tiflah* – the church, to repair whatever was required and to benefit from his fees. He would take the leftover wood he had sawed to the cheder of Rebbe Shlomo-Yosel for stoking and heating, so that their "impurity" would be cleansed by the breath of school children. However the Rabbi did not allow the synagogue to be heated with this wood. Yankel the Shammes had amazing recall for tales of the Chasidic masters. During the third meal of the Sabbath, after the Mincha prayers, when the sun had set and dusk started to mingle with the darkness of night, melodies of yearning of the hurried meal started to be sung. The Jews dipped their challah in the fish sauce, continued with a roasted meat dish, and after singing *Yedid Nefesh*, silence prevailed and

Yankel started stringing his chain of tales of the Baal Shem Tov and other Chasidic masters, as a *segulah* (a good omen) for success and blessing on Motzei Sabbath, when the holy separates from the profane. All stood crowded and open mouthed, leaning forward to as not to lose a word. The lengthening of the Sabbath and the adding of the profane to the holy distanced the weekday concerns which were fast approaching. The two neighbors, Zalman-Leib and Yankel Wiesel vanished in the conflagration on the 26th day of Iyar.

Shepherds and Kashrut Supervisors

There were two shepherds in Schiff: Reb Aaron-Leib Hirschel's (Moskovitch), who owned a flock of sheep and would join the Gentile shepherds, and Mordechai-Shemuel Yakob's. His house was at the end of the village near the statue of Jesus on the cross (the *tzelem*). His son, Alter-Reuven, looked after the household while his brother Moishele was the gooseherd of the village. In the spring, the Jews and the Gentiles would gather all the flocks and according to long-standing agreements, would hand them over to other shepherds. The Jews would join them as supervisors. Since all the fields near the village were ploughed and sown, the flocks had to be led far away to the forests and meadows, tens of kilometers away, in the forests of Barscheh and Visho. There they would set up huts for the shepherds and pens for the sheep and the dogs. There they would milk the sheep daily and would churn the milk into the special Brinza and Urda cheeses. The task of the Jewish shepherds was to supervise the Kashruth of the milking and to watch out for sharp practice and cheating. The supervisors were called *kasherarim*.

During the period of the three weeks, *bein ha'metzarim* when it was customary to eat dairy food, the families of the Jewish sheep owners would join the kasherarim. The huts in the mountains, the trees and the grasses, the virgin forests, the streams flowing in the

ravines and the mineral water springs, turned the grazing meadows and the mysterious forest into a place of convalescence and recreation. The wages of the Gentile shepherds were according to tradition passed on from generation to generation – for every season an agreed upon sum in cash, so many packets of tobacco, two or three peasant outfits of clothing and sandals. The Jewish supervisors received their wages in cash and a quantity of kosher Brinza and Urda cheese, all according to custom and agreement.

Butchers, Butcher Shop Owners

There were many butchers in Schiff, since the cattle and sheep traders were also butchers. In the village slaughterhouse by the river, on the way to Rozavlea, the slaughterer would slaughter the animal and every butcher would take the slaughtered meat, purge and prepare the meat for sale, as additional income. I remember a number of active butchers who owned shops: Hirschel Meir's (Moskovitch), Avrum Malik – next to the synagogue on the south side, Reb Yakov Apter who was also a scribe, Abba Moshe's – opposite the house of Rebbe Shlomo-Yosel, and the cripple Zelig Scheintche's. Animal parts which the Jews refrained from eating due to problems with purging would be sold to their Gentile neighbors.

Reb Moshe the Tzitzit Maker

Opposite the house of Reb Azriel Anschel's Perl, the head of the congregation and the community elder, stood the house of Razi'el Wiesel. It was a large rustic house, surrounded by a big garden which bordered on the house of Abba and Frieda Lieberman. There was a deep well in the courtyard, with a huge wooden wheel with an iron chain around it for a tin pail. Razi'el and his wife Chava were both short and industrious. He with his heavy boots looked

after the work in the orchard outside the village. He would see to the sowing of the fields and the harvest, while Chava looked after the house and the garden. She tended the beds of onion, garlic, carrots and other vegetables. The milking of the cow and its feeding were also done by the housewife, whereas the work in the fields in the open spaces in the village fell on the shoulders of Razi'el. Razi'el had the good fortune to make a match for his daughter with a learned, well born and well known scholar, Moshe Klein, son of Reb Shalom of Holmin. In comparison to the remote village of Schiff, the town of Holmin was a royal city. There, they spoke a Hungarian-Yiddish compared to Schiff where they spoke Besserabian-Yiddish spiced with Ukranian words. Here were followers of Vishnitz and Spinka, and the well born bridegroom was a follower of Satmar.

Within a few years, Reb Moshe Klein integrated well and became like one of the peasants: he began to know the difference between a raddish and a turnip, between a he-goat and a ewe, between an ox and a cow. Reb Razi'el, his father-in-law, would take him to the fields to teach him about ploughing and sowing, picking corn and reaping wheat, picking apples and gathering plums to make *povidel* jam. The father-in-law would walk slowly with his boots into the mud after the rain, and Reb Moshe, his son-in-law, would follow with town shoes and white socks with his trouser legs tucked into them. Together they marched down the paths in the fields, one well experienced, the other a devout follower who observes the wonders of nature.

Reb Moshe and his wife Ita had a splendid home. Among the children I remember were Sarah, Elka, Nechemiah, Miriam, Blumah, Ester'l and Meirke the *mazhunik* (the child born in his parents' old age). Reb Moshe and his wife Ita were paragons of kindness and charity. Ita, with her shy smile and her whispered speech, always ready and willing to help others. Reb Moshe boasted a pointy reddish-brown beard. He had penetrating, bright eyes, his brow was lined and his eyes warm like the rays of the sun. He

would cup his reddish beard, muse a while and quote a Chasidic saying or some words of the Torah in the name of the Rebbe. He was always running and rushing not to miss, G-d forbid, the satisfaction of performing a good deed for its own sake. From the bundle of cash he would bring home, he would set aside alms for widows who hid in their tumble-down homes, to encourage and give them strength.

Whem my mother of blessed memory went into premature labor, one Sabbath eve in the month of Mar-Cheshvan (1939), and was about to faint with her strength failing from hemorraging – the labor-pains were stronger due to the miscarriage – they called Reb Moshe Klein. He came to the house as quick as a flash, removed his shtreimel and Sabbath kaftan, and went straight to the stove. He put on pots full of water and put on the fire while murmuring Sabbath melodies. The Sabbath candles were burning in their burnished copper candlesticks, and their holy flames mingled with the weekday fire of the stove. The white Chasidic socks of Reb Moshe and the sleeves of his Shabbath shirt were stained with the blood of the woman in labor. Zeidel, one of our neighbor's children, ran to the village of Rozavlea, to call the lady-doctor while we five young children watched helplessly as the village people came to help, since our father was away from home, earning a living. My good uncle, Reb Ezriel Anschel's and Reb Moshe Klein, my father's friend, held my mother as she was giving birth and as her soul departed. In a weeping voice our old uncle turned to her and said: "Schprintze Rochel, watch over whom you are leaving, your children..."

To augment his income, between sowing and harvesting, between the budding of the trees of the orchard and the harvesting of the fruit, Reb Moshe would engage in manufacturing threads for *tzitzit.* He set up a domestic workshop in his courtyard. Miriam, the widow of Moshe-Hirsch Wiesel and her neighbor used to spin the wool; their wages were a little cash and a great deal of reward for good deeds. The factory was an improvised installation, like a sort of a "ח" on the one side and opposite it, at a distance of about

fifteen meters, a huge wooden wheel, which revolved on an iron hinge. The threads which were twisted by the skilled fingers of the spinners were stretched and tied in parallel between the two devices. By moving the wheel, fringes of double threads or "double-eights" were woven.

The revolving wheel and its movement were a great attraction to the *cheder* children. During the summer months, on Fridays or during days off, we would go to Reb Raziel's courtyard and help Reb Moshe with his holy task. When the work turned out perfect and the threads were ready to be cut, Reb Moshe would produce a few coins to buy sweets, in addition to a promise that our reward would be paid by "the One who dwells on high" for the good deed, the commandment of *tzitzit,* which is weighed against all 613 commandments put together. When handing over the wool to be spun, Reb Moshe did not forget the declamation that the spinners should say before they started to work: "For the sake of the mitzvah of *tzitzit*". In the course of time Reb Moshe was given a nick-name, *Reb Moshe der tzitzith macher,* the *tzitzit* maker. During slack times, Reb Moshe would load the sacks (*sakves*) full of books and *tzitzit* and would go around the villages and townships peddling his merchandise. The sales took place in the synagogues in the townships, between Mincha and Ma'ariv.

Reb Moshe had the good fortune to survive Mengele's selection and was liberated from the Dora-Mittelbau camp near the city of Nordhausen. His two daughters and his son, my friend Nechemiah, immigrated to Israel. In his old age Reb Moshe lived in Mea Shearim, occupied himself with Torah and mitzvot, and was buried in Jerusalem at a ripe old age.

The Jewish Miller (*Laib-der-Milner*)

There were three flour mills in Schiff: the upper mill, the middle mill and the lower one, *de unterschte mill.* The owner of the lower mill was a Gentile peasant who hired Leib to be his trusted agent

in running the mill. The wages for grinding were a portion of the wheat or corn. A sack of wheat was called a *zipt* and the container used to measure the wages for grinding was called a *kane*. The wages were what Laib-the-miller saw fit, and according to the financial situation of the *zipt* owner. When the miller desired, he would keep a lot, and when the miller felt more generous he would be satisfied with little. The mill owner would give the miller a share of the wheat and cash.

Generally, old peasant housewives who no longer worked in the fields or old peasants with time on their hands would come to have their wheat ground. At the entrance to the mill was an ancient wooden bench.There they would put down their sacks and rest from the exertion of walking. The peasants would open their bags, take out their pipes, press a pinch of tobacco into the *pipa*, and by rubbing a piece of special steel against a basalt stone they would make sparks of fire fly into a piece of cotton-wool or a dry wood-fungus to kindle the pipe.

The mill served the Gentile peasants as a sort of meeting house, a club, a source of world news and village events. Sometimes marriages were arranged there, horses or oxen were traded, tales were told of floods and the like. The flour mills fulfilled the same function as the *mikveh* for the Jews: a good source of news and rumors. This was, of course, the only mill that did not function on the Sabbath. At the commencement of the Sabbath, Leib-the-Miller would divert the water of the river into a side channel. The giant wooden wheel would stop revolving, and with it the millstones came to a standstill. Leib shook the fine dust of the ground wheat off his garments, combed the chaff from his beard, changed his weekday clothes for his Sabbath clothes, put on his shtreimel, and went to the synagogue to welcome the Sabbath Queen. In the forties Leib left the village and went with his wife and his five children to another city.

Small Traders

Trading the village produce was an especially hard and exhausting way to make a living. The apples and plums, sheep and cattle, wheat and vegetables were traded and passed from hand to hand, from the village to the city and from there to distant places. The peasants lived quite far from each other, their houses were scattered in the valleys and the mountains, and their produce waited for the small traders. The peasant was busy tilling his fields and grazing his livestock, and therefore he was happy when the Jewish trader arrived with cash in his pockets.

Abba Lieberman, Eliya-Leib Wachs, Dovid-Aaron's Moshkovitch, Itzik-Laib and his son Yoseph Popovitch ("*Der-Tursch*") were among the local traders. All traded in livestock and sheep. They drove the herds of cattle to the markets in towns, accompanied by Gentile guards. The animals were sold there to work or to be slaughtered. The wheat merchants would load their merchandise on the wagons going to the city of Visho or to Sighet, and there they sold it to wholesalers.

The trade in apples was a business in its own right. The merchants would do the rounds of the orchards as soon as the buds appeared on the trees. Then they estimated the expected yield, and the purchase was concluded by shaking hands and advance payment. When, G-d willing, the hail and the winds stopped and the weather cleared, the merchants had trees laden with fruit. The picking started in September-October, and then great days began for the Yeshivah students. The older lads who were on holiday, had many days of gainful employment. The apple picking was done by experienced hands with a sharp cutter, in order not to damage the fruit. They picked the fruit off the lower branches first, then from the higher branches by climbing ladders. One group would pile the apples in heaps, while the others took the fruit into empty rooms in the houses. There they would wrap each apple in thin paper and put them into cases for weighing and transport.

There were a number of large orchards in the village whose owners were courted by the local merchants, and those of the surrounding area. The orchard of Itzik-Laib der Tursch (Popovitch) and his wife Chaya-Rivka was famous. The orchard was in the center of the village, and the owners' house was at the edge of the orchard. This was an extensive orchard with a large variety of trees in it. In addition to the apple and plum trees, there were walnuts, cherries, *agreshen* gooseberries and *maidlech*, used to make jams and jellies.

We loved to sneak into the orchard through widow Alte-Aaron's Davidovitch's garden, and to run for our lives when old Chaya-Rivka noticed the thieves. She had a powerful voice, and strings of curses echoed from one end of the orchard to the other. Berish Halpert's orchard, and the orchard of Raziel Wiesel, the "Prisaka" (a town in Romania), were also sought after by the merchants. Likewise the orchard of the headmaster of the state school Loyosh was in demand as was the orchard of Mikle and Genge, the magnats of the village, people of power and authority. These three Gentile squires had cultivated, developed orchards. They sold fruit picking rights to Jewish merchants, and during the picking we could glimpse into the "holy of holies" of these squires, for throughout the year no Jew ever set foot in their houses.

I remember a special Jewish merchant from the village of Dragomirest who used to buy the yield of Genge the squire. His name was *Dovid-der-Levi* – the Levite. From the time the blossoms fell until the time of the apple picking – in fact throughout the spring and part of the summer – he lived in a hut in the orchard to guard the fruit. During the Sabbath he would stay in village homes as a Sabbath guest. At night he would walk around under the trees. With a stick in one hand and an empty can in the other, he would drum and shout: "*Tiye vied*", in Romanian, "I can see you". The children would deliberately pass by the orchard to throw a stone or a piece of wood onto one of the branches, and then the Levite

would be alarmed and begin to drum "I have seen you, I have seen you..." a well tried and tested device against fruit thieves.

At the end of the season and after the fruit picking, Dovid the Levite would pack his belongings, the pot and the utensils he had used during the weekdays, the kaftan and the shtreimel and the Sabbath shoes and would place everything in a pair of sacks he threw over his back. He would kiss the *mezuza* of his hosts for the Sabbath and would return to his village until the coming of the next year.

The Schiff Slaughterer

The village slaughterer was Reb Hirschel Sachs, a tall man with a lined brow. His eyes were bright, his face thin with a pointy beard framed by two earlocks peeping out from beneath his yarmulka, from his forehead to the edge of his cheeks. In the hierarchy of the *klei kodesh* (religious functionaries), the slaughterer was a sort of stand-in for the Rabbi or the *dayan* (religious judge). In cases of questions or doubts which arose during the slaughtering and the removal of the hide, Reb Hirschel would be the arbiter. He was learned, quick and skilled in the slaughtering of large and small animals. All his free time was devoted to the study of Torah, Talmud and the *poskim* (rabbinic literature). He had a pleasant voice, and when needed he acted as a cantor and a reader.

We loved going to the slaughter house (*Schlachtbrik*) of the village to watch the slaughtering, especially the slaughtering of large cattle. The butcher shop owner would tie the animal by its four feet. Two by two they held the head of the tied animal, while it opened two large, moist round eyes, entreating and staring around. Reb Hirschel would take out the large knife with its glinting blade and light brown ivory handle, hold it in one hand and with the nail of the forefinger of the other, went back and forth over the point of the knife, to ensure that the knife was fit (kosher) and had no blemish. Reb Hirschel would shut the knife case with awe and

reverence, while holding the knife between his teeth. He would tuck the edges of his kaftan into his belt, shut his eyes and make the blessing over the slaughtering. I pictured the slaughterer in my mind to be like Abraham our Father at the binding of Isaac in the drawing by Doré. On his face there was a restrained and tense expression. His lips moved in silent prayer that G-d forbid he should not fail in his holy task, the proper slaughtering of the animal.

His salary as the community slaughterer was meagre, and did not suffice to provide for five sons and two daughters, so he also slaughtered for the communities of Batize and Polien-Glad as well, a distance of seven to eight kilometers. He carried out his holy work tirelessly, in summer and winter. He would walk when it was twenty degrees below zero, in gleaming, deep and yielding snow. He would put a goatskin fur hat on his head, a *kotchmah*, a woolen scarf around his neck, mittens, and wore a thin kaftan with a long coat over it. His long legs were wrapped in woolen rags in high boots; this is how he would stride alone. From the second watch of the night until the dawn of the day he would journey from Schiff to Batize, to slaughter for the community during the morning hours, and return to Schiff for mincha-ma'ariv.

His wife, Braine, was an exemplary housewife. She had a small plot with a vegetable garden, a few plum trees, a brooding hen with its chicks, a small flock of geese for fattening and a milk-cow in the cow shed. It was customary for the slaughterer to receive certain parts of the animal as "priestly gifts" – the entrails, gizzard and spleen. Braine made delicacies from them for the members of the family: Esther, Moshe, Yeshaya, Menachem-Pesach, Shmuel-Leib, Dovid, and Binah.

Braine was known in the village for her modest ways. From the dishes she cooked, she would set some aside, and bring them to the needy. The village people knew: when Braine, the *shochet'ke* (the slaughterer's wife), had her Sabbath scarf on her head, and her hands were concealed under her enormous shawl, this was the sign she was bringing cooked food to the needy. Esther, the eldest

daughter, went to Israel in the thirties, as a pioneer. Against his will, Reb Hirschel sold the cow to provide his daughter with travel expenses. The pioneer daughter, who lived in the cooperative village of Ramat-Yishai, survived. One son, Menachem, returned from captivity in Russia, and the youngest daughter, Binah, reached the land of Israel from Bergen-Belsen. All three of them put down roots and established families in the land of Israel.

Chapter 4

FAMILIAR FIGURES

Widows in the Village

Many women remained widows nearly to the end of their lives. Usually, the father of the family left his wife with a large number of children to look after. The older ones would leave home and seek their fortune in the large cities in the nearby districts, while the support of the remaining children rested on the shoulders of the widow, who out of a sense of mission and a desire to carry out the will of the deceased devoted her life to maintaining the ways of the home. Rarely did the widows remarry, since the village was small, the choice of a match limited, the burden of making a living was heavy, and little time was left for thoughts of remarrying.

Most widows lived in dire poverty. The community could not support them properly. They all tried to find a source of income and sustenance. Some were spinners of wool for tzitzit and knitting, pluckers of feathers to stuff pillows and quilts, embroiderers and seamstresses, or worked as helpers and cooks for joyous occasions such as circumcisions or weddings. Most of them looked after a small holding of 50-60 geese for fattening. Their children did not pay tuition fees or only paid a small sum. The charity money collected from the members of the community was distributed among the needy, openly or in secret, but it was a mere drop in the ocean: "the handful did not satisfy the lion".

There was a custom in Schiff that every Thursday Reb Moshe the Melamed would arrange four groups of older pupils to go from door to door of Jewish homes to collect food items for the needy for the Sabbath. They would be given anything that could be

contributed, not necessarily cash – wheat flour, corn flour, beans, etc. The pupils knew how to approach the poor, leaving the parcel of goods secretly as an anonymous donation. In the huts with the leaking roofs, in loneliness, with teary eyes and a heart full of hope, the widows sat and waited for the arrival of their cheder children and the older boys from the Yeshiva, with a heartfelt prayer that they should not put their parents to shame.When the children grew up and established homes and families, they remembered the difficult circumstances of the family in the village, and of course, set out to assist in providing for their sustenance.

The Widow Sarah Malka Glazer

The widow Sara-Malka was left with the care of seven children – Leah, Yaakov, Nachum, Fraide, Feige, Binah and Arieh, and lived opposite the government school. She was the sister of the slaughterer's wife, Braine. After her passing the family dispersed: Arieh, the youngest was a regular at the slaughterer's, the Sachs family. He studied at a yeshiva and was one of the religious pioneers, the dreamers and fighters for the land of Israel. During the war he tried unsuccessfully to get to Israel. When the war over, in 1947, he arrived as an illegal immigrant in Cyprus, where he established a sort of "kibbutz in the making". He organized the *Bnei Akiva* youth organization in the Cyprus camps, and devoted himself to "*Torah Va'Avoda*" activities with all his heart and soul. On arrival he and his family joined kibbutz Tirat Tzvi. His son fell in the Yom Kippur war. Arieh the pioneer is buried in Tirat Tzvi.

Hoddes (Haddas) the Righteous

Hoddes, the wife of Moshe-Dovid Freed Davidovitz, was a special, mysterious figure, a sort of "hidden-righteous". She was revered by Reb Shlomo-Yossel's cheder children. She lived with her little

daughter Frieda in her large house. All the rooms were crammed full of shelves of religious books and books of Hebrew grammar. One of her sons, Chayim, was a lover of Modern Hebrew. Her four sons studied in Yeshivas and excelled in their studies. The oldest son, Mordechai Fried, was one of the outstanding students of Reb Yoelish of Satmar. His nickname was Mordechai Schivver, i.e., Mordechai of Schiff. He gradually acquired rabbinic status both for instruction and for making Halachic decisions. His brothers, Isaac and Chaim Leib also learned in Yeshivas and excelled. There were also two or three daughters who worked as housekeepers and helped support their mother. Hoddes' husband, Moshe-Dovid, left the village and would return infrequently, mainly in order to visit his old mother Rivka Aaron's. The rumor was that Moshe-Dovid left his wife because she was too meticulous in keeping the commandments, whereas he was captivated by the ways of the 'great world'...

The house of Hoddes was a house of mystery. Hoddes used to sit behind curtains next to the holy volumes and murmur prayers and supplications. The house was higher than the dirt path, four or five wooden steps led up to the veranda, and from there to two tall doors with a chequered design of wood and glass decorated in light greenish paint. Through those doors Hoddes used to watch the cheder children in silent prayer as they walked to the cheder, and would wait for them at the end of their studies. Hoddes earned a meagre livelihood and was satisfied with little. She tended the vegetable garden and flower beds, and raised some poultry for home consumption. All her free time after the household chores were done was devoted to silent prayers out of her holy volumes: the *Tze'nah Ur'enah,* the *Ma'aneh-Loshon,* the *Supplication,* and the *Korban-Mincha* prayer-book in Yiddish. There she found refuge for her yearnings and her distress, and prayed for individals and for the community. Her "Western-Wall" was the wall in the synagogue, dividing the women's gallery from the men's hall. She would enter, first among the women, with great reverence,

wrapped in her Sabbath shawl, a black velvet dress on her thin body, her handkerchief inside her thick prayer-book, entirely alert, ready and prepared to offer her prayers. From time to time she would burst into restrained weeping with flowing tears. Her voice would penetrate through the wooden wall up to the men's benches. Her unique figure stands before my eyes, like Chana in her prayer, with her lips moving yet with her voice muted.

We, the children of Reb Shlomo-Yossel's cheder, benefitted from the warmth of her heart, from the gentleness of her eyes and from her home baking. She would lie in wait for us behind the tall narrow doors. Before we managed to reach the narrow bridge (the *klatke*), she would call to us with great affection and caressing eyes, and with fresh, warm, flat pastries (*paltchiklech*), just out of the oven, in her hands. With a heart full of contentment, she would ask us in a whisper what we had learned and whether we knew the blessing to be made over the cookies. She would hand each of us a warm pastry sprinkled with sugar and poppy seeds, and with tearful eyes she would beg: "kinderlach, children, make a blessing loudly word for word..." and with infinite joy she would answer "Amen" with great devotion.

She went up in the conflagration with the same devotion, like a seraph and like an angel, on the night of the 26th of Iyar (1944). Two of her children survived: Reb Mordechai Fried "Schivver", who passed away in the agricultural village Beit-Me'ir, in the mountains of Jerusalem, where he served as Rabbi and Rabbinic arbiter. His younger sister Frieda also immigrated to the land of Israel, where she married and established a family.

Hirschele-der-Langer (Long Hirsch)

In Schiff, as in many villages and townships in Marmarosh, there were those stricken by fate who were part of the rustic landscape. There was no way of dealing with the odd and the backward, who were mostly left to fend for themselves. There were those whose

family saw to their basic daily needs, and those whom the village people supported with minimal sustenance, water to wash and clothes to wear. Generally these odd ones provided entertainment for jokers who laughed at their expense. The best known beggar in Schiff and its surroundings was Long Hirschele (*Hirsch-der-langer*). When called up for the reading of the Torah, they would intone with a note of importance: "Let Reb Tzvi, son of Reb Chanoch Halevy, stand".

When we were learning with Rebbe Shlomo-Yossel about Og the King of Bashan (who, along with his army, was slain by Moses and his men at the battle of Edrei) and about the giants the spies encountered, immediately the figure of Hirschele came to mind as an image of how those giants must have seemed. Hirsch-der-Langer soared to a height of over two meters. His head was over-sized, his lips fleshy and thick, his eyes black, his nose turned up and his teeth big and protruding like the teeth of a horse. His straight sidelocks, black as pitch, came down on either side of his forehead, and his wide and short beard surrounded his face. The bristles of his hair were like a horsetail. On his head he wore a faded, crumpled hat. His garments were tight and small for the size of his clumsy body, since the second hand clothes he received from the generous village people did not fit his large frame. Sometimes, Hirsch the tailor would take pity on him, ask for Hirschele's outworn coat and fit an extra length of sleeve and an extra patch on it, to fulfill the mitzvah of charity.

Hirschele's hands sprouted out of his short sleeves like wide oars. His painful legs, wrapped in rags, were pushed and compressed into gigantic shoes. Chena, the cobbler, made a special mold and stitched gigantic shoes from rough leather to fit Hirschele's feet. The metal strips to strengthen the heels of the shoes were the handiwork of Eliya, the blacksmith. By contrast to the size of Hirschele, his wife, Rachel (Ruchtche) was his very opposite: thin, short, pale, her back bent, her legs crooked from birth, stammering in her speech, always wrapped in a colorful scarf and dressed in a

flowery dress. When they went on their rounds to beg from house to house, they were nicknamed "Long Sabbath and Short Friday". They lived in an old wooden house opposite the smithy of Eliya the blacksmith. The floor of their house was plastered with yellowish clay and around the rim of the baking oven Ruchtche had arranged empty jars and bottles to decorate the house.

In the synagogue, Hirschele would sit on the back bench, next to the bookcase. Wrapped in a giant prayer shawl, as yellow as parchment, he would mumble his prayers while falling asleep over his prayerbook. That was the golden opportunity for the practical jokers among the lads, who would scatter pungent snuff under Hirschele's nostrils. When the snuff started to act, the children would retreat a little from Hirschele and wait for a series of sneezes which resembled an earthquake. Hirschele would exhale and rub his nose, and sneeze very noisily until the wooden beams of the roof of the synagogue shook. By the first sneeze he realized that someone was playing a trick on him. He would leap up as though he had been bitten by a snake, and would generously distribute "the gift of his hand" – pushes and smacks – until he calmed down. At the prostrating of *Kor'im* during the Musaf prayer on the Day of Atonement, we would wait to see how the giant Hirschele would bend and prostrate too. He always waited for the congregation to get up and then there was room for him too. He would prostrate himself fully, on the scattered straw, onto about half the floor space of the synagogue. Then mischievous children had the opportunity to shove and push little children to ride on his shoulders. Hirschele would get up and shake the straw and the riders off himself, like Gulliver in the land of the Lilliputians.

The regular joke was on Seder night: Hirschele's neighbor, the son of Reb Laizer Ovitch (Tzvi Laizer's), was a real comedian and loved to tease Long Hischele. On Seder night Tzvi Ovitch would sneak to Hirschele's door and would wait for Hirschele to open the door on reaching the section of "Pour Your wrath" in the Haggadah, as is customary. Then he would push a white goat inside that

would bleat and shake its beard and head directly for Ruchtche the queen of the Seder night. Hirschele, her husband the "king", would soothe her until she stopped making frightened noises. Hirschele knew who did it and forgave him. This same grocer's son would give him a generous handout in cash when replacing his father at the grocer's counter between Minchah and Ma'ariv.

There was a custom on Simchat Torah in Schiff to leave the *hakafa ozer dalim*, the sixth circuit around the altar, to the poor. This Hakafa was considered second rate in terms of honors because of the opening words: "*ozer dalim, hoshi'a na*" ("Helper of the poor, save us), and here the jesters of the village had the opportunity to add joy to gladness and pull Hirschele's leg: why, oh why, was he alone discriminated against with an unworthy Hakafa? I remember one Simchat Torah, when the beadle declared: Reb Tzvi son of Reb Chanoch is honored with "*ozer dalim*". Immediately Hirschele ran up to the attic above the vestry, brought down the burial gear and ran in great rage to the wardens to avenge the insult. There was such an uproar that they had to call Ruchtche from the women's gallery and through her special stammering Hirschele understood that it was time to stop. He calmed down when he saw the respectable Reb Azriel Anschele's take a Torah scroll and join the Hakafa too, dancing with enthusiasm and singing: "*Ozer dalim, hoshi'a na*", and all the village beggars clapped their hands and danced with Hirschele.

This Hirschele suffered from open sores that ran with pus on his legs. In the forties, during the war, he fell ill. His painful swollen feet could not carry his clumsy body. The village women helped Ruchtche change his bandages and clean the house. When he passed away, the community, and especially the *hevra kadisha* (the burial society) had problems performing his *tohorah* (ritual purification) according to tradition. On this occasion, Reb Moshe Klein Holmin'er was revealed in his full spiritual stature. He stroked his pointy beard, wrinkled his brow, and started the holy task: he took a pair of pails and went to draw water from the mikveh, he took the

board for purification, went into Hirschele's house, overcame the stench, and he himself removed the tattered, worn-out garments of the deceased, peeled off the bandages, saturated with blood and pus sticking to his legs, washed and purified his whole body with devotion, with his face aflame with the merit of doing this tremendous good deed. Reb Moshe wrapped Hirschele's body with clean shrouds which he had brought with him. At last Long Hirschele, the giant beggar, had a new garment, white and clean that fit the size of his body. When they brought out the heavy bier, everyone pressed forward to have a share in the mitzvah of escorting the dead. Ruchtche stepped with her crooked, faltering legs, after the pallbearers, shedding tears and mumbling. Everyone followed Reb Tzvi son of Reb Chanoch Ha'Levi as far as the edge of the village to the *paderes*, the village cemetery. Reb Moshe asked the deceased for pardon and forgiveness for all they had done to offend his dignity, in the name of the Holy Congregation and in the name of the Holy Burial Society, whether knowingly or unknowingly.

Moshe'le the Gooseherd

In contrast to the clumsy, overgrown figure of Long Hirsch, there was another figure in the village, neither boy nor man: the short Moshe'le Shemuel-Yakov's, the gooseherd. The children were convinced that he was a "transmigration of a soul", a sort of mysterious figure that had descended from the source of souls, to rectify something in this imperfect world. Moshe'le's father, Shemuel-Yakov, was a shepherd and kashrut supervisor over the making of goat and sheep cheese. Moshe'le's brother, Alter-Reuven, his wife and only daughter, saw this odd member of the family as both a punishment and a reward. Their house was the last house on the upper edge of the village, near the road connecting Sighet to Sastchel, where the *tzelem*, the statue of the crucified, known by the Jews as *Yasele-Pandrei* towered prominently. Moshe'le the Gooseherd was born mentally retarded. He learned in the cheder



to read Hebrew (*ivri*) in the prayerbook and when people saw that he would not be able to have a *tachleth* (a proper position in life), his parents decided to employ him as a herd of the family's and the village's flocks of geese.

He was short, with a round, sad and frightened face. His bewildered eyes peeped from under his bedraggled hat. During the weekdays he wore a long cloak or a wide sleeved shirt and patched trousers. His short legs were bare and swollen. During the long summer days he wandered from one end of the village to the other, to look for grazing grounds for the geese. A herdsman's bag was slung diagonally over his shoulder with a portion of cornmeal bread in it. Under his armpit he held a thin whip to keep the flock from scattering. In his other hand he had a wanderer's staff to frighten the *shkotzim*, the Gentile youth and the wandering dogs. In this way he led his geese every day.

His bed was in the attic, by the warm chimney. There he warmed his body during the cold nights and there he ate his meals: the family's leftovers. His language and his articulation were unclear. As children we got used to his form of speech and figured out his needs from his broken sentences. He was very scared of the

"angel of death". Apparently he was influenced by the tombstones in the cemetery: there he would lead the geese to graze and there he met the funeral processions. The "angel of death" in his mind was a man who killed people... he always repeated the stammered sentence: "When the angel of death will come to Moshe'le to take, I will run away to the alleyway of Zack the Gentile..." Zack lived in a remote alleyway and was known as a horse thief...

His favorite place was the area between the great river which crossed the village, and a side tributary of the river, which moved the wooden wheels of the lower flour mill of Leib the Miller. There was a wide open ownerless space covered in green grass. There Moshe'le sat down to rest on the large stone, and leaning on his staff he would watch the river and his flock of geese. From time to time he would get up, gather his scattering flock, shift the brim of his hat from his forehead, and watch the sky for a hawk or a sparrow hawk lurking to devour a tender chick. We would run home and bring him a slice of bread with butter or just any cooked dish, and we had the satisfaction of having performed an act of loving kindness.

Moshe'le Shemuel-Yakov's great day was the Day of Atonement. He was like that rustic lad in the Chasidic tales who enters the synagogue on the Day of Atonement and sees the whole congregation at prayer and who in his enthusiasm coupled with his ignorance takes out his shepherd's flute and starts piping. The Rabbi in the story stops his prayer, goes up to him and turns to his praying congregation to say: "The "flute prayer" of the shepherd who does not know how to pray has pierced the seventh heaven and our prayers have been accepted in his merit". We were convinced that a holy soul, acting for the welfare of the community, was concealed in Moshe'le. In honor of the Day of Atonement, his parents would dress Moshe'le in clean festive garments. They fitted him with felt shoes for his swollen, scratched feet, and brought him down to the synagogue to *daven* and stay awake the whole night. Moshe'le removed his shoes and stared all around him. The murmur of the prayers and the tunes of the cantor overwhelmed him.

The flames of the candles in the sand bins flickered on the walls and on the prayer-shawls. Vassily, the Gentile in charge of lighting and guarding the candles, would sit down, from time to time, next to Moshe'le the herdsman. Moshe'le would look around him and feel like "one of the people", barefoot among the bare footed, equal among equals. The passage of prayer "and all who believe that He is easy to placate, who is equal and makes the small equal to the great...", took on a special meaning, when Moshe'le the Herder stood next to Long Hirschele, together with the great and the good of the village, united in the holy day's prayers. The straw scattered on the floor of the synagogue reminded him of his sleeping place in the attic of the house. The hum of the prayer seemed like the honking of the young geese. The warm atmosphere in the synagogue roused him to join, as best as he could in the pure prayers as one of the congregation.

About two years before the Holocaust, in 1942, after a long winter, frost and snows, Moshe'le fell ill and died. In the attic, between the wooden rafters and the chimney of the stove, his soul rose to heaven, alone and unnoticed. When his father went up the ladder to bring him his portion of warm corn porridge he found him frozen in his bed, his skin blue-grey. His brother, Alter-Reuven, ran to Reb Azriel Anschel's Perl, the president of the community and of the burial society to inform him: "Moshe'le has passed away". They called Reb Moshe son of Reb Sholem Klein, who ran immediately to the edge of the village, climbed up the ladder and with great effort, with the help of others, brought down the deceased. This time Moshe'le lay in honor in the house on the soft wooden floor, covered with a shabby blanket, with candles burning around him and a quorum of people sitting and murmuring Chapters of *Tzidduk Ha'din* (Justification of Judgment prayer) and *vidui* (confession).

Reb Moshe the maker of fringes and of good deeds removed his kaftan, tucked his fringes and the four cornered garment into his belt, turned up his sleeves and started carrying out a true act of loving kindness. With awe and reverence he removed the faded

blanket off the deceased. It was difficult to remove the garments, which had "grown" with the deceased. Reb Moshe Klein did not tarry: he instructed those assisting him to place the deceased on the bed of the dead and to carry it to the mikveh. He asked the community for permission to attend to this special mitzvah for the dead, as he understood that there were not many contenders for the task, due to the stench of decay. He asked Hirsch the Tailor, the communal bath attendant, to warm up water, and like a mother looking after her sick child, Reb Moshe Klein started his holy task of purification. Hirsch handed him the tailor's scissors and Moshe cut the soiled garments clinging to the body of the deceased, saturated with excrement, sickness and blood. He washed the body, which had not received such treatment since his birth, with warm water. He cut his hair and the nails of his fingers and toes. Moshe'le was given a clean, white, linen garment which covered his whole body, including his swollen, bare feet. He was carried on many shoulders, with everyone shoving and pushing to share in the mitzvah. Thus he departed from the green meadows and grasses, where he had led his flocks of geese to graze, with all his strength and in perfect faith. Men, women and children accompanied him with restrained tears, praying *Yoshev Be'sether Elyon*, "He who sits in the refuge of the Most High..." . Two years later, Moshe'le remained under the mound of earth in the cemetery of Schiff, while his relatives who had accompanied him reached Auschwitz, on their last journey.

Other Members of the Community

Each of these names was concealed like holy parchments: each of them returns from my childhood recollection. No other memorial remains. Their loves, their celebrations, their pains in their afflicted bodies, are still heaped in the mound of ashes on the altar of the conflagration and sacrifice of Auschwitz. Worlds of yearning were cut off, tears of joy and fear dried in the blaze of those crematoria. May their memory be a living monument that will never cease.

Rivka Yitzchok's

Every Sabbath afternoon she would put on her Sabbath dress and would come to Aunt Chantch'e to relate the troubles of her step daughter Tzipr'e (Tzippora).

Raize de Laibishk'e (Raize the wife of Laibish)

She lived near the house of the slaughterer. A very tall woman, heavy set and deaf, who would walk barefoot during the summer months with a smile on her face. Her husband, Reb Laibish, may he rest in peace, would go round the villages and sell religious tracts. He died in foreign parts, and Raize did not remove her black widow's dress. She liked to help with the baking of cakes for weddings and with the preparation of the roast meat. When she was not called to help, she was offended and reacted angrily in her own way – she would go into her chicken shed, catch a hen that did not lay eggs, bring it to the slaughterer. In the village they knew: when Raize had a chicken slaughtered and bought flour to bake a honey-cake, it was a sign she was offended for not having been asked to help. In order to "annoy" the *mechutonim* (the parents of the bride and groom), she would prepare a "Royal Table" for herself.

Baile Dovid's Tobal

She lived in the neighborhood of the synagogue. She was a smiling good-hearted woman. She rented out her house to Rabbi Moshe the Melamed. She could neither read nor write, but through listening to the voices of the cheder pupils, she knew almost the whole of the *Tzena-Rena* prayerbook by heart.

Alte Aharon's Davidovitch

She lived near the orchard of Itzik-Leib Popovitch. Her small house could be seen from a distance, and one window served as a sort of "lighthouse" at the time of lighting Sabbath candles. In Schiff they used to say: "Take a look and see whether Alte-Aharon's had already

lit candles", that's how everyone knew that the Sabbath had come in. Her daughter Tzirel, who married late in life, lived with her.

Miriam Moshe Hirsch's Wiesel

She lived near Hirsch, the bath attendant, with three daughters and three or four sons. The daughters left home to help the mother make a living. The oldest son Wolf-Laib Wiesel survived the Holocaust. The mother, one of the daughters, and the sons Ya'akov-Boruch and Avigdor perished in Auschwitz.

My Young Aunt Fradle Anshel's Tobal

Her husband, Anshel Tobal died in 1940 in Schiff from typhoid and left behind a widow with her five children: Chayah, Chaim Yisroel, Leib Ber, Sarah and Chanah'le.

Abba Moshe's and his Wife Simma

They lived next to Rabbi Shlomo-Yossel. Abba was a sheep trader, and he had a small butcher shop. In their old age a daughter was born to them, Altotche (little Alte), who learned at the cheder of the Melamed.

Shemaya the Tailor

He lived next to Laibush, the husband of Raize de Leibushke. Shemaya *der Shneider* had one daughter who survived and reached the land of Israel.

Babbele Mendel-Schul's

The old man Mendel-Shaul's (*Mendel-Schul's*), lived on the other side of the river, next to the house of the priest. His daughter, Babbele, married Mordechai Tobal from Rozavlea. Mordechai fell ill and died at a young age. His wife was left a young widow, with the care of their young children: Yoseph-Meir, Moshe, Shaindel and Ephraim. Babbele was a shining example of diligence. She was good-hearted, loyal to her family, satisfied with little. She was a

regular in our house and a friend of my mother. When our mother was lying on her final sickbed, Babbele came, responding to the call, from the other side of the river, and supported us through the difficult days. Her son Ephraim survived, and established a home in the land of Israel. He was active in the organization for the commemoration of the Dragomirest ghetto. His sister Yaffa-Schaindel and her husband Avraham Tobal live now in Israel. Schaindel was resourceful. In 1944, just before the deportation to Auschwitz she managed to cross the border to Romania through Oradia, together with the two children of her employers, and thus was saved.

Alter and Rochel-Leah Berkovitch

Reb Alter was the brother-in-law of Rabbi Shlomo-Yossel (Rochel-Leah was his sister). Their house stood opposite the *Tiphle* – the village church. Before the Hungarian invasion of the district Rochel-Leah passed away, and the widower Alter moved to live with his son, Abba Berkovitch, who lived in Sighet. Reb AlteReb s daughter Gutzah married her cousin Berel (son of the Melamed Reb Shlomo-Yossel).

Reb Yankel the Scribe

There was a scribe (*sofer s'tam*) in Schiff, Reb Yaakov Apter. His wife was the sister of Eliya-Leib Wachs, and the sister of Rechel Laizer Yakov's Ovitch. Reb Yaakov Apter came originally from Borsha. Their older son Avrum-Mordechai died in his youth, while the youngest son, Moshe, was about 14 when he was sent to Auschwitz. He was transferred from there to the Dora-Mittlebau camp, and worked in the "Kartoffel-meiten-Kommando", together with his young cousin Moshe Wachs. The two of them were sent from there to Bergen-Belsen on the last day of Passover in March 1945. He was liberated from Bergen-Belsen. He reached Sweden with the sick the Swedish government took in. In 1947 he travelled to the U.S.A, where he settled and established a family.

Yocheved

Yocheved lived in one of the remote alleyways. Her home was near the dam, next to the fork in the river. The place was called *Meirel's Pless* – Meir's Dam. We loved to swim and fish in the deep waters there. Yocheved moved to another district in the thirties. Of the children, I remember Meir Yocheved's, Gavriel and Mendel.

Elia-Leib Wachs

The house of Reb Elia-Leib Wachs stood between the state school and the house of the squire Gange. He was a cheerful person, a sharp cattle merchant with a sense of humour. In every situation he liked to crack jokes, laugh and make others laugh. He was the brother of the energetic fiery woman Rachel Leizer Yakov's. Elia-Leib was tall, with a dignified appearance, with a face adorned with a broad brown beard. His older daughter, Gutzah, married a young scholar from Schiff, Anshel Feig, of Kechnieh. They left Schiff for another township. The second daughter, Rochel, immigrated to the land of Israel as a pioneer before the outbreak of the Second World War. She married Avraham Cohen, in Netanya. Their home was open to all Holocaust survivors from Schiff, and was renowned for its hospitality. Another son of Elia-Leib Wachs, Simcha, also survived. Like his sister, he made his home in Netanya. In his youth he studied in the Yeshiva of Oradia-Mare and shared a study bench at the Bet Ha'Midrash with the Vishnitzer Rebbe, Reb Moshe Hager. With the liquidation of the ghetto, at the selection in Auschwitz, Elia-Leib was left with two sons. The three of them were sent to a labor concentration camp. His older son, Eliezer (Leizer) was then about 18 years old, and the younger son was about 14. From Auschwitz they were sent to Buchenwald, and from there to Dora-Mittelbau. The father, Elia-Leib, was sent to one of the camps annexed to Dora, Hartzungen or Elreich, where he perished from lack of food and hard labor.

The Leizer son survived. He reached Sweden with the Red Cross and from there he immigrated to America. He had a pleasant voice,

and served for many years as a cantor in one of the communities. His young brother, Moshe Wachs, was in the camp of Dora until its evacuation. Apparently, from there, he reached Bergen-Belsen. On April 15, 1945, he was among the liberated. Little Moshele came down with typhoid and was sent to Sweden to recover. His cousin Moshe Apter joined him there to support him (both were about 15 years old). He became increasingly sick on board the ship and breathed his last, out at sea, between Germany and Sweden. His emaciated body was lowered into the depths of the sea. His cousin alone accompanied him, crying: "The L-rd promised, I will bring back from Bashan, I will bring him back from the depths of the sea"...(Psalms 68:23)

Chapter 5

THE RURAL WAY OF LIFE AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE GENTILE NEIGHBORS

In spite of day to day concerns with physical and spiritual subsistence, and its joys and sorrows, life flowed on along its fixed path. Sometimes people were surprised by a war far away or close by, but soon everything returned to its earlier course. The disabled Gentiles who returned from the wars recounted how they had been wounded in battle, and described their adventures for many more years. On Sundays and other Gentile holidays, during the drinking of wine and spirits, they told exaggerated tales of daring-do, embellishing their heroism and devotion to their motherland.

In Schiff there was John, the potter, with an amputated leg, who leaned on one leg. The stump of his leg was placed in a wooden crutch. With his pipe in his mouth, he would scratch his head with his black nails and reminisce about the battle in which he was wounded by the big guns and the bayonets of the enemy. He would display the articles he carved and engraved from poplar wood, like table spoons and forks and bowls, on a bench below the church fence and would sell them so he could buy tobacco and wine.

The life of the Jews, their rest days and festivals, were like a living calendar for their Gentile neighbors, and they adjusted their daily lives according to it. The cycle of nature, the snows and rains, the blossoming and withering, sowing and reaping, were

intertwined, tied and interwoven with the private and communal life of the Jews and the non-Jews. The peasants got used to seeing their Jewish neighbors as workmates in times of need, and indeed they would help each other. When the snows melted they would join forces to divert the surging river. All would set out for the riverbeds to break up the ice blocks that floated on the waves of the river, to steer them and push them in the direction of the flow. After the heavy rains, they would all set out to repair the damaged roads.

It is true that the Gentiles did not forgive the Jews for "the killing of the merciful Jesus". When coming out of the church, on "the Great Thursday", after the priest had described the "crucifixion of the Messiah", his birth and his death, they would throw stones on the roofs of the houses of the Jews. But a "good deed" was one thing and real life was another. Trade and work was one thing and "the killing of Jesus and its avenging" were another. The two domains did not really touch each other. There was a sort of "cease fire" and consent at heart. One man went to the synagogue to hear "the voice of Jacob", and the other went to his life of field work and hunting; the priest was in charge of the religious life of his peasants, the gendarmes enforced the law, and the Rabbi guided his community in the paths of the tradition of the Fathers. During the Christian festivals which were always a source of trouble, the gendarmes attempted to demonstrate their "goodness of heart" and their excellent protection, particularly in the Jewish alleyways. For the "good deed of maintaining law and order" they received their reward in this world, in money and in kind. The Jews called it "hush money".

In Schiff, as in other villages, the Gentiles consulted the Jewish Rabbi or the *Gazda*, the head of the community, to resolve their differences. In Schiff they came to Reb Azriel Anshel's Perl, known as "Izdraileh" who was the head of the community and highly esteemed. They also used to come to Reb Ben-Zion Stern, who was extremely knowledgeable about the laws of the land, and was

trusted by his Gentile neighbors as an arbitrator and adjudicator. Precisely because the Jews were orthodox in their faith, because of their observance of the Sabbath and the festivals, their abstinence and their loyalty in family life, the peasants preferred to air their disputes and their quarrels with their Jewish neighbors. When the Gentiles got drunk on hard liquor and wine, quarrels would break out accompanied by the wielding of knives and axes, and it was the Jews who separated them and restored the peace until the next quarrel.

The Sabbath *Goy* (a Gentile for the Sabbath) knew to come of her own accord during the winter, before dawn on cold, snowy Sabbath days to stoke the heating stove. The daughters of the peasants who worked in the homes of the Jews were expert in all the laws of Kashrut, milk and meat and forbidden foods. Sometime they helped the young children who had trouble knowing which blessing to make, or had forgotten to say the night-time "Shema". The well known proverb: "The Gentile assistant of the Rav can arbitrate in matters of Halacha" was a simple truth. The postman Sikkah's wife, the expert in plastering baking ovens, could speak Yiddish.

The children of the peasants sat in the state-run school on the same bench as the Jewish children. One child sat in his tailored jacket, and another in his thick peasant made woolen garments. The Jewish child with his yarmulka and his earlocks sat next to a gentile friend wearing a kotchmah with his tonsured head. We ran around and wrestled in breaks as friends and as enemies, like Jacob and Esau, with bites and with kisses. On Purim, the children of the Gentiles too would dress up in order to get goodies and Purim money, and, on the other hand, on Christmas we would go to the Gentile neighbors to sing the *Kolindea* folksongs (in Yiddish *kolindeven*).I remember some words, a sort of parody in Wallachian-Romanian – "a black hen sits under the roof and clucks: good granny, give me a biscuit, if you will not give, I will not sing any more..." In peasant-Romanian it was a rhyme. The snow and the

cold enveloped and covered the universe, and we waited for the peasant or his wife to come out and give us an apple or a handful of hazelnuts.

During the days of Chanukah it was the season of slaughtering the fattened geese. My Gentile friends would come to watch how Reb Hirschel the slaughterer lay the bleeding birds on the white snow. On the other hand, we, the Cheder children, would go to the frozen area between the two rivers, to see the slaughtering of the *davar acher,* the pigs, at Christmas time. We were not jealous of them when they were given a singed pig's tail or the roasted ear flap during the skinning of that unclean animal. Everyone knew his boundaries and the limits of what was permitted and what was forbidden.

During the fruit picking and gathering, when the crops were divided between the Jewish land-owner and his Gentile tenant farmer, it was customary for the landowner to select his share, after the peasant heaped the heaps of corn, sheaves of wheat and barley, straw and clover. The division was usually two thirds for the owner and one third for the tenant farmer. There were no disputes or quarrels. In the season of plenty and harvest time, the joy of "He who carries his sheaves with joyous song" echoed. It was a time of good will and satisfaction. Wagons harnessed to horses and oxen filled with fruit and wheat streamed towards the homes of the field owners at the end of the tiring work day.

The storage of crops for the winter and the planning of the next sowing season were sufficient to distract those who, in the name of religious and in patriotic feelings, were aiming to harm their Jewish neighbors. At the end of World War I, there was a Jewish secretary named Reb Ben-Zion Stern on the Schiff council. He was tall, thick-bearded, G-d fearing man, and a great scholar who was an expert in the law of the land, especially in real estate. He was also perfectly conversant in Hungarian and Romanian, with elaborate and precise handwriting. He was generally known as "*Reb Ben-Zion der Nater*", the notary. The land map of the village

and its holdings was located in his house. When Romanian rule became well established, control of village affairs moved to the house of Reb Azriel Perl. The village council was located there, and he served as a sort of adviser to the head of the village council for various on-going problems.

At one time two Jews, appointed by the authorities and the village council head, served as village inspectors. In Yiddish they were called *Bachters* (a distortion of the German word *Beobachter* – inspector), and they would accompany the tax collectors of the village council. When a large amount of taxes was owed, such as council or land taxes, they would impound personal possessions. They would take pillows and featherbeds from the Jews as well as the Sabbath candlesticks, and would take the livestock from the peasants as a form of pressure to get the money immediately. The debt collectors would register the impounded objects, and the *Bachters* would tie the packages in sheets and transfer them to one of the empty rooms of the village council. In most cases the merciful inspectors, Gentiles or Jews, could not bear the wailing and the tears of a Yiddishe Mama bereft of her Sabbath candlesticks, or the quilt to cover her children. Then, through the window that opened onto the courtyard, the inspector would hand over the pledge to the debtor in exchange for a "gift": two packets of tobacco for the pipe, and some small change for the village clerk, and all was settled satisfactorily until the next repossession ceremony.

Peter the Postman

There was no post office in Schiff. The nearest post office was in the nearby village of Rozavlea, on the main road between Sighet and Sitchel, about two kilometres from Schiff. Peter the postman was a small Gentile, useless for farming, who was so frail and skinny that he could not do any hard work. His wife was a capable woman; she knew Yiddish and did not turn down any kind of work: she helped with housework in the houses of the Jews, with

the laundering of the sheets and the raising of the children. She was an expert in the plastering of baking ovens, and during the cold snowy winter months, she stoked the heating stoves in the houses of the Jews on the Sabbath. So she took on the yoke of earning a livelihood. The two of them had two daughters who were on friendly terms with the Jewish girls of the village. This Peter was a sort of Gentile *Kuny-Lemel* (the *schlemiel* – the traditional bungler of the shtetl). Somehow, he had earned the trusted job of bringing the post from Rozavlea to Schiff, although he could neither read nor write. A leather pouch hung on his shoulder, into which he would place the pile of letters, and in a special compartment he would put his personal belongings, including a pipe, tobacco and his kindling tools: a peace of black basalt stone, a dried wood fungus, a piece of polished steel. By rubbing the steel against the stone close to the fluff of the fungus, held tightly with the thumb to the basalt stone, sparks were created, which kindled the fluff and then kindled the tobacco in the pipe. Peter was dressed, summer and winter, in a long thick woolen coat, a leather hat made of kid fur (*kotchme* in the language of the peasants) that drooped over the middle of his forehead, and held a crooked staff of birch wood in his hand. Every morning, except on the Sabbath and Sundays, he would walk from Schiff to Rozavlea along the path by the lower mill of Laib *Der Milner*, and he would return towards noon to complete the day's work: the distribution of the mail. On his return he would pace in a leisurely manner, deep in thought like a philosopher, inhaling and exhaling pipe smoke, his crooked stick in one hand, the mail pouch under his armpit. To alleviate his boredom he would transfer his crooked stick from his hand and place it on the nape of his neck. Then he would fold his arms behind his back and walk slowly in the manner of a squire to the village, to distribute the mail. We, the *cheder* children, would glance in the direction of the bridge to see whether Peter was coming. We too were curious to know who had gotten a letter. Of course, everyone knew everyone, and the joy of the recipients of the letters was a general joy and promised

much news of the day. Since Peter could neither read nor write, he was very glad to have the help of the cheder children, and even forgave the enthusiastic, festive welcome we gave him. When Elia, the son of the blacksmith, was in high spirits, he would seize the skinny, tired Peter, swing him like a *kapparot* chicken before Yom Kippur higher and higher and throw him down like a sack of potatoes to the sound of laughter of the others. Good Peter would forgive him, remove his hat from his head, wipe off the sweat and spit impressively.

Slowly, cautiously, he would open his shepherd's satchel, and shake the letters together with the remnants of tobacco out of it. We would sort the letters addressed to the Jews and to the Gentiles, and Peter would put marks on them, a mark for each letter, to remember who it was for. He placed letters for "Lazar" in a special compartment in his satchel, and mail for Feiga the widow in his wide belt, and so on: in the trousers pocket behind, between the lid of the pipe and the pipe, in the fold of the *kotchme* on the inside, in the right hand and the left hand, this is the way the letters would reach their destination with no mishap.

When Peter brought a real piece of news like a "*ritzipissle*" (a money order) from distant America, or from a local relative, he would receive a slice of Sabbath challah and a small glass of spirits. More than once a letter would lie forgotten at the bottom of Peter's satchel, until the children conducted a thorough search, and the lost item was found.

In addition to this important government job, Peter was also the town-crier of the village, who passed on announcements and council regulations to the inhabitants of the village. Every local or governmental announcement reached the ears of the inhabitants of the village, far and near, through Peter. A little drum with two thin engraved drumsticks made of oak served as a public address system, with which he would drum on the taught pigskin stretched over the circle of the drum on both it ends. When the special drumming with the two sticks working at once in a military

band rhythm was heard, the villagers would come to their front doors and would cock their ears with great curiousity to hear the "royal edict". Peter would survey the ranks of his audience like a general watching his troops on parade. He would lift his fur-hat above his forehead and announce loudly: "It should be known to you honored citizens...", and the announcement were varied as for example "to pay the *portzia*..." – a seasonal tax, or: "In village so and so there will be a market day", or: "A certain pasture is closing and another pasture is opening". He also announced who was called up to repair the road that was damaged in the floods, or break the ice on the river when the snow started to melt and the like: everything was announced by Peter's drum.

In addition to the meagre salary he received from the village council, there was a longstanding tradition that the postman-drummer would collect a *kane* (a receptacle of about three liters) of flour, wheat, corn or beans, each season from each household. Likewise it was customary that every Friday the Jewish households would give Peter a roll or a little challah that was baked from the remainder of the dough scraped off the kneading bowl. This pastry was called *oischabechtz* in Yiddish, meaning dough scraped from the bottom of the bowl. According to Kabbalah, food that is scraped from the bottom of a bowl or a frying pan is "hard on memory"; in other words it causes forgetfulness, and the Jews were careful not to eat it. From experience they knew that Peter would come to no harm if he ate the *oischabechtz*. Every Friday Peter would do the rounds of the Jewish households and collect the fresh rolls, brushed with egg-yolk and sprinkled with poppy-seeds in a *tarbe* (a sort of peasant sack). During the week Peter and his wife Sikka and their two lovely daughters, would taste a little of paradise in the challahs of the kindly Jews.

In April 1944, after the Passover, before the uprooting of the village Jews and their deportation to the ghetto, Peter the drummer and postman announced the fateful and final order concerning the Jewish inhabitants in Schiff. The sound of Peter's drum still echoes

in my ears, like the sound of the *shofar* (ram's horn) that blows in a city and alerts the inhabitants. The sound of the drum echoed from one alley to another on the Sabbath and the Jews, wearing their Sabbath kaftans came out to hear the town-crier: "Jews, you should know that all the families are requested to gather immediately in the courtyard of the synagogue and from there you are travelling to Palestine..." This was Peter's free translation of the order he received from the Hungarian gendarmerie – the deportation order.

In the summer of 1945, when the survivors of the camps returned to the village, hoping to find someone from their families, Peter was still alive. His wife and the daughters welcomed the survivors with tears. Three or four young girls aged 14-16 and a similar number of lads returned. The houses were desolate, looted and empty. The survivors tried somehow to get together, to join one another, to start building a new life on the tombs of their forefathers in the graveyard and on the heaps of ashes. Among the returnees was also the son of the blacksmith. In response to the Holocaust, he cut off his connection with the Master of the Universe and started to behave like a *sheigetz*: he wore peasant clothes, drank *le'chayim* in the tavern, ate their foods, and at a certain stage wanted to make a match for himself with one of the daughters of Peter and Sikka. Peter's wife remembered the kindness of her Jews and agreed to the match, and apparently they asked the girl and she accepted. Then skinny Peter got up and stood up to the full height of his stooping figure, placed his *kotchme* on his bald head, spat three times on the floor, in the manner of a real man, and on no account would he agree to the match. He explained his final view in the following way: "Listen my friend the son of the blacksmith, if the son of Lazar Yankus (one of the respectable Jews – Reb Laizer-Yakov's) would have returned from Palestine (the peasants thought that the Jews were deported there), or Yeshaya the son of the slaughterer (a most handsome, scholarly yeshiva lad), I would have agreed whole heartedly, but you are naughty-who didn't want to learn at Shlomo-Yossel the Melamed and you were beaten by him and by

your father – no way am I willing to get hitched to you..." So the son of the blacksmith left the village, reached the land of Israel, and established a fine family.

Vassily, the servant of Gazda Pinchas

Reb Pinchas, whose full name was Pinchas son of Reb Alter-Shmaya-Osher-Zelig Huz, was the owner of lands and orchards, and Vassily was in charge of them. This servant worked seven days a week, toiling in the cowshed and watching over the hired hands in the field. He was always busy with the ploughing and the harvesting, cutting the clover and the hay, picking corn and the fruit off the trees. He called Reb Pinchas *Gazda Penhes,* Master Pinchas. He instantly sensed the wishes and thoughts of his master, he knew everyone in the village, and everyone knew him, just like a tree rooted in the ground, and nobody remembers who planted it.

He had a lively little horse. He would lay a double sack filled with straw on it instead of a saddle, and he would sit on it with his two legs on the same side, his back upright, the reins in his right hand and his pipe in the corner of his mouth. A little kick to the belly of the horse, and Vassilike was galloping wherever Gazda Penhes needed him to go. Sometimes Pinchas himself would ride the horse. The poor horse would immediately feel the heavy weight of the master. The poor beast would inhale and exhale with difficulty, while the feet of the rider would practically touch the road and trip on stones along the way.

Vassilike had no relatives among the Gentiles. Apparently he was orphaned in his youth, and then served the master Reb Pinchas for decades. He lodged in the barn above the cowshed. They used it to store the clover and the hay to feed the cows and there was a space there to dry the corn cobs. In the chimney they used to hang spiced meat for smoking, which made the chimney a warm place in winter. In the barn Vassilike had a straw mattress

and a large box in which he kept all his personal belongings. As was the custom in the village, the master took care of all his needs: summer trousers and winter trousers, peasant clothes, boat-like shoes, a sheepskin fur coat for the snowy frozen winter months and a large *kotchme* for the head. He was given food from the family kitchen, as well as two packets of tobacco a week to fill the pipe and a sum of money, as was the custom in the land.

It was a matter of course that "Gazda-Penhas" was the man that Vassily trusted most, who kept the money which he had saved over the years with him. He differed from the rest of the household by his Gentile attire, in his non-observance of the Sabbath and in his attendance at the rustic church every Sunday, to take part in prayers with the rest of the peasants. Otherwise he was like one of the family, a true member of the household. He could neither read nor write and no one could remember whether he had ever attended school. He himself did not know his exact age, and never needed any state document. As long as the little horse carried the withered body of Vassilike, all went well. In the winter of 1942, Vassilike became ill. Pinchas called in the village doctor who gave him a prescription for medicine. The daughters of Pinchas, Ekka, Shosha, Mattel and Raize tried to ease his heavy cough. In the room next to the kitchen they arranged a cosy bed until he could recover and return to his attic. They gave him milk, still warm from the milking, a well-known remedy for coughing. They cooked polenta in cream and chicken soup, hoping it would help.

Nothing helped. The thawing of the snows began. Drops of melting show dripped from the roofs and the ground absorbed the rays of the sun. The tops of the green bulrushes appeared and among them could be seen the sparkle of the winter crocus, and Vassilike became paler and paler. When eating became difficult for him and the coughing increased, Reb Pinchas called his daughter Mattel and instructed her to attend to all the affairs of the dying Vasilike. Mattel was a beautiful girl, 18 years old, quick and healthy and she considered Vassilike as a sort of *"met mitzvah"*, a deceased

for whom it is a religious obligation to attend to his burial with all honor, since he has no family. First, she ran to the priest and asked him to come and arrange confession, the *spvede*. The priest arrived accompanied by his beadle (*di'ak*), each in his special vestment, with the vessels for incense and frankincense, with two flags of painted saints, and with a large wooden crucifix. The day after the confession, at sunset, Vassilike breathed his last. Pinchas ran to the Rabbi to ask whether it was permitted to pay the church for the burial plot and for the grave diggers, to avoid having it appear that he had contributed money for the upkeep of the church or supported idol worshippers.

According to the custom of the Christians, the funeral took place on the third day after death. Out of respect for Vassilike, they did not use the term *hithpager* (became a carcass), as usual in relation to the death of a Gentile, but *niftar* (passed away). The news that Vassilike had died reached all the Gentile inhabitants of the village, and all the villagers got ready for the funeral. A problem which they had not foreseen was who should mourn for him. The peasants were accustomed to accompanying the deceased with special prayers: women recite verses and would wail for him in a responsive manner such that after each improvised rhyme by the keener, a chorus of followers would respond: "Woe to us and woe to our lives..." Mattel, Reb Pinchas' daughter decided she herself would be the keener since he had no friends among the Gentiles, and his closest friends were the daughters of "Gazde-Phenhas".

The second problem which arose was that the peasants were accustomed to having a large funeral meal immediately after the burial. This meal was called *pietre kane*. Here too the eighteen-year old Mattel was ready and prepared, as our sages say: "He who starts a good deed is told to complete it". On the other side of the road Reb Pinchas Huz had another house which served as a wheat granary at harvest time. There was a chimney and a wide hall where the young peasants used to come on Sunday and on festive days to bowl. Pinchas had made an oak-wood surface

where they would place 12 carved wooden statuettes, set up in five rows. These would be knocked down by a large wooden ball. Mattel cleared the hall of the bowls and set up a row of tables. In the kitchen she put on kosher pots full of lamb, stuffed cabbage and potatoes cooked with sour pickled cabbage, all according to the ways of the mourning Gentiles. She sent her sister to borrow small wooden bowls and spoons from Dimitrey Tzitzol, the cripple with the wooden leg, who was an expert in making wooden vessels from poplar wood. All was ready and prepared for the meal. There were a number of loaves on each table, wooden tablespoons and bowls. Mattel instructed the house helper to watch the tables to avoid uninvited vagabonds, dogs and cats and any unwanted guests from among the children of the peasants.

Alter the carpenter prepared a coffin of smoothed boards, and on either side of the coffin, at its head and at its feet, there were decorations artistically carved like the coffins of the gentry. The priest arrived at Reb Pinchas' yard in his black cassock, embroidered with a multitude of crosses in gold and silver thread. His beadle, with his assistant, brought the holy water. The frankincense gave out a pungent smell of smoke. Peasants helped carry the flags of the holy icons and the wooden crosses, and four strong men carried the deceased on their shoulders. The funeral procession moved in the direction of the garden of the village church, the place of burial.

Young Mattel wrapped her long hair in a flowery, red kerchief, in the style of the peasant women, she made way through the rows of mourners until she got near the deceased, and the dirge of Mattel for the death of Vassilike began. In Valachian Rumanian she made up rhyming verses which amazed the listeners.

> About the orphaned horse which is left without a loyal rider...
> And the peasant women responded with the lamentation –
> "Woe to us and woe to our lives".

About the summer clothes and the winter clothes that are left
Folded, and there is no one to wear them –
"Woe to us and woe to our lives".
About the pipe that is left full of tobacco and there is no smoke coming out of it... –
"Woe to us and woe to our lives".
About the cows' udders full of milk and there is no one to milk them –
"Woe to us and woe to our lives".
About the wind blowing among the branches and is searching for Vassilike –
"Woe to us and woe to our lives".
About the fruit that drops with dew drops on it and there is no one to pick it –
"Woe to us and woe to our lives"
About the flowers that will emerge from beneath the melting snow
and there is no one to step on them –
"Woe to us and woe to our lives".
About the kotchme that is left bereaved when the head is in the grave –
"Woe to us and woe to our lives".
About the cows which are lowing and wailing for the touch of his merciful hand –
"Woe to us and woe to our lives".
About Vassilike and the goodness of his heart, who has gone to the grave
and has left us sighs –
"Woe to us and woe to our lives".

The procession with the coffin approached the courtyard of the church, and the "keening lady" retreated from the crowd, perhaps in order not to stumble with 'over proximity' to Gentiles,

concerning whom, as is known, we were commanded "You shall surely detest them and abominate them for they are banned".

All the mourners reached the burial plot, and the carriers of the coffin placed it at the edge of the pit. The priest sprinkled holy water on the coffin and the mourners. The final lumps of earth covered the grave to the tinkling of the church bells. Mattel dropped out of the procession and walked home. With the help of the Gentile neighbors, she took out of the kitchen the pots of food. Slowly the mourners returned and settled around the tables for the funeral meal in memory of the soul of Vassilike, may the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have mercy on him... The peasants took off their hats, as was the custom of devout Christians; they made the sign of the cross for a blessing and the meal began. Mattel moved among the laden tables, and the peasants satisfied their hunger by chewing meat and gulping down potato soup with sauerkraut with loud smacking of lips, and finishing with a glass of spirits for dessert. They tore the loaves of bread , piece after piece, with calloused hands and nails dark with clods of earth, and dipped them into the steaming soup. All praised the quickness of Mattel, the daughter of Penhas, her tasty dishes, and in particular they enjoyed the keening and the wailing accompanying the bier of the deceased. They had not seen such a funeral or had heard such laments for years. Two years later the Jews of the village were deported to the ghetto of Dragomirest, from there they were taken by cattle cars to Auschwitz. In Iyar they rose to heaven in the smoke of the crematoria. On the wooden benches, in the shadow of the wall of the church, the Christian peasants continued to tell stories about the First World War, about the funeral of Vassilike and about the excellence of the keening of the Jewess, Mattel Huz.

Chapter 6

YESHIVA, HARVESTS AND THE SEASONS

There were five children in the family when we lost our mother. I was the eldest and when the disaster struck, I was about two months after my Bar-Mitzvah. I was accepted at the Beit-Aharon yeshiva headed by the local Rabbi, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Kahana, may Hashem avenge his death, who was murdered in the concentration camp of Dora, near Buchenwald. We had relatives in Strimtere, a village close to Schiff, and they arranged for me to eat on fixed days ("eating days") at the table of various householders. I slept at the house of an old aunt of about ninety, who lived with her widowed daughter.

I studied in the village of Strimtere, near Schiff, for a full three years after being orphaned. On Sundays and Mondays I ate at aunt Rivka's and Uncle Moshe Leib Stern, who was a brother of my grandmother Sarale. On Tuesdays, I ate at a cousin's of my father, Reb Yaakov Stienmetz. On Wednesdays I ate at the home of Rivka Rosenberg, the wife of Reb Yaakov Rosenberg, who lived permanently in America. On Thursdays I ate at Itzik Huz and his wife Metze, who were childless. On Fridays I ate at Aunt Chana Chaike's, sister of my grandmother. Generally, the "eating days" included only a rich dinner. As for breakfast and supper, every yeshiva student managed somehow by himself. They would buy a loaf of bread and a herring, tea and a glass of milk, and so they 'broke' their hunger.

On the Sabbath I ate at the table of Reb Pinchas Huz. He was one of five brothers who lived in the village, all of them rooted in the fabric of peasant life, in the field work and the rearing of cattle and sheep. Reb Pinchas was a strong man, tall, with an impressive demeanor, a pointed, copper colored beard, with a cigarette burning in his mouth dropping ashes on his thick beard, and always busy. He had five daughters and two sons. I was a serious yeshiva *bocher* (boy), already obligated to keeping the commandments. I would sit down at the table, my head bent, on the side of the boys who were younger than me. I would glance at the Sabbath candles, at the lady of the house, who hardly opened her mouth, while her daughters, some of them already grown up and spoken of in terms of prospective marriage, and the little Raizel, who served the dishes. I tried to look down into my plate: I longed for our table at home and my mother's dishes. I was shy as it seemed to me that little Raizel was watching me in particular.

In the summer months the daughters of Reb Pinchas Huz liked to suntan in the warm sun, just when father Pinchas was in the synagogue wrapped in his great prayer shawl. They hid behind the cowshed and the threshing floor, near the high fence that separated them from their Gentile neighbor. The rays of the sun penetrated their embroidered nightgowns and warmed up their modest bodies. As befitting well-born daughters of Israel, they were careful to reveal little and hide much, so that G-d forbid no stranger's eye would invade their privacy. After the morning prayers on the Sabbath, I made my slow progress following my host, together with two or three other yeshiva lads who were also hosted by Reb Pinchas, while he stepped majestically in his decorated prayer-shawl with the shtreimel hanging sideways on his head. In the absence of an *eruv* (a religious boundary, permitting Jews to carry certain items on the Sabbath), his little children carried his prayer-book and the Chumash (the five books of Moses). We followed him, submissive and hungry, dressed in Sabbath clothes with hats on our heads. The smell of the cholent stew wafted far into the air

and my stomach reacted accordingly. After a substantial *Kiddusha Raba* over spirits, the master of the house would wash his hands, with us in tow, sit down in a comfortable armchair, slice the great challah and make a blessing in a loud festive voice. This was the custom of Reb Pinchas – he expressed his displeasure with the sunbathing by not waiting for the girls with the Kiddush, and immediately after it he would begin to distribute the portions of the "absentees". He addressed the older ones amongst us, as follows: "Young man, do you want another portion?" straightaway he would hand him one of the portions of the sunbathers. I was the youngest and he addressed me as follows: "*Yingale* (lad) – do you like chopped onions with duck liver?"... and he would hand me another portion. In the depths of my heart I prayed that he would not give me Raizel's portion, for we were classmates in the state school, where I completed my primary education, and we used to chat freely, with the friendship and pleasure of 'stolen waters'.

We prayed *Shachrit* in the house of the Rav, our teacher, Moreinu Reb Tzvi Hirsch Kahana, the head of the Beit Aharon yeshiva. The studious among us would return to their accommodations and sit down to learn with enthusiasm. Learning together would make you forget your hunger. Looking forward to eat a substantial dinner at the home of the provider of the "day" helped pass the hours with a sense of plenty and satisfaction. My good friend, my relative Faibush Steinmetz, was my *havrutha* (my partner in learning) at the yeshiva. We would meet in the house of aunt Chanah, and his older brother Shema'ya, who was a diligent and scholarly student, helped us and was our guide and mentor. At the yeshiva they called the older lads who revised with younger students *chazer-bochur*, a boy who revises the lesson with his trainee students.

On Thursdays we three yeshiva students ate at the house of Reb Itzik and Metze Huz. This Itzik was a man of means, and tried to show his support of the affairs of the yeshiva and the students of Torah. He had a large country house. Chickens and geese walked about the spacious courtyard. Horses, cows and oxen were tethered

in the stable and the cowshed. In the pen behind the garden there was a large flock of sheep and bee hives. In the rooms there was a pungent aroma of goat cheese and lambs' wool; peasants were coming and going. Conversations in Romanian echoed, with a pat on the shoulders to conclude a business transaction. Jugs full of milk and bowls full of honeycombs were displayed ready for sale and for consumption.

Metze, a quiet, modest woman, wrapped in a black shawl to hide any hair remaining on her head and the whiskers on her chin, was always attentive to her husband's every word. Reb Itzik Hus was warm-hearted with shining eyes. A pointed, red beard adorned his face; he was always immersed in community affairs and his dealings with the Gentile peasants. They had no children. In the village they had decided that the whiskers which appeared at times under her chin were the explanation for her barrenness. Reb Itzik and his wife considered the yeshiva lads who "ate days" with them as a sort of adopted children. In their hearts of hearts they hoped to be rewarded with children.

I liked eating at Itzik's as he created an atmosphere of homeliness. He liked to amuse us with "scholarly" questions from a man of knowledge and understanding; he asked what we were learning and which page we had reached. He asked which village we came from and how many pages of Gemara we already knew by heart. The special aroma of plenty in Itzik's house filled our nostrils. Everything was given with generosity and whole heartedly, with no prerequisites or afterthoughts.

A white embroidered tablecloth was spread on the wide table which was laden with all of the best: Sabbath cholent, soft brown beans, stuffed guts fried with fat goat meat. The cholent leftovers had the taste of paradise. Metze would add fried goose skin and spices and would beg us: "Eat dear lads, may it be for your health, Amen". Itzik would stand over us, bring a fresh loaf of bread and he himself would slice it into thick slices, pressing and urging us to eat and eat. In between Metze would remember a pot of lockshen

soup warming on the stove, bring it and urge us to finish it all: "Look in the mirror and see how skinny you are... dear lads". After a short pause and a deep sigh she would finish with a short prayer: "If only your Torah will bring me salvation and I will witness the comforting of the holy Torah..." This was a hint and yearning for the fruit of the womb which for some reason was denied her. At the end of the meal she would bring out a large honey-cake for dessert and we cut slices and ate our fill to thank Metze for her generosity.

The smell of skins spread out to dry on wooden boards filled the courtyard and blended with the delicate aroma of the honey. Occasionally while chewing a bite we would pull out a long hair of a horse tail which had gotten mixed up accidentally in the cake dough. Metze and Itzik derived much satisfaction from our healthy appetites. The master of the house would join us for the singing at the end of the meal. We would leave with a gift: the remainder of the cake. At supper we would let our flatmates sample the honey cake of that gracious woman, Metze.

In the spring the village people got ready for the ritual of gathering the flocks of sheep to send them to graze in the forests in the region. The fields of the village were tilled and sown; therefore they hired Gentile shepherds to take the herds further away. Jewish supervisors watched over them, to ensure the kashrut of the milk, the cheeses, the butter and the Brinza during the period of grazing through the months of Iyar to Elul. For ages the peasants had set a specific day when they decided who would stand at the "head of the herd", in other words, who would decide how to apportion the produce and the profits, according to the size of the individual flocks and the milk yield. On that day they pushed the herd to yield a lot of milk. They made enormous efforts to milk and squeeze the udders to the last drop. They milked even the barren sheep. The peasants called that decisive day *Ruftul Sterflar*, in Vallachian Rumanian, the tearing of the udders of the barren ones.

One Thursday, after the meal at Itzik's, the master of the house came in busy and enthusiastic, as fitting Kosover Chasidim, cracking jokes at the expense of "the watchdogs of the Holy One Blessed Be He" (a nickname for the yeshiva students used by the village Jews), taking out a bottle of spirits and asking us to wish him that he would be elected "First of the Brinza" – head of the herd. At the same time he invited us to come out on the coming Sunday to the distant valley on the other side of the river to see the crowning ceremony and the tumult. "The Torah will not run away from you, and you need not tell the Rabbi every thing..." Itzik joked. "Come and see how Itzik Huz, the Jew, will stand at the head of the sheep herd – it will be a real sanctificaton of the Name..."

I recall my transgressions... I persuaded my good friend, Faibush Steinmetz, who was a native of the place and was familiar with the forest paths of Strimtere, to come with me so that we could see Itzik Huz in his glory. On Sunday after Shachrit, we closed our Gemara and started to walk out of the village. We crossed the river and climbed up the narrow, steep path between fruit trees, oaks and firs where ravens had started building their nests in the willow trees along the river. Hazelnut trees bent their branches in greeting. On the apple trees the fruit had started to form and it was already possible to discern the quality of the apples the trees would yield that season.

High grasses covered the meadows. Peasants were working in the fields, thinning out the rows of corn. The daughters of the peasants, who brought their babies, rolled them up in a thick woolen blanket and tied them like a sort of hammock hanging among the branches. Their crying merged with the crowing of the ravens, the chirping of the blackbirds and the flight of the sparrows. Grasshoppers skipped from one reed to another and made a sound like the sharpening of a sickle. From time to time a peasant woman would stop her work with the hoe and go over to her baby, bare her breast and thrust her nipple into the baby's mouth so it would suckle quickly and she would not lose precious working

time. An old grandma, who still had strength in her arms and her hoe, would pluck a soft poppy stem and push it into the mouth of the crying baby for it to suck the sap. It was a well tried and tested method used by the Gentile peasants to put the cry-babies to sleep so they would not disturb the work in the field.

After walking for about an hour we heard the barking of dogs, the sound of sheep and the tinkling of cow-bells. We had reached the place. A wide open valley stretched before us, entirely covered with flowers and grasses like a giant carpet. Flocks of sheep were scattered round about the hills, each farmer and his flock. The Gentile villagers were wearing colorful garments and their faces were shining with joy and solemnity in anticipation of the ceremony of fixing "The day of designation" of "The first of the Brinza", who would be in charge of dividing up the cheese produce of the season.

Our acquaintance Reb Itzik and his wife Metze, their neighbors and their relatives, dressed in festive clothes, were sitting in the shade of the birch and acacia trees, and Reb Itzik's shepherd was gathering his flock. A short distance from there, a hidden stream, coming down from the mountain, flowed with pure cold spring water. Shepherds were leading their flocks to drink along its entire length. Itzik was rushing about from place to place ensuring that each friend would corral his own flock into the area designated for him. Soon the milking and the "tearing of the udders" for the crowning of the "First of the Brinza" would commence.

Some distance from there, the peasants took out cooking utensils, brought firewood from the forest and lit bonfires. Sheep were slaughtered to cook for the meal that would follow the ceremony. In the middle of the valley, in a narrow pit, they stuck a 16-foot tree trunk stripped off its bark. They left its branches intact, and hung a large loaf of bread with a hole in it, like a large bagel, decorated with a garland of flowers and ears of corn, as a symbol and blessing for the fertility of the fields.

The eldest shepherd blew a long horn and the milking competition commenced. The jugs filled with milk were emptied into large milk barrels with iron hoops, standing in rows, with each flock's milk into its designated barrels. Itzik and his relatives encouraged their milkers and made sure the barrel was filled to the brim. The milking was completed and the measuring of the milk began by using a long, thin stick with notches. The tension was great. When the crier declared, after the blowing of the horn "Itzik Huz is this year the First of the Brinza", there was a roar of joy which echoed from the valley to the mountain and from there all the way to the village. Itzik's eyes were streaming with tears of emotion.

The peasant families gathered in groups to eat the festive meal. Reb Itzik and his Jewish guests washed their hands and ate the kosher food they brought from home. Itzik took out a bottle of spirits and offered *l'chaim* cups to his Gentile friends as well. After the meal and the rest the owners of the flocks decided who would be the shepherds who would lead the joint flock, who would oversee the milking and the churning of the cheeses, the Brinza and the Urda, and who would be the leader. Once again the roar was heard – "Itzik will be the head leader". According to shepherd tradition, they chose the eldest shepherd to conclude the ceremony of the *Ruftul-Sterflar*.

The shepherds wore their white garments, the shirts with the collars embroidered in a riot of colors and girded with the broad leather belts which served them as a purse and a satchel, with their knives thrust into them. They hung hollow horn trumpets on their shoulders and wore a round shepherd's cap, decorated with special rivets on their heads. This cap served also as a drinking utensil: the shepherds would milk a ewe into it to give a drink to a thirsty lamb. With the passage of time this cap became leather-like, saturated with milk and butter.

Each flock owner took his shepherd and his flock and brought them to the center of the valley. Here they all mingled and became one enormous flock. This was the "meeting" of the sheep and the

shepherds in preparation for the common grazing during the upcoming months. The eldest shepherd, a muscular, sturdy Gentile, about 70 years old, stood in the shade of the decorated pole, with the "bread-loaf" and the garland of flowers at its top. He lifted his long horn trumpet, filled his lungs with air and sounded a mighty blast. The other shepherds thrust their long horns into their mouths and joined in the sad *doyna* tune, one of those pastorals which the shepherds played during the long, star-studded nights, with which they would express their longing for their peaceful village homes and their waiting wives, until the gathering of the flocks back to the villages at the end of the summer.

According to tradition, the oldest of the shepherds would remove his trousers, hang them on the pole and remain in his breeches. He stopped for a while, watched the enormous flock, thrust two fingers into his mouth and sounded a sharp whistle which pierced the valley and the fields. The whole flock started to move after him in a circle, around the decorated pole. After two rounds, accompanied by hand-clapping and cheering and the bleating of the sheep, the oldest of the shepherds turned to his friends and handed over the whole flock to them. The peasants followed the flock with happy and sorrowful eyes until it disappeared down the path leading to the wide meadows, far far from the village.

Reb Itzik and his Gentile friends returned satisfied. My good friend Faibish and I returned to the yeshiva like thieves in the night since we had wasted *(bitul)* Torah study time, but Itzik still managed to get to the village synagogue in time for Mincha-Ma'ariv.

Chapter 7

THE COMING STORM

The district of Marmarosh, with its 164 communities underwent three phases before the Holocaust, between the two world wars. The first shock occurred at the end of World War I, with the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. From 1918 until September 1940 the region was under the rule of Romania and Czechoslovakia. Finally, from 1940, Marmarosh was reconquered by the Hungarians until the deportation of the Jews and their destruction in 1944. After the war, the region reverted to Romania (the Czech sector reverted to the Ukraine-Galicia).

The first two periods barely affected daily life. The Gentile peasants and their Jewish neighbors had no interest in the political upheavals and the changing of flags. The fields and the orchards were cultivated, ploughed and sown as of old, and the Jews continued to call the Romanian gendarmes "feathers". When I was a child I often heard my grandmother saying: "woe to me, the feathers are here...". Only with the arrival of the Hungarians, in 1940, did I understand why the gendarmes were called "feathers" – on account of the feather caps they wore.

Until the mid 1930s, the Jews in the villages did not feel anti-Semitism. The Romanian peasant did not know exactly where Hungarian patriotism ended and Romanian fanaticism began. Due to the remoteness of the region and its distance from centers of industry, the inhabitants enjoyed periods of tranquility. The neighborly relations between the Jews and the Gentiles were not undermined, and life continued to flow along its natural course. The two populations drew water from the same river, and needed each

other. The Gentile did not perceive the Jew as the blood sucking "rich merchant" who lived at the expense of the native "masters of the land". The *Cheder* children, who attended also the state school, raised the standard of studies. The Jewish child was a role model of diligence and the Rabbi was an emblem of honesty and fairness, even in the eyes of the Gentiles.

Starting in 1937, with the rise to power of antisemitic political parties in Romania under the Cuza-Goga government, antisemitic agitation began. Here and there, there were students, sons of peasants, who studied in the big cities and were exposed to the theories on the "nature of the deceitful Jews...". There was a rich Gentile in Schiff, an estate owner. His name was Mikele. The Jews called him "Mikele the *Poritz* (squire)". His sons and daughters studied at the university and they were among those who set up bands who organized attacks on Jews.

In 1938 the headmaster Lo'ash retired. He was a good hearted, smiling man, a real philosemite. He was replaced by a new headmaster from Reghet, who was an avowed Jew hater. He established new rules: students had to conceal their earlocks behind their ears and attend school on the Sabbath as well (without writing of course). He was pedantic about the correct pronunciation of the Romanian language and did not refrain from hitting the Jewish children because of their different garments and their poor language. In the eyes of the Jews of Marmarosh, who had kept a traditional religious-Chasidic lifestyle for generations, these decrees, on the face of it trivial and childish, were a real shock. They were a sort of preamble, anticipating the Final Solution. They were the barely noticeable, minor cracks that were to undermine the ramparts.

The real turning point began in 1940, when the two parts of Marmarosh, the Romanian and the Czech, were conquered by the Hungarian army.When the agreement became known, the Jews put on their festive garments and the patriotic Gentiles raised new flags with slogans in Hungarian reading "Welcome" and "Long

live the Hungarians!" Columns upon columns of artillery, cars and horsemen inundated the roads. The Jews, who still remembered good king Franz-Joseph, tried to recall the slogans in Hungarian, like "Long live the Hungarians" and "Welcome" and other expressions of politeness to greet the guests, the successors to the king of kindness, His Highness the Emperor, with cordiality. The heavy hand was felt immediately. The authorities forced the Jews to participate in a Special War Loan. The collection of the taxes was handled harshly. Jewish youth were conscripted and taken for forced labor. The Jewish soldiers did not wear uniforms, but rather a military cap and a yellow armband. Many families were left without a breadwinner since the head of the family had been conscripted.

In most places the Jews married only according to Jewish law and they saw no reason to go through a civil ceremony at the notary. The children were registered under the name of the mother as "illegitimate" (bastards), and had no civil status whatsoever. There was a great deal of running about to obtain citizenship documents. There was great distress. The small merchants who wandered in the streets and the alleyways bumped into the cruel Hungarian gendarmes and were required to present their documents. They would be detained and beaten. The situation was worse than hopeless.

On the April 15, 1944, the Sabbath of Parasha Shmini, after Passover, a large group of Hungarian gendarmes – the notorious "feathers" – arrived in the village of Schiff. Their brutal appearance, with their odd, feathered, shiny black caps, their black boots and bayonnets, heralded fear and dread. They swooped down on the village like fearsome eagles preying on carcasses. The Jews had just returned from their Sabbath prayers, dressed in kaftans, Sabbath clothes, shtreimels to their heads and prayer shawls on their shoulders. Even before they managed to make Kiddush, the gendarmes, accompanied by the council clerk, entered the first houses. It was a simple procedure – registration of the family members and an

oral command to take a parcel of personal belongings, to lock the house and hand over the keys to the council clerk. They were told to gather in the synagogue.

People started to march from all the alleyways, from the houses, the huts, towards the courtyard of the synagogue, like celebrants marching to a big wedding. The men were in their long Sabbath coats, the women in their Sabbath dresses and head covering, their little children holding the hands of their parents or the hem of their mother's dress. Meanwhile, Peter, the drummer-postman-town-crier, went around from alley to alley with his famous drum in his hands. With his simple language and his free translation he announced: "Let it be known to all believers (the Christians) that they have to appear immediately at the synagogue courtyard to send the Jews to Palestine..." A stream of wagons hitched to horses, oxen and cows with or without bells, started to flow to the synagogue courtyard. Peasants and their wives, dressed in festive and workaday clothes, came to transport their Jewish neighbors, some joyfully and some with a measure of sorrow.

The Jews threw their parcels into the wagons, with Sabbath and weekday in a tangle. Braina, the slaughterer's wife, arrived. A large bundle under her arm, dressed in her black Sabbath dress, embroidered at the hem with artistic lace, holding her youngest daughter, Binah in her other hand. The child was holding a *Korban Mincha* prayerbook wrapped in a scarf, an heirloom from grandma Pessele: a prayerbook soaked with the tears of joy and pain of three generations. Rabbi Shlomo-Yossel, with his wife Poliye, appeared on the wooden bridge crossing the river. The Rabbi, in his Sabbath clothes, a forced smile on his lips, due to the strange scene before him, with tears flowing on his white beard because for the first time in his life he had desecrated the Sabbath. From a small package in his hands there peeped the black, Aleph-Bet blackboard and the pointer.

One after another they all came: a man and his wife and their small children, grandfathers and grandmothers, with their bundles

and their walking-sticks. The synagogue courtyard was filled with piles of belongings, their owners and their children next to them. Inside the synagogue it was noisy and chaotic, nobody knew what to do. They were waiting for instructions from the "feather caps". The honorary officers decided to leave all the holy texts behind, to entrust them to the Guardian of Israel, until the danger would pass. All the alleyways were filled with wagons. The peasants pressed forward in order to do the good deed of "the removal of guests" from the village.

The bookseller and pursuer of good deeds, Reb Moshe Raziels, wandered about with Chasidic fervor. His socks peeped out beneath his silk kaftan. From time to time a tear rolled down to the floor, and his reddish beard was wind-blown. "It is the Holy Sabbath today" he cried out and urged the members of his family and their neighbors to sit on their packages, open the cooking pots and set up a proper Sabbath meal with Sabbath songs and Grace after the meal. "Jews! It is the Sabbath day to the L-rd... ". All joined him: "It is the Sabbath day to the L-rd", today you will not find Him in the field..."It is the Sabbath day to the L-rd"..."Dear Ita" he shouted to his wife "It is the Sabbath today!! Do you hear? Today is the Sabbath!!" The meal over, the gendarmes finished gathering the last families and the order was given to start walking in the direction of Dragomirest. The children and the elderly were placed in the wagons, the adults walked slowly, with downcast eyes and crestfallen, embarrassed faces. They decided to go on foot, next to the wagons, to avoid desecrating the Sabbath.

The peasant youth who came to watch the spectacle of the "Jews to Palestine", stood open-mouthed and could not believe their eyes. They accompanied their Jewish neighbors to the edge of the village. Next to the image of their crucified Savior, a large group of Gentile youth waited. When the last wagon passed them, the Christians crossed themselves, as befits believers; they placed their hands on each others' shoulders and danced in a circle, in honor

of the "King of the Jews", the crucified Jesus, to the sound of the pealing church bells.

In the Dragomirest Ghetto

The Hungarians concentrated the deportees from the following villages in Dragomirest, geographically from Sighet to Sitchel: Bisanef, Strimtere, Rozavlea, Schiff, Batiza, Glad, Phalien-Glad, Slatine, Untchest, Nanesht, Walen, Kechniye, Yu'ed, Selisht and Sitchel. All the Jews with their children and pathetic belongings were squeezed into the houses of the host village. Dragomirest became like "the desired land" (*Eretz Ha'tzvi*): as much as they squeezed them, room was found for all. People lived in stables, cowsheds, granaries, hay lofts and fodder stores, in addition to the houses. The generosity of the people of the host village knew no bounds. The inhabitants of the village made do with as little space as possible and they put up, in every little room, whole families with their young and their old. The last to arrive, in mid April, were the inhabitants of Schiff, due to an outbreak of typhoid in a number of villages.

During the first few days it was still possible to walk around almost freely in the alleys of the ghetto. The heads of the congregations and the Rabbis established a council, a sort of *Yudenrat,* to maintain order. It was apparently part of the psychological entrapment to let people feel that nothing was going to happen. Rumors abounded that very soon the men would be sent to labor camps. One day I went over from our living quarters in the house of Hirschel Steinmetz, the Dragomirest village dentist, to the other side of the road, to the house of the Rav, Reb Moshe Yisroel Feldman, a colorful patriarchal figure. I had heard that my teacher and master, the Rav Tzvi Hirsh Kahana from Strimtere was a guest there. I took short cuts so that the gendarmes would not catch me. I found him sitting at the end of the balcony, immersed in *Shas* and *Poskim* with the same enthusiasm with which he was accustomed

to give his lessons to the yeshiva lads in the Beit Aharon yeshiva in Strimtere. The next time I visited him, it was after his beard had been cut off; I remember how there stood before me a man whose eyes and clothes I recognized, he glanced at me and I glanced at him, yet I could not remember who he was. Suddenly I heard his caressing voice: "Chaim-Yisroel, don't you know me?" I restrained myself from crying. I saw "Samson the Giant", great in Torah scholarship, a genius, the enthusiastic constant learner, without his "tresses", shorn of his beard and his sidelocks. I was ashamed to have seen him so.

On the way back I glanced into the basement of one of the houses, and there I saw the Melamed Shlomo-Yossel with his wife Poliye, sitting withdrawn, withered and depressed, on a pile of straw, like at the reading of the Book of Lamentations. Rays of dusk penetrated the small basement window and lit his sad eyes. His face was wrapped in a large scarf, to hide the shame of the cutting of the beard. The place was narrow and damp. His only son Berel was far away, I think in a labor camp. The numerous pupils of the Melamed were also scattered, lonely and orphaned like him.

There was no rigorous guarding of the ghetto. Even after an order was given not to be seen in the streets after 11 o'clock in the morning, it was possible to see people slipping between the yards and the gardens, from house to house. There were no attempts at all to escape to the forests. There was no contact whatsoever with the leaders of Hungarian Jewry. The Marmorosh district was forgotten, whether because of its rural nature, or due to differences in outlook and the patronizing attitude of those sitting on their high seats in Budapest and other great cities.

The gendarmes organized a sort of Jewish police to maintain internal order. These *zsidó-rendőr* were in charge of organizing teams of laborers to repair the road connecting Kechniye to Mount Bokovel. No one dreamed that the repair of the road was prepara-

tion for the march out of the ghetto to the railway station of Visho, in the direction of Auschwitz.

There was no shortage of food. The country Jews brought with them basic foodstuffs like flour, sugar and other goods. When this stock ran out, they got permission to organize convoys of Jews who would return to the villages and would bring foodstuffs from the locked shops and the locked homes. The zsidó-rendőr would accompany the convoys. They saw to it that all those in need would get their food. The *Yudenrat* of the villages of Marmarosh did not arouse any feelings of anger or thoughts of suspicion. Even when in charge of the life and the provision of food for the inhabitants of the ghetto, they remained the same wardens of charity whose duty it was to take care of each individual. This was how they conducted themselves in the townships and villages in normal times, this was how they carried on in the ghetto, and this was how they went up in the conflagration.

The peasants of the surrounding areas and in particular the wives of the peasants, started to bring packages of flour, oil, milk, eggs and vegetables. Each one brought food to "his Jew". There were those too who sought out their former Jewish neighbors, to support them in particular. I saw such a manifestation of humanity when peasants came to visit my old uncle, the 76 year old Reb Azriel Anshle's Perl. The tenant farmer Shandor and his wife walked barefoot for about five hours, and brought him of all the best. It was touching to see when Shandor started to consult my uncle on matters of sowing and cultivating the fields in preparation for the coming season. This peasant was put on his feet with the help of the squire "Izraila" (Azriel), who built him a house on a portion of his field, Shandor becoming his faithful tenant. For about 40 years he cultivated my uncle's fields and shared the produce in equal parts. His wife, Alizka, put down the sack she brought. She glanced at the squire, sitting on the floor of the room on his meagre bundle, with his shorn beard, pale and exhausted.

She burst into bitter weeping and stroked my head and the head of my sister Malka; we were the family of the uncle.

Beard and Earlocks for the Sanctification of the Name

It was neither the hunger, nor the oppressive atmosphere in the ghetto, nor the loss of possessions and the fruit of the toil of generations, none of these had broken the three old men. It was not the deportation from their warm homes, the home of their fathers and forefathers – none of these had broken their spirit. It was the decree of cutting the beards and the earlocks that trampled their pride and humiliated their dignity. The trampling of their Jewish image of G-d by their Nazi oppressors and their willing supporters made their lives offensive and loathsome in their own eyes and hastened their demise. Under stress and in need, the three elderly men, the 76 year old Reb Azriel Anshel's, 70 year old Reb Aharon Matithyahu and 80 year old Grandpa Alter Deskel attempted somehow to patch up their torn, tattered lives. With trembling hands and tottering knees they plastered and stopped up the cracks of the fort of their spiritual lives that had all of a sudden collapsed about them. With the tenacity of a peasant they went about arranging for themselves a Jewish "daily routine" – conduct, prayer and study in the midst of the overcrowding and the life of sorrow and despair, in spite of and to spite those who abused His Name and His people.

My uncle Reb Azriel Anshel's had lived all his life in wealth and dignity which had come to him together. Sadly, he was childless, yet he and his wife Chantche were like grandparents to all the children of the community, mother and father to the poor and the orphans and to those in need of "anonymous giving". He himself was never in need of help from human hands. He asked for health and complete recovery from Him who is the "Healer of the sick", mainly on behalf of the community of Israel. He prayed for

a livelihood in order not to change, G-d forbid, the formula fixed by the sages. All those in need benefitted from the produce of his fields. During Grace after Meals he concentrated on removing from his heart any trace of reflection and grain of pride of "my might and the strength of my hand". On the balcony of the house there were always jugs filled with milk and cream, sacks and containers full of wheat and corn, fruit and beans for all who were hungry and needy. His whole appearance and his ways always bespoke the dignity befitting the community leader. His seat in the village synagogue was by the eastern wall, to the right of the Holy Ark.

The day after the festival of Passover 1944, he was deported from his home and his possessions were taken away from him. Two Hungarian gendarmes, their guns, with drawn bayonets, feathered hats on their heads, accompanied by two peasant-clerks from the village council, entered his house and ordered him to follow them. The rest of the Jews of the village were already waiting in the courtyard of the synagogue with their bundles and their families. Old Reb Azriel took the bag with his prayer shawl and the phylacteries, the Beit-Ya'akov prayerbook , the "*Chok Le-Israel*" learning book, leather-bound with gold lettering. He put on his Sabbath skull cap, his shtreimel, stroked his white beard as though he was setting out on a religious mission, kissed the mezuza, closed the door and went out. He did not ask why and wherefore or where to, but as one who takes on suffering with love, he joined his flock and got ready for deportation.

Reb Aharon Matithyahu was about 70 years old, a short sturdy Jew with heavy boots on his feet, summer and winter. His serious face was adorned with sidelocks and a short, smooth, yellowish beard, with two good smiling eyes. He too, like Reb Azriel, left all his possessions in the village and was incarcerated in the ghetto. Of all his sons and daughters, ten in number, only one daughter was with him together with her husband and their two children. His sons and daughters who were married lived in townships and villages in the district. Each of them endeavored, to the best of

his ability, and with the help of heaven, to continue to weave the chain of the generations, according to his strength and his fortune. His unmarried sons did not manage to get home at the end of the term of the yeshiva before the roads deteriorated and were filled with troops and life-threatening danger. Reb Aharon Matithyahu was always hard pressed and busy. The lands he had inherited from his forefathers and the fields, which he had received through marriage, were always thriving under his watchful eyes and his capable hands. Immediately after his return home from the synagogue, after morning prayers, he would simply remove his weekday skullcap, remove his hat and exchange it for a worn out and shabby hat. He would sit down to eat breakfast, pray and remind the members of the household not to forget to feed the occupants of the cowshed and the fowl of the chicken coop. He would take the staff made of birch wood, kiss the mezuza and announce loudly that he would return home, G-d willing, after Minchah-Ma'ariv. The day was short and there was much work. He would watch over the ploughing, supervise the clover harvest, in a certain field the weeding of the corn was taking place and in a particular valley he ensured that his Gentile tenant farmer would attend to the hoeing of the potato fields. He hurried and rushed from Sunday until he went to dip in the mikveh in honor of the Holy Sabbath, the restful Sabbath.

Reb Aharon Matithyahu experienced a kind of "World to Come" during the festivals of Passover and Succoth, the periods of *Bein-Ha'Zemanim* (between terms), when his sons returned from their yeshivas with their belly full of '*Shas*' and '*Poskim*' (Talmud and its commentaries). One could hear the melodies of *shakla ve'tarya* (the give and take of Talmudic disputation), in the alleyways of the village, out of the open volumes of *Shas Vilna*, Zhitomir or Lamberg, together with the lowing of the cows and the clucking of hens. The melodies would refine the coarse body and uplift the soul higher and higher. At such times Reb Aharon Matithyahu would remove his rustic garments, put out of mind field and land concerns, and

he too would wrap himself in the cloak of Torah, to enjoy the thrilling melody of the study of Gemara. He would open, ever so slowly, the door of the lounge where his older sons were sitting. He would sit down with reverence, next to his eldest son, Mendel, with a sense of the partnership of Yissachar and Zevulun . On occasion, out of great longing for the study of Torah, he would recall his *Girsa de'Yankutha* (childhood learning experience). Then he too would enter into Talmudic debate over deeper considerations and precise points of the *tosafot* (the medieval, post-Rashi commentaries on the Talmud), though he knew well, without a bit of jealousy, that the strength of sons who learn is greater than that of fathers who recall.

Reb Aharon accepted the decree of deportation as a heavenly decree which one has to accept without question. Like Reb Azriel, he too did not think much, and the moment the brutal gendarmes entered and one could hear their boots clattering on the wooden floor, polished in honor of the Sabbath, he knew that the die was cast. He glanced at the laid table, took the bundle of religious objects, buttoned the Kapote, stroked the tails of the shtreimel, surveyed his home, and as is the fashion of a householder, he tidied up, as if the ordinary rules of conduct were still applicable. Before he slammed the heavy wooden door, he went up to the cowshed and fed the cow that mooed and licked the sleeve of his caftan.

In the back garden he scattered wheat and corn for the chickens and the geese, and while walking he asked his Gentile neighbor, who was peeping through the slits in the dividing fence, – "to keep an eye on the animals..." He entered his house, put on his shtreimel, straightened his clothes and parted from each and every mezuza with a kiss, like a Chassid before his trip to the Rebbe. As he stood on the top step of the house, with his bundle of belongings under his armpit, he lowered his eyes to the oak-wood stairs, stepped down, a step at a time, and lingered a moment. The river in front of the house glinted with many shades of sparkles. Bubbles were formed and burst in the sunlight. The two sides of the river were

connected by a wooden bridge, and large stones protruded in its midst as if frightened. The din of the water and the clanking of the wheel of the flourmill on the other side of the river muffled the echo of the footsteps of the deported Reb Aharon Matithyahu and his household. Finally he turned his head and parted from his house, from a distance. In his heart he envied his wife Breindel who had the merit to die on her bed before the troubles.

Old Reb Alter Deskel had lived for the last 15 years with his only daughter Rivka. His son-in-law was Hirschel Steinmetz, the dentist of Dragomirest. The old man was not driven from his home. His daughter saw to all his needs while he devoted himself to the study of Torah for its own sake, to perfect the imperfect world of his youth and prepare for the hereafter (the *traklin,* the grand Hall). The old man was cut off from what was happening around him and did not speak with the new lodgers. The overcrowding and the tumult in the house did not concern him. Day by day he sank into an enforced loneliness and deep silence, a sort of fast, refraining from speech. From four in the morning until he went to bed, he would sit in his corner and learn the revealed and the hidden Torah. He had a shining face, the color of parchment, adorned with a bushy beard, short and wide, with grey-white curls and frizzy sidelocks that waved back and forth. Under his thick eyebrows his eyes sparkled with childish delight. He was dressed in a short shabby coat and wore an ancient yarmulka on his head.

Since the incarceration of the Jews of the surrounding area had filled the houses, the space of the old man was restricted, and he would move his chair from one place to another. Sometimes he would find a broken case, and would sit on it to seclude himself in a corner of the yard with a book. After Mincha-Ma'ariv, he would eat his meals, shake off the food remnants and for "dessert" he would learn Chapters of Mishnayot, for the redemption of the souls of the departed. His daughter would prepare water and a vessel for him, and immediately after saying the bedtime Shema, he would fall asleep on his bed till the rooster crowed.

During those sad hours of helplessness and hopelessness, I would observe this wondrous old man with his sweet ways. Sometimes he would be so absorbed in his studies that he achieved a negation of the self. He would sink his head between the lines of the Gemara or the Zohar and with his face between the pages of the book he would inhale the scent of the holy letters so as to appreciate the secret of the magical, sealed fountain. His eyes would caress the lines, and the flashing of his eyes would penetrate the letters and illuminate the hidden intentions in every word. At the time of this spiritual exaltation he would make strange sounds in his hoarse throat. He would stare ahead, holding the book to the corners of his fringed prayer shawl and smile to himself like a dreaming baby.

Amongst the thousands of deportees incarcerated in the ghetto, these three old men seemed to me to be floating on a boat headed for destruction but were tranquil and heroic despite the furious stormy waves. On the day the rumor spread that beards and sidelocks must be cut, a great dread descended on the ghetto. The cutting of the beard, regarded as the *tselem* , the image of G-d, was equal to cutting the soul.

The ghetto police went from house to house to announce the decree. At first they postponed carrying out the order from day to day and from hour to hour. Reb Azriel and Reb Aharon sank into sad reflections, and looked at each other. Old Deskel did not stop his learning. With his impaired hearing, he did not take in what was happening. His world was not impaired. The light emanating from his books was the same light. In fact, from day to day it was brighter, increasing and bursting forth from a passion and a sense of running out of time. The day after the announcement of the decree his daughter went up to him. She approached him with slow steps and touched his sleeve. For a moment he stopped the hum of learning and Rivka his daughter spoke into his ear: "Father! A new decree from the enemies of Yisroel, the gendarmes have ordered beards to be cut off..." When he understood what was said, he

turned his face upwards, his eyes widened in terror, he cupped his beard in his fist, glanced into his daughter's eyes, turned his head to the Gemara and covered his face.

One evening, at the beginning of May 1944, the ghetto police came again to the *Yudenrat*, to announce that there would be an inspection at the behest of the commander to check that the order had been carried out. Reb Azriel Anshel's and Reb Aharon Matithyahu decided that I would be the messenger – the "hangman", so decreed Reb Aharon. Rivka went to bring the scissors and to prepare her old father for the "binding of the beard and the sidelocks". First Reb Aharon Matithyahu sat on the chair. He clenched his teeth until his lips bled. He removed his hat and threw it on the floor, in protest. The yarmulka remained on his head. Silence descended on the room. All the members of the household were sitting on their bundles. At the sound of the cutting and the scissors, the women burst into restrained weeping, and then the children joined in. The wisps of hair from beard and sidelocks dropped off like cut off branches and rolled about like Torah scrolls torn by plunderers. The job done, Reb Aharon Matithyahu arose and straightened himself with the last of his strength, wiped his cheeks and cupped his bare face. In a trembling but authoritative voice, with his eyes turned to the pile of shorn hair, he said: "If You, Master of the Universe want this – here You are, maybe with our new look, we shall find favor in Your eyes..."

Reb Azriel went to the chair for the cutting like a man ascending the gallows. He sat down and held his snow white beard between his trembling fingers, like a man refusing to part with his precious treasure. The two horns of his beard, which resembled rays of glory, trembled like two tender goat-kids on a cold rainy day. The swish of the scissors seemed to him like the swish of the slaughtering knife. White locks fell at his tottering feet. He sat with his eyes half shut, as if reciting the "Shema", and the tears running down his cheeks, like two pearl necklaces, were absorbed into the pile of hair. The task done, he paused for a while. Two women

supported him, helped him to get up from his chair and led him to his corner. Unintentionally he glanced at the face of his neighbor Reb Aharon Matithyahu, he smoothed his own face, sat down on his bundle of belongings and bedding, like one in deep mourning, straightened his knees on the floor and whispered with moving lips: "The L-rd had given and the L-rd had taken, Blessed be the Name of the L-rd...".

Eighty year old Reb Alter Deskel was the last to be led to the chair. Very reluctantly he relented to his daughter Rivka. He closed the Gemara and came with slow steps, and sat down on the chair. Rivka supported him from behind and he opened wide eyes like a sheep bound for slaughter. Yet again he renewed his entreaties to his daughter that she should go to the Hungarian officers; perhaps she could persuade them to let him keep his beard. "See Rivka, please see, I have such a short beard...", the old man pleaded. Hearing the rustle of the scissors, he raised his burning eyes and shouted: "Enough!", and all the women of the house nodded their heads like keening women and repeated after the old man: "Enough, enough, Master of the universe, if only with this it were enough...". When the old man felt that he was stripped of his beard and his adornment had been taken off him, he arose at once as if bitten by a snake. On no account would he allow the rest of his beard to be cut. He hid his face in the lapel of his coat, as if ashamed to look at those surrounding him who could see him thus. He grabbed his book, pressed it to his heart and fled to his corner.

The beards and the sidelocks were strewn on the floor, hair touching hair. Silence reigned and helpless wondering. Reb Azriel Anschel's arose and went up to the place where the chair stood, he bent down reverently onto his knees and gathered his hair into his hands. He returned to his place, sat down on the bundle of his belongings on the floor and sorted out the beard separately and the sidelocks separately, he smoothed them and stroked them, wet the tips of his fingers and combed the stresses like a mother bathing

her child. Then, he took out the red kerchief, bundled the beard and the sidelocks into it and tied it with a knot. He never parted from his kerchief. Two days before the liquidation of the ghetto and its transference to Auschwitz, he passed away in his bed. He was given a Jewish burial. His prayer shawl and his tied and knotted kerchief were laid by his side. He was victorious: he went up, with his "image of Gd" with him.

Days of Despondency and Despair

Day by day the sadness and uncertainty increased. About three weeks had passed since we were incarcerated in the ghetto. The ghetto police were given the order to announce: "All males between the ages of 15 and 60 should present themselves for work..." The road between Kechniye and Mount Bukovel needed repair and that work was imposed on the residents of the ghetto. Fathers and sons marched in rows to the work location. The trees were blooming and the peasants tilled the fields, which were green as usual. They sang their *doinas* (folk songs) with no hindrance, while we, marked with the yellow patches shaped like a Star of David, accompanied by the brutal gendarmes urging us to waste no time. There is much work and the time is short... we have to repair the country road between Kechniye and Visho. This work was apparently devised with two aims in mind: to physically weaken the men incarcerated in the ghetto, and at the same time distract them from their impending fate, to lull them to sleep. The bayonets glinted in the sunlight, and the ritual fringes of the Jews stuck out and trailed over the pits in the road, which twisted like a long snake.

The women waited anxiously for the arrival of the men. We would return tired and dejected from the long road and the exhausting work. We prayed separately in the overcrowded houses, ate a meager meal and prepared for the following day. We lived in one apartment: our widowed uncle Reb Azriel Anshel's, myself, my little sister Malka, and three more families besides the landlord,

Reb Aharon Matithyahu Viezel the widower, his granddaughter, and another daughter – Batya Gantz with her husband Avraham and her two children. The Pasternak family of Salistea was there. It included a father, a mother with two young daughters, Sheindle and Chavalle, and their son Sholom with his wife Devorah. They got married shortly before going into the ghetto, and it was there that they "celebrated" their "seven days". Their honeymoon trip was their journey from the ghetto to Auschwitz. Eventually, Sholom Pasternak survived the selection of Mengele. He passed through four concentration camps and remained alive. His wife Devorah'le also survived, and they were reunited after the liberation.

The daily routine in our house was as follows: the young went out to work, and the elderly, the women and the children passed the long days somehow by running the household, prayer and study, reciting psalms and awaiting salvation. The women cooked and prepared "delicacies" from the little that was still in our luggage. At times they went out to the courtyard to warm up in the rays of the sun, to enjoy the beautiful days of the budding and blossoming of spring. At nights we would lie on our beds, twisting and turning with dread thoughts. The children would cry and fall asleep to the sound of the traditional lullabies; the same words, but with a sadder tune.

The rumors of the deportation of the Jews increased from day to day. The heads of the communities had no contact with the centers. No leader raised his voice to warn of what was coming. It is possible that just one postcard from those in the know, from the leaders of Hungarian Jewry, could have influenced people and sounded the alarm. It was apparently part of the dreadful calamity: the blindness and shortsightedness which "retarded the wisdom of the wise..." according to the midrashic definition of the days of the destruction of the Second Temple. On rainy nights when the rain knocked furiously on the wooden roofs and thunder rattled the windowpanes, I would wake up in fear. I heard the groans of the people and I saw their worries on their furrowed brows.

The Last Day in the Ghetto

On Sunday May 6, 1944 towards evening, the running began. Dozens of ghetto police ran in panic from house to house. A new decree: "All males from the ages of 11 to 60 must report immediately". The assembly point was at the upper end of Dragomirest, next to the school, after the bridge. The addition to the announcement was that the remaining people, the old, the women and the children, must be ready to travel. We were leaving the ghetto. No one said where and no one knew. Rumors had it that the men would work in labor camps, in agriculture, inside Hungary. The women and children would stay nearby. Once again the rumors had lulled us to sleep.

People started to pack every valuable, needed object, stroking the pots, fingering the garments, packing and unpacking. What shall we take and what shall we leave behind? Will we travel or walk? Will we have the strength to carry? One thing was clear: the prayer book and the sacred objects will certainly be taken. Packets of candles are not forgotten. The grandmas mumble a prayer in the midst of the panic. They are convinced that their pure faith will stand them in good stead in this time of trouble. Meanwhile they pack the *Techina* (women's prayer book), the candles and the shrouds. The heart beats in dread. The eyes stare in panic. The children have fallen asleep on the prepared, packed baggage. Devorah, the newly-wed, who got married just about a month ago, packs her new dress. She is still trying to weave her dream of happiness with her new husband, Sholom.

Midnight had long gone. On the bridge by the school, the assembly point for the men, rows of gendarmes stood; the field companies of the Hungarian army. All of them were in battle-dress, their guns with bayonets at the ready. The youth, the sons of the peasants, with their sticks in their hands, gathered next to them. They helped out as volunteers. Whoever crossed the bridge would receive a push, a blow or just a kick to hurry him, even those stumbling received blows: "Get up quickly and clear the road

for the assembling people!" A bus arrived with reinforcements. Hungarian gendarmes spread out into small groups to get at the laggards. They were sent to the remote corners of the ghetto to ascertain that all the men had obeyed the order. A Hungarian officer attempted to enforce order in the midst of the overcrowding, the darkness and the panic. The order to stand in lines did not succeed. The plan to organize the men in military order and to hold them until daylight was not carried out. Meanwhile, soldiers and gendarmes of the Hungarian army took up shooting positions. The officers, revolver drawn, tried repeatedly to organize the lines. The heavens were strewn with stars, but the darkness deepened. We shivered with cold. We hoped that some miracle would happen and we could escape from the trap that was closing in on us.

The officer saw that he could not get the lines in order and decided on a change. He produced a whistle, blew and roared like a wild beast. Silence fell and he started a sarcastic, hate filled speech: "Since you Jews are dirty and disorderly, and since you have no head for order and good manners... therefore you shall remain here, like a herd, in this place, until daylight...", then he added: "I, as a good man, have given instructions that you shall be placed in the school building and the buildings near it, to stay there till daylight. Whoever disobeys this order and tries to leave the place will be shot on the spot!"

The Road to the Train Station

At sunrise the gendarmes started to bring out the men and boys from the schoolyard and to assemble them along the road leading to Kechniye. While getting ready, two officers arrived. One was a Gestapo man and the other was a Hungarian. The Gestapo man was in charge. The gendarmes and the soldiers of the Hungarian army carried out the orders. Meanwhile, the women, the old and the young, who had remained at home, started to arrive, carrying their parcels of pillows, quilts, rucksacks, backpacks, baskets and

just bundles. Mothers held their babies in their arms, and grandmothers held their grandchildren's hands. The order was given to the rows of men to set out on their way to the road leading to Mount Bukovel. The journey began. Tired and exhausted from the long night, hungry and thirsty, with bowed heads and faltering steps, we marched toward the village of Kechniye, accompanied on either side of the road by gendarmes who harried the marchers.

Peasants stood and watched this great sight, some with joyful eyes and some with restrained amazement. This human stream in black coats and a shining yellow Stars of David twisted and moved like waves. The gendarmes in their polished boots and their raised bayonets stared with eyes that struck terror and hatred. Occasionally a group of field gendarmes passed with machine-guns in their hands. While the column of men marched in the direction of Kechniye an order was given to the peasants to go with their wagons in the direction of the column of the elderly, the women and the children assembled next to the school. There was a very high response, for two reasons: fear of violating an order from the extremely strict Hungarian authority, and second, out of pity and astonishment.

There were peasants who knew the deportees well, were on good trade and neighborly terms with them, and yet they carried out the order to deport the Jews. Some viewed it as a religious duty due to incitement by the priests. Perhaps they did feel some pangs of conscience. There was a stream of harnessed wagons, which were immediately filled with the old, the sick and young children. Young mothers walked by the side of the wagons as well as those who still had some strength left. Here too the column was accompanied by gendarmes armed with revolvers and machine guns. The columns halted for a rest in the village of Kechniye. Here the two columns united. The men and the boys who marched separately looked for the families they had parted with the night before. We broke our fast, the peasants brought pails of water, and after a rest we got organized to go on the road leading from

Kechniye to the railway station at Unter-Visho through theMount Bukovel.

Our good uncle Reb Azriel Perl returned his soul to his maker two days before the deportation. On the night after the cutting of the beard, he fell asleep on a bundle of pillows lying on the floor and in the morning he did not wake up. He had the merit of having a Jewish burial in the ghetto. Many envied him for that. I found my little sister Malka next to one of the wagons, together with our widowed aunt Fradle and her five orphans: the oldest, 12 year old Chaya, Chaim-Yisroel, Leib-Ber, Soral'e and three year old Chantch'e. Here too, among the wagons, the rumor was that we were travelling to Hungary. From here to the railway station it was a distance of about three hours on foot. It was midday and the sun was high over our heads. The order was given to move on. The road was filled with wagons harnessed to horses and oxen. On either side marched men and women, accompanied by armed gendarmes. Peasants and their children who were working in the fields stopped working and came running to see "this great sight" – the exile of the Jews. The men who were exhausted and could not carry the baggage started in desperation to cast them off. The peasant children ran after the column and pounced upon the 'prey' like a vulture on a carcass. "Modest" peasant women stood, wrapped in colorful scarves, astonished at what they saw, occasionally crossing themselves. The church bells tolled in the distance.

Suddenly, while marching, the order was given to halt. Again we were filled with dread. We did not know what new decree was about to descend upon us. Then the instruction was given to move off the road. All the people withdrew to the roadsides and waited. From up the mountain a wagon, hitched to two galloping horses, raced down. A body covered with a white sheet was in it. Reb Leizer the Italian from Rozavlea had passed away. He was about eighty, a colorful Jew, a farmer in every limb of his body. He was a charitable, hospitable man. Almost everyone knew him. He

would appear at all the weddings dressed in shepherd's clothes and would sing nostalgic songs in Hungarian and Romanian to delight the bride and the groom. He had the merit to die on the way. The family received permission to bury him in the Jewish cemetery in Kechniye, the village nearest to the column. So he was given a Jewish burial while those accompanying him made their way to Auschwitz.

The gendarmes started to urge us to increase our speed. The sun blazed and sweat covered our faces. Shirts clung to the body. The climb to the summit of the mountain, towards the village of Bukovel was hard. The wagons moved slowly forward. The crying of babies and the groans of their mothers mingled with the bleating of the kids in the fields and on the hills round about. Here also the peasants stopped their work and came to watch the strange column covering the whole road from Kechniye to the mountain: the men, in their black garments and the women in summer dresses, some with shoes and others barefoot. The whole road was covered with black kaftans, silk hats, white shirts and laced sleeves. Yellow *tsitsit* fluttered in the light spring breeze of the month of May. There were colorful scarves on the women's heads. From a distance the column looked like a swarm of black ants, going away from their mother's nest.

The country Jews were familiar with this mountain that occupied an important part of the landscape of our life. We travelled through it to the weekly market in the city of Visho. On this mountain the melodies of the yeshiva students, travelling to Reb Mendele Hager from Obervisho could be heard. The merry voices from those days *Ve'taher libbenu...*(Purify our hearts...), *Ashrenu, ma tov chelkenu...*We are fortunate, how good is our portion...), were still echoing here, up the mountain. Reb Yosele the wagoner would urge his brown mare, and would whisper to her to pull the wagon with faith, that it should not cause any wasting of Torah learning time to the yeshiva students, G-d forbid... The Jewish villagers used to travel along this mountain way to the Vizhnitze Rebbe

and to the Rebbe of Spinka. Here they used to push the wagon to spare the animal. On this mountain they used to pray mincha and ma'ariv, and they took the flocks of sheep and the herds of cattle across it to the markets of Visho and Borsa. In the distance a flock of sheep was seen grazing in a valley covered with fresh grasses. A spring was flowing. Peasant girls and their friends were dancing after watering their flocks. Soon the sun would be setting and they would go home to the wooden hut in the village with none to molest them.

THE SETTING OF THE SUN – *NEILA*

The sun, which had bothered us for long hours, turned slowly westward. Its last rays glanced over us indicating it had to part. Its slow withdrawal was a sign to ask our forgiveness. We passed the village of Bukovel, which was already emptied of its Jews, who had joined the Visho ghetto. The Gentile lads had brought the flocks into their pens and the cows to their cowsheds for their night's sleep. The peasants milked, the peasant girls kindled the ovens for supper and for their night's rest. We marched with tired, stumbling legs, and peasants were full of amazement. They had never seen so many Jews. From a distance we saw the train tracks and the small station of the village Lower Visho. Dozens of cattle-trucks stood on the line with a locomotive belching thick smoke at their head. The sliding doors stood open-mouthed, ready to swallow us into their bowels.

The gendarmes took positions on the paths with their guns in their hands, ready to shoot. The field gendarmes spread out equipped with their machine guns. The wagons with their passengers halted. An order was given to leave the large parcels in the wagons next to the trucks. "Take a few clothes and food!" The police started to push and to trample, to harry and to shove those standing near the trucks. Shouts and crying tore the grey skies. Children shouted to their mothers. My aunt, the widow Fradel,

looked for two children who had disappeared in the great chaos. She was pushed into a truck with three children, and the doors were closed from the outside. My sister Malka and I held on to each other. I still managed to give a hand to old Deskel, who was with us in the ghetto, and it fell to me to cut his beard among the other old ones in the house. His daughter Rivka, son-in-law Hirschel, and granddaughter Soroh'le were with us in the truck. Old Deskel, who never stopped learning in the ghetto, kept a bottle of water so that he should be able to wash his hands for prayer. As soon as a truck was filled, its doors were slid shut with a terrifying screech, and were closed and sealed from the outside.

Darkness descended. Through the slits of the small window, faint light penetrated from the star strewn skies. It was overcrowded with not even sitting room. Somehow we squeezed next to each other. We breathed with relief after the exhausting march. We were tired and hungry and fell asleep, the little children wailed incessantly. Our lips were parched from the sun and the thirst. There was no water. A few people had water jugs with them. Through the cracks in the sliding doors and the shuttered window, cool refreshing air penetrated. From time to time shots were heard, piercing the quiet of the night. When the locomotive started to hiss like a hungry beast and the trucks began to move we understood that we had been caught in a terrifying trap.

Sparks flew from the chimney of the locomotive. In the trucks, as if gripped by murderous fists, all the people of the Dragomirest ghetto were being led G-d knows where.

Day followed day, and night followed night. The children relieved themselves in their clothes. The adults attempted to hold themselves back during the day, and only at night, under cover of darkness, they relieved themselves in every conceivable place. The door was sealed and locked and it was impossible to empty the containers. Sometimes the train halted for some reason. Through the slits of the windows and the sliding doors we saw sun-drenched fields and flowers, butterflies on the flowers, bees

humming around, and trees in blossom. We saw wells with well buckets above them to draw the water and a drawing-wheel above them. We heard children's shouts of joy but we were trapped, tightly locked in behind lock and bolt. The adults tried to say words of comfort, perhaps, in spite of all, we are going to labor camps, and the women and the children will stay nearby. The train raced along, and we longed for a little fresh air and for water, for a decent bed, to stretch our bones and straighten our legs, caught in the crush of the truck.

In Koshitza (Kosice), we stopped. Here was a moment of mercy. Our escort pushed open the doors of the truck, and Jewish soldiers conscripted to the labor battalions of the Hungarian army, surrounded the trucks and brought pails of water. We drank like thirsty horses. We filled empty containers. Some found their relatives among the soldiers, who also did not know where we were going. There was a changing of the guards. S.S. men and Wermacht soldiers, stationed in Hungary since the invasion by the German army in March, took the transport over from the Hungarian gendarmes.

Cracow

The fourth day of the journey, at first light on May 10, 1944, I glanced through the slit in the window and saw a lit up sign: "Cracow". We were racing hastily, without stopping or slowing down. Hearts were throbbing. There was a feeling that we had reached the end of the journey. We felt movement and tumult. The train began to slow down. Mothers started to wake up the unconscious babies, tired out from moving about and travelling. We started to look for our bundles. We stretched out the tired legs. Old Deskel held his talith and tefilin, and Rivka, his daughter held his shtreimel for him. For some reason he asked for the kaftan as well because he wanted to be dressed in his Sabbath clothes. "It is Sabbath today..." he murmured, hardly standing on his feet. My

aunt Freidel gathered her remaining children, and asked my sister to help her to go out, so that perhaps now she would be able to find her two younger children who were lost on the way from the ghetto to the railway station.

The train gave a sharp whistle, a triumphal blow. The locomotive let out a sigh of relief like a hunter who had trapped a wild beast and it is lying in front of him. SS men opened the locks, moved the sliding doors, and we stood on a wide platform. SS soldiers with switched on hand torches that blinded our eyes. They burst into the carriages with savage roars – "*Raus! Raus*!" beating and shoving at the same time – "*Raus! Alles hier lassen*" – "Get out, leave everything and get out!"

Men in striped uniforms entered the carts. Numbers were sewn on their trousers and shirts, with a yellow triangle above the number. They waited for our arrival, for the transport. These were the men of the labor battalion – the 'Canada-commando", who attended to the baggage of the deportees. They spoke in Yiddish and were anxious and extremely pale. When the SS men were not near them, they asked us where we came from and when had left our homes. They spoke with pain and sarcasm. I can still hear echoing in my ears the words they uttered: "Hungarian *Behemes* (beasts, idiots), now you have come to Auschwitz?!" And they carried on with another broken sentence: "Why did you not hang yourselves before you arrived at the 'smoking-chimneys'...?, we did not understand the meaning of "smoking-chimneys". These were Jewish prisoners from Poland and Slovakia who had been sent to Auschwitz much earlier. They had drunk the cup of affliction since 1942. I remember that we met them after the selection and someone asked them innocently: "When can we meet our families?" and their response: *Zei bratten ziech shoin du zest nisht dem coimen und dem oiven*?... ("They are already roasting, don't you see the chimney and the oven..?").

At the end of the platform a convoy of military trucks with their headlights on was waiting. Dozens of SS men with guns, revolvers, machine guns and hunting dogs surrounded the carriages. The

skies were heavy and grey. An SS officer screamed angrily: "Men and women separately, doctors and dentists in a separate group". The selection started: some to the right and some to the left... All the old people were loaded on to the trucks; men and women, mothers holding little children. The children were thrown like logs of firewood. Sounds of shooting, the swish of sticks and barking of dogs mingled with the crying of the mothers and the children.

All together they were led from the ramp in the direction of the chimneys. About two hours after midnight we were left, after the selection: a group of men and a group of women, who were selected and condemned for work. Accompanied by SS guards, we were led by veteran prisoners to the showers. Here we were shaved from head to toe. We dipped in a pool of chlorine, which scorched the eyelashes and the forehead. We showered. Our civilian clothing, except shoes, glasses and belts, were taken from us. We moved on to a vast hall. We stood naked like sheep after the shearing. We shivered with cold, hunger and thirst. We received a shirt, a coat and trousers, a hat and wooden clogs, and waited to go out. From a distance I could see my thirteen-year-old sister Malka, together with some of her friends, shaven and frightened, dressed in long gowns, like inmates in a mental hospital. They also were fortunate to have been condemned to work in a concentration camp. From afar I shouted to her "We will meet at home..." so she told me when we met in Cyprus in 1947.

We dragged our feet in the direction of the barracks of Auschwitz in a long column. Two SS men and a Kapo accompanied us, arranged in rows of five. From the watch-towers the voices of the guards echoed, the rattle of guns and the derisive laughter. On the poles of the electrified barbed wire, rows upon rows of bulbs were burning. The voices of the mothers and the children were silenced. The groans of the grandfathers and grandmothers were heard no more. The journey was over. Tall chimneys belched thick smoke, and spread the smell of burned bread and fire-roasted flesh.

Part II

In the Shadow of the Flames

Chapter 8

AUSCHWITZ

After that night of the ramp and the selection, we dragged our stumbling feet towards the blocks, our "new home". A wide door yawned open, like the jaws of a fearsome beast. We were pressed into the block in panic, with shoves, kicks and beatings, like animals herded into pens. Three tiered bunks stood at the ready, spaced about 70 cm apart. We squeezed onto the bare boards and lay down. There was a step made of bricks along the center of the block and the "command team" stood on it when passing on instructions and decrees.

The senior prisoner in charge of the block – the *blockaltester* – stood at the head of the pyramid. He had a separate room in the block. The janitor, the prisoner in charge of cleaning the barracks, (*stubedienst*), saw to the cleaning of the blockaltester's little room, ironed his clothes and brought him his favorite foods. There was a "runner" at the disposal of the blockaltester – a *laufer*. He was a sort of errand boy. The *kapo* was another man with an important administrative role: he was in charge of discipline, and getting the prisoners to roll call and back to the barracks. These men were under orders from an SS man, appointed by the camp command, who was the ruler and who decreed life or death. At the sound of the swish of his brightly polished boots, breathing stopped on all the bunks and silence prevailed. Those in charge of our life or death would hand down new orders, mornings and evenings.

The first commands in Auschwitz we heard was: "No one goes anywhere or leaves his bunk without instruction from those in charge! This is Auschwitz, the only way out is through the hole in

the chimney...!" For the first few days we did not grasp the meaning of these words. The thread of our lives was hanging in the balance, in the shade of the chimneys, the chimneys of the crematoria looming towards the grey skies, ceaselessly discharging smoke and flames. By contrast, the fireplace in the center of the block, where those in charge stood to issue commands accompanied by beatings and screaming, with their eyes flashing the fire of hatred, remained cold.

Dawn broke. We started to stretch. We looked at each other like frightened animals entrapped in a snare. The new striped garments scratched and barely preserved the little warmth of our starved weak body. After the selection there were only about 500 men from the ghetto left. We were the fortunate ones, sentenced to live.

Friday, May 11th, 1944. The first day of the new order: you are no longer the son of someone. In one fell swoop your name has been erased from the books of birth and life. You no longer have the right to be anywhere without the permission of those in charge. Your body no longer belongs to you. Hours and minutes are measured here by the chronometer of eternity. Time is not yours. Your place and address are reduced to the surface area you lie on, on the wooden bunks. We lie down by command, we rise by command, and we breathe by permission, to a command. Our ears echo with the words so sharp they stab: "This is Auschwitz!" We are no longer a group of people but *scheisshaufen*, literally, a pile of excrement. Our status is that of *haftlinge*, prisoners in a provisional indeterminate state. We are not yet registered in the Auschwitz Death Book, since we are suspended, transitional between the cold fireplace of the block and the belching active chimneys. Under the pressure of the frequent transports from Hungary, we crossed over the shadow of the burning chimney, from the Sambatyon of ceaseless fire, which does not cease even on the Sabbath to the blocks, until our fate was decided to be spared or doomed.

Hunger stalked us constantly. We didn't know when we would be given food. We dreamed of a piece of bread and a sip of water. We would be taken out at any time, with murderous screams accompanied by whips and clubs for exercises in "training for orderliness". The slogan was *Ordnung muss sein*: there must be order. We went out for roll call: the Appell.

We were not given numbers yet. At the sound of the whistle of the command, we were rushed out with the kapo pressing us into the parade ground to line up in rows of five. After lining us up, which was accompanied by kicks and beatings, the most important and vital exercise in all the concentration camps began: *Mutzen ab, Mutzen auf*!: hats off, hats on! We carried out this order hundreds of times. Those who did not understand immediately, or confused the order, received murderous beatings. Later I managed to understand the purpose of the exercise and its value. In the eyes of the Germans, we were sub-human, by contrast to the SS "Supermen" and therefore it was forbidden for a prisoner to stand in front of the man in charge of the block dressed in military uniform with his hat on his head. When an SS soldier would address a prisoner, the prisoner had to remove his hat immediately, stand up, be silent and wait. If he was asked, he was allowed to answer. We the prisoners, human-dust, dust and ashes, risked severe punishment when we addressed the one in charge, with all humility, without being called and without receiving permission to open our mouth. The soldiers of the Third Reich considered it a grave affront to the "Supermen".

There was a special order to relieve ourselves. Without the express permission of the kapo or another person in charge, it was forbidden to go to the toilet. The latrines were located in special blocks, in which the order-loving Germans had placed row upon row of perforated cement surfaces. The whole block went to the latrine when the whistle blew. We had to sit bare-bottomed on the perforated surface and relieve ourselves quickly in a rush. At the end-whistle, we had to stop, button our trousers, run out and

line up in fives. The fate of those prisoners who did not hurry and remained seated on the hole in the latrine was bitter. Whips and clubs struck their bare behinds. Mucus and the feces were smeared on their trousers and their bodies. The stench was an additional reason to earn a beating from those in charge.

During the first few days we suffered enormously from hunger and the dreadful food. The tasteless soup gave us stomach pains and diarrhea. Meal times were haphazard. We were not certain whether we would get food at all, due to our unclear, provisional status. The punctilious, order-loving Germans did not waste loaves of bread or canisters of water for soup on prisoners destined for the crematoria.

Their meticulous diabolical planning was calculated to the minutest degree. Prisoners whose fate it was to burn and were taken to the gas chamber had their clothes removed and waited their turn naked and hungry. The fact that we had clothes on made us hopeful. During the breaks between drill exercises, walking to the latrines and back, I started to make the acquaintance of my neighbors in the bunks. Family men, recently parted from their wives and children, still believed the rumor and were hoping for family reunions. They failed to understand the sentence handed down the first night after the showers. When the asked when they would see their families, they were told: "They have already roasted..."

Before sunset during one of the first days, we were told to line up after roll call. We were told that we would get food. From a distance we saw prisoners with steaming cases of soup on their shoulders. They were wooden cases, like drinking troughs for cows, containing thick soup made of potatoes and turnips (for animal fodder) mixed with groats. On either side of the boxes were hung children's potties, into which they poured about half a quart of thick soup for each prisoner. We were famished. Each person drank out of the potty and passed the empty pot to the next prisoner in line. In other containers they brought a murky, foul drink which for some reason was called coffee. Each prisoner received a

set amount in a cup and when he finished drinking he passed the cup to the next prisoner. Night descended and we were taken to our bunks. We fell asleep feeling satiated and hopeful for better days to come.

After two or three days we started to feel like veterans. New transports arrived. They were housed in nearby blocks. During the breaks between roll calls we approached them to hear what the new arrivals could tell. The will to live returned to us. We wanted to know where we were, where the rest of our families were. We tried to find out from anyone what awaited us...

My Shoes

The Germans let the "select few" who remained after the first selection keep their glasses, their belt and their shoes. All the other garments we removed in the shower hall remained on the benches of the bath hall and were collected by a special commando in charge of transport belongings. I had good shoes made by Dermata, a well-known firm in Hungary. I bought them in Sighet, from savings I had, before I left the city to travel to the village to celebrate Passover at my uncle Azriel-Anschel's Perl. My sister Malka lived there after the passing of our parents. I did not know that it would be the last Passover we would celebrate as free men.

A whistle pierced the block. The kapo in charge of the block allowed us to go to the latrines. It was a moment of kindness and mercy, so to speak: we were able to run and relieve ourselves without being accompanied and without commands. The vicious Kapo who wore the green triangle of a convicted murderer on his chest, who oppressed and tormented to satisfy his primeval lust, thus "acquired his place in the world to come". We were able to sit on the cold cement hole of the Auschwitz latrine in a leisurely manner, without pressure and without the swish of the whip. I felt like a sheep for which the shepherd had opened the gate of the pen straight into a field of fresh clover. The perforations of the latrine

provided us with precious moments of rest and relief, a time to stretch our limbs.

The latrine block served also as a meeting place of sorts between acquaintances and relatives who lived in different blocks. Here, while buttoning up our trousers, we were able to meet those who had come in other transports. Sometimes we were surprised to find an acquaintance or a friend whom we thought to have gone to the crematoria, sitting on the hole in the cement, alive and well. The most longstanding prisoners, of various nationalities, came here to carry out transactions such as trading bread for cigarettes, shoes for watches, margarine for tobacco and the like. You could tell the "rank" of the prisoner, his status and his role, by the garments he wore or by the rucksack and the bundle on his shoulder. The veterans walked around with a rucksack containing priceless possessions, such as cutlery, tobacco, bread and thin paper for rolling cigarettes. Generally the veterans made sure they had nice leather shoes rather than wooden clogs. Some had numbers tattooed on their arm, and a red triangle sewn on their shirts which had their nationality printed on it, a sign of their seniority and role. Striped garments made of thick cloth that fit well also attested to a certain status.

As *zugange*, the newly arrived, we were in an inferior position. Out fallen faces, eyes sunk in their sockets, the hunger and the fear turned us into skeletons moving about in ill fitting clothes. Bony, stick- like arms protruded from short sleeved coats. Legs dragged along out of the tubes of the trousers in Dutch wooden clogs, their heels worn down, and their upper leather torn. We were helpless and without any rights whatsoever. We were at the mercy of the veteran prisoners. We resembled a convoy of ants that moves and wanders, runs, advances and retreats, to glean a remnant of a carcass of a fly or a seed to provide sustenance for the nest. At the echoing sound of the whip and the kicking of the boots of the SS, the whistle of the Kapo or the roar of the Blockaltester the ants

in human form gathered into the belly of the hut until the next command.

We got used to the daily routine. There were long breaks between one roll call and the next. The routine of "*Mutzen ab, Mutzen auf*", which froze our blood on meeting an SS man for the first time, became second nature. The hunger had its effect and our senses of taste and smell were blunted. We waited impatiently for the deep night-potties, with the vertical handles, burnished from enamel casting in white, blue and green. The turnip soup with groats became tasty and delicate. The imagination that connected the potty with the baby that sat on it in the past and the smell of the smoke of the crematoria were dulled. Hunger had turned the potty into the dream of the pot of soup of the morning. Even the murky coffee took on the taste of a drink that satiates dryness and thirst.

One day, there came an opportune moment to go to the latrines not by command. From my position on the cement surface I looked around for one of my acquaintances. I got up and went out smugly and at leisure and stood at the latrine entrance. A veteran prisoner whom I did not know approached me. I remember that he had a red triangle sewn on his coat under his recorded number and the letter P or R meaning a Polish or a Russki, a Russian, political prisoner. Naturally and with wonderful simplicity, with few words, he pointed to his shoes, wooden clogs, and to my shoes, my expensive leather shoes from home. He added no further explanation or hint, took out half a loaf of bread which consisted of about two portions of prisoner bread and laid it aside, on a smooth stone on the side of the latrine. I did not react. With the instinct of a hunted animal I realized that I must remain silent and see how the matter developed. I leaned on the corner of the of the latrine block while he started to remove my shoe. I started to murmur a sort of zidduk-ha-din prayer, said at the cemetery when one accepts the inevitable. He removed my other shoe. The wind caressed my bare feet and I felt a sort of relief. My unknown acquaintance checked the shoes like a strictly observant Jew choosing his ethrog

- the beautiful, unblemished yellow citron for Succoth. He turned it from side to side and tested the length of the brown laces and the thickness of the soles. Apparently, lying on the bunks without bedding, cramped among prisoners without rights and without hope, had blunted my feelings. The nagging hunger, the uncertainty concerning the next moment, life hanging on a thread not knowing what the next day would bring, caused me to observe everything with a sort of apathy and indifference. Perhaps due to those moments of weakness when I felt the touch of the hand of my fellow inmate, when his hand grasped my tired, thin foot, like motherly gesture during the removal of the shoes, I had nothing in my heart against him; on the contrary at the time I felt a sort of joyful parting from my precious shoes, a remnant of home life prior to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

He placed the shoes which used to be mine next to half a loaf of bread. He gazed at the bread with a look of tenderness and affection. Then he removed his wooden clogs and placed them on my feet. He touched my toes to see whether they were not squashed in the wooden Dutch clogs and put on the Dermata shoes. He tied the laces with two bow knots, stepped three steps forward and one back, like a sort of "He makes peace in His heights" of a devout cantor in prayer, wiped the dust off his, previously my shoes, with his sleeve, stepped gracefully over the latrine surface and returned to the stone where the half loaf of bread was placed. All that time he kept quiet and did not speak. Then he took the bread and handed it to me with a sort of *shalom u'vracha* (greetings and blessings) of diamond merchants on completing a transaction. He patted my lean shoulder and said: *Molodetz!* (Excellent!)... meaning you are a fine man. He looked behind him and his eyes complimented me for my courage in controlling my instinct and giving up the shoes.

Thus I parted from another item and vestige from home, my leather shoes. I was parting from the scent of the soil of my village that was stuck in the grooves of the soles of the shoes which I wore in the fields and in the fruit orchards of my uncle Azriel Anschel's.

I was parting from my memory of the open spaces, home and warmth. I thought a lot about the behavior of that prisoner, who was one of the veterans of Auschwitz, with rights like all strong-armed men. After all, he could have come up to me, a short thin prisoner, a weak defenseless lad, remove my shoes in exchange for a few punches, as was customary, according to the unwritten code that prevailed throughout the kingdom of Auschwitz. The ways of man are indecipherable. Perhaps some of those hidden righteous the *Lamed Vavniks* had also reached the ramp of Auschwitz. Perhaps some of them were also being tried in the shadow of the furnace, walking about with half a loaf of bread to perform "good deeds" in the midst of the kingdom of utter evil...

I walked about with my new treasure with a sense of joy and plenty for two days. I guarded it closely from all danger. I wrapped the bread in a rag so that not a crumb would be lost. I would wake up at night to touch my life-giving parcel. The bread, the reincarnation of my shoes, was a source of hope. This guarded bread preoccupied my thoughts and my reflections flowed to it like blood that fills the veins and pumps life. I developed a special technique for eating the bread. Each time I took one crumb from the slice, to be satisfied with the little there was, and then returned the slice to the parcel with a feeling that the slice was still whole.

When prisoners received their portion of bread they experienced a moment of excitement and exaltation. They would hug the bread and hold it close. People did not eat it immediately. The pangs of hunger eased from the moment the prisoner felt the bread with his own hands. He would tuck it in the depth of his coat under his armpit with awe and reverence. The prisoner would crawl with the bread from the distribution spot, usually the Stubedienst's cubicle, to his bunk. He was exposed to the dangers of the journey such as snatching or stealing by violent prisoners, usually non-Jews. The portion of bread remained at all times within eyeshot and contact range. I recalled the opening sentence of the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, "Let him overcome like a lion..."

speaking about overcoming one's evil inclination, while trying to master the muscles of my mouth, not to swallow the portion of bread all at once. I would open the parcel and pinch the center of the slice of bread with my fingers, to feel the amazing taste before it disappeared in my mouth. There was a special method and a special ceremony to the slicing of the portion of bread and the dividing of the slice. There were no knives. The Germans in their extreme prudence avoided any hint of danger from the prisoners, and knives were in the category of "weapons". So we improvised with the handle of a spoon or just any piece of tin. We sharpened the improvised knife with a stone and cut the bread with it: first into thin slices, the slice into quarters and then the quarters into small cubes. We accompanied the cube with longing glances and paused between the chewing and the swallowing so that all the limbs of the body would enjoy the precious delicacy of bread from heaven. We smacked our lips so that the ears too could benefit. We did whatever we could to enhance the portion of bread.

We were sorely tried with the commandment of charity: "You shall surely give". There were welfare and charitable institutions even in the remotest and poorest communities and "You shall surely give him... you shall surely open your hand to him..." was one of the cornerstones of communal life. More than once a poor Jew had to withstand the test of whether to open his hand or not. It was clear that one would share the little that one had with the needy who had nothing. The itinerant beggars and those relying on soup kitchens knew that they would not be turned away. But here, in a desert of hunger and thirst, when the life of each one depended on the meager portion of food and the thin slice of bread, this test went beyond imagination, beyond any comparison. In the concentration camps only a few people of exceptional quality, spiritual giants, could make up their minds as to whose life had precedence. I had my resting-place next to a well known and dignified Jew. In the past he had been a man of standing, a highly respected scholar. He would finish his portion of bread in a state

of weakness of mind and body and would ask, with humility, for an act of "loving kindness" for a *kezayit*, an olive sized piece of bread. Older people suffered more from hunger pangs. Their bodies required more and their condition deteriorated faster than that of the youngsters. Those fathers whose fate decreed that they were together with their son transgressed the saying "As a father is merciful towards his children" and asked their young child for a remnant of the piece of bread the child had hidden, and the child had to refuse. I overheard a child saying to his father: "Dear father, I too have to live..." I was happy that my father had passed away and was buried in a Jewish cemetery and did not reach Auschwitz and I did not see him so reduced.

The day after the Dermata shoes transaction – bread in exchange for shoes – I met my friend and relation Faibush Steinmetz from Strimtere, who shared a bench with me at the Beth Aharon yeshiva under Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Kahana, may the Lord avenge his blood. He entered the latrine as I went out. I waited for him and gave him a slice of my treasure, and he gave a few bites of it to his father Rav Yakov. Their eyes lit up for a while. The Hebrew metaphor "prisoners of gratitude" took on horrible significance in Auschwitz, the kingdom of evil.

Day followed day and the hours progressed at a snail's pace. We would lie on the bunks, which we called *fritches*. I do not know the origin of the word. Apparently the Hungarian transports adopted it, a sort of affectionate term for the bunks of the skeleton-like muzelmen, the condemned prisoners in the camps considered unfit for work. I would lie and stare and listen to the creaking of the boards and the sighs of those lying on them as they would turn from one side to the other. We were already trained and prepared for the roll calls. When the Kapo shouted *De sheissehauffe-Raus! "Raus*! the whole heap of garbage – out", it terrified us and we ran immediately to the roll call area. In the rows we would pray in a whisper, cautiously, so that those in charge of us would not notice it. We endeavored to maintain our Jewish-human-image.

The murmur of the Kaddish, the mourners' prayer, or the Kedusha in the darkness and the silence, breathed into us a spark of hope and salvation; it kindled a spark of light in the extinguished eyes of the tortured figures.

The fritches became part of the daily routine. Those who lay on the top bunks developed characteristics of reptiles in order to squeeze through quickly and hide their emaciated body from the wrath of the Kapo's whip. We strained to have our head crawl ahead and drag our feet after it quickly. We clung to each other like sheep scenting the predatory wolf. The screech of the door of the block signaled that the immediate danger had passed. The SS left and went on their way. I would imagine the boards above me as silent witnesses. The eye-like knots in the wood would wink at us as though they too were parties to the secret of the torture, as if they were straining to tell the story of the suffering of the tens of thousands of muzelmen and their final groaning before being led to the conflagration.

During one of the roll calls, one of the Kapos passed by our group. You could tell he was one of the veterans. He had a green triangle on his chest, and was German according to the letter on the triangle. His eyes flashed with hatred in all directions. In his right hand he held a handful of black phylactery straps with the boxes of the head phylacteries and hand phylacteries dangling like the condemned on the gallows. With the bunch of phylacteries he hit any prisoner who chanced on his path, at the same time cursing and reviling them. This cursing reminded me of the legend we always read on the ninth of the month of Av, about the destruction of the Temple. The legend says that when wicked Titus entered the Holy of Holies and saw the curtain covering the Ark of the Covenant, he drew his sword, pierced the curtain and shouted: "Where is your G-d? – Let Him come and fight me!", and the legend concludes: "all of a sudden blood drops oozed out of the curtain of the Holy... to mislead the villain..."

On many nights I would wake up drenched in sweat. In the nightmare that recurred I saw piles of innards pouring out of torn split stomachs with phylacteries tied to them. All the Jews of the ghetto were in the roll call area while the Kapo was winding the straps of the phylacteries around our necks.

Among the prisoners there were well known personalities such as rabbis, public figures and other community leaders. One of the sons of the Admor of Kretsnif, Rav Elazar Wolff Rosenbaum, who survived, turned up in a transport that had arrived after us from Sighet. He was popular with Yeshiva students in Sighet who had failed to live up to the religious standards expected of them and had strayed off the path. They were attracted by Communism, rejected tradition and established a "literary club" – as a front that hid the truth from their parents and from the authorities. The rabbi of the small community of Strimtere was also with us. He had established a Yeshiva called Beth Aharon where I studied for three consecutive years after the passing of my parents. The Rabbi was a young man in his forties, a prodigy and an outstanding Talmudic scholar. I saw him in the ghetto after the cutting of the beards and I did not recognize him. Only his pale complexion and the delicate outline of his forehead attested to his deep sorrow. When he saw I was embarrassed to be unable to identify him, he drew close to me, caressed me with his deep-set eyes and said with his fatherly voice: "Chaim-Yisroel my pupil, don't you know me?..." Then I turned my head so as not to see him in his wretchedness, with the bareness of his pale face. He was sent to Auschwitz with his wife and their six children. Only his thirteen or fourteen year old son, Zanvil, survived. During the roll call we would cling to each other to warm our backs and to mouth prayers while standing in rows of fives.

Many transports of Jews from the Carpathians arrived at the end of May. The barracks were full. The bunks groaned under the weight of the prisoners awaiting their fate. Men from Munkatch, Chust, Voloba and the surrounding villages, men from

Ungwar (Uzhorod) and Bergsas joined that "nest of killer ants" of Auschwitz-Birkenau. The lines grew longer.

We got used to the sound of the marching wooden clogs as they dragged from the bunks to the latrines and from there to the roll call area, accompanied by shouts and beatings. The bed, devoid of any softness and warmth, received into its flat 'arms' the prisoners who fell onto it tired and exhausted at the end of the day. Our minds were preoccupied with one only thing – how to overcome hunger, how to reach the bucket of soup, a mixture of tasteless water with pieces of potatoes and white beet, to manage to lick the remaining groats that stuck to the sides of the night-potties from which we ate the soup and drank the foul, murky coffee. We dreamed of the dawn and our portion of bread, a mixture of sawdust, flour and ground straw – that "heavenly manna" with its taste of paradise.

At nightfall we curled up on the bunks without removing our clothes. Fortunate were those who had coats or shirts with long sleeves, so they could warm their hands without clinging to their neighbor for the meager warmth generated by the thin body. After lights out, the kingdom of night and fear ruled over the prisoners. The single light bulb which shed insubstantial light at the entrance of the janitor's cubicle swung and flickered over the bodies of the "living-dead" like a memorial light in the cemetery. In the cubicle of the blockaltester the Kapo's servants were busy preparing his supper from foodstuffs which were stolen during distribution, morning and evening. Beyond the electrified barbed wire, sparks of high-tension electricity flickered. The SS guards marched in the watchtowers back and forth to warm their feet in their leather boots. We heard the rumble of the wheels of the train in the silence of the night. The trucks discharged the transported. The noise and tumult of those marching "to the right or to the left", pierced the darkness. The chimney-stacks blew the flames heavenwards and the sparks scattered over the roofs of the barracks. The kingdom of smoke spread its net. Dawn broke and the block awakened. We

ran out to the sound of the screams of the Kapo "Raus! Fall in line – Appell!" The stink of roasting filled our nostrils with morning gloom. It was the end of May 1944 and the starving innocents were still inhaling the smell of burned bread.

The Ray of Light

We stood in lines ready for inspection. We sensed that there was an unusual bustle. SS men of higher rank joined the SS soldier in charge of the barracks. They were with an officer with the rank of captain of the German air force, the Luftwaffe, who went into a huddle with the SS officers. We knew that there was a difference between the military units of the armed forces like the Wermacht and the Luftwaffe and the units of the "death heads" of the SS who were directly involved in destruction of Jews.

Silence prevailed. No one moved. We waited for a command. The blockaltester announced: "The camp command is organizing a transport of prisoners who are skilled workers: carpenters, tailors, cobblers, locksmiths and blacksmiths, for work in another camp. All the skilled workers *austreten* (step forward), step out of line and line up on the right." Once again people's animal instinct arose, the instinct for survival awoke in me, just like on that night when we arrived from the ghetto to the ramp and I stood before that SS officer (who later I found out was Josef Mengele, the notorious physician known as the Angel of Death) and I shouted to him with convincing confidence "I am a carpenter...". I was sent to the side of those condemned to life.

I felt that this was a chance to leave the misery of Auschwitz. I decided to raise my hand, thinking I could get onto the list of skilled workers. I whispered to the prisoner standing in the row next to me – my teacher and my master Rav Tzvi Hirsch Kahana: "Rabbi, raise your hand, perhaps we can get out of here...".During those fateful moments the Rabbi faced a grave dilemma. His wide furrowed brow was covered with sweat. This Torah scholar, an

authoritative decision maker, a posek, opened works of Rabbinic authority from memory, paged in his mind through "those who say so" and "those who say thus"... his thoughts moved between the permissible and the forbidden. Where is the boundary? Would this lie fall into the category of desecrating the Name of Heaven through trickery? ...What right does he have, as the Rabbi of the town, a place where he is known, to do that which would appear as an dishonest behavior, a "stain on his garment"?... And possibly there was an additional reason for leniency: this was a time of persecution and real danger to life is hovering here in this land of draconian measures...

My teacher and master felt that he was facing a trial which the jealous and vengeful G-d had arranged for him precisely at this time of concealment of his countenance, like the trial of Abraham facing the fiery furnace of Ur of the Chaldeans. Seconds, which appeared to me to last an eternity, passed between the time I raised my hand and the Rabbi's decision. I knew that if he were to remain in the human maelstrom of Auschwitz, he had little chance of survival. I prayed in my heart that he would decide to join the skilled workers. At the last second, before I started to leave the line, I turned to face the Rabbi and his young son. He grasped his son Zanvil's arm and the two of them set out towards the group that stood on the side. He had made up his mind that he was a skilled laborer in the need of the moment.

The order-and-precision loving Germans called this transport the *schneider-schuster kommando*, the tailor and shoemaker unit. This change of name was like a "talisman and a reform", a protective measure to help a dangerously sick person by changing his name... we had been freed from the status of muzelman, combustible matter, from the status of *scheisshaufen* (a dung heap) to the status of those needed for the war effort of the Third Reich. There were about a thousand Yiddish and Hungarian speaking men in this transport, Jews from the regions of Marmaros and the Carpathians. There were many adolescents between 13 and

18 among them, most of them with adults – a father or a family relative. The Germans were not strict and turned a blind eye. We stood for about two hours in the roll call area. We waited for instructions. A group arrived with cases of bread and portions of margarine. We received two portions of bread, a little bit of jam and a small piece of margarine. Before the "dismissal parade" and the head count took place, we were commanded to run to the latrines to relieve ourselves quickly and to return. Accompanied by the air force officer and the SS men with guns on their shoulders, we marched in rows of five towards the railway line. Our feet felt lighter and our mood had improved knowing that we were leaving this place and especially because we had our bundle of food, a treasure worth its weight in gold.

"...He Brings Down to the Grave and Raises Up..."

The cattle wagons stood silent on the railway lines. The sliding doors were wide open, pushed aside to either side of the entrance, the same entrance that discharged transports onto the ramp. The long column of prisoners drew near and halted. At the command of the SS we climbed up the long step and entered the maw of the freight cars. A command was issued to sit on the floor. We sat down pressed against the knees of the person sitting behind us. The SS men sat down on the benches at the entrance with their loaded guns in their hands.

The sides of the car hid the forest of barbed-wire fences and the barracks filled with muzelmen. I felt like someone who had left a dense forest teaming with wild beasts, and had reached civilization. We waited with trembling and joy for the moment the wheels would begin to move beyond the ceaselessly belching fire and smoke, beyond the shadow of the crematoria of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The whistle of the locomotive proclaimed that we had left Auschwitz behind us. The wheels of the wagon started to clink. Inside the car, on the piece of space allocated to me, I started to plan. First of all I was careful to sit in such a way that my portion of bread, my "pipe-line for survival" was safe. I pinched off an olive sized piece, placed it in my mouth with three fingers gripping the bread, so that the crumbs would fall straight into my mouth. I was reminded of the first speech of the SS man when he inspected us after the selection, after the haircut, the shower and the immersion in chlorine, when we stood outside, dressed in striped garments, trembling with cold and hunger. He said: "You should know, Jewish pigs, here is Auschwitz, from here there is only one way out for you, and that is through the hole of the chimney..." and with a threatening finger he pointed to one of the chimneys of the crematorium. This time we had left Auschwitz through the main gate and not through that exit.

I decided to treat myself and to pinch off another morsel of bread. The taste was mixed with the joy of leaving and the crumbs were like manna fried in fresh oil... I recalled my religious school teacher, the melamed who, when telling the story of manna, would smack his lips to demonstrate the savor of a "cake soaked in honey". We felt its fragrance and its taste, just like this bread that was rolled and hidden under me.

Every so often the train would halt and then we could get up to relieve ourselves. Two by two we would approach the entrance of the car. The two sides of the door were pushed aside, a metal rod was laid across the width of the opening, and the trousers were pushed down. The SS guards gripped their guns and we, facing inwards with our bare behinds aiming outwards, could somehow relieve ourselves. Apparently the Wehrmacht officer, the commander of the schneider-schuster kommando convoy, was not familiar with the rules of *scheissbaracke* (latrine) enforced in Auschwitz. There, relieving oneself started by a whistle of the

Kapo, and stopped by the wielding of the whip over the protruding bones of the bare bottoms.

We did not know when we would arrive at our unknown destination and I do not remember how long we travelled. The pressure of events between the stay in the ghetto and the selection, the dread and fear of every move of the Kapo, all the roll call rules and the drill exercises blurred my sense of time and place. I started to feel I was a nameless person, without a place or a time. The clanking of the cars and the clinking of the wheels transported us over bombed out towns like a shadow passing swiftly by. We saw trees with spring blossoms, sun rays sneaked in through the slits in the windows in the walls of the car. We tried to work out where we were. Judging by the sound of the sirens and the echoes of explosions, we decided that we were near inhabited places and cities. On the floor of the truck we sat entwined in each other. From time to time we fell asleep and bobbed about like pieces of wood in the flow of a rushing river. The dimness of sunset heralded yet another night of uncertainty.

Hunger started to afflict us. The bread portion grew smaller and smaller. We were tired and exhausted from the drill exercises of Auschwitz. Here too the day started with the sun penetrating the gloom. I tried to straighten my bent knees by holding onto my seatmate. I did not dare to ask for permission to stand up. The SS guards straightened their uniforms and checked their weapons. The train slowed down. A deafening whistle blew. The train stopped. From the mouth of the SS men we heard the actual name of the new place we had reached: Buchenwald.

After days of sitting on the floor of the car, we were commanded to get up and leave the wagon. As experienced prisoners, we arranged ourselves in rows of fives and started to march at a steady pace, accompanied on either side of the convoy by SS soldiers. The roll call took place.

After a head count we were transferred to new ownership. Each group entered into organized barracks. We were among the first Hungarian Jews to arrive in the region. Around Buchenwald there

were a number of camps for political prisoners and for prisoners of war. There were tens of thousands of prisoners from all the European countries conquered by the German army. There were important political prisoners like Leon Blum, whom the Germans held as a bargaining chip for their hour of need. They were called *prominente haftlinge*, "privileged prisoners". For us this was a breath of encouraging fresh air to see mature prisoners, well dressed, in striped garments of good quality. They appeared well-fed, and radiated authority even here.

There was something special in our transport: among the many adults in the schneider-schuster kommando were many adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18. The political prisoners who were imprisoned there since 1938 as opponents of the regime, citizens of Germany, Russia and France and others, were astounded to see child-prisoners. The sight of the striped garments on the bodies of children dragging themselves among the adult prisoners prompted shock and astonishment. Some tried to imagine how their own children would look if they had been imprisoned in some concentration camp. The sad faces of the helpless children who had only recently been torn from their mother's apron strings brought out hardened veteran prisoners, heroes of their countries, prisoners of war – Russians, French, Dutch and Poles – to the barrack entrances to see the rare sight of *kinder haftlinge* (child prisoners). Until the transports of the Jews of Hungary, the Germans had destroyed the young. Children under the age of 16-17 were considered useless. In the countries conquered by the Third Reich, there was still a large reserve of forced laborers, capable of work, Jews and non-Jews. They had not yet started to employ young forced laborers whose upkeep wasted the resources of the Reich. In 1944 the Jews of Hungary were the last human resource in Europe. Over half a million Jews were awaiting their fate. Apparently this practical consideration for reserve slave labor affected the selectors on the ramp in Auschwitz, and caused them to include young children in the work force intended for the concentration camps.

In the eyes of the prisoners of Buchenwald we were like creatures from another planet, like rare animals in a travelling circus, species which had not yet become extinct. We, the young, symbolized the lost world that they had almost forgotten; we brought them "greetings" from the world beyond the barbed wire fences. The smell of home and family still clung to us. We were the last remnant of hope after years of despair and hopelessness.

Every time we went out for a roll call, the veteran prisoners with the special privileges would hold their breath, and stare at this awesome miracle, to see children who had just been torn and driven away from their school benches straight to the Nazi hell. I remember the face of an "old" Russian prisoner (in concentration camp terms) of about 50, standing at the entrance to the barrack without taking his eyes off us. He had a bright face, shining eyes that radiated good heartedness and deep longing. Each time he would appear with half a slice of bread in his hands or a cooked potato, to give to one of the starving and frightened youth. From time to time he would turn his face and wipe away a tear. Someone told us that he was a general who had been captured. We knew nothing more about him. During every break from activity these good veterans would appear to give us good advice, such as to be careful not to get hurt during work, not to be spoiled and to eat whatever the stomach could digest. They told us to be careful not to eat salt, and the main thing, to keep up our hopes at any price.

After staying for three days in Buchenwald we received instructions to line up in rows of five. We marched towards the camp command room, and from there we were transferred to a bath-house. The barbers and their assistants the *fleggers* (the medical orderlies) conducted a lice removing ceremony, the *lauze-kontrolle*; we were counted and dipped in a pool of chlorine, which was particularly strong, to eradicate the lice and their eggs. The chlorine burned our eyelids and the eyelashes. With shouts of *"Raus! Raus!"* we ran to another hall and there we were issued clean garments. We marched back to the command hut and here we were "raised in

rank" – we were given the status of numbered prisoners. The process was as follows: each prisoner sat down on a chair positioned opposite a small window. A prisoner-photographer photographed the upper part of the body, full face and profile, with a numbered piece of cardboard attached to the chest. My number was 55660. On the front of the coat and on the side of the trousers they had sewn the number with the addition of a yellow triangle with the letter U for Ungarn – Hungary. We understood that we were there as provisional prisoners and at any moment we had to be prepared to move on to one of the camps in the region.

After a while, when we moved on to the camp of Dora-Mittelbau near Nordhausen, we met the Kapo Willi who was in charge of *gertnerei* (gardening). Ulsen Willi was a prisoner of Buchenwald and always boasted of his low prisoner number 1279. This granted him the status of a hardened concentration-camper, a *katzetnik*. He was one of the political prisoners who had been imprisoned in Buchenwald in 1938-1939. He told us that the conditions then were very severe, almost unbearable. The prisoners started to work at dawn and continued until late at night. The taskmasters of the camp invented all sorts of jobs to keep the prisoners occupied, weaken them and break their spirit. For an example, Willi told us that one of the punishments was to empty the containers of excrement with empty food tins. Beatings, shootings and injury were their daily ration and a matter of routine. The situation of the prisoners who were German nationals improved with the arrival of the first prisoners of war, Allied soldiers who fought against Germany. Then the Germans with the green triangles (murderers), the red triangles (political) and the grey (sabotage) were assigned important positions such as kapo, blockaltester, *vorarbeiter* (foreman) and *lager-schuzmann* (camp guard).

In all the concentration camps the authorities were afraid of contagious diseases. The SS command developed a paranoia, a psychotic fear of epidemics. They were afraid that lice would transmit an illness that would strike even the master race. In each

residential block, office, clinic or workshop, there were signs with an enlarged picture of a louse that stated in large letters: *"Eine Laus – dein Tot"*, i.e. "One louse – your death". There were two types of lice: flat lice (resembling aphids on leaves of plants) and large, slightly rounded lice. The flat lice were small and thin. They would embed themselves literally into the thin skin of the prisoner in their private parts. Sweat, warmth and body odor nourished the thin lice, which were satisfied with little and barely moved. Ordinary "bourgeois lice" could move. They laid their eggs in the hair of the head or in body hair or even in the folds of garments. These "tourist" lice wandered to find new living quarters. One could feel them sucking, which was disturbed by scratching. Generally they were particularly attracted to muzelmen, to their weak, apathetic and neglected bodies.

The SS men tried to find a solution and planned how to eradicate the epidemic and prevent this plague of the Pharaohs which could spread typhus. The aim was to take preventative measures. The lause-kontrolle was one of the cornerstones of the rules of hygiene. All the barbers and their assistants were involved. The prisoner doctors and the medical orderlies were engaged in instructing and detecting. The main task was to cut and shave the hair on the head, around the groin and the armpits – the hiding places of that shy and modest insect. Under the supervision of the blockaltester and his assistants, with boundless seriousness, they arrayed themselves against that enemy threatening the health of the heroes of the Fuhrer and the slaves of the Reich.

Ulsen Willi, the Kapo, told us what punishments were meted out to a prisoner on whom lice were found. Besides the murderous beating he received for having "allied himself" with those entrenched lice, he had to be in total isolation for a day or two and undergo a series of lice routings. The treatment involved daily shaving of all parts of the body which grew hair, immersion in a special pool of concentrated chlorine, and undergoing an exacting body check. Since the work conditions were extremely harsh, there

were many prisoners who were envious of those who had lice. It was a case of a mixed blessing since when in isolation, they were forbidden to work, so as not to pass the lice on to others, and were able to rest from the hard labor and enjoyed some respite.

The Russian prisoners had a talent for inventiveness and were able to improvise in all sorts of situations. They developed a lice-trade, a sort of a stock market. They had a secret place where they hid a tin padded with cotton wool, where they propagated large numbers of lice. A day or two before the weekly lause-kontrolle, with the expertise of specialists they would "plant" a pair of lice under the armpit in exchange for half a portion of bread or margarine. The prisoner had to be careful not to scratch himself, to ensure that the lice would be acclimated and take root naturally. Someone brave and fortunate would get some rest in the isolation hut reserved for those infected with lice. The Kapo concluded his tale of the Russian specialists with "All is well that ends well". In the end, they found Nikolai (the nickname for all Russians in the camps), the owner of the lausezucht (the lice factory) with about 20 portions of bread, and he received exactly that number of lashes. Twenty lashes of the whip on the bare behind was quite an ordinary punishment and a light one, considering the felony of propagating lice to spread contagious diseases.

At the end of May, towards dawn, our whole transport was awakened. We got dressed and marched to the roll call grounds. Beyond the gate of the camp, a long column of military trucks with trailers, covered with dark grey tarpaulin, was waiting. Each group of about a hundred men, accompanied by two SS men went into each truck. We sat down on the floor, pressed against each other's knees. The drivers started the motor and the convoy set out on its way. After about two hours we arrived at a new camp, Dora-Mittelbau near the town of Nordhausen in the Harz Mountains of Saxony.

Chapter 9

DORA-MITTELBAU

The SS guards jumped off the trucks with diabolical agility. We were commanded to get out and form lines. We glanced around and saw a familiar sight – structures, huts, prisoners moving about like ants on a summer's day. All around were barbed wire fences and watch towers. I think we were the first Jews to be brought to this concentration camp, which had just started to be built. The roads were half completed, the huts were not finished, and the smell of tar, cement and building materials permeated the air.

Sunday, end of May 1944; it was the holiday of Shavuot 5704. Most of the camp prisoners rested on Sunday afternoon. Apparently, due to the urgency, we started our first work day on the day of rest. We stood in rows of five. They called out the numbers of the prisoners and then we trooped to the roll call area. We were welcomed with shoves and shouts by the SS guards and the kapos. The pace was too slow. The cry of "*Stillgestanden*" (stand still) froze us. A sullen looking SS sergeant, short and as tense as a coiled spring, took over roll call from the commander of the convoy who brought us from Buchenwald. In fact, from that moment we became prisoners of the Dora-Mittelbau concentration camp. The SS roared "All listen"! And started a short speech: "You, the accursed Jews, should know that you are now in the camp (*katzet*) of Dora. Whoever does not work properly, or dares to sabotage, should know what to expect... look over there..." and he pointed to the chimney of the crematorium spewing dense smoke. He too concluded with the famous Auschwitz sentence: "From here the only escape route is through the hole of that chimney..."

Later we found out that the small crematorium of the camp served local needs. It was neither a large facility nor was it sophisticated. It was used for the bodies of prisoners who died from work injuries, or muzelmen who expired slowly. Often, as we went out to the roll call ground for work assignments, we would pass through the active crematorium. On a rainy, cold and wet morning, we would slow down a little and peep in to see how they placed the bodies into the gaping oven. For some reason I had a macabre association with taking the Sabbath loaves of bread from the rustic oven in my grandmother Sara'le's house in Schiff. Sometimes we managed to warm our cold hands at the entrance of the crematorium, before we ran to join the work commando. In the middle of the summer of 1944, after the completion of the camp and the roads, the crematorium was transferred to the *holtzhof* (wood yard), where the gallows for prisoners who were condemned to death, but not in public, were situated.

From the day we arrived at Dora we felt a discriminating and humiliating attitude towards the Jews. Here there was not one Jewish Kapo or Jewish blockaltester. Among the transports of Hungarian Jews there were many doctors, but all of them worked as prisoner-slaves in various jobs. Later a Jewish doctor was able to work in the *revier* – the clinic – but as a medical orderly. The discrimination was manifested in another way as well: we had to move from one block to another. We had to tidy and overhaul the barracks in our free time, after work. We would drag bunk beds, scrub and clean the barracks and its surroundings. When all was shipshape, we would be ordered: "The Juden – from barrack number so and so, move on to another barrack". And we started all over again.

The first barrack we had in Dora was barrack number 28, in the vicinity of the main gate of the camp, up the slope of the mountain, on the right. We did not have beds. We slept on mattresses, which we arranged on the floor in the evening, after roll call. When we went out to work, the sick prisoners would arrange

the mattresses in a pile and clean the area. Our barrack was not far from the *postenstube*, the guardroom of the SS soldiers, and therefore we were "privileged" to have many surprise visits by the SS men. Surprise visits, especially towards evening, always ended in punishments and beatings from the SS soldiers who guarded the camp. According to the rules of the concentration camps a prisoner was not allowed to address a Nazi "superman" like an ordinary mortal. The rules were that when an SS man passed, the prisoner had to halt in his tracks, remove his hat and wait until the SS would utter the words of deliverance *weiter machen* - carry on. Many Hungarian Jews spoke fluent German, and were university graduates. In their great innocence and politeness, they would address the SS man with ordinary questions, such as when do we change the dirty clothes, or, what is the exact time. Their "answer" would be a lesson in education ... beatings and humiliation, slaps and kicks.

The First Days in Dora

All the men of the *schneider-schuster kommando* were led towards the main gate, escorted by the kapos and the SS guards. We marched towards the *bahnhof,* the train station. They took us into enormous tunnels, which led into large hangars lit by electric lights. This was where the first workshops were located, where prisoners worked on the production of V1 and V2 missiles, the secret weapon of the Reich, which were designed to guarantee its victory over the Allies.

Under the mountain that dominated the whole large camp of Dora, there was a secret city, hidden and entrenched. Railway wagons carrying raw materials and forced laborers moved deep inside it. With the enforced industry of ants, for the twenty-four hours of the day, the men were employed in the production of missiles. Mainly Russian and French prisoners of war were sent to work in this secret plant. The prisoners slept there, in the underground

hangars, and worked under impossible conditions, in the light of electric bulbs. They did not see daylight or the rays of the sun. They worked there until their strength ebbed and the sap of their bones dried out. Then they were exchanged for other prisoners of war and forced laborers. On our arrival we started to clear what was left of those who had left their lives and their hopes here.

We gathered the eating utensils, clothing, the mattresses saturated with sweat, blood and mucus, skulls and traces of bones, objects that reflected the whole world of the prisoners who perished there. Anonymous "mitzvah dead" (corpses whose burial is a religious obligation on whoever finds them), were crowded here and had left their footprints. We were forced to pick up whatever was left of them and throw it into the empty trucks. Thick dust and smells of mould and sweat filled the air space of the camps. The cruel kapo beat and vented his fury on any group that did not push the truck exactly according to his wishes and command.

I looked at the men I knew from home, distinguished men, holders of office. We were afraid to look at each other or say a word. Time was short to complete the cleaning of the halls, to prepare them for re-organization and increased production. From a distance I saw my teacher and master from the Yeshiva, completely covered in dust and dirt with his little son Zanvil next to him, both of them pushing a wagon with Chassidic fervor. The same fervor was still burning inside him, just as he used to urge the yeshiva students to finish baking the *shemurah* (guarded) matzah rapidly to the tune of the Hallel: "When Israel went out of Egypt..." with his face aflame and his side-locks blowing next to the opening of the white-hot oven.

In the depth of the tunnels and the halls we did not feel and did not know that outside the day had grown dark. Then, the redeeming whistle was heard: *"Feierabend"* – a break from work. Hurting from the beatings and encouraged by the break we marched to the entrances. The cool breeze of the end of May flowed over our sweaty faces. By the entrance of the camp the electric lights on the

electrified barbed wire were already lit. We marched to block 28. We received our portion of soup, washed our faces and hands, and before lying down to sleep on the spread out mattresses, Rav Tzvi Hirsch Kahana of Strimtere managed to gather some of his students and to whisper to them quietly: "It is the Festival of Shavuot today and tomorrow". We quietly recited the evening prayer for the festival and we left the *Akdamut*, the poem of praise of G-d and Torah, for the next day, the second day of the Shavuot of the year 1944.

The gong of the camp guard, the *lagerschutz*, woke us early in the morning. We dressed quickly. We were given a portion of bread, a piece of sausage, a dab of margarine, and a little hot drink, resembling black coffee. We set out to the roll call grounds and from there to the tunnels, beyond the gates of the camp, next to the railway station. The pace of work increased in relation to the previous day. The kapos moved about as if possessed by evil spirits. They hit out left and right shouting in German: *"Los, los, immer... immer los"!* (Fast, fast, always fast!)

The prisoners were scattered between the halls in the tunnels. Some pushed the trucks with the dirt and the refuse, others scoured and swept the floors. Apparently the work was very urgently needed to renovate the work halls in time.

While pushing the trucks we glanced into the huge hangars, with the perfectly aligned workshops in them. We saw row upon row of worktables with prisoners next to them, their striped garments saturated with grease stains and dirt, absorbed in their work, under the supervision of army personnel in SS uniforms. In the midst of this panic, while pushing the trucks, we were able to hum part of the *musaf* (the additional) prayer for Shavuot. The tune of the *Akdamut* reminded us of the scenery of the Carpathian Mountains at the start of spring, the wild flowers and the garden flowers that decorated the homes at the conclusion of the counting of the *Omer*. The memory of the Festival of Shavuot and the taste of the dairy dishes increased our pangs of hunger and thirst. We

returned to the barrack at twilight. A rumor spread that after finishing the renovation and cleaning the tunnels and the halls in the depth of the mountain, we would be transferred to various jobs building the camp.

The Road Builders

Over the next few days more transports arrived, with brothers in trouble. According to the numbers and the red triangles on their chests, we understood that they were not Jews. Some were Dutch, with the letter N stamped within the red triangle, and some were Belgians with a B displayed on their chests. All the time we were hoping to meet Jews to get any bit of information about our situation, our position and the state of the war. Relatively speaking, we already felt like veteran prisoners, compared to the new arrivals. After the difficult first days of working in the tunnels, all other work seemed easier to us. We had come to terms with the situation and tried to keep our limbs intact and to keep up our hopes, however dim. We tried to raise our low spirits to save our souls from dejection.

We pitied the tall, thin Dutchmen who were more depressed and humiliated in their ill-fitting, uncomfortable clothes. Their tailored suits were replaced by provisional bits of clothing that were thrown to them from the pile in the bathing halls. Their long arms protruded from the narrow sleeves of their tight jackets. The trousers reached just below their knees. Most of them wore glasses. Their helplessness and sadness flickered through the lenses of their fine golden frames. On the roll call grounds they looked like professors who had just been jettisoned from their academic days to the abyss of disgrace. Their fair eyelashes stood out against the light color of their fallen, unshaven faces. The sun beat down upon their smooth foreheads and their bare arms were scorched by the blazing sun of those days, between the end of May and the beginning of June 1944. Their wives remained at home to tend the

colorful flower fields: they did not "experience the smoke" that followed the selection. The men, who were accused of undermining the occupying German authority, were placed in concentration camps. Their warm homes, offices and tulip fields were replaced by surfaces of asphalt and cold cement, the smell of pitch, the smoke of the burning of bodies and barracks filled with tortured, starving prisoners. It was hard for them to get used to the primitive latrines of the camp.

We compared the latrines of Dora to those of Auschwitz, where hundreds of prisoners had to press themselves onto the perforated, cast cement surface and had to relieve themselves at the pace dictated by the Kapo with the brandishing of his whip and the screech of his whistle. Here in Dora, the toilets were situated between the back of the huts and the electrified, barbed wire fences. They were trenches, about 5 feet deep, 10-12 feet long and 6 feet wide. Around each trench there was a wooden rail which the prisoner would hold while the lower part of his body was bare. When we returned from work, we could go there and stay there with hardly any supervision. Sometimes we went in twos, to chat. We "practiced" holding our trousers with one hand, so that they would not drop by mistake into the pit, while holding onto the rail with the other hand. The Dutch prisoners had to summon all their mental and physical strength to perform this "natural" activity of relieving themselves into the pits of the Dora-Mittlebau camp.

The Dutchmen and the Belgians also underwent the "baptism of slavery" with various jobs in the tunnels. The daily routine of the new - the *zugenge* - prisoners included work for the sake of work. Our Sages define the term "hard labor" which you may not impose on a slave, as "work that serves no purpose". In the spring of 1944 the Dora-Mittlebau camp was gripped by a frenzy of building and road building. Rows of huts were in the early stages of construction. Floor tiles, building blocks and parts of huts were stacked in every corner. These piles of building materials served the SS taskmasters as instruments of torture and subjugation, to make the

prisoners who had finished their regular day's work do yet more. In the course of the evening roll call we would be shaken to hear the loudspeakers that conveyed commands to the prisoners. We were forced to get accustomed to additional work during the rest hours. Generally they would announce: block number so and so is to remain on the roll call ground to transfer building materials or dismantled block parts *(baracketeile).* We sympathized with the suffering of the Dutchmen, who looked like skeletons, when they practically collapsed under the heavy loads of hut parts. Their shoulders were rubbed to the bone. It was forbidden to put down the load on the way, for then, the progress of the human ant trail carrying the load would be held up. It was very difficult to lift the load and switch it to the other shoulder. The SS men urged the prisoners on with beatings and shoving. The Kapo and the foreman –the *vorarbieter* - screamed with all their might to demonstrate their loyalty to the rulers. We, the veteran prisoners, invented a trick: we padded our shoulders with a rag under our shirts, but we had to somehow avoid being detected by the taskmasters. Generally we would finish the extra measure of slavery about an hour after roll call. When we finished transferring the piles from one end of the camp to the other, the whistle would be heard. We would run to our hut and here we would begin to prepare for the soup distribution while exchanging words with our friends. We removed the wooden clogs and stretched out on the bunks for our night's sleep. The next day we transferred the piles to the other end of the camp.

Over the course of the first few days I grasped there was a survival technique: to be an expert at all things, to dare and work as though you were a born expert. One day at roll call they asked "Who, here, is a *steinsetzer*? (a stone mason)? I did not know what was meant. The only word I understood was *stein,* which means stone, work connected with stones. I raised my hand. Since there were not many candidates, the Kapo decided in any case who would be a *steinsetzer.* I was made to join a group of Italian

captives, who had been under General Badoglio and who had rebelled against the Germans and the Fascists. The Italians were expert at road building by a special method. They cut large stones and smashed them with large hammers into little cubes, which they slotted in arched rows along the width of the road.

There were about 25 of us prisoners doing this work. An SS man accompanied by a large guard dog supervised us, since the building of the road took place beyond the gate of the camp. I was given a hammer and I was attached to the Italian captive as his assistant. I could not communicate with my *meister* (master craftsman) since the Italians knew no German. I sat down next to him on a large pile of stones. I watched his movements, learning how he cut the stone and fit it into the row, and so became a *steinsetzer* by the end of the day, an expert "from birth". After I managed to cut a certain quantity of stones, we would carry them in a wheelbarrow to the other group who fitted the stones in arc-shaped patterns. We had a lunch break for half an hour. We sliced a small slice of bread off the bread we were given in the morning, and spread it with jam or margarine.

We worked even in torrential rain. It was forbidden to stop. The road building was holding up the development of the camp. Mario, the prisoner who was in charge of me, brought me an empty cement sack. By suitable folding we turned it into a sort of "raincoat". I sat bent over the pile of stones; I wore the sack over my head and my back, which were now protected from the rain, however the heavy rain lashed by hands and the hammer. The drops of water, which dripped from my forehead onto my face and into the mouth, quelled somewhat the hunger and the thirst.

On sunny days we worked as if possessed. We were hungry and thirsty. Sometimes we were given permission to go up to one of the puddles that filled up by the roadsides on rainy days, to fill an empty tin can and to drink of the foul water. More prisoners were added to the group of stone cutters, most of whom were Jews from Hungary. They were employed in righting the road and carried sand and gravel in wheelbarrows. One day I saw that the

SS soldier guarding us with the guard dog was paying special attention to the work of one of the prisoners. I think his name was Weinberger from Bereznik. The SS man noticed that the prisoner was not holding his spade in a professional manner. It was evident that he was not used to manual labor from home. He had a wide, full face and frightened, helpless eyes. He was a well-mannered man, about 40 years old. His mother tongue was Hungarian and he knew a bit of Yiddish. The SS man did not remove his hostile eyes from him. He was boiling with rage. "This prisoner, this Jew gets food, and does not carry out his work at the pace the Reich requires", he thought to himself. The guard called him. The Jew went up to him, removed his prisoner's cap, according to camp regulations, and waited. Then the guard asked him with his arrogant German pronunciation: "Listen here, you Jew, what were you at home?" *(Hor mal zu du Jude, was warst du zu Hause?)* The unsuspecting Hungarian answered him innocently, with Hungarian politeness, in polished German: "I am, sir, a philologist, a language expert...".

Two murderous eyes lit up in the face, red with rage and hatred. The SS guard, whose ethnic origin was apparently Ukrainian called the philologist to come closer. Like a crazed tiger, which falls furiously upon the prey at its feet, he slapped the philologist professor resoundingly on both his cheeks until he fell into the nearby ditch, which was running with dirty water. With his polished SS boots, he kicked his face and smashed the glasses on his face and nose. Then he set his dog on him. The dog plunged his fangs, with bared, furious jaws into him. The guard dog glanced at his master and expanded his nostrils, sniffing the fresh blood running off the face of the prisoner into the puddle. At the end of that workday, the Jewish friends of the learned doctor, who could hardly stand on his stumbling feet, propped him up. They supported him until we reached the camp. I never saw him again. I asked the neighbors and the acquaintances of the beaten man and they answered

me with sorrow that within three days of that incident he passed away.

The Rabbi of Strimtere

Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Kahana worked in Dora together with his young son Zanvil, who alone was left of his seven children. His wife Zissel, the daughter of the well to do Reb Hirsch-Leib Bash, had been sent to that other side. I knew the Rabbi well. I used to stay with him as a frequent visitor, as one of the household, both as a diligent student and as an orphan who had lost both his parents. Sometimes I remained in the yeshiva between semesters. I knew his great passion for learning. Everyone regarded him as a great Torah scholar and a *matmid* (a diligent student) who does not waste a moment without learning. He invested all his time and energy in the Beit Aharon yeshiva which he had founded and nurtured with much love and devotion. When he bent over his notebooks, in which he recorded his new Torah and halachic insights, I would watch his shining face and bright eyes. He had a fair complexion and a wide beard a color between gold and copper. He had a refined soul and a sensitive heart. He led his community firmly, and was particularly concerned about the education of the younger generation, which did not always persevere in their yeshiva studies. Due to his great diligence, always bent over his books, he was very sensitive to changes in the weather and was careful to avoid drafts.

He was about 40 years old when he arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau, into the maelstrom of horror. After that night of the selection, he murmured "The L-rd has given and the L-rd has taken away...". He accepted the judgment and took comfort in his remaining young son. He was very concerned for him and guarded him like the apple of his eye, as far as camp conditions allowed. His son Zanvil worked in the *schachtkommando*, in the production halls of the V1 and V2 missiles. At dusk, when we returned from

our various work places, and we gathered for the roll call, the Rabbi would run around to look for his son and to hug him. In a quiet trembling voice he would shout: "Zanvil! Zanvil!...", and we would join in the search to reunite them as quickly as possible.

Unfortunately the Rabbi fell ill as soon as we arrived in block 18. Like many others he developed suppurating wounds, infected furuncles, as a result of lack of vitamins. At the end of the workday he would join the long line at the entrance to the dispensary to have the wounds dressed. The only relief they got was a sort of iodine spread over the infected area bandaged with crepe paper. Generally the sick were assigned to work in the *lagerkommando* – cleaning and tidying of the huts. In the evenings, until lights out, we tried to be in the vicinity of the Rabbi to draw encouragement from his special spirit. He would always welcome us with joy after reuniting with his son Zanvil, checking with each of us how our workday, with its burden of hardships, had gone. When he chanced to have sick days he considered it to be "the hand of G-d", who grants strength to the weary.

Relief and deliverance came to him also from another source. The Germans let us keep our shoes, our trouser belt and our glasses. Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Kahana had three brothers-in-law in America, who supplied his Yeshiva with all its needs. His garments were spotless, as befits a Torah scholar. His caftan was made to measure, from expensive material padded with fur, and his boots were made of soft, shining leather. Miraculously his boots remained on his feet both in Auschwitz and in Buchenvald, without some Kapo or blockaltester coveting them. They remained hidden under the hem of the striped trousers. So he reached Dora with them, until they were discovered.

The Altester of block 28, a German prisoner with a green triangle (convicted for murder) named Erich, set his eyes on them. One day when the Rabbi was working with the other prisoners in cleaning the blocks, the blockaltester Erich called him and proposed to a trade: shoes in exchange for the boots. He was in a

relaxed mood and treated the prisoner as a distinguished person, knowing nothing of his identity and position. Apparently the deep eyes of the Rabbi and their innocent pure gaze, his manner, his attitude to the work and his refined steps in his luxurious boots, made an impression on him. We were still in the month of Sivan about the time of Shavuot.

Perhaps an association with the transaction between Boaz and Ruth and the Redeemer flashed into the mind of the Rabbi. There too the removal of a shoe was a conclusion to an acquisition. Perhaps he recalled something from the *choshen mishpat*, the Talmudic laws of buying and selling. The Rabbi frowned, like someone who is about to resolve a halachic tangle. He understood where he was, and the enormous distance between his home and the block; between the fragrance of the blossoms and the Festival of Shavuot dishes and the smell of the chlorine, the Lysol and the crepe paper bandage on his wounds; between his position as a helpless prisoner and Erich, the all powerful blockaltester. The Rabbi's boots, of course, made their swift way onto the feet of the blockaltester, whose feet and position they fitted perfectly. He gave the prisoner-Rabbi his own shoes and added a clean pair of socks, folded by his personal block servant, who was in charge of Erich's "royal" bed-chamber.

When the sick days were over, Erich gave the Rabbi a regular position in the lagerkommando. From that day on, the Rabbi was considered a regular prisoner who works in the huts, a sort of assistant to the *stubedienst* (the block assistant). Here he was able to benefit from leftover bread slices, which remained on the table of the blockaltester, in his chamber. The Rabbi's wounds healed. The delicate body adjusted to the camp diet. The Rabbi's feet adjusted to Erich's shoes. The Rabbi was an orderly man. He performed his work methodically and faithfully. He recalled the words of the Rambam: "a person is obligated to work with all his strength as it is said: 'for I served your father with all my strength…', that is how our forefather Jacob conducted himself when working for Laban

and this is how we are obligated to conduct ourselves, for the honor of Heaven', so he expressed his opinion more than once. Those who knew him from home tried to help him lift the mattresses and scrub the floor. He himself tried to place the mattresses, one over the other, precisely in a straight line, as required.

Since the trade, Erich, the blockaltester was able to show off his superiority and his skills as a successful "organizer" to his fellows. It was difficult to "organize" a trade of such fine boots made of such superior leather. The word "organize" had a special connotation in the concentration camps. A kapo who had managed to steal provisions from the kitchen was referred to as "an organizer". Those who stole clothes from the storerooms "organized". Prisoners were sent to steal all sorts of items for the kapo or the blockaltester, so that they could boast to the other staff about their successful "organizing". Erich's appearance in the offices of the SS in elegant boots gave him the status of someone who is an "organizer". The Rabbi also benefitted and saw the "hand of G-d" in the trade, a sort of mission which the Almighty had accomplished through the boots. Sometimes the blockaltester sent him to bring food from the central kitchens. There it was possible to find leftovers from the previous day among the empty jugs - for example a potato stuck in the depths of the empty unwashed container. That was a priceless treasure. All was kept for his only son Zanvil.

One day we returned from work and as was our habit we went to see how the Rabbi was. I saw him in a good mood and more content than usual. Once again I was able to see the brightness of the deep eyes as of pre-camp days, and the sparkle that penetrated the souls of his students during the weekly test. The smiling face, which used to be adorned with beard and ear locks expressed satisfaction as though after a wonderful insight into the *Gemara* or the medieval Talmudic commentators, the *Tosafot*. As a matter of routine I asked him: "Rabbi, my Rabbi, how was your day?" He paused for a minute so as not to be guilty of conceit and answered me as follows: "Today I had a wonderful day...after arranging the

rows of mattresses and washing the floor I was given permission to rest. I sat down alone in the midst of the piles of mattresses and I reviewed all of the laws of *issur v'heter* (the forbidden and the permitted) by heart... thank G-d, Baruch Hashem".

In Dora there were about twenty boys who had studied at the Beit Aharon yeshiva in Strimtere. The Rabbi knew our parents who went up in the conflagration and he was a sort of "Wailing Wall" for us. He felt it was his special mission to support us, in this place in particular, in our special situation. Before lights out he would sit down, cross legged, with his pupils seated on the mattresses around him and he would teach a page of Gemara by heart. There were no books. Not a page of a prayer-book, a Gemara or a Bible was to be found. Everything had gone up in the conflagration or remained on the shelves in the bookcases in the houses of learning and in the synagogues. The religious texts in the homes of the Jews were looted and burned when the Jews were deported.

The Jewish home, both of the wealthy and the simple folk, was characterized by its bookcase of religious, holy, texts. The books themselves were a reflection of those learning them, each according to his status and his talent. The scholars' bookcase had in it the Talmud published in Vilna (the *Vilna Shas)* while ordinary householders had books of *Drush* and *Magiduth* (talmudic legends and ethical teaching). Each Chassid had the books of his Rebbe. On the women's shelf one could find the *Tzena-U'Rena*, the *Korban Mincha* prayer-books, *Techina* (supplication) as well as *Ma'ane-Lashon* and *Shevet-Mussar* set in large clear type, in *Ivri Taitch* (Yiddish). Books with ripped pages and fading letters were possessed by outstanding scholars, witnesses of constant usage and learning. They resided honorably next to the brand-new *Shas* in leather binding inscribed with golden letters, a sort of "tablets and broken tablets placed in the ark, next to each other".

When I was a child I liked to "travel" through the various exiles by looking at the frontispieces of the books that lay in the bookcases and on the shelves in the synagogue: the Piotrekov printing

house, Lemberg, Zhitomir, Warsaw, Vilna, Vienna and Budapest. Among the pages of the books I would discover the traces the learners of previous generations. Between the pages, yellowed with age, I would discover long hairs, stretched like the strings of a violin, the hair of beards, as white as snow or gray, or black hair from frizzy sidelocks which had been plucked and removed in the effort to understand Rashi or the Tosafot. Satiated learners accompanied their learning with a happy melody while hungry learners, boys who "ate days", had a sad, longing melody. According to the Kabbala, a hair plucked from the beard or the sidelocks has to be kept, like fingernail cuttings. They are an extension of the garments of the body since the beginning of Adam, the first man. Sometimes a torn ritual fringe, pressed and hidden between the pages of a book, would peep out together with traces of the tobacco of the learner. In the margins of the pages there remained, like faithful witnesses, oil and paraffin stains from the lamps that burned and lit the pages, and the stains of wax and tallow candles that warmed the fingers of the learners during the long cold winter nights.

The prisoner Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch with his phenomenal memory retained whole shelves of books with their treasures. When we sat around the Rabbi on the spread out mattresses, after an exhausting day's work, he helped all those around him retrieve their image of old. There was a special savor in the Gemara cantilation. The Rabbi quoted by heart, word for word, fluently, as though the book was open before him, in the shadow of the electrified barbed wire fences.

He was our arbiter here as well. We brought problems to him and asked him to judge according to *Din Torah* (Torah law). One teenager was suspected of "organizing" and hiding his neighbor's portion of bread. The two litigants came and made their conflicting claims. The Rabbi listened with his eyes shut. One of them, the suspect, did not speak to him respectfully; he expressed himself with insolence. The Rabbi remained silent, held his chin, as if he still had a beard adorning his face, frowned and said *Midechtzif*

kulei hai, shema minah... (quoting a case from the Gemara which concludes with the inference: "Since the litigant is so insolent, from that you may conclude that he is not in order...")

One day, probably in early July 1944, we returned from work and discovered that some of our acquaintances who worked in the *lagerkommando* were gone. We found out that a large group, the Rabbi among them, had been sent to Ellrich or Hartzungen which were concentration camps affiliated to Dora. Conditions there were very harsh. Every day they would transfer dozens of wounded prisoners who were injured at work, or from beatings by those in charge to Dora. There was a central hospital in Dora. At the beginning of January 1945 we found out from a Hungarian Jew, a doctor who worked as a medical orderly in the hospital that the Rabbi was there, suffering from extensive wounds as a result of beatings. Somehow he had managed to pass a note to his son Zanvil. It was not possible to reach him. The next day he passed away. His body was removed and thrown onto the pile of the dead ready for cremation. Consistent with German orderliness they wrote the dead prisoner's number in ink on the body. Reb Moshe Klein from the street cleaning *strassenreinige kommando* identified the body by the ordinal number of the transport which reached Dora from Auschwitz via Buchenwald: Prisoner number 55577, a Jew, a *met mitzva* whose slayer is known. Reb Moshe recited the Kaddish.

The soul of the Rabbi went up to heaven through the chimney of the crematorium of Dora on the 28th of Tevet 1945 and joined the "burning parchment scrolls and floating letters" of all the generations.

The Digging of Drainage Ditches in the Schachtkommando

We made progress with the road building in the steinsetzer kommando. We built the road from around the railway station up to

near the entrance gate of the camp. One morning when we were about to finish roll call and head off to our kommando placement, to set out to work, a command was given via the loudspeaker: "All the *steinsetzer* (the road workers) are moving to a new unit, the *schachtkommando*, to work digging sewage trenches...". The network of ditches and sewers was connected to large pools outside the camp area.

There were about 60 people in the new unit, prisoners from different countries. Among them were about 20 of us, Hungarian Jewish adults and youngsters who had arrived in the schneider-schuster kommando transport from Auschwitz via Buchenwald. We had worked in the hills beyond the barbed wire. Under the hills, in the depth of the earth, were the workshops and production lines for the V1 and V2 missiles. Here too we were guarded by SS soldiers armed with guns and with dogs, in addition to the prisoners in charge - the kapo, the foreman and the messenger (the *laufer*). The first two wore green triangles, which showed that they were Germans who had been sentenced for crimes such as murder. They were transferred from prisons to the concentration camps and were given command positions over the other prisoners. There were also trench engineers, German citizens, who oversaw the work from a professional point of view and prepared the excavations according to maps and blueprints. The work force was supplied by the Reich.

Thousands of prisoner-slaves who were incarcerated in the camps were occupied with back- breaking work from sunrise to sunset. We were hungry and thirsty. The daily portion of bread we were given early in the morning with the addition of a piece of margarine or about an ounce of horsemeat sausage, were not enough to quell our hunger. In addition, we were not trained for this type of work. The tools were unsuitable for the job: we had to dig trenches for the system of pipes with hammers, pickaxes and chisels. This type of work could suit inmates whose whole life was ahead of them... We felt helpless: on the one hand we were urged

and pushed to work at a murderous pace, with no break and with not a moment's rest, and on the other hand they supplied us with primitive, unsuitable tools. Nor was the method of work compatible with the practical, precise German "Master Race". We had to improvise when digging the rocky terrain. We were given heavy hammers, weighing 5-6 pounds, and blunt 20 inch long chisels to excavate the rocks that blocked the route. A young prisoner, sometimes literally a youth, would hold the chisel, with one hand or with both, where they wanted to cut or break up the rock. An older prisoner would strike the chisel with the heavy hammer. This way we could dig and excavate to a depth of about 2 and a half feet or more.

Sometimes the chisel would slip from inexperience and the prisoner's fingers would get caught against the rock and blood would flow. At a short distance, under one of the trees on the hill, an SS man with the rank of *Unterscharffuhrer*, a sergeant, would sit and shout at us: *"Well Yankel, was has tu zu Hauze gemacht "*... ("What did you do at home, Yankel") literally with these words, in Yiddish. In Dora we came across many SS guards who came from the *volksdeutsche*, Hungarians and Romanians who lived in Transylvania in regions populated by Yiddish speaking Jews.

Two brothers from Strimtere were there with us, Mordechai-Yaakov and Shemuel-Huz, the sons of Reb Hirsch Huz, a Kossover Chassid. Mordechai was about 30 years old and his younger brother was about 17. The two were the only ones left from a large family. In the line for the selection, on the night we arrived from the Dragomirest ghetto, the father managed to ask the older brother to watch over the younger Samuel, as a father does. They were always together. Here too, in the excavations, they worked as a team – Mordechai-Yaakov held the hammer and Samuel held the chisel with inexperienced hands. With one of the hammer strikes, the chisel slipped and the skin of four fingers was peeled literally to the bone. The hand flowed with blood; bits of flesh remained hanging by the skin of the hand. The Germans of course did not

provide bandages or disinfectants. Such supplies were more precious than the life of the prisoners. The lives of the Jews were hanging by a thread in any case, sooner or later we would face elimination and annihilation. We felt helpless. We could not help the boy in his distress. We could not even stop working and approach him to give him some advice. Time was more precious than the blood flowing on an iron chisel and on the stubborn rock. The Kapo and the foreman harried us with shouts and whiplashes "*Immer los, immer dalli, immer weiter machen*!" (Keep moving, let's move it – from the Polish word 'dalej') The older brother was at a loss; he did not know how he could help his younger brother. Samuel was holding the chisel smeared with blood, as if it was glued to him. The color of the blood that was flowing onto the black iron of the chisel turned dark, which frightened the injured boy even more.

The ways of the L-rd are mysterious. I have often thought of the SS guard who emerged at that moment. That guard spoke both Romanian and Hungarian; he was apparently from the *volkdeutsche* in the region of Transylvania, and knew the Jews well. He did something which did not fit in with the sum total of rules and conduct between the rulers and the ruled. Each time I remember him I am astounded: what prompted him? He approached the older brother Mordechai-Yankel who was in a panic and said to him quietly, in Romanian: "Take the boy to the side and urinate on the bleeding fingers...", and handed him a piece of crepe paper to wrap the peeled fingers with. This "disinfecting" helped at least to the end of the working day. In the evening we found friends who worked in the *schneider kommando* and got a piece of cloth to bandage the wounded hand. Thanks to this rare action of the SS man, "a righteous man in Sodom", I understood the words of our Sages: "There are those who acquire their World to Come in one moment"...

We acquired expertise in digging the trenches. After we got past the rocky sections, we breathed a sigh of relief to dig soft earth saturated with moisture. The coolness of the earth and the smell

of the roots and the leaves reminded us of villages and fields. The longing for the smell of the dank soil breathed into us strength and hope. The deeper we dug, we could bend, pile handfuls of earth, remove it to the edge of the trenches and while doing so we could rest as we were hidden from the eye of our supervisors. The excavation of the trenches was considered hard labor and therefore we were entitled at noon to about a pint of a dark sweetened drink, tasting of chicory coffee. The main meal, a bowl of warm food, we would get in the evening, at the end of the exhausting day. One day I was fortunate and the runner of the kommando took me and three other prisoners to bring the containers of coffee from the camp's kitchen to the work place. I jumped at the opportunity. I ran quickly to enjoy the actual walking and the break from digging. I girded my loins and stretched out to the full height of my short stature, so as to be "worthy" of the task, almost like on that evening of the selection by Mengele.

I was a bit afraid of the weight of the jug and the distance, which was about half an hour's walk. Filled with a manly courage, I stood next to the three friends, the kapo and the runner. We marched with the footsteps of camp prisoners. There were five of us. The leader was the kapo. He apparently joined us with the hope that he would be able to "organize" a rich meal through his friend, the kitchen-kapo. We had to go through the entrance and exit gate checkpoint of the camp, where a large hut was situated which served the SS guards who controlled the entry and exit of the prisoners with great diligence. There was a fixed procedure: the kapo would stand with his cap removed and next to him, in a straight line, the prisoners would stand still, they too with their heads bare. He would declare loudly: "Kapo *Schacht Kommando* prisoner number so and so, with five accompanying prisoners, are entering the camp...". When we would return with the jugs, the procedure was repeated: "Kapo... this and that, prisoner number... with five prisoners, are leaving the camp".

We marched with a sense of freedom towards the kitchen. It was midday and the camp was a hive of activity. Groups of prisoners in striped and numbered uniforms, with clanking clogs and caps on their heads, were scattered in various work places. The chimneys of the central kitchens emitted smoke and steam, the heavenly aroma of steaming potato soup assailed our nostrils. Thousands of prisoners dragging their thin legs, with their tortured, starved faces, were making their way towards the kitchen chimneys. They all had a silent prayer, from the very depth of their hearts, for a bowl of soup with protruding potato pieces like life saving rocks ready to save a ship sinking at sea. From a distance we could see the chimney of the crematorium – the other side of the coin.

I became jealous of my friends from the cleaners in the *strassn-reniger kommando* (street cleaning squads) who were able to breathe the steam and the aroma of the beetroot and the potatoes that were floating in the enormous cooking pots. My good friend, Zeidel Moshe Perl, who was employed in sweeping the streets of the camp, told me that they would plan their time so that they would sweep in the vicinity of the kitchen around midday, to enjoy the aroma of the food and the clanking of the soup jugs which sounded the tune of plenty, the tune of an unrequited dream. There was hectic activity around the kitchen, which supplied a hot meal for 12,000 starved prisoners. The various kapos, too, were drawn to the sweet aroma of the food. Trades were carried out behind the back doors at the expense of the prisoners' basic food. Each office bearer had his man, who cut down the portions of the slave-prisoners, reduced their weight and contents, so as to smuggle food stuff to the *blockaltester* or to the kapo of his preference.

In the midst of this tumult we waited for our portion of coffee. Here, at the rear of the kitchen, was located the storage place for the jugs and containers used to bring the daily portion of food to each block. Here was a row of faucets connected to rubber hoses for washing the vessels.

The door opened and a fat Russian cook came out and handed me an empty jug to rinse. It was meant to contain the coffee for our *kommando*. I ran quickly towards the faucets, at a certain distance from the rest of my fellow prisoners. I then found a priceless treasure, more precious than gold: at the bottom of the supposedly empty jug, was leftover food from the previous day, dream food: cold congealed soup with potatoes and a mixture of noodles in it. This was a prisoner's daydream come true, the one he nurtured during the precious moments when he would be standing in the line to get his bowl of soup in the evening; a dream and a prayer that he would get the thick soup, mixed with potatoes, at the bottom of the cooking pot. And here I am feeling and touching with my fingers at the bottom of the jug – about two pints of thick aromatic food with a thousand tastes – and it is mine!

Time was short. Soon, the Russian cook would come out and ask for the clean empty jug. Firstly, I swallowed quickly as much of the food as I could. My hand became a spoon, and I shoved the contents of the bottom of the jug into my mouth. I removed my cap and filled it mainly with the potatoes and the beetroot that were clinging to the congealed soup which was now going soft. I called to my friends so they could enjoy this fabulous treasure. They helped me rinse the jug and we brought it back to be filled with coffee. The wicked Polish runner came out and saw that I was holding my cap which contained food. He started threatening me with sabotage, i.e. destroying my hat, the property of the Reich.

My satisfaction compensated me for the threat of the runner. We started to march with the coffee jugs towards the exit gate, again four prisoners, the runner and the kapo. In one hand I held the jug and with the other hand I held up to my chest, under my coat, the cap filled with the congealed soup. But I had forgotten camp procedure: it was forbidden to move about without a cap. Prisoners had to wear their caps unless an SS man approached them, at which time they had to take off their caps until they were told to 'carry on' ("*weiter machen*"). I got to the gate of the camp with my

head bare. The kapo approached the SS guard to inform him that he, number so-and-so, is leaving the camp with five prisoners. The SS soldier went out to check and straightaway noticed that one of the prisoners was bareheaded. "Where is that prisoner's cap?" He asked the kapo. Immediately trouble befell me: the two of them came up to me and pulled the cap out filled with soup, which was dripping on all sides. The SS man started to scream: " How dare you destroy the property of the Reich?!...". I was convinced that my number was up, I was destined to be put to death... for sabotage. Meanwhile, we had created a bottleneck. On both sides of the gate kapos were waiting with their groups of prisoners, to enter or to exit. The SS gatekeeper did not manage to deal with me adequately. The kapo took advantage of the chaos and started to kick me and push me towards the exit, to clear the way. He raised his fists as though he were threatening me, and pushed the four of us with loud shouts and kicks until he distracted the SS man who went into the guard room. I felt I should judge the kapo favorably. He grasped the danger that I, a poor kid, had got into, and a spark of mercy was kindled in him. He decided to save me from the claws of the devouring SS by beatings and screams that were meant to convince the guard that I, the "criminal", was being dealt with.

We finally got to the hill, where the prisoners were waiting for the hot coffee. I arrived with my last bit of strength. I put down the jar of coffee with my full hat still in my hand. I went to the side to avoid meeting the eyes of the kapo. I was afraid of a second installment. I wiped my beaten face, ate the remaining food and rinsed my cap.

On days of hunger and thirst there was a great desire to satisfy one's hunger just once and to die. Then I would remember the Russian cook who brought out the jar with the food remnants at its bottom. The sense of being sated gave me momentary joy and hope for further days of good fortune. I understood that the meaning of the blessing *"Hatov ve'hametiv..."* ("He who is good and who

does good..."). I was grateful to the kapo of the *schacht-kommando* who had the sense to beat me at the right moment and in the right place, and thanks to whose pushes I was saved from the wrath of the SS gatekeeper.

Old Reb Moishe and his Assistant the young Zeidel

Many adolescents from the Hungarian transports worked in the *Kartofel-mide-Kommando*. They stored potatoes for the winter. They would arrange heaps of potatoes in long lines in the shape of an elongated pyramid, about 3 feet wide and 3 feet high, with a layer of straw over it, then alternate layers of earth-straw-earth. The straw and earth preserved the vegetables so they would not be damaged by the winter frost. Potatoes were an important basic ingredient of the diet in all the concentration camps. There was a special watch over these pyramids so that hungry prisoners who tried all sorts of stratagems could not fulfill their dream of a cooked potato. There was a storage area near the Garterei-Kommando for which kapo Willi was responsible. There were other work units as well:

The Asphaltrieren–Kommando 114 put asphalt on the roads and transported tar and gravel. Generally they worked under the German foremen who worked as building contractors in the camps. They operated the compression machines and the steamrollers. The prisoners used wheelbarrows and spades as their tools of work. The *Bahnhof-kommando* worked in the freight train station. These trains brought building materials and raw materials for the camp and the missile production line. From here, from the entrances of the camouflaged tunnels, the material was shipped in special freight cars to their destinations. The *Holtzhof-kommando* worked in a fenced area behind the crematorium. There was firewood there, and straw for filling mattresses and repairing them. The gallows were also there. A prisoner who was condemned to death without any special ceremony would be hanged there. A prisoner who had

died in a work-related accident and the like, would be thrown to the *Holtzhof*. Here they would remove his clothes, write his number on his naked body and from there would transfer him to the crematorium. My good friend, the Yiddish author Yechezkel son of Leibush Ring from Sighet, worked here.

The *Gereite kammer Kommando* was the clothing, food and supplies store. The lucky and favored prisoners worked here. Everyone was jealous of them. They were the first to see thousands of loaves of bread. They were able to satiate their eyes not only with bread but also with other commodities. Their hands touched the bread and stroked the margarine packets; they smelled the bread and breathed in the steam of the oven in which the bread was baked. The men of the *Gereite kammer* knew about all the secret trades that were carried out under the noses of the SS men in charge of the food supply for the thousands of people in the camp. There was a direct connection between the dull eyes and the sunken cheeks of the muzelmen and the food store, with all the portions of bread and soup that did not reach the plates of the hungry prisoners.

Gartnerei-Kommando 135 was a large group of prisoners employed in gardening the areas around the SS camp beyond the gates of the camp. There were experts who built hothouses for growing flowers and vegetables in a primitive way under camp conditions. Among the prisoners in the gartnerei was a large group that was employed in transferring human excrement for fertilizing the vegetable plots – the Scheissetrage. The strassenreinige-kommando were responsible for cleaning the streets and roads, and sweeping the roll call grounds and around the blocks.

There was a management team at each work kommando. At the head of the kommando was the kapo, after him the foreman, the secretary, (the *schreiber)* and the messenger-runner. Each position holder had a ribbon sewn on to his sleeve, with his role printed on it. Each work kommando was under an SS person, usually a professional, in addition to the SS guards who guarded each and every group. The prisoners who had a role had power and

authority. Each ordinary prisoner in the kommando was at their mercy for good or for bad. The more a prisoner with a role showed a special capacity for cruelty and torture, the greater the likelihood he would be promoted, or at least he would hold on to his role, to the satisfaction of the SS men.

Reb Moishe Klein from Schiff was a solitary Satmar follower among the Vizhnitz and Spinka Chassidim in the village. He was one of the few men who survived the selection at Auschwitz. He too arrived at Dora in the Schneider-Schuster transport, and was put in the Strassnreiniger-kommando. Zeidel-Moishe Perl from Schiff, an adolescent, was assigned to him. In this kommando, which consisted of prisoners of different nationalities, the two Jewish prisoners with the yellow triangle and the letter U (*Ungarn*) for Hungary on it, with the ordinal number 55,000, stood out. The Hungarian speaking Jews called him 'old uncle Moishe' (*Az öreg Mose bácsi*). Although chronologically he was 42 years old, in the concentration camps those aged between forty and fifty were called *stari* – the old ones. Zeidel was about 15. They were a team of two. Aside from cleaning the camp, they patrolled the inner streets and gathered up any sliver of refuse of value, such as a piece of wood, iron, straw, bone, etc. They would bring the material to the Holtzhof kommando. There they packed everything and sent it to factories as raw material.

The working day started early in the morning, at the end of the morning roll call. Each prisoner marched from the roll call ground to his kommando, and from there to his work place.

Reb Moishe and Zeidel marched to the tool storeroom where they were given a wheelbarrow, a broom and a dustpan, and immediately started to work. Moishe the Chassid would walk around the camp roads with the same Chassidic enthusiasm as of yore when he was still at home and travelled to remote villages selling books and tzitzit fringes. Since there was risk to life, he was obligated, even here, to work with all his might to demonstrate his loyalty. He tried to placate the kapo and the SS who whipped the

prisoners to keep up their pace. Zeidel would push the wheelbarrow with the refuse, and old Moishe with his withered face and burning eyes would sweep meticulously so that he would not, G-d forbid, leave any refuse whatsoever or be caught by the searching eyes of the wicked ones. The old man wanted to show, in this merciless place - a place where at every turn the flames of hell broke through – that even here the gates of loving-kindness were not locked. He tried, especially here, as he stood bereft, like Job in his time, to perform acts of loving-kindness. Beyond the curtain of darkness, in the depth of the "concealment of the Countenance of He Who dwells on High", he was determined to withstand the test resolutely. It was a silent defiance against "the Judge of all the Earth" who had decided to cast the world back into chaos.

He was naïve. With all his heart he believed that somewhere, his youngest son, the son of his old age, five year old Meir'l, was benefiting from the kindness of others. After the selection under Mengele, when only he and his 14 year old son Nechemya were left, he asked one of the veteran prisoners guarding us, a Yiddish speaking Jew: "Please tell me, when are we going to meet the women and the children...?" The prisoner gave him an answer as well as a resounding slap: "You stupid Hungarians, your families are already roasting..." (*Ayere froyen un kinder braten zich shoyn in oyven...*). He left his young wife Yetta, her parents, his children, six in all, including Meir'l, a cute child with frizzy sidelocks like golden springs, who had just started to read the verses of the Chumash.

According to the laws of the camp, a prisoner was not allowed to keep a bag or a knapsack, but each prisoner made sure that he had some improvised bundle hidden under his clothes. There he kept his precious "possessions" such as a thin rag to wrap his bread in, a sharpened aluminum handle to cut bread or spread margarine and a spoon to gulp the soup. Another valuable item was a piece of wire which served, when push came to shove, to fasten the sole of a shoe. Moishe's knapsack was a sort of free-loan

society *(gemach)*, a treasure-trove full of rags for various uses: rags to bandage a wounded foot, to wrap around the bare feet of helpless boys, to soothe corns rubbed raw in the wooden clogs. He had rags to patch a torn garment or a piece of cloth to wrap a pinch of salt or tobacco in – two precious, rare commodities. When an older prisoner caught a cold Reb Moishe would immediately take out a piece of cloth from the bottom of his knapsack to wrap around his neck. His gemach knapsack was always open for service. During the evening roll call, at the end of the exhausting workday, the knapsack became a sort of first aid station.

He further took upon himself to be a one-man institution for the ultimate acts of loving-kindness, those offered to the deceased. Here, in this hell of the Dora camp, the kingdom of the men with green triangles, where murderers and criminals ruled, where the hangmen and those who allocated life and death by the swish of a whip prevailed, Reb Moishe decided to say *Kaddish* for the Jewish dead. The prisoners' last journey passed through the Holtzhof kommando. Their physical exhaustion and the abuse of their bodies from the time when their souls departed until their bodies were placed in the cart which led them to the crematorium, adhered to German orderliness, since *Ordenung muss sein.* If a prisoner was killed in a work related accident, or was condemned to death, was a muzelman, or just expired from illness the body was transferred to the Holtzhof kommando. Here they would record his number, on the naked body, in black ink, and from there take him to the crematorium.

The street sweepers, who could get to every corner of the camp, were able to see the bodies. They helped load them on a special cart. When Reb Moishe identified the ordinal number "fifty five thousand..." on a body, he knew for sure that it was the body of a Jew from the Hungarian transports. During the evening roll call, when thousands of prisoners would be standing and waiting to be counted and for other orders, old Moishe would recite the Kaddish prayer. His voice would rasp and echo together with the

buzzing of the loudspeaker: *"Yithgadal ve'yithkadash shmey Raba..."* (May His great Name be glorified and sanctified...), and he would ask his mates, standing in rows of five, to reply: *"Amen. Ye'he Shmey Raba..."* (Amen. May His great Name...). Here, among the remains of the Jews and the heap of bones moving like trees in the autumn, Reb Moishe felt like an orphan of the universe who is in need of comforting. He felt that the orphaning of the people of Israel was enfolded in the words of the Kaddish which are recited over the open grave. Often the loudspeaker would reverberate and announce a *lauze kontrolle* lice check or a march to the bath house, and this is when Moishe bacsi quickly set up a quorum to recite Kaddish. More than once he was beaten during the command to "stand still" – *"Stillgestanden"*, or at the shrill order *"Achtung"* screamed by the *Lager Fuhrer* (camp commander). Just then he would get to *"Osseh shalom bimromav"* (He Who makes peace in His heights), and while taking the ritual step backwards at the end of the prayer he would break the line of five and the *Ordenung* of the rows.

In our cruel reality, Moishe spun a sort of invisible armor made of fine, imaginary threads. He erected a sort of partition that moved with him everywhere, a pillar of cloud in the wilderness, to preserve a tiny world of kindness and good deeds. On the black asphalt of the camp streets, he outlined an imaginary path, crystal clear, which would lead him from his destroyed home to the abandoned rural synagogue, from his Sabbath table to the prisoners' bunks and the bread portion. In the imaginary bubble of fire and cloud, he walked about with his broom of twigs. There he would reminisce, criticize, ponder and question, within the boundaries of the permissible.

For many months Reb Moishe Klein and teenage Zeidel walked and waddled in their clogs and striped garments, next to each other, walking and sweeping, walking and mumbling. In between, while working, they would say chapters of the psalms by heart, as was their custom in the past. There, in the village, during the

long summer Sabbaths, the members of the congregation would go down to the rural synagogue dressed in their *shtreimel* (fur hats) and *kaftans* to complete reciting the whole of the book of psalms. Moishe had a rigid daily routine: he started sweeping in the block next to the camp gate – the *postenstube*, following the instructions of the streetcleaners' Kapo. There the SS soldiers who guarded the camp were waiting for him to joke and laugh at the expense of the thin, withered, bent Yid, like in the cartoons of Nazi publisher Julius Schtreicher. They used to call him "Moishele" as he removed his prisoner's cap and stood at attention, complying with camp rules. The SS man would declaim a mocking couplet: "Jud, Jud, HEP, HEP, HEP - Schwine Fleisch ist doch fat" "Schweine Fleisch ist gut – Vorstinken ist der Jud..."

Although he did not really understand the words, he understood that "So it was decreed from before Him and they are His awesome deeds, they are His mighty deeds...".On hearing the sarcastic shout of the SS to *weiter machen* Moishe grabbed the redeeming broom with alacrity, and went away to his work. He thanked G-d that today the song did not end with whiplashes. Straightaway he turned to his work and to his chapters of Psalms. At the gate of the camp, he started with "Praiseworthy is the man who walked not..." (Psalms 1:1) and before sunset, if he merited and his thoughts did not bother him too much and his memory did not let him down, he would reach "Let all souls praise G-d..." (Psalms 150:6). He would repeat the last verse with a flood of tears.

Zeidel would mumble together with him. He had excellent memory since he had recited the Psalms often at the home of his teacher Rav Shlomo Yosel, may Hashem avenge his blood. Here between the fences of barbed wire they took delight in the praises and the prayers of David the King of Israel who lives and is eternal here too. Zeidel would imagine that here as well, David was leaping over the dangers as then, in the wilderness of Judea, when fleeing from Saul. The special cantillation of the verses of

the Psalms filled his empty stomach and eased the boredom of the monotonous work and the dangers that lurked around every street corner of the camp.

By the summer of 1944 we were veteran prisoners. We would find time to rest and engage in conversation with friends about the course of our work. Twilight lengthened and the sun went down slowly. The black asphalt emitted pleasant warmth with a smell of paraffin. The light clothes were suitable for the warmth of the summer and the rays of the sun stirred a longing for our homes and families. We knew that our dearest ones had been annihilated but we tried to suppress these thoughts. Reb Moishe continued to long for his youngest son Meir'l. We tried to imagine the village orchards, the abundance of fruit and vegetation and the water flowing in the streams. Reb Moishe would sigh. He was concerned about his memory, which was weakening. Once he expressed himself with heart rending words, expressing his fear: "I don't know what to do, my memory is getting weaker... lately I have to stop the recitation of the psalms and turn to Zeidel to remind me where I was... apparently the troubles have affected me... or perhaps the End of Days is coming...".

In the beginning of March 1945 Reb Moishe, together with other prisoners, was sent to another camp. Zeidel, who remained in the kommando of the camp sweepers told us that Moshe was offended that they dispensed with his devoted work. Who besides him would pay with a portion of margarine to receive the best broom? He went up to the SS man who guarded the group that was about to be sent to another camp and shouted at him in Hungarian-Yiddish: "*Du scheigetz, wer wet eich azoy getrei karen de gasse we ich klein Moses*?" (Tell me wretch, who else would sweep the streets for you with such loyalty?...), and he burst out crying.

After my liberation from Bergen-Belsen (the twelve thousand prisoners of Dora were evacuated there), I went in search of my friends from Dora. I inquired what became of "uncle Moishe". Friends told me that they had seen him after the liberation in the

city of Nordhausen near Dora. He walked about the streets, which were full of liberated prisoners from the nearby camps, with a bottle of spirits under his armpit. He took out small glasses and cookies from his gemach knapsack, which he had managed to "organize", and searched for Jewish survivors. He would stop every Jew he met and hand him a small glass and a cookie and shout to him with tearful eyes: "Make a blessing aloud and drink *l'chayim,* since we have merited to be liberated..." (*Mach a broche un trink l'chayim az mir haben zoche geven di bafreianug...*)

His two older daughters, Sarah and Elka survived the concentration camps. His young son Nechemya was liberated in Bergen-Belsen. His children established extended families in the land of Israel, and he saw the start of the rebuilding of Jerusalem. He passed away in the land of Israel at a ripe old age.

The Dignitary and the Beggar

During the months of July-August 1944, I worked in Dora in the drainage canals with a large group of prisoners from all over Europe. The oppression could be felt in the air. The prisoner foremen and the kapos urged us on with shouts and beatings. It was forbidden to rest. In addition the SS supervisors constantly inspected the canals to increase the burden and to harry us yet more. Apparently the foremen had undertaken to finish building the camp, including the barracks and the storerooms, by a certain date. The aim was to increase the production of the secret missiles in the underground tunnels. More and more prisoners were assigned to work in two shifts in the underground workshops.

One day in July we felt the heavy hand of the SS guards, made up of Ukrainian speaking soldiers of exceptional cruelty. They walked about armed with sticks and whips and hit out left and right. We did not understand why, since there was no way of obtaining any information whatsoever about what was happening on the battlefronts. Someone peered secretly at a newspaper held by

a German soldier, the *Volkischer Beobachter*, and saw that there had been an attempt on the life of Hitler. Of course, we the prisoners were to blame for everything; therefore we had to suffer.

As Jews we were discriminated against. In Dora there was not even one Jewish kapo or *Blockaltester*. The Russians were also discriminated against to a certain degree. Among the Hungarian transports there were many Jewish doctors. In Dora there was not even one Jewish doctor who was assigned to work in his profession. There was an older prisoner, Dr. Farkash, who was about 50 years old, whose acquaintances helped him a great deal. He was a famous dermatologist possibly from Ungvar (Uzhgorod, a town in Transcarpathia, Western Ukraine). He worked in the tunnels, but he was beaten more than the others were because he could not learn to use the digging tools or adjust to the murderous pace of the work. Eventually, the Jewish doctors were employed in the big hospital as paramedics and orderlies.

When the digging of the trenches and drainage network was completed we were sent to other places to work. There were community dignitaries who found it very difficult to adjust and be like the common people. I recall Reb Baruch Stigman from Sichel near Dragomirest. He was a man of substance. He built a large electric sawmill in Schiff, which employed about one hundred people, Jews and non-Jews. He stood out among the prisoners due to his height and his appearance, in spite of the prisoner's clothes. He was among the older ones and worked in cleaning the huts of the older people. One of Stigman's hands had three fingers missing and in order to conceal his hand during roll call, he would wrap it in a rag. His workmate, Dan, from the Carpathian-Rus region, would help him at work so that his disability would not be noticed. The two of then worked in an isolated hut near the fences up the hill, which overlooked the roll call grounds. In great secrecy they related that the hut served as a brothel for the "privileged" office holders. From them we found out that there were even Jewish girls there. This information distressed us greatly.

We related to Stigman as to a wealthy man who had fallen on hard times but retained his dignity. It was distressing to see him in his reduced state, in ill- fitting inmate clothes, hungry and utterly humiliated. The two of them, Dan and Baruch, reacted in a particular way to the situation in which they found themselves. While we, the young and the old, endeavored to keep going by guarding sparks of faith, by seeing the light in the midst of the heaps of cinders and ashes, Baruch and Dan retreated into themselves and walked about sullen and apathetic. We searched for any crack through which a ray of hope could penetrate but they had turned into walking glaciers. During bombardments, when we felt a sort of exaltation and expectation for retribution and revenge, Reb Baruch and Dan remained as frozen as ice. They walked about sullen and with a severe countenance. They responded to the Great, Mighty and Awesome G-d as measure for measure. Just as Baruch and Dan no longer existed as human beings, but turned into walking ciphers, so, as it were, He no longer existed for them. He had become an absence, an unknown quantity. The curtain veiling His countenance had become a wall, which returns no reverberation, despite the cry of the prisoners and the groaning of the sufferers.

Fried Lazar also reached Dora. All the Jews of the villages between Sighet and Butizhe knew him. He was about 35, a sort of odd reincarnation, healthy in body and happy with his lot. He was always hungry and ready to fulfill the wishes of those who treated him kindly. He came from Butiza. His relatives were ashamed of him and therefore persuaded him to travel to Sighet. There, in the great city, filled with kindly Jews, market places, shops, synagogues and artisans, he found his niche and would not starve or lack shelter or clothing. In Sighet he became a sort of jack-of-all-trades, a porter in the market, an errand boy for housewives, water drawer and yard cleaner, waggoner- helper, beggar, fetcher and carrier of the Sabbath stew cholent pots to the baker and the like. As payment for all these tasks he would be fed and allowed to sleep in the attic of the synagogue. Every Friday he would bathe

in the bathhouse and would dip in the mikveh, the ritual bath. There he changed his weekday garments for his Sabbath garments, which he received from generous people. He was always in excellent spirits. He had a pleasant voice and he liked to imitate the voice of the cantors, although he muddled the words. On Fridays he would go begging from door to door with a bright face, pleading: "Balebuste (mistress) – leave me a bit of cholent and kugel...". On Friday night he would offer to help the cantor sing the melodies of Reb Moshe Nanesher, a well-known Chassidic composer in Yiddish. He would confuse a "Shin" with a "sin" and would mispronounce the sentences with a special charm. About a month before the High Holidays, at the end of summer, he would leave Sighet and return to his family in Butiza. He covered the 20 mile distance between Sighet and Butiza on foot, and on Fridays he would stop for the Sabbath, in one of the villages en route.

Fried Lazar was sent to Auschwitz in one of the transports from Sighet. In our barrack he was the only prisoner who was happy. The hard labor had no effect at all on his mood. The kapo and the SS soldiers did not frighten him in the least because the local ruffians in Sighet had abused him more than once. The hunger did not faze him in particular, for at home he was often hungry but somehow it was all right: some kindly housewife would leave some cholent for him from the Sabbath meal for the middle of the week. Here in the camp he ate the portion of food and the bread with satisfaction, and felt he was an equal among equals. He would return from the clothes storeroom, his wooden clogs slung over his shoulder, and his feet drumming on the sun- warmed, cement surface. He would join the food line or the roll call like a full member of the community, like an obedient soldier.

He also knew the well-to-do Stigman. Stigman always used to give him a generous handout when he passed through the edge of the village of Schiff on his way to Butiza. Here in Dora he felt uncomfortable towards the wealthy man. Whenever Stigman would pass, with his hand wrapped in a rag, Fried Lazar would stand

abashed. He did not know how to express his wonder. He would silence the other Jewish prisoners who were standing near him: "Hush, hush: Reb Stigman is passing..." One evening, when we were sitting on the edge of our bunks getting ready to go to sleep, we saw that Fried Lazar wanted to say something. He looked pleased with himself and it seems that he was pleased with the ways of destiny. Apparently he could not hold something back and wanted to express his feelings towards the wealthy Stigman. He went up to Reb Baruch, who was two heads taller than him, and stood next to him, both of them in their striped garments. Fried Lazar ventured to say to him: "Nu Stigman, I ask you, is it possible here to tell the difference between Fried Lazar the porter and Stigman the dignitary...? Look, I have the same trousers and the same shoes – go ask the master of the universe..."

The Gartnerei-kommando

When the canal and drainage work and the road building of the Dora-Mittelbau camp were completed, I moved to a new work kommando. I felt that I already belonged to the place, that I was a veteran katzetnik. Here too I noticed that the principle of being "an expert at all things" is sometimes a refuge, an opportunity to find easier work.

One morning at roll call there was an announcement: "Who here is a carpenter?" I raised my hand. This time I felt I was a real expert. At the end of 1942 I had left the Yeshiva without permission and went to Sighet. There I was accepted at the Joint (Jewish philanthropic organization) boarding school. As an orphan, the head of the boarding school saw to it that I would learn a trade. My plan was to go to Israel. There were rumors that it was possible to get to Palestine from Sighet. So I switched from being a carpenter's apprentice with Mr. Green, (who called me "the carpenter with the side locks), to a sought- after carpenter in Dora.

I stationed myself next to the sign "Gartnerei-kommando 135". There were about 120 of us. The Gartnerei kommando was composed of various work groups. There were prisoners who were expert at propagating plants and growing vegetables. Other prisoners worked as farmers, by hoeing, leveling the ground and preparing it for planting vegetables. Another group worked at preserving vegetables, like potatoes and beetroots, for the winter. A group of about twenty people worked at carrying human excrement to fertilize the cultivated areas. This group was a sort of punishment-kommando, the "Strafkommando". In prisoners' slang they were called "Scheissetrager" (excrement carriers). When a prisoner was caught and was brought to trial in the guard house, the postenstube, he could get a variety of punishments, depending on the severity of his acts. This ranged from flogging on his behind, imprisonment in the bunker to hanging, as a function of the judgment and the mood of the SS man or the kapo.

One mild form of punishment was assignment to the Gartnerei. Generally they would announce the punishment during the roll call: the following numbers, or this or that kapo are moving to the Gartnerei, to carry excrement for so many days. This work was extremely hard and unpleasant. The workers used half barrels made of iron which, once upon a time, contained kerosene or pitch and had been converted into containers for carrying excrement. On either side of the container handles were soldered through which two long wooden poles were threaded. Two prisoners would go to the collection pools and would dump about six pails of excrement into the heavy container. In the gardens, they spread the excrement on a designated area. Here, other prisoners were waiting, with hoes and spades and would turn the earth. They leveled the beds with rakes and the gardener-prisoners would plant vegetables. The Scheisse-kommando reeked with excrement. During the filling of the containers, squirts of excrement and urine would spatter them. The smell was part of the punishment.

My friends, the young Jewish lads, generally worked in weeding and hoeing around the plant hothouses, and sometimes helped picking carrots or beetroots. While working, it was possible to wipe a piece of carrot with one's sleeve, put it in one's mouth and swallow it before the kapo or some other person in charge passed by. The eagle eyes of kapo Willi would grab anyone who attempted to "organize" the vegetables without permission. The skilled workers of the kommando were Willi, who was an agricultural expert, and Victor, an older Belgian prisoner of about 55, who was a specialist in growing vegetables and bee-keeping. He set up three or four beehives and placed them in different spots around the camp. There was a Russian prisoner who was a shoemaker. He made shoes and boots for the kapo. I was the "expert" carpenter. Willi assigned two Russians to help me with the work. We worked in a hut that served as a storeroom for agricultural tools and as an improvised carpentry shop. Part of the hut was a sort of secretariat and a private room for the kapo and the secretary.

We had to do a variety of jobs depending on the material the kapo had managed to obtain. There were hardly any work tools. We had a forestry saw, about 6 feet long with two wooden handles on either side, an old plane, two hammers and a bent pair of pliers. The main brunt of the work was to repair the agricultural tools, the hoes, the pickaxes and the spades, and prepare wooden frames for the glass windows in the hothouses and the sowing boxes. These were filled with fertilized earth before winter, when would be covered so that the plants would not be damaged by the cold.

All the work was done by primitive methods. I had the impression that the purpose of the work and the activity of the various groups in the Gartnerei kommando was simply to keep people occupied. The tumult and the commotion in assigning the prisoners every morning and the shouts of those in charge created an atmosphere of urgency and importance. The main thing was that the prisoners would have no time for thought or planning. In the workshop, we were able to rest occasionally when the kapo went

out to check the prisoners in the agricultural grounds. German efficiency evaporated when it came to the prisoners' places of work. We toiled for long hours, sometimes for whole days, sawing a wooden board into long planks for the frames for the hothouses. We laid down the wide plank on the table at a certain angle, with my two prisoner-assistants holding it, while two others moved the forestry saw back and forth as if we were in the forest cutting wood. The sound of the saw and the uproar of the work proclaimed at a great distance that the prisoners were not idle and were all harnessed to their work for the benefit of the Reich.

The kapo, Ulsen Willi veteran prisoner no. 1279, was a German with a red triangle who was detained for Communism and undermining the regime. According to what he told us in a moment of smugness, he was detained a few days after his wedding. He had a son of about nine whom he had never seen. His five brothers served in the Wehrmacht as high-ranking officers, but were unable to mitigate his sentence. He claimed he used to be the personal driver of the inspector-general of the German armored corps, Marshall Guderian. Kapo Willi was one of the cruellest and harshest in Dora. His name prompted shuddering and horror and it was no surprise he was the kapo of the Strafkommando – the Scheissetrager. In addition to his expertise in agriculture he was a master at flogging.

The second in command of the kommando was a foreman named Arthur, also a German criminal. He was something of a green thumb. Sometimes he would go out, with a special permit, with a group of boys (the *Jugendhaftlinge*) to collect various seeds from non-fruit-bearing trees and wild plants to bring back to the expert nursery workers. The boys were aged 12-14 and they too were subject to German order. They would go out in rows of five accompanied by Arthur and the Czech secretary. An armed SS man would join them, his task being to ensure that no one would be missing at the end of the operation. Arthur was familiar with

the surroundings and he led the group to the wooded parts to pick seeds and acorns of oaks and pines.

My friends told me that on one occasion the local population came out into the streets to watch the boys who were imprisoned in concentration camps at such a tender age. It is possible that some of the inhabitants of the villages around the concentration camps did not know what was going on inside. On the other hand, all the skilled workers who were connected to building and developing the site were civilians, living nearby, who worked in the concentration camp saw the conditions in which the prisoners-slaves were held daily.

Once they returned from a tour of collecting seeds and brought a hard- boiled egg with them. I recall what a sensation it was. All their friends and acquaintances gathered to see the egg with their own eyes and to feel it in their own hands. This was in the autumn of 1944. The pressure at work, the hunger and the despair were so intense that they led to forgetfulness and a complete detachment from all past life. We forgot what our homes looked like, our garden, or the domestic animals like a hen or a goat, the taste and the appearance of foodstuff like an egg. Everyone wanted to touch the eggshell to return momentarily to that era before Dora, before the ghetto.

The two lower rank post holders were the secretary, a young Czech of about 25, with a red triangle - a political prisoner. He was good hearted which stood out in the human mosaic of the camp. The other one was the runner of the kapo, who would carry out various errands, the kapo's servant. His name was Videk. He had a red triangle with the letter P on it - he was a Pole. A youth of about twenty, he was thoroughly wicked and a quintessential Jew hater. An SS man, appointed by headquarters, was in charge of all the post holders, generally someone specialized in the particular commando's work. In the Gartnerei-kommando the absolute ruler was SS *Rutenfuhrer* (Corporal) Klar. He was wounded in battle and was transferred to an administrative position in the concentration

camps. Two SS soldiers, armed with guns, and sometimes with watchdogs, guarded us as we worked.

"Organizing"

In the concentration camps, the verb 'steal' no longer existed in the dictionary. Prisoners did not "steal" anything. They "organized" for themselves. A prisoner with power and status who wanted a good coat belonging to another prisoner, did not take it and did not steal it; rather, he organized its appropriation by other means. A prisoner who pilfered tobacco or some other commodity, would boast that he had successfully organized. Every kapo had to prove his organizing skill to control his kingdom. Kapo Willi from the Gartnerei had to obtain various materials like cement, iron, wood, glass and nails. He would send prisoners to the Bahnhof-kommando to organize materials and bring them to him. The kapo in charge of the railway station of Camp Dora sent prisoners to organize fresh vegetables so that his cook-prisoner could make him delicacies. Willi's shoemaker had to organize thread, needles and all the material to make him the boots. The kapo organized good quality striped material from the sewing shop, so that the tailors would be able to make a custom-made prisoner's uniforms. One of the assistants at the carpentry shop was a Russian artist. The kapo organized colored pencils and drawing paper for him and the artist sat for days and painted street prostitutes in a variety of postures. He supplied these pornographic pictures to his friends in exchange for other materials. These artistic endeavors satisfied the suppressed sexual drive and increased kapo Willi's fame as one of the best organizers.

Organizing became a regular procedure, on the borderline of the permissible. At the same time it became a sort of unwritten law, as long as you were not caught red handed. If you failed and were caught you were punished for your incompetence. Any prisoner who was caught while performing an errand for a kapo

was punished like a thief who did not fulfill his task properly. No excuse helped. On the contrary, if you claimed that you were sent by the kapo to steal, your punishment was doubled, first for telling tall tales and second for not knowing the laws of the camp which do not apply to the strong and to the ruler. Furthermore, it was a sign that you were recently a civilian while others were already suffering in the camps. This was another reason for you to get thrashed.

I always tried to keep busy fixing the gardening tools. The sound of the saw and the sharpening of the tools had to fill the air of the Gartnerei, to be a member of the orchestra of the ant's nest, constantly on the move to accomplish the dictates of the Reich. I felt like a hunted animal and was always on the move, running as though everything around me was burning. I checked the tools I repaired constantly, in case they needed another tap of the hammer. I developed a barometer-like-skill for measuring the mood of the volatile kapo Willi. By the way he exhaled his pipe smoke, I knew that he was about to vent his rage on the prisoners under his control. He was short, bubbly and as tense as a spring, always running and patrolling between the various groups working in the gardening areas. He had eagle eyes, a long nose, literally a classic Jewish nose. A boot-like pipe was stuck into the corner of his tightly shut mouth. In his pocket he had a leather bag packed solid with tobacco. He always managed to organize tobacco for smoking from a variety of sources.

When in a good mood, after having eaten well and without any mishaps and comments from *Rutenfuhrer* Klar, the SS man over him, he would walk about like a puffed up peacock. He would stop a prisoner whom he wished to befriend, generally a Russian prisoner, (he could chat in Russian) and would address him sociably: "Come here Nikolai (he called every Russian Nikolai), take some tobacco and roll yourself a cigarette..." For some prisoners, tobacco was more important than food. The compulsive smokers would roll a bit of cheap tobacco in thick brown paper from

cement bags, light the cigarette and inhale the smoke to get a taste of tobacco. On the other hand, when kapo Willi was in his usual aggressive mood, or when he would get hold of a prisoner sent to him by a kapo from another kommando to organize some vegetables, he would immediately become a beast of prey, a predatory eagle.

From the window of the tool shed I would glance to see whether Willi had caught a victim. If he held his pipe between his gnashing teeth and the smoke was coming out of his nostrils and the corners of his clenched mouth I knew that an organizer from another kommando had been caught. Once he caught an older Russian prisoner with carrot seedlings in his hands. Willi burst into the hut and demanded a pickaxe handle. Then he decided he wanted a spade handle instead, that was rounder and more effective. The frightened prisoner, with a red triangle with an R (Russian) in it, stood next to the kapo. Willi had a routine of his own when he was about to flog a prisoner who had done something wrong. He had an inviolate condition, that chastisement must be accepted with gratitude. He would phrase this condition as follows: "If you shout or make the least groan, for example by saying 'oy vey', I will start counting all over again..." The punishment apportioned to the thief was twenty lashes on his bare behind. The preparation, the tension and the conditions were part of the pleasure and the satisfaction the Kapo exhibited before the flogging. With the fervor of an enthusiastic Chassid preparing to serve his God he approached his work of torture....

The prisoner submitted to the punishment in silence and prepared himself for the twenty lashes. He undid his belt, lowered his striped trousers, removed his prisoner's striped shirt and wrapped it on his bald head. He bent in dread and fear over the "altar" - the chair the kapo had prepared for him. Willi's predatory eyes glanced to all sides. We all held our breath. With a restrained silent prayer I hoped that I would hear no groaning. The kapo gripped with the chastising rod and started to deal one blow after another on the

sunken behind of the Russian, from one to twenty. The swish of the stick echoed in the tool shed. Drops of sweat trickled down the kapo's aquiline nose. By the grinding of his teeth one could hear his frustration and fury, as the helpless, battered man waited for the final blow. In flogging the prisoner, the kapo exposed his weakness and his fury for having been imprisoned for so many years. Perhaps he was annoyed with the victim who withstood the ordeal with courage and restraint, absorbing the pain without uttering even the least groan. I marveled at the strength and courage of the prisoner, who could have been my grandfather, and I shared his pain and suffering, which we could not help at all. I was proud to be on the side of the victim.

The flogging over, the kapo threw down his rod onto the pile of tools. He took his pipe, stuffed it full of fresh tobacco, lit it, inhaled and exhaled the smoke to the full capacity of his lungs. The beaten Nikolai straightened his painful, bent back. The skin of his behind had red and blue stripes, the colors of his wheals and bruises. He took his shirt from over his eyes and put it on. He pulled up his trousers leaving his shirttails in, because the rough cloth pained him greatly. Beaten and humiliated he turned to leave. Before releasing his victim, Willi called him and said in pidgin Russian: "Come here Nikolai, jot down my prisoner number and my name:Ulsen Willi *haftlinge numer* 1279, when the war is over you will be able to kill me..."

This was his regular *hadran* (refrain) whenever he punished a prisoner with murderous beatings. He did not believe that anyone would survive the concentration camps; certainly he did not believe that the Germans were going to lose the war. His changeable, volatile character remained an unresolved enigma to me, with cruel behavior alternating with generosity. When angry and furious, when he was rebuked by the SS in charge of him, he turned into a beast in human form, and would trample any prisoner who chanced to cross his path. He had unpredictable reactions. He was particularly vengeful towards the French prisoners whom he

compelled to work in the meanest, hardest jobs. He would come into the tool shed cursing and shouting: "These accursed French!... Despicable, self centered!... I will teach them a lesson!" His hatred of the French was apparently motivated by his wish to repay them in kind for his detention with French captives who had received food parcels through the Red Cross. The other prisoners would watch with longing eyes when "those accursed ones" opened their parcels and ate everything themselves. "We cut our fingers – they cut the sausages...", therefore the time had come for payback and revenge.

One day a French prisoner, a non-Jew of about twenty-five was attached to the Gartnerei-kommando. For kapo Willi the letter F in the red triangle was like a red flag to a bull. Whenever he would bump into him he would bully him: he would accuse him of negligence at work so he could beat him severely, he would move him to hard jobs, and assign him to the excrement carriers. This prisoner decided, in his despair, to put an end to his suffering by running towards the electrified barbed wire fence. Generally this was certain death. The SS guards in the watchtowers would shoot people and kill them immediately. Fortunately, or unfortunately for him, the first bullets missed him. The guards shot him exactly when the kapo was in the area. But then something surprising and inexplicable happened. The cruel kapo tackled the prisoner, grabbed him with all his might and pulled him out of the tangle of barbed wire fencing, out of the range of fire and out of the range of the watchtowers and saved him. He took the Frenchman into the tool shed, settled him on a chair, calmed him down with a glass of water and assigned him to work in an easier job, with the group of adolescents. From that day on he saw to it that he got his portion of soup among the first. He would send him together with those who brought the coffee jugs with the secretary and the runner of the kommando. This errand was considered a sign of favoritism from those in charge. I marveled about the reversal that took place in that cruel man, kapo Willi, who turned from an enemy to a friend,

to a Frenchman of all people, one of those who did not share his parcels with the other prisoners.

At a distance of about a third of a mile from the tool shed, there was a little hill and beneath it a sort of rocky outcropping, a natural cave. The kapo set up a pen for breeding rabbits there and two or three beehives. Two prisoners looked after the "farm": the Belgian Victor, who was an expert at growing flowers, vegetables and bee-keeping, and the Russian shoemaker who made the kapo's boots. This hidden nook was an initiative of the kapo. SS *Rutenfuhrer* Klar, who was an invalid after being wounded in battle and was sent to be overseer of the Gartnerei kommando, was in the secret and turned a blind eye. From time to time he would be honored with delicacies which the kapo would cook from the rabbit meat.

One day Willi wanted to surprise the SS and caught a fattened rabbit to slaughter it for the commander. He held the poor animal by its two front paws and brought it into the tool shed. In high spirits he asked me whether I knew how to skin the rabbit. Once again I applied the principle of "being an expert in all things", I summoned all my hidden inner strength until I uttered the word "yes". I recalled those occasions when we ran from the cheder to the village slaughterhouse – the *schlachtbrich*, to see how Zvi Eizek, the slaughterer, attended to the animals. We were very curious and wanted to see the whole process, starting with the passing of the slaughterer's knife on the neck of the calf or the goat and until the squirting of the life-blood onto the wooden floor of the abattoir. I loved touching the inflated lungs with Reb Hirsch the slaughterer with a reed in his mouth, the inflated lungs of the slaughtered animal hiding his face and beard. All this helped me now, in a time of distress, when I decided to pass the test, to slaughter and skin the rabbit. Meanwhile SS *Rutenfuhrer* Klar also entered. The rabbit was twitching in the gripping hand of the kapo. I did not know how to start.

"Come here, Perl... I will teach you how it is done... first you have to stun the rabbit by hitting it hard on the nape of its neck",

he said and he showed me. The poor creature remained dangling in the hand of the kapo, its two ears twitching like at the time departure of the soul. I hung the stunned rabbit on a nail inserted in a board and I started skinning it from the neck down. So Avraham Malik, the butcher used to skin the lambs in his butcher's shop. My hand trembled with fear.

The SS man and the kapo watched me, and my fingers barely obeyed me. I was afraid that I would not do the task properly and I would be punished. While doing the skinning, I overheard the conversation between the two Germans - the prisoner kapo and the ruler, the SS man: "Well, well, there are still Jews left... In the *Umschlagplatz* near Warsaw, I did something similar to the work of this accursed Jew... hundreds of Jews were undressed and were killed naked...*Vorfluchte Juden*..."

During December of 1944, it was already extremely cold and sometimes it snowed. The main work in the Gartnerei was to guard the hothouses and ensure that the plants would not freeze. The kapo organized paraffin stoves to keep the plants warm. The agricultural areas were covered with snow. One morning we got to work and discovered that the rabbits had escaped. Apparently the thoroughly wicked Polish runner, Videck, did not shut the door of the cage. Kapo Willi's mood became predatory. There and then he decided to conscript the whole Gartnerei kommando to search for the rabbits. The kapo was already planning the punishment suitable to all who had any connection with the rabbits. We scattered, following the prints in the snow, and managed to capture the frightened rabbits before Rutenfuhrer Klar arrived.

There was a more serious incident in Victor's beehive. The kapo's personal shoemaker, the expert in organizing boots for the kapo, did not know much about bees. It turned out that the noise from the hammering by the shoemaker caused the death of many bees. During the winter months, when there are no blossoms, the bees need a special diet of sugar. This is the only way for the working bees to survive until the seasonal flowers blossomed. Victor,

the expert, became very tense and started to work to revive the bees. The kapo calmed down when Victor persuaded him that by spring the bees would recover and the beehive would grow. The fury of the kapo subsided.

One autumn day that year, 1944, the kapo entered the tool shed agitated and infuriated. He commanded me to take a block of wood to plane it and smooth it for the SS. Two Luftwaffe soldiers had brought the wood. The Luftwaffe had a defense and guard position for the city of Nordhausen situated near the camp. We positioned the planed block, about 6 feet long, near the rabbit hutch and the beehive. All the prisoners who worked nearby were evacuated. I could see from a distance a group of SS soldiers accompanying one unarmed soldier towards the block of wood. We heard shots, and about a quarter of an hour later we saw a military wagon on two wheels, drawn by two soldiers, with a body in it, covered with a military blanket. Very quietly, the kapo told us that the SS soldier was condemned to death. Apparently he had contact with the prisoners' underground which was active in Camp Dora.

The Chemist Ashkenazi and the Villager Reb Anschel

There are two figures in block 141 who remain deeply etched in my memory. The first was Reb Anschel Ungvar from Dragomirest. A Jew of about 50, old in terms of a concentration camp, he was a country man, a farmer. The other was young, tall and slender, with a round and jovial face, who was fluent in Hungarian and German. He was Mr. Ashkenazi, the chemist from Koshiza-Kascha. His friends simply called him "the Kashai". The two of them worked in Schacht-kommando number 11 in an underground tunnel which was the V1 and V2 missile works. Work conditions were harsh. Their faces were pale for lack of light and air.

The assimilated Hungarian Jews were not familiar with the country Jews in the Marmarosh region. They spoke Hungarian among

themselves, whereas we spoke Yiddish. Although hunger united us, we were different from the urban Hungarians. We missed the fruit and vegetables, the filling homemade bread, the abundance of water and the yields of the fields. Furthermore, we felt the need for synagogue life, for prayer and for study. We endeavored not to lose track of the calendar of the Sabbath and the festivals. The Hungarian -speaking Jews, when tired and hungry, would "cook" and "fry" all sorts of good dishes in their imaginary "kitchen" which they invented. This was a unique feature of the Hungarian-speaking prisoners of the concentration camps: they concocted menus and described their preparation to the last detail. During any free moment, when standing in the roll call, while working, and at every opportunity, they would "cook" dishes. They would "weigh" the meat, the flour, the spices – the black pepper or the red paprika – and "cook" and "fry"... they would "fry" sausage with fried eggs. They would describe in minute detail how to bake and fry potatoes. The composition of the bacon (in our jargon the "*davar-acher*", the forbidden "other thing") would be described meticulously and with precision: the thickness of the first layer, the thickness of the fat and the color of the layer of meat. Sometimes there was an addition of cream to complete the menu. Amongst the Hungarian Jews there were a great many assimilated and converted men, who were nevertheless overtaken by their Jewish fate. Through the menu and its composition we knew the level of their Jewishness. Another complete chapter was the description of "cake baking". We understood the language but did not speak it since the region had only been under Hungarian occupation for four years. The older people still remembered the language from the days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Sometimes we would say in Hungarian, to the "cook" on finishing the preparation of the food: "bon appetite sir... you forgot to make a blessing on the ham, "*she'hacol*"..."

Our acquaintance, Mr. Ashkenazi, the chemist from Koshiza, would also sometimes listen and smack his greedy lips during his

friends' "cooking" sessions. We found out that he was a chemist and among the last to be placed in the ghetto, since he wore a white band on his arm (instead of a yellow one), the one worn by all the Jews who had converted to Christianity. Many "merited" being sent to the crematoria with the white band of the privileged ... apparently Mengele was "color blind" and could not distinguish between white and yellow. Under the Camp Dora-Mittelbau regime, there was no advantage at all to having a white band. To all extents and purposes Mr. Ashkenazi was considered a Jew fit for toil, for work, and for the Jewish fate.

His partner at work, Reb Anschel Ungvar, worshipped his friend the chemist. Country people always appreciated the chemist and the doctor, who were considered to be above the common rabble, even if they happened to be assimilated Jews. There was a sort of tacit consensus that a scholarly, clean shaven Jew, even though he transgresses many prohibitions, and is on friendly terms with, of all people, the village priest and the head of the village, his ever so important occupation atones for everything.

They would run together to the work kommando, and together they would return, tired and exhausted. Reb Anschel would turn to his friends and acquaintances, join a quick prayer, or lend an ear to hear some words of Torah teaching. Sometimes he would manage to receive "on loan" an olive sized piece of bread from the youngsters. He was happy when he managed to find potato or carrot peelings; then his eyes shone with a sad smile. He would groan and smile, comforting himself and the others, and hoped for the arrival of the day when we would be redeemed. In spicy Yiddish he would turn to the young boys, show interest in their work and their daily routine, and walk among them like a good grandfather among his young grandchildren.

Mr. Ashkenazi the chemist, the young giant, would return from his work heavy in body and crushed in spirit. He was always sad and thoughtful. He would swallow his soup ravenously, rinse the utensil and stare vacantly and idly at the prisoners rushing

about as though engaged in urgent matters. Mostly he would find solitude in the corner of his bunk, lie down on the mattress like a wounded lion, and would fall asleep in his clothes until the ringing of the gong of the *lager-schutz* to get up and set out to work.

The smell of autumn was in the air. The mornings were cold. Our feet, clad in wooden clogs, were the first to be adversely affected by the cold. We started to pull down our prisoners' cap over the tips of our ears. The coolness and the wind reminded me of the days of predawn prayers of forgiveness, the *slichot,* before the Days of Awe. Then we used to prepare for "The King the Judge" (*ha'Melech ha'Mishpat*), getting up early in the morning to pray and say slichot.

There was a considerable distance from our block, block number 141, to the roll call ground. We passed quickly by the blocks, which discharged prisoners with beads of sleep still visible on their eyelashes. Each man ran to his work- kommando position and to his taskmaster, the Kapo. Together with my neighbor, Lipa'le, we would hurry to the *"Appell"*. There we would hum *"Kel Melech Yoshev al Kis'e Rachmim"* (G-d, King who sits on a throne of mercy), from the *Slichot* recitation. One prisoner from the village of Polien-Glod, Chayim-Meir Polack was fortunate to find amongst the clothes of one of the Jewish transports, a small, worn *siddur* - a prayer-book. He managed to remove this precious treasure from the sewing workshop when he threw out the rubbish and remnants of clothes, and hid it under a large, sunken stone he found nearby. The select few, those who could keep a secret, were able to see and touch the siddur.

The sewing workshop and shoemaking workshop kommandos were almost entirely made up of Jewish prisoners. Most of them arrived with the transport from Auschwitz via Buchenwald. Many of them were from Marmarosh, where almost all the minor craftsmanship was in Jewish hands. In the workshops of the shoemakers and tailors a special cultural pattern developed. While repairing shoes and garments they spoke Yiddish among themselves. The SS

guards and officers got used to the language, and here and there they used Yiddish words to mock the oppressed Juden. We, who worked in various places outside, envied them because of the relative comfort of their work, their tidy appearance in clean clothes made to measure, and because of their whole, matching shoes.

We had no Hebrew calendar, but we found out from one of the transports the exact date of the two days of Rosh Ha'shana (the New Year). Two days before the festival, a Jewish prisoner, one of the veterans at the workshop, who felt that he already had status, approached an SS officer with a request. In his utter innocence, or rather, in his utter foolishness, he asked for "consideration" for the Jewish festival day, so they could pray a short prayer, i.e., to free them before the usual time. It is hard to understand why he endangered himself and the others with such a request. Every prisoner knew that addressing an SS man and especially an officer, without permission, was literally mortally dangerous. Apparently the urge to do something to remember the festivals, and the innocence of the Jew who believes that "No harm comes to those engaged in doing a good deed" blurred his logic. The reaction of the officer was typical to SS men: his eyes were kindled with the fire of hatred. *"Ja, ja, Jankel, sie haben Feiertag, verfluchte Jude...los weiter machen..."* (Yes, yes, Yankel, you have a holiday, accursed Jew... carry on with your work...").

The next day, at the end of the usual day of servitude and the roll call, we were already getting ready to go to our block, to get our allotment of bread and to organize a quick prayer in honor of the day. When the counting of the prisoners was over the buzzing of the loudspeakers could be heard, an ominous buzzing. The voice announced: "all the Juden from block 141 are to remain on the roll call grounds, from there they are going to clean the camp": we had to finish before we could *abmarschieren* – march to the hut and to sleep. The SS men accompanied by the kapos started to harry us with shoves and beatings to clean the camp. Every stone, piece of wood or board had to be picked up and collected. All the

other prisoners received their food and could rest, while we had to continue cleaning until literally nightfall – a punishment over the Jewish festival we wished to celebrate here, in the land of the Third Reich.

After about two hours, to the sound of the redeeming buzz, we marched to our block to sleep. The blockaltester, with a red triangle and the letter N printed in it, a Dutchman, knew that the Jews had received a punishment, in addition to cleaning the camp: we did not get any supper. He managed to organize a bit of soup and bread for the young prisoners. At the end of the war, we found out that he was a Jew who managed to keep his dangerous secret bravely. With nightfall the festival set in. Yearning flooded us. The memory and distant echo of Rosh ha'Shana caused us to forget the hunger and humiliation. We entered the hut tired, aching and humiliated. Our feet pushed out bodies upward in the direction of the three tiered bed bunks. We lay down on the boards and a deathly silence prevailed. It was the silence of mute prayer, a prayer of deep, anguished cries. We had no *machzor* (prayer book for festivals), no siddur, not even a page with Hebrew letters. The hidden siddur was in its hidden solitary confinement, under the stone. The owner of the siddur, Chayim Meir Polak, was unable to get it before nightfall, as planned. The Ma'ariv prayers of the eve of Rosh ha'Shana as of yesteryear echoed in our ears, but they were silenced with the clatter of the trains to Birkenau. We looked at each other. We had a great desire to pray, just because of the hatred of the SS. The desire to burst out in a pent up outcry rose up in us like a spring bubbling in the depth of the earth and searching for an outlet. Here, within our four walls, restricted between the bunks, with the wooden clogs attached to our feet like stocks, among the wire fences and the death-heads, in the midst of the cruel world of illusion, here, the desire to survive, to live despite everything, increased in us.

Old Reb Moshe stood leaning on the boards of the bunks, his eyes blinking with tears. He was emotional and excited as he reflected

over the tremendous contrast between the Day of Judgment with the "One who sits on the throne of Mercy" (*"Ha'yoshev al Kisse Rachmim"*) and our days and nights, full of cruelty and the absence of mercy. All of a sudden he shook off his outer shell of street sweeper of the Strassnreiniger kommando, and uttered a shout, a cry of distress: "Yidden it is Rosh ha'Shana night now!... (*Yidden, heint is Yom-Tov!)* It is the festival today..."

We jumped out of our beds with alacrity. My good friend, 14 year old Lipa'le Wiesel from Volovo, placed himself next to me, ready and prepared to pray. Many got up, came down and stood next to the bunk beds, so that they would not be seen praying through the window. We watched by the door so that we would not be caught by surprise by an unexpected visit of the SS or the kapo. The old man, Reb Moshe started to recite the evening prayer with the sad tune in the style of the Satmar Chassidim, from memory. Others joined in, humming the tune of the prayer of the Days of Awe. I shut my eyes for a short while and once again I saw the synagogue of yesteryear lit by countless candles and lamps. I imagined the people standing in prayer in white robes for special occasions, the *kittels*, standing bent, crowded together in prayer and tears. The more we continued to recall further passages of the prayer, the greater was our desire to cry. The wellsprings of tears were re-opened. It was a rare thing in the camps, as the ability to cry had all but disappeared. The floodgate of tears, which used to be the refuge for sorrows, was shut and locked. As the troubles and oppressions increased, crying decreased. The wellspring dried and the wish to cry was cut off. Sometimes we longed for that crying which eases the pain and the suffering, we bit our lips, but weeping did not come.

The prayer and the recollections, without a *shofar* (ram's horn), and without the majesty, melted down the awful frozen barrier. For a moment even the fear disappeared. The silence turned into a roar of prayer, the humming started to embrace all those present. Prisoners who had fallen asleep in their exhaustion, woke up

and joined the quorum. We forgot the soup we were denied, and stood humming the *Kaddish "...le'eila ule'eila..."* (...higher and yet higher...).

In the silent prayer (the *Amida*), the *shatz* (the cantor, representing the congregation in public prayers), encountered difficulties. Many passages were forgotten. Then and there it was agreed that whoever recalled any passage, even if it was not in the correct order was welcome to act as the *shatz*. When we reached the sentence, recited during the Days of Awe – "and inscribe all those of your covenant to good life", old Reb Moshe repeated the sentence and everyone repeated it after him. All felt the significance of the words and their absolute relevance. The peak of emotion was reached when the tired and exhausted Anschel Ungvar, a Vizhnitz Chassid, asked to say verses from Psalms chapter 24, "For David a Song", following the Chassidic custom on the night of *Rosh Ha'Shana*. That prayer, on that night of Rosh Ha'Shana 1944/45, in that place in Camp Dora-Mittelbau, amongst the bunks laden with the exhausted prisoners, turned into a massive protest at the time of that concealment of the face.

Even the exhausted giant, Mr. Ashkenazi the chemist from Kasha-Kuschitze, woke up and stood amazed and astounded. The surreal sight of innocent Jews, starved and humiliated, standing with such devotion in prayer and crying like babies before their mothers, stunned him. The force of the words astonished him. I do not know what was taking place in the depth of his soul. After the prayers, as is customary, we went up to each other to bless and be blessed with the words: "May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year". It was then that this man from Kasha, shook himself, like Samson between the marble pillars with a shout "Oh L-rd – I hope for your salvation!" He started to kiss each person praying, young and old, with a strange ravenousness. He apologized that he did not have the strength at that time... he went from man to man, kissing and crying, begging and pleading for us to forgive him. After he calmed down he explained to us why he

was crying and pleading for absolution. With restrained tears he explained in Hungarian: "Forgive me dear Jews... It is I who had kept my distance from you...believe me I had no wish to convert to Christianity... my father is the one who pushed me into it. He was afraid that I would not be able to cope with the dread war and thought that converting to Christianity would save me... please make me one of you again..."

As the cold increased in the nights and the hunger by day, the chemist Ashkenazi sunk into despair. He would return from work and seek solitude in a corner of the block, or would lie down on the bunk and stare vacantly at the low ceiling above him. He did not have the strength or the drive to fight in order to survive. The material world, which broke down around him and the remnant of his family who were consumed by the conflagration sapped his strength and he was incapable of behaving like one of the company. His faith in the ways of the enlightened world had let him down. Slowly but surely he burned out and melted like a wax candle. He became a muzelman. Finally he was no longer counted as part of the manpower of the Schacht kommando. He was removed onto the pile of bodies.

Lipa'le

I had a friend, a companion in Dora-Mittelbau, a brother in trouble, younger than I. He was also sent to Camp Dora in the Schneider-Schuster kommando at the end of May 1944. He came from the village of Volovo in the Carpathian mountains, a region which was captured in 1940 and annexed by Hungary. Lipa worked in the Kartofel- miede close to me, collecting and storing potatoes for the prisoners' kitchen. He was thin and short, his face was round, his eyes were shiny - the eyes of an innocent, pure boy who had just left the cheder and his mother's apron strings.

The older prisoners amongst the Jews from that region made an effort to draw the boys close to them and give them paternal

protection. They considered us to be orphans. An older Jew named Shevach was a sort of "father of the orphans". He attempted to help the inexperienced, helpless young boys in every possible way. At the end of the workday, when they had to push amongst the starved older men to get to the portion of soup, he would help them hand over the bowl and then take it back without losing a drop. Reb Shevach would give good advice how to restrain oneself and not eat the portion of bread in one go, how to hide the leftover bread and the "extras" - jam, the margarine and the slice of salami. Lipa stood out among the dozens of youthful, Jewish prisoners in his enthusiasm to perform commandments. At first he would refrain from eating the soup because of the prohibition on forbidden foods. When he was persuaded that in the concentration camps the most important commandment is *"Ve'nishmartem Le'nafshotechem"* ("You shall take good care of your souls"), he too understood that the sanctity of life is actually the true Sanctification of G-d's Name. Just as he did at home, he kept the regular commandments such as prayer, blessings over food and learning from memory. Whatever he had learned in the cheder, he revised from memory. He was among the enthusiastic participants in the lessons given by our teacher Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kahana from Strimtere. He would squeeze onto the mattresses spread out on the floor, to be as close as possible to the Talmud lecturer – the *Maggid Shiur* here in the Yeshiva of the lower realm... without any books of course, just from memory. He had a special talent to elicit and infuse others with enthusiasm.

It seemed to us that winter came early in 1945. We suffered from the cold and thought that there had never been such a severely cold winter. The lack of vitamins, the hunger and the backbreaking work were the main causes for feeling so cold. The handles of the work tools were cold and frozen, and they literally stuck to the palm of our hands. We would blow onto our clenched fists so that our breath would warm them. The tips of our noses turned red from the cold and our exposed ears froze and prickled like needles.

We would wrap our feet in all sorts of remnants of rags or with the thick paper from cement sacks, to keep them warm. Standing in the roll call grounds froze the whole body. Sometimes we remained standing to attention (*"Still Stand"*) for a long time, as the roll call numbers did not add up. We lived at the time in block 18, which was divided into two wings: on the one side Italian captives and on the other Hungarian Jews, as well as some other prisoners. Days of niggling rain followed. We sunk into despair. We lost the will to fight or to go on living. We lost the Hebrew calendar and hope was lost. We made an effort to remember which day of the week it was. The short winter days were as long for us as the nights. Out of a group of about a thousand who arrived in Dora-Mittelbau at the end of May 1944, there were only about 200 of us left, scattered in various work groups.

We received some encouragement from Jews when new transports arrived from other camps. From them we found out when it was *Rosh Chodesh* (the new month), Hanukkah (Festival of lights), Purim (Celebration of Haman's downfall and the sparing of the Persian Jewish community) and other festivals. More than anything else we were happy to learn that there were other Jews. Wherever there were Jews, the feeling gnawed at their hearts that they could be the last Jews on earth. We were desperate to hear about the condition of Jews in other places. We felt a physical need to know dates. We would identify the day of the week through the food we got. As is well known, the Germans love order, and we were always given the same food, for example beet soup with pieces of horse-meat or dry bones emptied of their contents, on the same day of the week. The wizened body would move to work and back from it, in fixed rows of five. We were numbered skeletons, in striped pyjamas; heads shaven, covered with a motley of caps, deep eyes in sunken eye sockets, shriveled faces with protruding cheekbones. Our feet were used to marching at a regular pace to the monotonous voice of the kapo that could be heard even far away: "Left! Left!" The staccato clattering of the wooden clogs

could be heard from the columns crawling along the black asphalt: the lame, broken echoes of aching feet and bodies shattered from beatings. Muffled sounds of stumbling feet on what was perhaps their last march could be heard before the whole body was transformed into the state of a muzelman and from there to its final redeeming journey.

The hour following the end of work and the march to the roll call ground was a time of expectation, tension and deathly silence. At the end of a workday no strength was left to talk or to chat. We were drained. We trembled and feared the buzzing of the loudspeakers announcing the day's and the hour's commands. The blockaltester and an SS soldier counted the prisoners. One could hear the bated, oppressed breathing of the prisoners along with the buzzing of the electrified, barbed-wire fences.

At the end of 1944 it seemed to us that everything was closing in on us and surrounding us, leaving no way out. The rainy weather depressed our spirits, which were anyway miserable. We lived on a piece of land surrounded by cruel guards with open jaws ready to swallow us. We were prisoners without hope who daily and hourly were facing the awesome concealment of the Presence. In the midst of the sea of troubles of the concentration camps, we, the Jews, absorbed nine measures of suffering. In the middle of the month of February 1945 more Jews arrived at the camp. Towards the end of the war the Germans transferred the prisoners from one concentration camp to another, apparently in an effort to conceal the traces of their crimes. Some of the Auschwitz prisoners were put on trains in open carriages. They travelled for about two weeks until they reached another concentration camp. During one of the Sundays of February, a command was issued via the loudspeakers concerning a lockdown of the blocks. It was very cold outside. We only worked a half day on Sundays, so we crowded together on the bunks to feel a little warmth. The next command was for the *Asphaltieren* kommando to stand immediately, with their wheelbarrows, for a roll call. From there they went to the railway station to

bring the prisoners from the open carriages, after their cold, frozen journey from Auschwitz to Dora.

It was forbidden to leave the blocks. We peered through the windows and saw a large convoy of prisoners, some of them frozen, being carried in wagons and wheelbarrows. Columns upon columns of marchers, their arms intertwined, moving like drunks, leaning on the arms of other prisoners. We found out that they had been imprisoned in the carriages without food or water in the rain, snow and frost. Many arrived literally frozen. Those who survived were taken to the big bathhouse of Dora-Mittelbau. They recovered after washing, medical treatment by the team of prisoner doctors, a change of clothing and a haircut. Even the SS men appeared overcome by the sight of this transport of the dying, standing and walking on their feet. We crowded at the windows of the locked blocks and stared at the new prisoners, looking for an acquaintance or a relative among them, but they all looked alike, hair overgrown, dull eyes and pale faces like at the moment of the departure of the soul.

In the days that followed we made their acquaintance. I met Reb Mordechai Sabo from Rozavlea, the village next to Schiff. This Reb Mordechai was a man of standing, respected and well to do. I think he had eight sons and one daughter. From 1939 to 1940 I studied in the Beit Aharon" yeshiva in Strimtere, together with his son Chanan. Reb Mordechai was a robust, burly man, a peasant type. He would send his threshing machine (the *Dresh-mashin*) to Schiff every year at the end of the summer. He would position it by the huge open area next to the river and the farmers, both Jews and Gentiles, would flock there, with wagons laden with wheat for threshing, each in his turn. The rattle of the engine, the bustle of opening the sheaves, the smells of gasoline and chaff, were a great attraction to the cheder children and the peasants. Reb Mordechai arrived in Dora together with one of his sons, I think his name was Yosef. When Dora was evacuated to Bergen-Belsen, at the begin-

ning of April 1945 the son perished, and Reb Mordechai was left alone.

The new transport breathed a little new life, a new spirit, into us. We, the veterans, tried to assist the "newcomers" with whatever we could. We rushed around to find out whether anyone had a siddur or just a page of a Jewish book, or a calendar. We yearned to see Hebrew letters. It was important for us to recover our past. We wanted to be connected and not lose our sanity.

The weather did not disrupt the precise German routine. Together with my friend Lipa, we would walk the distance between our block and the roll call ground, each of us presenting himself at his work kommando. We had common memories of what we had learned in the cheder. We would recall the images of our melamdim (teachers), their methods and their odd traits. The memories of our not-so-distant youth seemed like a hazy, distant dream. Sometimes we would hum tunes from the cheder like: *"ve'Ani, b'vo'i mi'Padan..."* (and I, on my coming from Padan... (Genesis 48:7), we would hear the pleading of Rachel crying over her children...and the voice of Lord announcing *"ve'shavu banim li'gvulam..."* (and the children shall return to their own land (Jeremiah 31:17). Sometimes we would sing one of the curses-blessings of Bila'am-Hitler, as the melamed used to refer to him with the arrival of troubled times.

My friend Lipa had a perfectly clear memory. He remembered whole passages of the prayers of weekdays and the Sabbath by heart. We see-sawed between despair and hope, and Lipa would lift us by the tufts of our hair to breathe hope into us. When it appeared that our capacity for suffering had run out, he would encourage us with faith and simple innocence. He had a special noble light that illuminated his surroundings and was contagious. Under his prisoners' cap, which the Germans with cruel sarcasm referred to as a *Teufelmutze* – a devil's cap, the two eyes of the youngster shone deep and pure like springs hidden in a thick forest, the eyes of a boy who just recently, before the deportation, had

celebrated his Bar Mitzvah. Whenever he heard that new prisoners had arrived, he was the first to find the Jews, ready and prepared to help. In the evenings he would go from one block to another to discover prisoner brethren, even though such visits were extremely dangerous, as it was forbidden to move about after lights out. The blockaltester's caretaker would watch at the entrance of the block to make sure that the prisoners did not leave the block unless they had permission to go to the latrines behind the blocks. The *lagershutz* (camp police, mostly with green triangles, with criminal pasts), who moved about with whips and clubs in their hands helped beat prisoners who walked around the camp after lights out.

One evening I noticed that Lipa was not in his bunk and I understood that once again he had gone to accomplish some good deed. I was concerned for him. Apparently I fell asleep. It was stormy outside and the wind was wailing between the cracks in the windows of the block. Suddenly I felt someone's hand under my blanket. I was shaken. I was convinced that some prisoner was after my piece of bread hidden in my trouser belt, or trying to steal my side of the blanket. I felt to see whether my wooden clogs were in place. While protecting myself I heard a quiet whisper: "Shush, sha, sh... sh... Chayim Yisrael sha, it is me Lipa from Volovo from kommando 114". I rubbed my eyes. My hands were heavy from yesterday's work – we were hoeing the snow- covered, frozen earth of the winter. The blanket, which covered my neighbor and me, had been pulled off my feet and the cold of the night engulfed my body. Facing me was my friend Lipa'le with his face lit by the weak light emerging from the caretaker's cabin. "Hush, Chayim Yisrael, give me your left arm"... as I was stretching out my arm I felt Lipa was handing me a pair of phylaceteries - *tefillin*. "Touch them and make a blessing...", he instructed me. Straightaway he disappeared to wake up yet more friends and give them the opportunity of performing the mitzvah.

The next day he told me that in the new transport, I think from Chenstchov (Czestochowa, in Poland), one of the Jewish prisoners had managed to smuggle in a pair of *tefillin*. On his way to the bathhouse he passed them to another Jewish prisoner, who had hidden them under a pile of stones. Somehow, this became known to Lipa. Risking his life, he removed the *tefillin* under cover of darkness, and went from one friend to another so they could touch and make a blessing over them. The soft touch of the *tefillin*, the furtive blessing, the tying of the black stripes, thrilled our hearts. The experience of stroking the *tefillin* in the midst of the hell of the camp strengthened us for the coming harsh days. In the morning we ran to work with new hope.

The Thin Fine Candle – Hanukkah 1944

December 1944. Winter, which had come early, was already at its height. The days were cold and harsh. The earth was covered in a layer of snow. I was working in the Gartnerei kommando, and we were clearing the snow from the paths so we could get to the sowing boxes and lift the glass covering so that the plants could soak up the sun and the air. The winter clothes we were issued were not any warmer than the summer clothes. We waited for the long day to be over. The lause-kontrolle ceremony which took place once a week gave us encouragement, since afterwards we went to the bath house and warmed up in the hot showers and dipped in the chlorine pool which burned our eyes.

According to the calculations of the elders amongst us and with the help of the new Jewish prisoners, we knew that Hanukkah was coming soon. The 25th of Kislev fell that year on Monday; in other words lighting the first candle took place on Sunday night, during our weekly half day of rest. Generally we would sit in a leisurely fashion to chat with our friends, repair our shoes, or prepare an improvised knife with which to cut our portion of bread. We recalled the people of our village, the houses, which were sunk

in snow at this time of the year, the peasants who were staying in their huts, the fields and the orchards, which were covered in snow. The Gentiles were preparing for Christmas while the Jews were preparing menorahs and *dreidels* (four sided spinning tops, a traditional Hanukkah game).

Before Hanukkah there was a special bustle among the Jews in anticipation of the slaughtering of the geese and the preparation of the meat and the fat for Passover. The village slaughterer would decide the order in which he would slaughter and in whose courtyard he would start. As children, we were not aware of the problem of animal suffering (*Tza'ar-ba'alei-chayim*), and the death rattles of the slaughtered fowl were a natural phenomenon to us. We donned our warm leather hats, put on the heavy winter coats, put on boots and went out to wait for Reb Hirschel the Slaughterer. On arrival he would take out the slaughterer's knife, pass his nail over the tip of the blade, make the blessing "...over the slaughter", and immediately went to work. We stood astounded over the rattling white creatures with their open throats and limp wings. The brilliant snow was spread like a huge carpet and the red fluid dripped on it and stained it with what looked like red forest-berries.

A small group of us crowded together during our leisure time to hear the news. Among us were Reb Yiddele Liebovitz, an expert tailor from Rozavlea, Ezra, the shoemaker from Strimtere, a G-d fearing scholar who worked in the shoemakers' workshop of the camp, Reb Shevach from Volovo, and Chayim-Meir Polack from Glod who had a paralyzed hand from birth and was thin and shy. The Yiddish author from Sighet, Yechezkel Ring and his friend Koyfman were also of the company, as well as the journalist and author David Shen. The people of Sighet and the surroundings knew him through the Sabbath leaflets he published every Friday (the *Shabbos' Tzetel*), and the book lovers savored their contents. His face was pale, his eyes were blue with thick eyebrows above them. He was always wrapped in a scarf, improvised from a rag, to protect his neck and ears from the cold. David Shen had a

fatherly gaze and he would encourage the young ones not to lose hope. As a journalist he was well acquainted with the rural Jewish way of life in Marmarosh, and encouraged me to write about the different characters of the village like Long Herschele, who was a well-known beggar throughout the district. I managed to obtain a pencil and wrote on thick brown paper taken from the cement sacks in the camp. I would write and sometimes read aloud to him and to Yechezkel Ring; then I would hide the papers under a large stone in the Gartnerei. Our teacher, the Rabbi of Strimtere was no longer with us, as he had been sent in one of the transports to Hartzungen, another concentration camp in the district.

About a week before Hanukkah I spoke with Reb Moshe Klein from Schiff, who was a friend of my father, about the approaching festival. I consulted him about how to procure a Hanukkah candle. I had a plan and I wanted to hear his opinion. I told him that I might be able to get wax for candles. My idea had to do with Victor, the Belgian expert beekeeper. He always helped the boys in the kommando and treated them like a kindly grandfather would treat his grandchildren. I approached him and asked for a little wax from one of the honeycombs, which he had removed earlier in the summer. He wondered at my request. It was hard for me to understand him because his German was spoken with a guttural, Flemish accent. He spat out his sentences through his false teeth so that it seemed he was angry. I do not know what passed through his mind when he heard my strange request. In any case, he went to one of the shelves in his storeroom and returned with a light brown piece of wax smelling of honey. I wrapped the wax in a rag to protect it from any evil eye and left, happy and with a merry heart.

In the evening I returned to the block with the treasure in my rucksack. I told old Uncle Moshe the secret of obtaining the wax and he started the service with reverence. He washed his hands and prepared himself for the holy task. He looked for a suitable rag and drew threads out of it to make wicks. As in yesteryear

when he was still in the village and he would prepare the twining machine for making threads for tzitzit, so now he was totally immersed in the preparations. He kneaded the wax like dough for the *shmure matzo* (guarded unleavened bread for the first night of Passover), for the sake of the mitzvah. While rolling the wax he mumbled "A psalm – a song for the dedication of the House (the Temple) by David..." (*Mizmor shir chanukat ha'bayit le'David,* Psalms 30:1:). With nimble hands he flattened the wax, threaded the wick and rolled the wax which turned into an upright, fine thin candle ready to be lit. A candle fit for the most strictly observant.

Sunday was the 24th of Kislev 1944, the eve of Hanukkah. We told our friends that we would kindle the Hanukkah candle immediately after the soup distribution. Those who were in on the secret gathered in the aisle between the bunks. The siddur owner, Chayim-Meir, undid the swaddling clothes it was wrapped in, like a mother rolling open a newborn's diaper before the circumcision. At this auspicious moment, he permitted me to touch the pages of the worn siddur. My eyes were filled with joy at the sight of the tiny letters of the service of kindling the lights of Hanukkah. The tiny siddur of Chayim-Meir of Glad, that siddur which was concealed and revealed, was, for us, a sort of "pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night" that accompanied the children of Israel in the exodus from Egypt.

The blackish letters darted and danced and reminded us of the burning parchments whose letters were floating up in the air... The letters stood together with the Jewish prisoners like the remnants of the thousands of synagogues and houses of learning that were plundered and burned together with their bookshelves and their holy arks. The longer we looked at the lines, the bigger the letters grew and flourished right in front of our eyes, like the dry bones of the vision of Ezekiel and became a truly mighty army.

We placed a stool between the rows of bunks and crowded around it. We became a wall to hide the flame of the candle. Reb Moshe took out the candle and stuck it to the board of the chair.

Chayim-Meir held the open siddur. The match was lit and an electrifying tremor passed through those present. We heard the blessings and hummed in a restrained voice. We responded with Amen after the three blessings. For a long time we stood with our backs to the candle and with our faces to the door so that we would not be taken by surprise by uninvited and unwanted guests... we felt great satisfaction, warmth and relief. From time to time we glanced at the small flame. The flame burned and brought to mind the burning thorn-bush (how G-d first appeared to Moses), which was not consumed

Around us there was noise and tumult. It was the time of the evening meal when the huts with their dwellers resembled hornets' nests. Prisoners were coming and going, one looking to exchange soup for margarine, another prepared to exchange a pair of wooden clogs for leather shoes and add his portion of bread and jam to the transaction. And within the sea of shaven skulls, the fine thin Hanukkah candle was darting and flickering, alight and burning, blazing and drawn upwards. Those close to it were glancing at it with longing, merging in the dripping wax, while their dull yet yearning eyes were streaming with tears.

Very slowly the candle burned out. We continued to stand for a long time around the stool and reminisced. My friend, the revolutionary author Yechezkel, son of Yehuda Leibush Ring from Sighet, was most moved. He got up and started to speak with the fervor of a visionary prophet: "Dear Jews! It behooves us to get ready from now on for the longed-for day after the war!". Yechezkel decided to establish a world-wide Jewish party, which would encompass all the Jews of the world and will be called the "*Yiddisher Folks Front*", "The Popular Jewish Front". Very slowly we removed our wooden clogs, climbed up onto the bed bunks and squeezed under the blankets, to gather strength for another long week behind the barbed-wire fences.

The Katzetnik Meir'ke from Radum

Starting in May 1944, there was a turn for the better in Auschwitz. The four hundred and fifty thousand Hungarian Jews who arrived in Auschwitz were the last human resource available to the Nazis. The Germans allowed many young children from these transports to survive, in contrast to the Jews of Poland, among whom there were hardly any children or adolescents left. In my work kommando, Gartnerei-kommando 135, there was a large group of Hungarian children who were employed in a variety of jobs. Among them was one unusual boy from Poland from the town of Radum. The name of that child remains etched deeply in my memory. He was skinny and short, about fourteen years old. He had a fair complexion with sad, frightened, blue eyes. He had a grating voice and thin lips, which occasionally assumed an innocent, thoughtful smile. He spoke quickly. He spoke both Yiddish and Polish. His name was Meir Appelboim. He was one of the only adolescents of Polish origin. Meir'ke, as we called him, greatly endeared himself to us. I do not know how or when he arrived in Dora-Mittelbau; he may have arrived after the liquidation of the Chenstachov, Lodz or another ghetto. Meir'ke was quickly absorbed among the Hungarian Jews, the "Magyars", in spite of the Polish Yiddish he spoke.

There was much tension between the Polish and Hungarian Jews. The Hungarians were called by their Polish brethren "Magyars" and the Poles were called "Lengyel" (in Hungarian, Poland is "Lengyelország"). After the Liberation I found out that there was no love lost between the women of the two countries either. Possibly there was a simple explanation – language. Hungarian Jews tended to be zealously patriotic as regards their motherland. They were particularly zealous about the language and they spoke only Hungarian, even among themselves. Polish Jewry, on the other hand, spoke Yiddish. There was also a significant difference in terms of order and obedience. Whereas the Hungarian Jews, like the German Jews were disciplined and obedient, the Poles on

the other hand were untidy and cynical, making funny, painful jokes in the language of Shalom Aliechem, a language the Jews of Hungary did not understand. For a Polish Jew, and to some extent also a Jew from Marmarosh, the assimilated Jews of Hungary were "half Jews". We immediately found a common language with the Polish, Yiddish speakers with whom we felt we had a shared destiny. We were curious to hear about their life in the ghettos there in Poland.

We greatly admired their courageous survival under an occupying regime for so long. We had heard about their actions and about the partisans, about life in the ghetto of Lodz and about the 'kingdom' of Chaim Rumkowski. One of the prisoners from the Lodz ghetto told me how such a simple Jew was chosen to be the leader of such a huge ghetto with its factories and workshops. The German officers entered one of the factories where Rumkowski was working as a foreman, and at once silence prevailed. The officer asked: "Who here is the *Judenaltester*?" The Jews misunderstood the question to mean "who here is the oldest Jew?" (in Yiddish: *der altester Yid*). They pointed to Rimakovski who had grey hair. So he was appointed the leader of the ghetto. The Germans exploited him for their own needs. They printed money with his picture on it and let him act ostentatiously with royal mannerisms.

We were fond of the special Yiddish Meir'ke spoke and he became one of the crowd. Generally, I was able to chat with him on our return from work. I was curious to learn how they managed in the ghetto, but his story was incomplete and confused, and I had the impression that he felt someone was chasing him. One Sunday afternoon, we left the block and went to rest behind the roll call grounds. We wanted to stretch our tired limbs, and forget the annoying commands of the Kapo and the foreman, looking at the huge grounds at a time of calm and relaxation rather than raging and seething when we went to work. I sensed that it was an auspicious time to ask him how he got to Dora-Mittelbau. He had always avoided answering this question as if he was hiding a

well-guarded secret. This time we paid full attention and Meir'ke told us the story of his rescue from the ghetto, a story he had kept to himself for a long time.

The sun warmed the black asphalt and we enjoyed the profusion of light and warmth. We felt like chicks crowding under the warm feathers of the brooding, mother hen. The days at the end of summer were long. We took off our shirts, removed our wooden clogs and enjoyed the weekly rest. The earth warmed up our bare feet. I had the feeling of being a free man who is reclining at the Seder table on the first night of Passover. I recalled the first spring days in the village, after Passover, when the paths were already dry, the earth had warmed up and had started to bring forth light green reeds, while we, the little ones, were given permission to remove our shoes and walk barefoot. For a short while we forgot the kapo's whip. We took out the bread remaining in our bundle. We offered it to each other and sat, relaxed, to hear the story of our friend Meir Appelboim.

Meir'ke was the *mezunik*, the son of old age, a spoiled child. Immediately after his Bar-Mitzvah, the Jews of Radum and the surroundings were forced into the ghetto. Meir was thin and weak and looked like a ten year old. There was a shortage of food at home. From time to time the Germans would catch Jews who could work and send them to the transports. Meir'ke's father knew a Polish peasant who was prepared to take the child for payment and to hide him. Meir'ke became Mark, a name with a gentile ring. Change of name – change of fortune: he was asked to speak only Polish but he was not to forget that he was a Jew. He parted from his parents. He kissed the *mezuza* as Meir'ke, but shut the door as Mark. At twilight he arrived in a dark village, cold and strange. Frightened and scared he remained sitting in the wagon on the crushed straw sack. The gentile did not bring him into his house, as he did not want to involve his wife in the project. The gentile knew his wife had hated *Zids* (Yids) from birth. The peasant signaled to Mark, touching his finger to his lips, as if saying "keep

quiet". He took him off the wagon, brought him near the cowshed and pointed to his new lodgings. Next to the cowshed there was a pigsty and there the peasant had prepared Mark's hiding place a while earlier. He partitioned a part of the pigsty with boards; he dug a pit in the ground lowering its level and so raising its ceiling; he lined the bottom of the hideout with dry straw and reckoned that the place would be sufficiently comfortable and roomy. Here the skinny lad, the little Zid, would be able to lie down and sleep by day and by night he would come to take him out to stretch his limbs. Yanek the peasant promised to bring him a blanket and he left the most important instruction for last. In a low voice, as if imparting a secret he whispered; "You should know, Mark, that my 'piggy' knows nothing of this. By day lie quietly and by night I will come and take care of you..."

It was agreed that every time he would come to feed the pigs in the pigsty and the cow in the cowshed, he would open the small wicket to the boy and set aside some of the food he brought for the pigs. He was to hide the little enamel bowl under the straw bedding. Meir'ke started to get used to his hiding place. He turned the days into nights and counted the hours till the peasant would arrive and bring him some food. When the peasant would arrive and open the little wicket, Meir would crawl through the narrow opening of the pigsty. Under cover of darkness he would relieve himself while Yanek would give fodder to the cow. Over the course of time the peasant camouflaged the pigsty with branches. He was very scared that his over-righteous, devout Catholic wife would discover his secret. There was a time when the peasants would inform and hand over hidden Jews to the Germans in exchange for a pound of sugar or a packet of tea.

During the cold winter nights the peasant would bring Meir'ke-Mark a sheepskin covering. When the cold got 20 degrees below zero, he would take him out of the pigsty and place him in the cowshed, which was built with thick wooden beams and was shut and sealed. He would lie down directly next to the cow or the calf.

Yanek would cover him with the fur and he would remain in the cowshed until before dawn. When he would arrive to feed the animals he would open the small wicket opening of the pigsty, place him deftly in his hideout and cover him. Then he would carefully camouflage the pigsty so that his wife would not notice any change when she milked the cow.

Days, weeks and months passed and Meir'ke got used to his cud chewing neighbors and to the "kosher" hooves of the pig. He trusted them not to reveal his secret. He did not remember the days of the week, the Sabbath or the festivals. The "menu" was always the same. The nights and the days changed only as far as the warmth, the cold and the wind. Through the smell of the manure of the fields he gathered that the season was changing. By the autumnal winds and the crowing of the ravens he understood that the rainy season was coming. Through the cold of the nights he could feel that winter was approaching.

Throughout his whole hiding period he did not wash, have his hair cut or his nails trimmed. He was unable to wash or change his creased, dirty clothes. The peasant was afraid to hang out unfamiliar washing. During the day Meir'ke lay down folded in his niche, buried deep in the layer of straw which had worn out and ground with the passage of time until it had turned to chaff. He lay with his knees bent and his thin arms resting on them, curled up like a fetus in his mother's womb. His "neighbor" on the other side of the wall of boards snorted occasionally. Through the sound of the snort and its rhythm, he knew that mealtime had arrived. The pig felt Yanek's approaching footsteps and snorted with relief. Meir'ke too would straighten up to get ready for the meal. With self-mockery he would consider whether he was obligated to make a blessing over the potatoes, the leftovers of the pig, with the smell and the dirt of the pigsty. Sometimes he would knock with his finger on the partition wall separating him from the pig – a sort of polite exchange between neighbors. The pig would respond with

a number of snorts then it would be silent as if saying: lie down Meir'ke, lie down... good night...

We shifted our seats, and got off the asphalt and moved over to the drainage canal. Meir'ke breathed deeply and mustered the strength to finish his story. One day he heard the footsteps of boots which did not sound to him like the careful footsteps of the peasant, with which he had become familiar over long months. Meir'l small wicket opening was roughly kicked open. He crawled out of his warm niche into sunlight, facing drawn guns, facing the victorious Germans and their Polish accomplices. Meir'ke reckoned that the neighbors had informed on him or perhaps the peasant's wife herself had discovered the hidden child, chatted with the neighbors and informed on him.

The first thing Meir'ke did when standing facing his captors was to breathe deeply and swallow bushels of the fresh air of the blossoming fields, mixed and spiced with the warmth of the sun. He almost wanted to make a loud blessing "...Who had kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this season"...

He attempted to stand on his trembling feet without success. His knees had become used to being bent in the niche of the pigsty. He felt like a frightened rabbit surrounded by hunting dogs. His hair and nails were overgrown; facing the sunlight his eyes rolled, and altogether he looked like a caveman. His clothes stank of dirt, excrement, human, animal and pig dung. A layer of filth covered his delicate childish face. Forest smells and the smell of animals emanated from him to the extent it was difficult to be near him. His blue eyes and light eyelashes peered and protruded from his blackened face. Meir'ke was surrounded by soldiers and men of authority and could not understand how he deserved such an honor. Such a "welcome" was certainly not his doing. The whole delegation stood staring astonished at this creature; they were sure that he had come from another planet. The peasants crossed themselves and drew near to feel him. The lad, the *Zid*, who was hopping as he walked and made strange sounds and uttered broken

syllables in Yiddish and in Polish resembled a monkey rather than a human being.

It was this appearance which saved Meir'ke from immediate death. This child-monkey fit the Nazi theories concerning the Jewish race. It substantiated in a most tangible way the theory that the Jews do not belong to the cultured, European, Aryan master race. For the occupying German army this Jewish child in his current condition was an important "scientific" discovery and a treasure worth its weight in gold. They moved the "child-monkey" to headquarters, where he was photographed from all angles, like a rare archaeological find. They fed him and gave him something to drink and guarded him carefully so that his authentic condition would last at least until the next Sunday. Then they would display the rare discovery to the regional German officers who would decide what was to be done with Meir'ke from Radum. For hours the boy stood, like a circus object, and then was placed in a locked room. At headquarters they decided to put him back in the ghetto and to send him with the next transport to a concentration camp. So Meir'ke Appleboim from Radum arrived in Dora-Mittelbau.

At the end of March 1945 the Dora-Mittelbau camp was evacuated to Bergen-Belsen. Meir'ke was sent there as well. The British army liberated the prisoners of Bergen-Belsen on April 14, 1945. Meir'ke was among those typhoid ridden, lice-covered patients who reached Sweden through the Red Cross. He recovered, recuperated, and in 1946 went to the U.S.A. with a group of youth survivors of the Holocaust. Rabbi Wolf Jacobson, who was a Rabbi in Stockholm at the time, arranged the necessary papers and stipends to study at the Rav Yitzchak Elhanan Yeshiva in New York. Meir Appleboim developed well. He kept his parents' wishes and did not forget that he was a Jew. He adopted a religious way of life. He visited his friends in the land of Israel and took the trouble to look up his friends from Dora-Mittelbau. We recalled experiences and were very happy. He appeared happy and it seemed that he had found some compensation for those years, the years of dread

and hunger, fear and hiding with the gentile Yanek. The ways of providence are hidden and there is no knowing how the measure of suffering is measured up above when the One who dwells on high tries those who dwell below. Meir'ke returned to America and there he fell ill. A malignant tumor killed Meir before he reached the age of twenty. I do not know whether he had managed to tell others his story. Perhaps there too, in foreign parts, as in the land of Israel, there were not enough ears tuned to hear the story of the katzetniks.

The Likeness – the Walbrummer Rebbe

For many years after my liberation from the camps, I wracked my brain for an explanation as to why in a matter of days, we became 'perfect' prisoners when we were placed behind the barbed wire fences. Exposed to the hunger and humiliation, which were intended to "educate" the prisoner, I felt as though I had been in that place from time immemorial. The sentence: "From here you have only one way out and that is - through the chimney of the crematorium..." was constantly repeated by the highest ranking officers and by the lowest ranking SS camp guards. From the moment we took our places in the huts on our bunk beds, I felt I had returned to a familiar place, that I had always lived in this sort of setting. There was no value or meaning to the past. Whatever preceded the camp with its surrounding fences of barbed wire had vanished under the oppressive conditions, the rules and regulations of the camp. There was a complete break between the boy who was a link in the long line of a family forged through generations, and the numbered prisoner, in the wooden huts filled with prisoners from all the nations of Europe. I would return from work, I would eat and go to sleep. I would stare at the low ceiling above me and it would seem to me that I knew the beams, and could identify the knots in the wood and the cracks in the boards, which looked like

the furrows of a worried brow. I would fall asleep as though I had never slept in a different type of bed.

At the end of the summer of 1944 there were frequent alarms. The camp command was extremely pressured and gave a permanent command: "When the alarm sounds, stop work, scatter and lie down motionlessly". The alarms sounded mostly in the middle of the day. In my work place in the gartnerei kommando there were various hiding places the prisoners ran to until the all-clear was sounded. I would run towards the compost heap. Camp Dora-Mittelbau was situated near the town of Nordhausen. Apparently a weapons factory and other important plants were located there and were targeted by the Allied bombers which overflew the district and strafed them. The fact that they did not bomb the camp's immediate surroundings was proof that the Allies did not know about the secret missile production plant, deep in the belly of the mountain.

The hours of alarms and the sound of explosions were like a cool breeze during a heat wave. We started to feel the sweet taste of revenge. When the alarm sounded the officers and the soldiers guarding the camp walked about like drugged mice. They took out their frustration on the main "culprits", none other than us, the prisoners. When the all-clear was sounded we returned to work with a sense of rejoicing at their misfortune and a sense of vengeance. During these half hours of enforced rest, I would lie by the side of the compost heap and try to conjure up the Jewish homes of the village. I tried to recapture the village synagogue, which was a vibrant center of activity and games, but I failed. I attempted to recall the characters I grew up with: my uncle, the head of the community, the melamed, family relations, peasants I knew, the giant beggar "Long Hirschele" – and I drew a blank.

I was unable to reconstruct the paths of our garden in my imagination. I wanted to recall the pear tree which produced sweet fruit and the sparrows that made nests in its hollows throughout the year – but I could not. I would shut my eyes and try to see the well

in the courtyard, the flowers behind the windows, the plum trees, the vegetable and corn field – but I could not. There were days when we stopped working several times because of the alarms, and I ran like a madman to lie down, and on the way I was already planning where to try to "visit", in my imagination, that day.

I enjoyed the noise of the planes making their way to wreak havoc and vengeance on the master race. I heard the whistle of the trains from Nordhausen but I was incapable of recalling what the interior of the carriages looked like. Everything became blurred in my imagination and got mixed up with millions of aluminum-paper flakes the planes released to disable the radar of the German anti-aircraft defense, the *Luftschutz*.

The attempt to recapture the landscapes of my childhood became a sort of sport, a form of obsession. On the one hand I was happy at the very thought that I was "walking" through these landscapes, but on the other hand, the blurring and loss of detail alarmed me. The low point was when I had climbed the ladder, in my imagination, in the corridor of our home up to the attic my favorite place. My grandmother, my father's mother, kept the dried fruit, the plums and pear-halves for Passover there, next to the Passover dishes. Suddenly, in the middle of "climbing", there were no more images. I had turned into a sort of robot with worn out wheels, which turn around endlessly without a purpose.

The autumn nights of 1944 got longer. We would fall onto our beds tired and exhausted. Sometimes we did not hear the wailing of the siren but in any case we did not budge. When the siren went off the block janitor had to switch off the light in the cubicle of the blockaltester. There were many rainy days, damp and cold. I would get up at the sound of the echoing gong of the lagerschutz, run to the latrine while putting on my wooden clogs, return quickly to stand in the line for the coffee or for hot porridge. Often, the distribution of bread took place in the morning before setting out to work, and then I would stand in another line. From there we hurried to the roll call ground to stand by the sign of our kommando.

Here, the kapo, the schreiber and the vorarbeiter were waiting. We lined up in rows of five and set out to work.

I noticed that our nights passed dreamlessly. I asked my friends whether they had dreamed of anything but not one of them could recall any dream at all. But there is no rule without an exception – as our melamed taught us in school. I remember one broken dream which would recur from time to time, generally after hard days or events of fear or extreme hard labor: on the giant roll call grounds there were Jews, with beards and sidelocks, dancing. In the center of the circle, on the bare cement there was an enormous plated challah, baked and browned, a Simcha Torah loaf. It was covered in a shroud, like a dead body, with the village Jews dancing around it in circles...

On the other hand, when I wanted to recall those figures by day, I failed utterly. Possibly the sense of being cut off and the erasure of the not-so-distant past were the consequence of our real situation. The hope, or more correctly, the illusion, that we would one day return and see villages and towns with their inhabitants seemed more far-removed than ever. The chances of escaping the death trap were very slim indeed. Apparently, somewhere, in the subconscious, all the things that for generation upon generation had been the foundation stones of life had been demolished. We had become prisoner-robots, without thoughts, or a will of our own, without the drive to live. Our taskmasters' method was so constructed that the prisoner-slaves would have no free time left for thoughts. Everything was urgent and vital. A prisoner who had received his portion of bread would plan stratagems where to hide it, how to attach the bread to his body under his shirt. The first pleasure was the feeling that you have "bread in your basket". You had to plan how to slice the bread into thin slices, how to pick crumb after crumb while salivating simply from the awareness that soon it was eating time. On the way to get the soup we prayed a sort of "travelers' prayer", made up of all sorts of wishes and requests: that in the soupy watery infusion, bits of potatoes

or turnip would float up. We became adept at doing everything quickly at a run. We resembled the angel with a thousand eyes, for we did not know from where or when an *SS* man or a lagerschutz would appear and find fault with our garments or our conduct. The presence of an *SS* man always ended with giving a kick and sometimes with a beating, simply to satisfy their sadism.

When we lay down to sleep, we fell asleep while worrying that our wooden clogs left under the bunk would be stolen. When the lights went out and we thought that we had reached the final refuge of the day, the darkness of night, under the worn blanket, we could not fall asleep for fear that someone would take it and give it to someone else. Being so pressured and oppressed over the course of time we became broken and crushed, weightless and insignificant, something between the animate and the inanimate.

At some stage we learned that the remnant of the Chenstchov ghetto from Poland had arrived at our camp. A rumor circulated that the master and teacher, the *Admor* of Walbrom was among them. This name, which my friend Lipa'le pronounced in its Yiddish original, the Walbrummer Rebbe, kindled my imagination and curiosity. My friend Yechezkel Ring remembered the name of the township, and the men of Sighet even remembered the Rebbe's court. In great secrecy we tried to discover where he lodged. With a sense of mission we, a number of young friends, decided to go and see the Rebbe with our own eyes. We entered the block where he was supposed to be staying, and one of the Yiddish-speaking prisoners led us through the aisle between the bunks. On the bunk-beds on either side, prisoners were reclining, resting after their day's work. There, on a simple chair, sat a Jew surrounded by prisoners and it was obvious that they were his protectors and invisible guardians, serving as a sort of stone wall in the dream of Jacob's ladder. These Chassidim were the guardians of the glowing ember, ensuring that it should not be extinguished.

We asked "where is the Rebbe?" and one of those surrounding him pointed out, with great reverence, the figure seated on

the chair. A thin man, just skin and bones, shaven, dressed in striped prisoner garments, numbered like any other prisoner, with a deeply lined wide brow, with warm, brightly shining eyes. He was mumbling some prayer or perhaps revising his learning from memory. We stood there, shy and confused like students before their master. One of the Chassidim, who observed the embarrassment of the young prisoner lads broke the silence and told us in an awed whisper: "Kinderlach" – my children – "this is the Rebbe". We pulled ourselves together somewhat. As we were used to from home, I extended my right hand, greeting him with "Shalom aliechem Rebbe". I was so excited I forgot to kiss his hand, as was the custom of the Hungarian Chassidim. My friends too drew near and extended their hand in greeting with "Shalom aleichem".

The Rebbe observed us. I think he too was surprised to see young Jewish lads here in Dora. He observed us with a warm, compassionate gaze. When I turned to leave he gestured with his finger for me to approach him. The Rebbe opened his left palm and in it was a picture – a small square photo, three by three centimeters showing the likeness of the Admor. A special light shone from it, because it was before his adornments had been removed. He had his elegant *spodik* (a tall *shtriemel*) on his head, a scholarly, shining brow and his face was adorned with beard and side locks. For a few moments I remained frozen. I literally could not move. I felt a sort of "resurrection of the dead". My eyes wandered to the eyes of the Rebbe in his awesome likeness as it used to be, then again to his Chassidim surrounding him, prisoners like us. In reality, I saw a Rebbe who was a prisoner, but in my imagination I dressed him in his precious garments of yore. Once again he appeared to me with his beard and curly side locks. I clung again to the small photograph, to his eyes, which watched us and sparkled like pure water in a deep well. We returned to our block hypnotized.

I recalled the story our melamed Rav Shlomo Yossel used to tell us every year about Joseph with Potiphar in Egypt. The story would flow with wondrous descriptions following the midrash

and the *Sefer ha'Yashar*. We were curious and full of suspense to see how Joseph would deal with his master's wife: would he resist the temptation and bring no shame on the House of Jacob...? The Rabbi would blow his nose, stuff a pinch of tobacco into his nostrils and continue: "and a day came and he (Joseph) came to do his work..." – the "*Tachshit*" (the little imp), young Joseph, wanted to do the work of the evil inclination... (give in to temptation). Then "the living image of his father Jacob" appeared to him in the window... and the Rabbi would add a touch of his own: "with shtreimel and kaftan, with a beard that had turned white due to his tribulations and with curly sidelocks; he cast one glance at Yossele the Tzadik – that was sufficient for him (Joseph) to remember whose son he was and whose grandson..."

The glimpse of that forgotten likeness during that time of distress, in the sea of forgetfulness and concealment of the Presence in which we were daily mired, was like a lifeline for us. The likeness of the Walbrommer Rebbe brought us back to the figures before the ashes and the crematoria, which we found so difficult to recall and recapture. For a brief moment he had revived the dry bones, and we literally felt skin and sinews being recreated, a strengthening of our spirit and hope for the future.

The Operation in the Kranken-Revier

The month of March was very cold. Winter, which froze the bodies of the prisoners, was slow to pass, as though it had made a pact with the taskmasters to oppress us even more. There were many days with rain mixed with sleet and frost. Our thin striped garments did not warm our wasted bodies. I suffered greatly from the cold, mainly my feet. I wrapped the soles of my feet with paper from the cement bags, on the advice of veteran prisoners who had survived a number of winters here. The rustle of the paper made me feel as though the cold was diminishing. My nose and the tips of my ears were red with the cold. The hours of work progressed

sluggishly. We waited for the end of the day, but the days had started to lengthen. When we finally arrived at the roll call grounds, we swayed like willows by the streams. We danced and knocked with our wooden clogs to quicken the blood flow and warm our bodies. We blew into our cold, cupped hands to warm them, and waited for the redeeming command that would let us march to the block. Here we could warm up with a warm bowl of soup, which, in truth, was insufficient to satisfy our hunger, but the warmth of the metal gave us a pleasant feeling. The overcrowding of the tired, hungry prisoners and the congestion on the bunk-beds added a little warmth.

At that time I started to have a serious problem. Two fingers on my right hand, the forefinger and the thumb, swelled for no obvious reason. At first, going by the pain I felt, I thought that a splinter from the wooden handle of one of the tools we worked had got stuck into the palm of my hand. I also suspected that I suffered from boils – pus filled furuncles – caused by lack of vitamins. The pain increased from day to day until I reached the point that I was no longer able to hold a tool in my right hand. I made an effort to work with my left hand, which I was not used to do, so that the kapo would not notice my disability. I started to have headaches, and my temperature went up. The pain started to spread from the tips of my two fingers up to my armpit. I was at a loss to know what to do. One evening, when I was chatting with my friend the writer Yechezkel Ring from Sighet and with other friends, I told them about my hand. They took me straightaway to a Jewish doctor who had arrived with the Hungarian transports and worked as a medical orderly in the central hospital of Dora-Mittelbau. I showed him my hand and he immediately noticed the inflammation, which had spread from the thumb up to the armpit. There was already a red line, which suggested that the infection had spread. I was afraid of the verdict and the sentence. I insisted on going to work and ignoring the pain and the swelling, as in any case it was not possible to be absent from work. One of the tasks

of the Lagerschutz was to spy and to check whether any prisoners were avoiding work without authorization. A prisoner who was found hiding would be sentenced to be murderously beaten to death. The procedure was that a sick prisoner had to go to the *Revier* - the clinic – and there the doctors decided whether he was entitled to a day or two of break from work (*Schonung*).

Another day passed. The thumb swelled even more. During the soup distribution I was unable to hold the food bowl with my right hand. I was hungry. I swallowed the warm liquid, which spread throughout my body together with the pain of the inflammation. I sat, thoughtfully, on the side and tried to work out how to get out of this trap. The prisoner-doctor came up to me. I was already a "familiar" patient, or perhaps he saw me as a sort of a son, due to the age gap. He lifted my sleeve and said authoritatively: "My dear friend, young Perl – if you don't go to the Revier, you are finished...". The next day I went to work, but the pain, the swelling and the pus that had accumulated in the thumb forced me to give in. I decided that after the soup distribution, I would go to the clinic, come what may. My friend Yechezkel Ring wanted to accompany me but I refused.

The Kranken-Revier was situated at the edge of the accommodation blocks in a fenced off area, out of bounds for healthy prisoners. There were rows upon rows of huts for people who had been injured in the course of their work. Here was the central hospital, which treated the wounded and injured from nearby concentration camps. The patients who were privileged prisoners, with special status and rights, were given different treatment than the ordinary *haftlinge* (prisoners). Here was the theatre of the absurd, which enabled the stage-show of the Reich. Of course, from here the outside world was informed of their "humane attitude" to the patients. The beds were polished and shining. The dazzling whiteness of the blocks, the painted windows, the polished medical instruments hanging on the necks of the doctors – some of them in SS uniforms, but most of them in striped uniforms with white

doctors' coats over them, the bottles apparently of medicines and the rolls of crepe paper for bandaging, as well as the smell of ether and chlorine – all these constituted part of a cruel game of "doctors and patients" in a concentration camp.

The chief doctor, an SS man with the rank of a colonel, walked around like an emperor, in a starched white coat, his military cap hanging on the wall behind his straight back. The death-head above its peak was grinding its open teeth and glancing with a satanic grin at all those present. Prisoner-doctors, medical orderlies and ordinary service personnel from the various nations would freeze in their shoes when given an order by the omnipotent SS men. Rows of sick prisoners were standing in line to have the privilege of receiving treatment. Any prisoner who had managed to reach the examining doctor was privileged to be touched by his stethoscope. The orderly wrote down everything according to the Geneva Convention. Everything was recorded and filed in clear handwriting, in German, in long sentences, with Latin medical terminology: the diagnoses, the treatment, the time admitted to the clinic, the kommando the prisoner belonged to, the number of the block he lived in and why he was a prisoner of a concentration camp (the triangle was the indicator of the crime). In the case of Jews they just wrote the word *Jude*, then the time of expiration and finally – on the cold corpse denuded of its clothes – the prisoner-orderly would write the number of the dead prisoner who had been removed from the ranks of the living and had been transferred by the wagon of corpses to the crematorium. "*Ordnung muss sein*".

My turn came. The fortunate ones ahead of me, who had fresh superficial wounds, got iodine and were quickly driven out to go to their blocks. Those who had furuncles peeled off the bandages that had stuck to their thin, stick-like hands, and the blood and the pus burst out and trickled slowly. The prisoners showed the orderlies their wounds with beseeching looks, and they, the orderlies, did their work as though compelled to, against their will. Muzelmen

from the various nations dragged their swollen feet to the revier with dull, despairing eyes, hoping to be granted a day of respite.

I entered with faltering feet. A Russian speaking orderly with a prisoner-doctor with an armband *Artz* (doctor) received me. The two of them looked at my swollen fingers. They chatted briefly. The Russian orderly told me in Russian: "*Malenki – khadi suda*" (Little one – come here). He wrote down my number, my block number, my name, and according to the yellow triangle he wrote Jew. In broken German he ordered me to remove my shoes and leave them outside. He took me into an inner room, and I dragged myself after him submissive and frightened. He laid me on a wooden bench covered with a sheet. My hand was extended to the doctor who stood over me like an angel of the underworld. I was ready for the "slaughter"... the operation. The doctor handed the orderly a piece of cotton-wool dipped in an ether solution which he deftly put to my nose. I inhaled and breathed the sharp smell of the ether and within half a minute I felt as though dozens of artillery guns were shooting into my hollow head. My ears rang with the imagined sounds of explosions and then thousands of church bells started deafening my ears and I fell asleep.

I do not know how long the operation lasted, I guess about half an hour. Outside it was still afternoon daylight. It was the end of March and the days had started to lengthen. I was in shock, in pain, confused and half-asleep. They left me on the wooden bunk to recover and be able to stand on my shaking feet. Then I collected my rucksack and cap, the orderly opened the door, sent me out and told me to wait until my name and my number were called.

The immediate, urgent thing was to find my wooden clogs. I was confused and could not remember where I had left them before the operation. I was still under the influence of the anesthetic. I searched for them around the steps of the hut and found them deep down, almost under the floor of the block. I had hidden them there instinctively. I was very worried because during the rainy season of March and in my state of health it would have been an

impossible task for me to organize another pair of shoes. With difficulty I managed to bend and extricate the shoes. Very slowly I sat down on the steps of the hut of the clinic and started the operation of putting on the shoes with just the one, left hand. With great exertion I threaded my frozen feet into the Dutch boat-like clogs. My head was as heavy as a lump of lead. My right hand was bandaged, from the armpit to the tips of my fingers, in three layers of crepe paper.

My hand was extremely painful. I tried to bend my fingers under the paper bandage but I could not. I was convinced that the two painful fingers had been cut off. I wanted to go to my block to rest, but remembered that without the permission note I would be in trouble. Many other prisoners who had had treatment were waiting together with me. They jumped each time the clinic door swung open on its screeching hinges; all were waiting for the longed for freedom-pass. I put my left hand into my trouser leg to warm it and turned my body so that my painful right hand would not be hurt. I leaned on the wall of wooden boards of the hut. For some reason it seemed to me that they were warm and were easing my pain.

The laufer from the revier appeared with a bundle of notes in his hands. Silence prevailed and the suspense was great. Finally his voice was heard reading the names of the prisoners entitled to a day off work. I waited with my heart pounding and with a silent prayer. Then the voice of salvation announced: *"Haftlinge nummer 55660 von Block 18 Perl Israel, ein Tage Schonung"* (prisoner number 55660 from block 18... one day off work), and he handed me the authorization, a piece of white-brown paper measuring 2 and a half x 4 inches. I clutched my precious treasure, reveling in the brief message:

Line 1 – block 18
Line 2 – *Panariz. Der zeigefinger*
Line 3 – *Hat schonung 55660* (my number)
Line 4 – *Ein tage*
Line 5 – the date 28.3.1945

It was the eve of Passover, the 14th of Nissan 5705 (1945), when the children of Israel left Egypt. According to the legends of our Sages all those who were sick were healed to be fit for the journey to freedom, after a stay of two hundred and ten years in camp Mittelbau of Pitom and Raamses, Pharoah's cities where the Jews did hard labor...

I was very happy to have a day of rest, the dream of every prisoner. My joy was mixed with the pain I felt in my bandaged hand and with worry for the following day. I was still convinced that two of my fingers were cut off. If I did not get more time off there was no way I would be able to work. My great fear was that I might be sent in a doomed transport of muzelmen, useless and hopeless. Day by day, slowly, they burnt out. I was afraid of the hunt by the lagerschutz who collected the dull eyed prisoners, wizened, walking like automatons, onto the truck platform and sent them to a transport and from there to the piles of bodies.

My friends from the kommando and my good friend Yechezkel Ring spoiled me. They guarded my rucksack which contained all my possessions: the improvised knife and spoon, a needle, rags and bits of torn paper and last but not least – the remnant of bread which I had managed to save. The Jewish doctor-orderly who advised me to go to the clinic encouraged me. He read the note and understood that they had cut open the fingers but had not cut them off. I was not at all convinced, as I did not feel them at all. I had severe pain with the slightest movement of my hand. I fell asleep feeling a little less worried as well as joyful at the thought of the day of rest awaiting me. My friend Lipa'le asked my bunk mates to let me have the last bunk next to the wall of the block so that my injured hand would be protected.

The early morning gong sounded as usual. Everyone jumped up as if bitten by a snake. Even the sick, who were exempt from going to work, had to get up and get dressed, to get their portion of bread and food and to run to roll call. After the counting and the dispersal to the various work kommandos, the sick who had

certificates returned to their block to rest. On the afternoon of the 29th of March I returned to the clinic to have the dressing changed and to hear what the rest of the treatment was going to be. I was still walking about with the feeling that without my fingers I will not be able to work and that my fate was sealed. From a distance I heard the work groups returning to the camp. More and more prisoners were gathering outside the clinic, some newly wounded and some to have more treatment. Then it was my turn. The orderly started to peel off the crepe paper, which was stuck with pus and blood. I did not take my eyes off my hand, I was curious to find out what had happened to my fingers. Then came the pleasant and soothing surprise – my two fingers were there. True, they looked "as if after a pogrom", split and cut lengthwise, with rubber tubes inside the cut to drain the pus. Deftly and quickly the orderly cleansed the wound, applied some ointment to it and once again rolled three layers of crepe paper around my hand.

I was sent out to wait by the door of the revier. There, the laufer would call out the schonung passes which determined fate: doom or reprieve. I assessed my new situation in relation to the day before. On the one hand I did have my fingers, cut and bruised, painful and bleeding. On the other hand there was hope that the pus would be drained and would disappear, the rubber tubing would be removed, the split fingers would come together and heal and once again I would be able somehow to continue to function in my Gartnerei kommando. I was scared the kapo would see that I was not working as well as usual and would remove me from his workers' list, in which case my fate would be sealed. Such people were generally sent to one of the camps adjacent to Dora-Mittelbau, like Ellrich and Hartzungen, which were notorious for their harsh and cruel conditions. So I sat and mused while I waited, after my wound was dressed, for the authorization exempting me from work.

Silence prevailed. The schreiber of the revier, a political prisoner with a red triangle, appeared at the entrance of the office and

started reading out the names and the numbers of the prisoners who had come that day for treatment. It was the 29th of March 1945, and according to the calendar in the memory of the older Jewish prisoners, the 15th of Nissan, the first day of Passover 7505 (1945). Memories floated to the surface. On that day we would dress in our festive clothes. The special Passover dishware would decorate the home and the tables in honor of the second Seder night. The special aromas of olive oil and melted goose fat would fill the house and a sense of exaltation and festivity enveloped all the families. Even the sheets and the curtains were white and festive, kosher for Passover. It was as though the sharp pain, which pierced my body from time to time, and the white shine of the crepe paper on my bandaged hand, had cleared my thoughts so I was able to recall every last detail of our home, the synagogue, the utensils and the kittels my father and my uncle wore.

I identified the smell of the fresh vegetables that were brought up out of the depths of the earth in honor of Passover. Waiting for the pass-note of salvation, for another two or three days of rest, moved me from "slavery to freedom", and or almost-freedom. Each time the schrieber called out a name and handed over a pass to a prisoner, but my name was not called out, I felt I a deep pit was opening up beneath my stumbling feet and I was about to fall into it. When the ceremony of calling out the passes was over and my name was not among them, I felt great despair, as if the heavens had fallen on me and black clouds had enclosed me on all sides. I recalled the description by my dear teacher Rabbi Shlomo Yosel of the Children of Israel on leaving Egypt. "The pursuing Egyptians on one side and the seething, raging sea on the other side and the Children of Israel in the middle, crying and crying... *Moshe helf!* (Moshe help!)".

I held my forehead in my left hand, my healthy hand, and I did not know what to do. According to camp rules, a prisoner who did not have a sick leave was obliged to turn up for work at a work kommando and work. I was convinced of one thing – I

was not able as yet to work. The operation had only been the day before. Like a beaten dog, sad and embarrassed, I withdrew into myself. I straightened my bandage and sat down on the wooden step of the clinic of the kranken-revier. A thin drizzle started. Low grey clouds enclosed the huts within the barbed-wire fences. The roofs of the blocks dripped raindrops on the prisoners. The striped shirts, sewn from a special material, shrank and hardened from the moisture, and clung to the thin skeletons shivering with the cold. The fortunate ones who had received the pass note returned encouraged to their block, but I continued to sit staring: how can I go to work at the Gartnerei kommando tomorrow?

I was sitting withdrawn and thoughtful, almost paralyzed. I was incapable of lifting my head. Suddenly I heard a voice calling my name: *Perl, was machs du hier*? (What are you doing here?) It was the schreiber from the gartnerei who had come on an errand for the kapo to accompany a wounded prisoner. I knew he was a fair humane fellow, a political prisoner of about 25 years of age, from Czechoslovakia. Every morning and evening when going out to work and when entering the camp he would call the names of those present. He saw me completely withdrawn and bandaged like an Egyptian mummy. I told him in simple German: "Only yesterday I had an operation, I received only one day of schonung and today after changing the dressing my name was not called out to continue the treatment..." He held my hand spontaneously and said: "Come with me!" He drew me in the direction of the krankenbau office, seething and raging about the wrong done to me. Since he was a man with a role, with an armband schreiber on his arm, dressed in the clothes of a person of status, holding under his armpit the registration file of the Gartnerei kommando, and not a Jew, he dared enter the lion's den. I followed him, dragging myself in my creased garments; during the last few days I had not taken my clothes off at night because of the pains in my hand and the bandage. With a devil's hat on my head, a yellow triangle, I was a

thin, wizened Jew, dragging after the schreiber inside the "Holy of Holies" of the revier.

Lights were burning on the desks. SS men, lower ranking officers and those with a high rank were rushing about with papers and lists. From time to time one could hear the clicking of the soldiers' polished boots as they saluted the officers with serious submissiveness. Prisoner-doctors and clerks from the various nations, in white medical coats with striped and numbered prisoner garments, with their triangles beneath them, were all anxious to carry out the orders of those in charge, as though their lives were at the mercy of their moods. Everything was dazzling, with the whiteness of cleanliness and in prefect order.

My schreiber was looking for the revier-kapo, to discuss the injustice done to his prisoner (in other words, me). The kapo leaped from one of the tables, like a hungry tiger on its prey. He had a green triangle with the letter D; in other words, a German, an imprisoned criminal, who was as "a slave who comes to power". More correctly: a slave murderer. The kapo assessed me with disdainful, angry eyes. He opened his mouth furiously as if sparks of fire were darting from his teeth, and turned to the good-hearted schreiber: "How dare you bring this dirty Jew in here! You have brought this *Schwein Jude* into the office of the revier? You have brought here this *scheishaufe* (dung heap)?! *Raus*! *Raus*! Straightaway *raus*! In Lublin we killed thousands of Jews! And you bring here this heap of excrement?!!! *Raus*!"

The schreiber grabbed my hand, we did a *'Bo'i be'shalom'* – we bowed ourselves out and went outside. Quietly, without undue excitement the schreiber said to me: "Wait for me here, Perl...". He turned to someone, then entered the clinic where I had the operation. A few minutes later he came out with a cheerful expression and with a victorious stride, he handed me the pass note of salvation, which is in my possession to this day. A line was added to the pass note I had received on the first day, with a stamp: *Heft. 55660 hat schonung bis...* until the 30th of March 1945 (prisoner 55660 is

not to work until…). The day after, March 31st was a Sabbath and somehow I fitted in with the kommando and passed the workday safely. I was already able to start moving my fingers.

On the evening between Sabbath and Sunday I managed to climb up to the bunk using just one hand. My hand hurt less. I had a feeling that on the next day, which was a half-day of work, I would be able to be myself again. I fell asleep feeling gratitude towards the schreiber who had arrived just when all seemed lost. I was reminded of one of the slichot composed in the eleventh century, a prayer and supplication that express the deep faith of the martyrs who sanctify the Name that says: "He wears justice and it enwraps Him like a coat. From the blow itself He fashions a remedy…"

Chapter 10

THE EVACUATION OF DORA-MITTELBAU

At the end of March 1945, Allied planes started to appear with greater frequency. There were alarms by day and by night. The bombing of the nearby town of Nordhausen affected the whole surrounding area. We were surprised that the bombers passed over the camp and the V1 and V2 missile plant. The entrances to the tunnels were well camouflaged and apparently the Allies did not know of the existence of the missile factory. According to the calculations of Victor, the Belgian at the Gartnerei-kommando, we too would be bombed before long. He had identified reconnaissance-planes circling above the camp area.

We had a feeling that something was about to happen. We tried to find signs of deliverance. Indeed, there were rumors that the Germans were suffering defeats and failures on the battlefield, but we did not notice any easing in our daily life. Our mood rose and fell like the pendulum of a grandfather clock. When we received our portion of bread and the bowl of soup hope increased, and when they woke us up early in the morning to go out to work we sank into despair. Day followed day and we saw not a glimmer of deliverance. We would fall asleep longing for better days. With open eyes we would stare at the low ceiling over our sleeping bunks and we would ponder again and again: how would we know, when would we see some sign of a change for the better? After all, the Jews are expert at calculating the End of Days, experienced in great hopes and even greater disappointments. They

have always looked for a sign that would herald the coming of the Redeemer. Even during the harshest periods, Jews wished each other, from generation to generation, to merit hearing the sound of the ram's horn of the Messiah. Those with good hearing and sharp senses will hear the braying of the donkey on which he will come riding... for some reason the Jews do not like good that comes as a surprise.

We thought that the sign of deliverance would be to wake without the sound of the gong of the lagerschutz. This was the sign we were waiting for: the morning when the sound of the gong did not reverberate for early rising: we would know that the time of our liberation had come. So we would sit withdrawn, or lie on the beds tired and exhausted, and yearn for the day when they would not drive us out of our warm beds to the roll call ground. We were approaching the end of March 1945, Nissan, a month fit for deliverance – the month of good fortune for Israel, and according to the Talmud: "In Nissan our forefathers were redeemed and in Nissan they are destined to be redeemed" ... so we learned in the cheder. My no-work pass was valid until the 31st of March 1945 and on that day I had already gone to work. Somehow the day passed. We were released earlier than usual. Our mood was at rock bottom; we were very tired and longed for a little rest. We waited with desperate anticipation for Sunday when we were given half a day of rest. Then the longed-for day arrived. On Sunday, the first of April 1945, the gong of the Lagerschutz fell silent.

We woke up by force of habit, drew our hands out from beneath the warm blankets, glanced at the small windows of the hut and behold it was day light. We had no watches, but we estimated that the day was well advanced - and there was no going out to work. We looked towards the other half of block 18 where the Italian captives were, but they too were lying on their bunks. We were surprised and stunned.

We started to think, trying to explain to ourselves why there was no early rising. We spoke to each other in whispers and with

joyful trembling. The tension could be felt in the air. We were accustomed to doing everything, every movement, to order. We could not get up and get dressed, as we were not instructed to do so. We waited to receive a command from the blockaltester or from the kapo. After about half an hour the loudspeaker system began to buzz. The buzz would make me shiver years later when I was a soldier in the Israel Defense Forces, and I would get goose pimples when the loudspeaker began to make an announcement. They were about to announce an order.

We cocked our ears like frightened rabbits. *"Das ganze hier horen"*! We are evacuating camp Dora-Mittelbau... everyone follow orders..."

All the regular rules of the camp were cancelled. There was no food distribution and no going out to work. We felt we were waiting for the aftershock of an earthquake. We saw that the *Lageraltester* had arrived and together with the head of the block they collected the military rucksacks from the Italian captives. After a while the loudspeaker buzzed again and an order was given to get up, get dressed and go to the roll call ground where we were to line up in rows of five. We were warned not to riot or create any disorder or mayhem. Whoever did not obey the commands of those in charge would be shot on the spot.

On the roll call grounds the kapos were waiting for us. Each group of about a hundred prisoners marched to the clothes storeroom, the *gereite kammer*. From there we marched to the food storeroom, the *lebensmittel kammer*. There we received a whole loaf of bread (about 500-600 gr.) and one tin of canned food (fat and meat), provisions for three days, so we were told. From there we marched quickly in the direction of the railway station. SS guards dressed in new winter clothes and wearing polished boots began to urge us to march faster. There were about twelve thousand prisoners in Dora-Mittelbau and the Germans were very scared of unexpected rioting. From time to time warnings echoed from the

camp rulers who were mustering the evacuation: "Whoever causes unrest (*Umruhe*) will be shot immediately!..."

During this general mayhem I forgot about my operated hand. I wrapped it in a rag to protect it from the cold. I held on fast to the loaf of bread and the tin can. From the pile of clothing next to the clothes store I took a civilian overcoat on the back of which a patch of striped material was sewn. (The Germans cut off a square from the trouser leg and from the back of the coat of all the civilian garments they collected from the transports. Before they were put to the use of the camp prisoners, they replaced the missing square with a patch of striped material. This patch was called the *Martirer Fleck* – the patch of the martyrs).

Each group of about a hundred people was squeezed into a freight car. The kapo organized the prisoners according to the method generally used in prisoner transports: one person was seated between the spread knees of someone else. There were wooden hoops in the freight cars. These were special installations for holding the missiles, which were transported from the tunnels to their destination. Each carriage was divided into two sections. Each section was guarded by two SS men seated, with loaded guns, on a bench at the entrance. After we were seated, intertwined like sardines, the order was given and the train started to move. Inside the carriage, among prisoners from different nations, we were a group of about ten Yiddish and Hungarian speaking boys and adults, who had known each other since we had arrived at Dora from Buchenwald. Then we had no idea what was waiting for us in Dora, and now, a year later we stood facing the same enigma which is intoned to the dead before burial: "Know where you are going..." and before what were we standing..."

Had it not been for the pains in my hand, which reminded me intermittently of the cruel kapo at the Revier – I would have said *Hallel* – "When Israel went out of Egypt...". I was quite elated for two important reasons: the gong of the lagerschutz had fallen silent, and I had whole loaf of bread and a can of meat. The train

speeded along. Night descended and I positioned myself next to the corner of one of the hoops. I wore the civilian coat, and beneath it I held my rucksack containing the treasure. We all were tired from the busy day and tried to fall asleep. Each person tried to position himself more comfortably and slightly ease the congestion.

I fell asleep in the stocks of the knees of my neighbors in front and behind me. It was dark, overcrowded and silent. The sliding doors were shut and not a single ray of light penetrated through the narrow high windows of the freight car. When I awoke in the morning after a night, which seemed endless, I found myself sitting among unfamiliar Russian prisoners. Apparently, while moving in the dark I was distanced from my friends. I felt insecure and I was particularly afraid of the nights. I tried to find a way to change my place, as it was forbidden to get up without permission from the SS guards. The next night I felt that one of my neighbors was trying to steal my bread from me. It was dark. True, the guards had torches but they only served to make sure that the prisoners were asleep and were not trying somehow to escape.

In the overcrowding and out of a survival instinct, I managed to shove my bread into my trousers and to sit on it. I was wounded by the pocket knife of the thief, but I had decided "Let my soul die with the Philistines", I would not let go of my bread. I woke up in the morning. My friends also started to wake up and somehow we managed to make contact from a distance. I summoned my courage, released my legs from the intertwined seating, stood up and raised my hand. That was the agreed upon sign that a prisoner had to relieve himself. The guard would permit him to get up and go up to the sliding door, he would open it and the prisoner would lower his trousers while holding on to the pole of the carriage. At the end of this "operation" I summoned all my knowledge of the Hungarian language and addressed the SS man who spoke that language. I asked him to allow me to sit next to my friends. When I made my way, I saw two prisoners who had passed away on the long journey to freedom. Their death somewhat decreased the

overcrowding in the carriage. In my new place, among my friends, I could breathe a sigh of relief. I was more protected and most importantly, I was sure that I would be able to guard my bread and my tin of preserved meat.

I found a corner to protect my hand, which was slowly but surely healing. Almost two and a half days had passed since we had left Dora. During the first days of the journey our mood was quite optimistic, even elated. We greatly appreciated the rest after the long months of hard labor. Having so much rest, we began to feel our aching bones. In my new place beside my friends I dared open the bundle of bread and the tin of preserved meat and I began to plan my meals. Beside me sat friends from the villages near Schiff, who had worked in Dora close to my commando: Mendele Herschtick from Glad, about 16 years of age, another Mendele from the small village of Slatine – a tall skinny lad of about 17, Zanvil Kahana, the son of the Rabbi–, Lipa'le Wiesel from Volovo and others, all were sitting nearby, and we were able to exchange words.

We deliberated on how to make food last for three days. Some had decided to believe the Germans that we would reach our destination within three days and therefore it was all right to eat the bread and the preserved meat to their fill. Even if we had to fast for a day or two – that would not be too bad. Most of them reached the conclusion that it was all right to eat a decent meal both from the bread and the preserved meat. The hesitant and the farsighted did as they had done in the camp: to slice a thin slice twice a day, "measure" it carefully and pick every crumb. Some would dip pieces of bread in the fat of the preserves and leave the main part of their meat for the coming days. To overcome our hunger day after day and hour after hour all through the long journey was beyond our strength.

Thin, skinny Mendele, who was as tall as a pole of an *eruv* boundary who knew how to endear himself to those in charge of him in Dora and to get an additional portion of soup, decided this time to

eat his fill. He polished off his bread and the tin of preserved meat within the first two days. He had a simple theory: "First, always take, then you will be called smart...", you got bread – eat it. He further persuaded himself "A believing Jew is not scared of fasting...". He told us that his father was an expert on fasting. He was one of the first who had fasted Monday-Thursday-Monday and *shovavi"m*... But on the second day of fasting Mendele began to ask for "charity of bread". Skinny, stubborn Mendele, who fasted for almost five days, reached Bergen-Belsen in a state of total exhaustion but was fortunate to be liberated.

From the third day silence prevailed in the carriage, a sort of cemetery silence which prevails prior to the lowering of the deceased to his eternal resting place. As hunger increased the tongue was silenced. Our eyes sunk deep in their sockets. The screeching of the wheels of the carriages was deafening. The train halted time and again due to bombing. We did not throw away the empty tin of preserves but kept it as a drinking cup. As the hunger increased we imagined that there was still some fat on the sides of the tin. Each time we put our thin hand inside the empty space of the tin our saliva glands started to gush, which we swallowed.

The nights passed in sleep broken by nightmares. By daylight we would attempt to rise to straighten our petrified legs and our bent knees. It was difficult to move our bodies due to the crowding. The bones of our bottoms were literally chafed from the constant movement of the train. We would stand up with the excuse that we needed to relieve ourselves, stepping on friends sitting apathetically, staring into space with glazed eyes. We could sit next to the carriage door in a comfortable position. The breeze caressed the bare half of our body. Our empty stomach rumbled and we tried to finish quickly and make room for the next person. When the train came to a halt because of an alarm and bombardment, we would get permission to get out and scatter under the carriages and next to them. Occasionally shots could be heard; apparently there were attempts to escape by desperate prisoners. Prisoners

who were evacuated from other concentration camps travelled on parallel railway lines. Their fate was no better than ours. We noticed that even the SS men guarding us suffered from a shortage of bread. They ate their tin cans of meat with onions with no bread. The chewing of the onions was heard through the carriage, while we watched them as though hypnotized, with longing and with hope that soon we would reach a safe haven and receive food and water.

The longer the journey lasted the more we turned into obsessive "food searchers". For some reason it seemed to us that it was possible to find in the empty rucksack remnants of bread. A sort of ritual-of-searching developed in the carriage. Every morning after we sat up and straightened ourselves from the night's posture, we would take the rucksack and pour out its contents. Slowly we would turn over and shake out every last rag and item in search of a crumb of food. Dozens of times a day we would rummage in the rucksack and whenever we would find a shriveled crumb of bread hiding among the items – our eyes lit up and it seemed to us that we had reached the source of sustenance.

During those despair filled days, relief and salvation came to me from another place. I remembered the civilian coat I had taken from the clothes store during the evacuation of Dora. At one stage I had pity on the bones of my bottom and I had decided to give up warming the body, instead I placed the coat, as padding on the floor of the carriage in order to relief the pain. Then behold – after the futile search in the rucksack and after the disappointing search for even a breadcrumb – I took up the coat from beneath me and started searching for something in its forgotten pockets. Here too it was hopeless. The pockets were like those of the kaftan of an observant Jew after checking the house for chametz before Passover... however I did not give up. I undid the lining and at the bottom of the flap of the lapel I discovered a "hidden treasure", a shriveled and crumpled toothpaste tube. Slowly I unfolded it. With great difficulty I managed to twist the lid open. I brought the opening

of the tube up to my nostrils. The smell of mint penetrated my nostrils and the palate and it was truly refreshing. I managed to tear the covering of the tube and found a small lump of solidified, dry paste with its taste and smell intact.

This precious treasure passed from one friend to another and from one nose to another. I was the first to sniff it as the "chief celebrant", then my starving, overcrowded friends sniffed it too. All reacted with an exclamation of "Ah...!". Then we started to give it a light, careful and suspicious lick, the tongue explored the lump of dry paste. As we licked it the lump became like the rose of Jericho, a plant that can revive itself after many years of drought when it comes in contact with water.

Another friend had a handful of salt. He would sprinkle a little on the back of the hand and we would give it a tiny lick to fool our empty stomachs as though we were tasting some food. The verse: "...for man does not live by bread alone" (Deut. 8:3) took on a new cruel meaning.

I pondered the history and the vicissitudes of the toothpaste tube I had found. Going by the high quality of the coat fabric and its beautiful buttons, I imagined the owner had arrived in Auschwitz with one of the transports: a neat man, a man of standing, he would have made certain that each member of his family was equipped with the necessary accessories such as soap, toothbrush and children's toys. The coat owner faced Mengele on the ramp, he was sent where he was sent...and perhaps all that was left of him was the coat and the remnant of toothpaste.

At Last We Arrived...

At last we arrived. After an exhausting journey of about seven days and nights, the train stopped and the doors were slid open. Cool air hit our faces. We filled our lungs with clean air. An order was given to get out and line up in rows of five. Many hundreds of prisoners came off the train. Many were weak and so starved

that they could hardly stand up on their feet. Opposite us, on the parallel railway lines stood a long passenger train. From the windows of the carriages the faces of many men and women peered at us. The women appeared well groomed and well dressed in civilian clothes and the men were unshaven, some of them with very short beards. They too wore suits and long coats; on their lapels they had yellow stars just like in the ghettos. They were speaking Hungarian among themselves and shouted at us: "Who are you and where are you from?...". We only managed to take in the Hungarian sentence: "here you will have it good!...".

Later we learned that this was the Kastner train on its way to Switzerland. The passengers thought that we too were going to the family-camp (*familien lager*). The SS guards began to urge us to line up and march towards the camp. We saw the sign of Bergen-Belsen. The SS soldiers, who had accompanied us from Dora-Mittelbau, marched on either side of the long column with their guns loaded. Whoever stumbled and fell was shot on the spot. With our last strength we entered the camp.

After a short roll call a kapo with a green triangle admitted us, with a short, sarcastic yet serious sentence : "Let everyone go into one of the buildings, grab a bed and wait for food... if it comes. Possibly you have nothing to wait for... until the Americans arrive, there is no chance you will get food...", so stated the kapo and left with no explanation. As experienced katzetniks, we ran quickly, with bated breath and stumbling feet, to the two story buildings of the Wermacht army. On the beds were mattresses without blankets. We undressed. We were sweaty and filthy from the journey. There was no way of getting washed. We lay down sprawled on the beds and breathed sighs of relief. After several hours we were brought steaming, hot, barley soup. Each group of four prisoners received about a pint of soup in one plate. We still had spoons from camp Dora. Our foursome made a "swallowing pact" to have a fair and just division: the spoon would pass from mouth to mouth. After each mouthful the spoon would pass to the next person. A person

on duty would count the number of swallows that each person had taken so that no one would take more than the others. Licking the plate after finishing eating would be done in turns, a different person each day. This warm soup was literally life restoring. It tasted of paradise. After having licked the toothpaste, the warm barley soup had a wonderful taste of yesteryear.

We lay on the bare beds and enjoyed the soft mattress filled with seaweed. Our bones, aching from the exhausting journey, enjoyed the relaxing repose. Water flowed in the taps. We were able to wash our faces and feet. We drank our fill. Someone noticed through the window that many prisoners were running on the main road of the camp and others were returning with pieces of carrots, beetroot and turnip in their hands. We too jumped up, left the rooms and started to run as we were, barefooted and undressed, without shirts or trousers.

We reached a large structure, which served as a kitchen for the German soldiers who had lived there. Here was almighty pandemonium. Hundreds and hundreds of prisoners were streaming there, hungry, barefooted with their hair wild. They were all rummaging in the dugouts where fresh vegetables were stored for the winter, as supplies for the soldiers' kitchens. Some of the vegetables were already rotten and unfit for human consumption, but at the bottom of the dugout there were still whole pieces of vegetables over which the prisoners fought. Getting hold of a piece of beetroot or turnip meant staying alive. Hundreds of bony hands, some tattooed with numbers, some the hands of young lads who had survived the previous year in the concentration camps were digging and rummaging in the mud and decay. They were hoping to rescue something from the bottom of the dugout, something that could still be placed in their mouths and calm their hunger.

My friend Eliya'le Stern from Strimtere and I arrived at a run and were swallowed up by the multitude inside the dugouts. We joined the starving people, searching for food in the refuse dump. I was pushed back and forth, with great difficulty I put my hands

in to fish out a piece of turnip. The moment I reached something and brought it up to the edge of the pit to Eliya'le my friend, a wave of prisoners arrived and pushed me back into the decay and the rotten juices. We both stood up to our knees in the mud of the decay and strained to push our hands in again, as deep as possible. In the midst of the din and uproar I shouted to him: "Go out and stand on the side, the moment I manage to get something take it and guard it, then we'll escape to the block".

After about an hour of stubborn "fighting" we managed to return with precious "gold" in our hands, the vegetables we brought up from the pit. We wiped off the rot, peeled the turnip and wrapped it in rags. We decided to eat the vegetables sparingly and frugally. Our friends too returned with booty which fanned our hope for a few more days of sorrowful life in the midst of the hell of Bergen-Belsen. We understood that we had chanced upon a camp where total chaos reigned. The chaos was particularly striking compared to the exemplary orderliness that had typified Dora-Mittelbau during the last few months. After the morning roll call, which was carried out by a blockaltester, an SS man, we would wander around feeling that soon even the air we breathed would run out.

Here was hell on earth. People were dying like flies. Prisoners lay down to rest a little and would have no strength to rise again. In the morning you talked with an acquaintance, but before sunset he was already on the pile of the dead. The day drew to a close. We put on our garments and got onto the beds. We had no blankets. We curled up in our clothes and fell asleep hungry and exhausted. We could still feel the echo of the wheels of the train. There was a feeling that we were still swaying, seated between each other's knees. We woke up with daylight. We heard the whistle of the whistle accompanied by shouts of *Raus! Raus!* and we went to roll call. The kapo, the blockaltester and the SS man stood next to the blocks. After the roll call we would drag our feet to the bunks and lie down. Day by day the number of sick increased. Lice began to

plague us but worst of all was the hunger. The prisoners of status, such as the kapos, the blockaltester and the various functionaries who had arrived from different places and were evacuated to Bergen-Belsen, appointed themselves to carry out the same functions here as well. Anything was possible in the chaos that prevailed. Occasionally we received a little warm soup.

One morning we got up and there was no water in the faucets. Rumors had it that enemy bombers had hit the water system. We found out that a few days earlier all the Wermacht soldiers had been evacuated from the region and sent to the front. Under these conditions of insecurity and chaos, the remnants of beetroot and turnip, which I had managed to "organize" with the last of my strength, saved me. During that time of expectation, disorder and hunger, I was planning how to obtain a little more food, something that could satisfy my hunger. I wandered again and again around the kitchen which used to supply food to all the inhabitants of the place. I discovered the heap of refuse and waste. I found a pile of empty tin cans and potato peels, which had blackened and rotted. Among the empty tin cans there were some which had been opened only a few days before. I straightened the tin with the last of my strength and licked the food remnants and the fat. Here and there were bushes which had just started to blossom (it was almost mid April 1945). I tried to chew the buds but it was difficult to swallow the bitterness. I recalled the village vegetation, the willow bushes we used to peel and lick their white stems. The bushes I had found in this accursed place were unfit even for that.

I started to enter the cellars of the tall buildings, thinking I would find something to eat. In one of the buildings I found the cellar door open. I sneaked in through the staircase so that the prisoners living there would not notice me. I entered the cellar. Faint light filtered through one of the barred windows. The whole floor was covered with scattered gun bullets, parts of military uniforms, and in a trance of searching for food, something one could place in one's mouth, I found nothing. On my way out, after I had got used

to the dimness of the cellar, I glanced sideways and saw a dead prisoner, lying sprawled out, his skull drooping, his eye sockets peered at me and a peaceful smile spread over his dead face. I stood facing him and it was as though he whispered to me "young comrade (*Kamarat*), search, search... I too searched for sustenance but I found death..."

This was the first time that a corpse had shaken me, yet I was used to seeing corpses in the oddest of situations. I returned to my bed. We noticed that almost all the military men who wore uniforms, the officers and the soldiers, had begun wearing a white band on their sleeve. Reb Shlomo Glazer from Rozvalae who was the eldest of the prisoners explained to us that it was a sign of capitulation. He remembered that at the end of the First World War the gendarmes wore a white armband before the capitulation of Austro-Hungary. Apparently the front was getting nearer, but we noticed no difference during the roll calls. Those in charge ruled us with an iron fist. They kicked, pushed, and cursed while straightening the lines. Nothing had changed for the better. Even the wave of rumors did not ease the hunger. All we wanted was to find a bit of food and to survive another day and another day.

I was very weak. The lice had settled in well and they plagued us. I felt a weariness in my feet. I decided to walk about and not to surrender. I did not wish to fall ill. I had seen that those who surrendered and sunk into complete apathy quickly lost the will to live. Towards the weekend of the 12-13 of April 1945 I decided to look for my friends from Dora-Mittelbau. I was curious to know who had arrived and where they were. On the Sabbath of the 14th of April, after the routine roll call, I went up to the block. I took my rucksack and started out again in search of food, of something to eat. I also thought of going from one block to another to find my friends, if I were so fortunate.

After an hour of searching I opened one of the doors and I was amazed to discover a group of about fifteen prisoners, all of them friends and acquaintances from Dora-Mittelbau in the middle of the

room of one of the blocks. Even Yechezkel Ring was among them. Over an improvised device of bricks, beneath which a fire was burning, stood a pail with pieces of turnip, beetroot and carrots. The water bubbled, the smoke billowed and filtered out through the open windows, the wood made crackling noises before being consumed and the embers spread a pleasant scent and warmth. Chaim Meir Polack, the prayer-book owner from Dora-Mittelbau, stood and led the prayers loudly and the others repeated after him with great concentration. They were saying *Hallel* for the new month of Iyar 5705. The pail was bubbling over the fire and made a sound indicating that soon the soup would be ready. When the prayers were over I sat down to hear the tales of my friends during their journey. They too were surprised by my arrival and were happy to hear from me that there were more friends from Dora in my block. I left them in a buoyant mood. My traveler's prayer was that somehow I would manage to drag my feet and reach block 28 safely and alive. I walked slowly feeling satisfied over the public prayers we just had under such special conditions – a lit fire on the Sabbath.

I had walked about a few yards when I heard a voice calling me: "Chaim-Yisroel, wait! wait!". It was my friend Yechezkel Ring who ran after me with a piece of turnip taken out of the pail bubbling on the fire, in his hand. I still had the will power to refuse. I knew that their situation was no different to mine. They too agonized over the question of "whose life has precedence...", nevertheless my friend managed to entreat me, until I took the gift and pushed it into my rucksack.

After the Liberation, when we discussed what we had gone through, my friend Yechezkel told me that immediately after I left their place, they had decided unanimously to take a piece of turnip out of the pail and give it to me. This was because they were convinced that I would not manage to reach my block, and since I did not stop gazing at the pail. They knew it was my last wish.

The day after that Sabbath, on Sunday the 15th of April 1945, pillars of smoke erupted from the engines of tanks and the smell of gasoline rose from military jeeps. The British army streamed with triumphant cheers over the barbed wire fences of the hellish camp of Bergen-Belsen. It was in the middle of the morning roll call. We were standing as usual, swaying and wobbling in rows of five. Hundreds of muzelmen who had breathed their last during the last few days, were scattered around the blocks. An SS man was still taking the roll call, for of course "*Ordnung must sein*". A British military policeman wearing a red peaked cap, a giant black man with flashing eyes, jumped out of a military jeep and stood stunned at the spectacle of the living and the dead. He took one of the prisoners who was lying spread-eagled, lifeless, and wrapped him around the neck of the SS man taking the roll call. We understood that we were liberated and we broke rank without waiting for the order.

Epilogue:
The March of the Survivors

The Second World War was over. The sounds of the exhausted victors as well as the exhausted vanquished echoed, the first with a sigh of relief, the latter in the throes of death. For us, the survivors of the concentration and extermination camps, the fight for survival and physical existence had begun. What was left of our body was crushed and pounded. We were wounded and bruised, bodies with scarcely any life in them. We lacked the will to fight. We had no strength left to drag our stumbling feet. We were afraid to lie down for fear we could not get up again. Our hearts expanded with beckoning freedom and our eyes watered. The immediate and urgent battle was to hold on and prevent the body from collapse. The dangers were now more tangible than in the concentration camp. Many of the prisoners of the camps were liberated in the forests while marching and fleeing. The SS soldiers accompanying the death marches would take the prisoners into the depth of the woods to rest at night. In the morning they would find many of them frozen to death with the frosts of the end of March. The SS guards shot them. When the guns of the allied armies approached, the guards vanished. Hunger, fear and chaos increased the confusion. The shock was overwhelming. The story of their lives and the miracle of the survival of the camp veterans are a beacon for the descendants of the survivors and for future generations; as the Sages say:"The deeds of the fathers are a sign for their children". Their struggle for survival is a monument of white fire on black fire, a monument of letters floating up from burning parchments.

This epilogue depicts the fate of two groups: the camp prisoners who were liberated by the allied armies, and Jews who served in the labor battalions of the Hungarian army. Enlisted like soldiers, with equal obligations, they were humiliated and persecuted, their rights denied. Some fell into Russian captivity, some disappeared somewhere in the killing fields and the deep snow pits of the USSR. At the conclusion of the war they returned to their villages hoping to find the families they had left behind. The sorrow, the shock and the trauma, when the bitter truth became known to them, were beyond comprehension. In addition there were those who remained beyond the Hungarian-Romanian border after the annexation of the region of Marmarosh to Hungary with the 100,000 Jews who lived there. The disappointment and the anger were palpable. They felt guilty for having abandoned their parents, the elders and the little ones. They were convinced that had they been at home during the deportations, they would have been able to save something from the conflagration. There was great frustration. A few individuals abandoned Judaism and joined the Communists on the other side of the border, or sought shelter under the wings of Christianity. Both groups were constantly searching for a salve for their afflicted souls. They wanted to beg for forgiveness but no one was left to grant it.

The Liberation of Bergen Belsen

The miracle of my survival began when the British army tanks pounded their way through the fence of the camp of Bergen-Belsen. It was on the afternoon of April 14, 1945, a Sabbath. We saw the dust raised by the tanks, we heard the tanks' caterpillar chains, a deafening noise. We did not understand what was happening. The Russian prisoners shouted excitedly "American Tanks!" Night descended.

We, the evacuees from the Dora-Mittelbau camp who had been transferred to Bergen-Belsen, had no strength to climb up to our bunks. For a number of days there had been no regular food

distribution. Water had stopped flowing in the taps. At daybreak a team of kapos and block altesters conducted the morning roll call as usual. In the middle of the counting a British military police jeep, driven by red berets roared into the roll call ground and came to a standstill with screeching wheels. We had no strength to lift our heads. We wanted to smile a smile of thanks and hope, but our emaciated faces froze. Our eyes stared at the liberators. We scattered.

A Jewish officer arrived, apparently a military chaplain. He stood on a mound of earth. At the foot of the mound were many prisoners who could hardly stand on their feet. He literally felt us with his hands to be sure that what he saw was real and not a nightmare. We shouted to him with our remaining strength: "We want to travel to Palestine!" The British soldiers went to the storerooms of the retreating Wermacht and returned with barrels of sauerkraut and tins of pork with fat, and distributed it to the starving people. Naked prisoners, some dressed in parts of clothing, some only skin and bones, snatched and stuffed themselves with whatever they were given. It was impossible to stem the craving for eating. They attacked the food like wild beasts. Sick with typhoid, hallucinating with high fever, they ate and immediately became ill with diarrhea and stomach pains. They relieved themselves on the floor of the block. While eating they held their posterior with one hand and with the other hand they shoved sauerkraut and meat with fat into their mouths.

The occupying British army was not set up to cope with all the problems. They called for help. Various teams of doctors and nurses from Sweden started to deal with the most urgent needs. There were the sick and the dying who fought with the last of their strength to stay alive. The fortunate ones managed to rise from the mounds of the dead and dragged their feet into one of the buildings. Those sick with typhoid and lung disease, muzelmen with dysentery got up, fell and got up again. Many were lying on dirty, tattered blankets. Lice swarmed yet the prisoners had no strength to scratch themselves. The April sun warmed like a stepmother, but bodies were getting weaker. The little natural heat that remained in

the body was a source of life for the lice, which dug themselves in mercilessly and bit into the dwindling skin. The most urgent thing was to separate the dead from the living. This task was fulfilled by the bulldozer which dug a giant pit and swept into it about thirty thousand Jewish and non- Jewish prisoners who had perished during the first days the camp was liberated.

About two months after the Liberation, the camp authorities decided to transfer the healthy among the liberated to a town near Bergen-Belsen called Celle. There was regular food distribution. We, the evacuees from Dora, set ourselves up in the horse stables of the Wermacht cavalry. From time to time we raided the villages in the vicinity to organize food like sausages, eggs and vegetables. Our mood improved. Recuperation was quick. There was plenty of bread. In the horse stables, which were empty, there was plenty of straw. We set up rest corners. The horses' trough served us a bedroom and food hiding place. Here we received uninvited guests – a multitude of mice as hungry as if they were camp prisoners. We would cook and roast potatoes and other foods on bits of tin from abandoned cars. Towards night we would sit warming ourselves around bonfires and tell the stories of the exodus from Egypt of our generation.

One day a rumor spread that we could leave Bergen-Belsen for Sweden. We decided to go and investigate. It was not very far to walk from Celle to Bergen-Belsen, a matter of about two to three hours on foot. We moved from one building to another. Everywhere there were sick female prisoners either sitting or lying in their nightgowns. Doctors and nurses were rushing around with medication and medical instruments. There were buildings which had been turned into a sort of mental hospital. Many of the liberated were in a state of mental collapse. They would scream, laugh and cry. I had a great urge to look for my younger sister Malka, who was about 14 when we got to Auschwitz. I had seen her after the selection, about a year earlier, in the bathing hall, head shaven, wearing a prisoner's shift.

As I opened the door to one of the buildings I saw a young girl wrapped in a white sheet sitting on the floor with her hair plucked and falling out. She was scratching herself like Job in his time. I looked at her and she looked at me. She recognized me immediately while I still hesitated. It was my sister's good friend, the same age, a remnant of a family of nine, Bina, the daughter of the ritual slaughterer of Schiff. My first question was: "Where is my sister Malka?" She told me that they had been separated during one of the transports from Auschwitz to another camp. I learned from her that the Swedes had informed their patients that they would be transferred to Sweden for medical treatment and recuperation. Whoever had found a family member could join them. We decided that she would announce tomorrow, during the doctor's visit that she had found her brother and he was located in Celle.

I returned to Celle in high spirits. I packed all my possessions, the food I had organized and garments I had gathered. I took a bundle of birth certificates of each individual horse, and I placed them in my rucksack. I already had a pencil and a pen and there was space to write on the reverse side. I started to write stories about the village so that I would not forget. My friends had also heard the news. They too decided to trace a brother or a sister in order to travel. I recall that a naive Yeshiva student I knew came to see me to ask for advice. He was very worried. His name was Shimshon. He turned to me: "Tell me Chaim Yisroel, what shall I do if I find myself a sister to travel with to Sweden and I get there and I want to get rid of her and she does not agree – what should I do?" I calmed him down, explaining that this registration was not a matter that is signed and sealed...

Sweden

At the end of June 1945 I returned to Bergen-Belsen intending to stay there until we sailed to Sweden. By the time I arrived the rumor had already spread that Blanka-Bina had found her brother.

There was great joy. At the beginning of July 1945 we climbed onto British trucks in Bergen-Belsen and set out towards the port of Lübeck. We parted from the gutters of the camp. The heaps of the bodies of the muzelmans still haunted our imagination. We left behind the mass graves and the accursed damned earth, where a third of the Jewish nation breathed its last. Our gaze was turned towards the wide expanse of the sea, to an unknown land, a land that had not experienced war for about a hundred and fifty years.

This transition reminded me of the Talmudic legend in which Rabbi Yehoshua jumped from his dwelling place in this world straight to the Garden of Eden in the world to come, without being taken by the angel of death. Similarly, we jumped over from the threshold of extinction and the shadow of death, from the depths of the underworld and oblivion, from a merciless place with no compassion straight to the gates of salvation, compassion, loving kindness and mercy.

The Swedes welcomed the survivors, the healthy and the sick, with open arms and generosity of heart. In Bergen-Belsen after the war there were both men and women. Almost all of them were Jews. The Jews were the only ones who had nowhere to return to after liberation. The grandfathers and grandmothers with their young grandchildren had been annihilated. The young women and the pregnant ones were cast into the furnaces. The houses, the land and all their possessions were looted. The few remaining survivors were neither able, nor did they wish to return. With the liberation of the camp we received a D.P. certificate from the occupying powers, a card stating we were "uprooted and stateless". I literally became a number again, a person without a homeland. From being number 55660, a Jewish prisoner of the camps I "went up in rank" to be No G.01788579.

Immediately upon the liberation of Bergen-Belsen, smartly dressed high-ranking Allied officers circulated in the camp and gathered their nationals from amongst the camp prisoners. I saw a Russian prisoner, decorated with the rank of colonel, who was

with me in Dora, whose friends from the Russian army had come to bring him back to the motherland. The British and French as well as the other nations did the same. We, the Jews, remained homeless and stateless, with neither parents nor siblings. We were the "orphans of the world", unwanted and unwelcome. That is why almost all the refugees who were absorbed by Sweden were Jews.

The waves of compassion with which the Swedes inundated the survivors were genuine and spontaneous. We embarked on a floating Garden of Eden, a luxury boat that was transformed into a floating hospital flying the Swedish flag. Most of the passengers were brought carefully to the boat on stretchers, under the watchful eyes of doctors and nurses. Their companions circulated on deck and in the ship's halls, like celebrants taking part in family festivity. Everything was shining and gleaming. We were scared to sit on the sofas and the armchairs. We were still traumatized and frightened, expecting to have to obey orders. We felt the upholstery in its variety of colors. I looked at my friend and adoptive brother in Dora, the Yiddish writer Yechezkel Ring from Sighet, a man of the wide world – to see how he conducted himself and did likewise. He was busy helping and supporting a young girl of about sixteen, Zipporah Bloch. She was recovering from typhus. Her frizzy hair had started to grow. Her blue eyes were drenched in tears of longings for her parents and brothers who had remained behind. She was the daughter of the Chassid Rav Avraham Bloch from Dragomirest, and Yechezkel had taken her under his wings as a compassionate father.

The Swedes were afraid of contagious diseases we may have brought with us. We were like people who had been discovered in the depths of the jungle, cut off from all civilization. During meals we unsheathed our claws when we snatched whatever came to hand. We pushed each other to fill our plate with thick soup. The fear of what the next day might bring was overwhelming. We walked around with rucksacks containing all the leftovers remaining on the tables. We guarded them like precious treasures. The

behavior pattern of snatch and eat, snatch and organize typified the cultural situation and the human conduct of the camp survivors.

The girls recovered and started to worry about suitable clothes. Those who were still sick were lying in the ship's cabins in their hospital issue nightgowns, while the healthy ones were wearing garments improvised from blankets and British army clothes. The fortunate ones with initiative were equipped with simple, basic sewing implements like needle and thread, a knife and scissors. They adopted the system of organizing that prevailed in the camps. The female instinct to look beautiful and attractive overcame everything and work commenced. The upholstery on the sofas and the armchairs, including the delicate leather stretched over the chairs – everything served as material for sewing dresses, skirts and other items of clothing. Within a few hours they stood before the polished mirrors and tried on the "new models". Our good, silent hosts not only did not prevent the girls from the destruction of the furniture but on the contrary, averted their gaze so as not to catch us at it and so that we would not be ashamed of our weakness. They enjoyed seeing the patients and the recuperating girls, their faces radiant. They asked to be photographed with the girls wearing the improvised garments on their skinny emaciated bodies.

We reached Sweden at the beginning of July, 1945. A large crowd gathered at the harbor to see the transport of camp survivors. They did not let us disembark on our own. Porters brought us down in stretchers with extreme care. They were afraid that the effort of walking would further deteriorate our health. The sick were transferred to hospitals and we, the healthy ones, moved on to an enclosure of wooden houses for quarantine. The rooms were gleaming in their cleanliness. In each room there were bunk beds with straw filled mattresses. It reminded me of the straw mattresses which we used to replace on each Passover eve with new "Kosher for Passover" straw. This time, though, the reason was medical. From time to time they would change the straw contaminated by possible disease, with new sterile straw. The sheets were made of

crepe paper and were changed every day. We relieved ourselves into special containers, which were emptied by the cleaners in one of the nearby forests, as a precautionary measure.

After resting from the fatigue of travelling, we were taken to a huge hall, a sort of improvised clothes store. Each of us received a new suitcase in which we placed our new clothes: two outfits of clothing in our size, shirts and underwear, shoes and socks. We went out of there in royal attire, like Mordechai the Jew in the Book of Esther. We were transformed. Each of us looked at the other and saw himself. We looked odd and funny in our new attire. We felt like we were wearing costumes. The Swedes smiled and we burst into wild laughter.

In July, there is barely any night in Sweden. We ate three meals a day, feasting on all the best. Our eyes were larger than our stomachs. We collected whatever was left on the tables, greedily and devotedly. We filled the pockets of our new suits till they burst. We improvised rucksacks and bags to hide everything. We remembered yesterday's hunger and were afraid of the shortages of the morrow. The ritual of collecting the crumbs and the leftovers took place mainly after supper. We were afraid of the long night that is the continuation of the day devoid of food. We licked the plates with the fervor of Chassidim around the Rebbe's table. We did not undress to go to sleep because we did not want to waste time sleeping when there were treasures of food in our bags. We were in high spirits. We would sit on the inflated mattresses, faces blazing, and tell of our experiences in the concentration camps. We laughed like drunkards when we recalled how the village notables and the city dignitaries looked in the striped prisoners' garments. We would take a break between one story and another. With great relish we would open the bundles of food and eat with renewed appetite as though we had been fasting the fasts of Monday-Thursday-Monday (fasts days undertaken by the pious after the high Holidays to atone for any possible, inadvertent transgression caused by festive light-headedness.) Generally, we would hide the

food we had gathered under the mattresses. We emptied the bags and pockets to make room for new food. As country people we recalled the field mice method. The mice would collect ripe, hazelnuts that had fallen off the bushes in autumn. They would hide the nuts under the heaps of cut and dry hay. In winter, when everything was covered by snow, the peasants would harness horses to the sleighs to gather the hay to feed the cows. Under the heaps, beneath the lowest level, they would discover the secret caches of the field mice.

Our daily routine began with a morning roll call. After breakfast we returned to the rooms to make our beds. Each of us stood next to the tidy bed and waited tensely for the medical team's visit. The Swedish angels dressed in glistening white, starched and pressed, equipped with their medical instruments moved on from bed to bed. There was total silence. Not a fly buzzed, not a bird chirped. The nurses whispered their comments to the doctors. They wrote whatever they wrote and commented as they saw fit, in a polite, quiet voice almost like the murmuring of the standing prayer or the whispering of a prayer to ward off the evil eye. The climax was reached when we were requested to lift our mattress and fold it half way. Suddenly our disgrace was publicly revealed: half slices of bread spread with butter and blackberry jam, leftover cheeses, pieces of sausage, baked potatoes with headless sardines, mashed potatoes with forest berries, in brief, all the leftovers from previous meals. We were caught in our weakness and they, the Swedish team understood in its cultural, upright, and humane love. The doctor glanced at the nurses and they at each other, and with a restrained smile, with trembling and compassion they re-arranged the mattress in their position. They straightened the crepe paper sheet and left having had an unforgettable experience.

After the quarantine period, the Swedish government established institutions for youth up to the age of 18. Their purpose was to enable the survivors, who missed years of schooling during the war years, to complete their studies. Among the architects of education

there was one family who stood out for it sense of a mission, a large family, five sons and two daughters. Shimshon Sompolinsky and his wife Chana-Devorah escaped from Russia-Poland before the First World War to Denmark. He earned his living sewing sacks. Their sons Avraham, Meir, Yitschok, Dovid and Ephraim-Fischel all went to college, including the two daughters. They all dedicated themselves to the rehabilitation of the life of the camp survivors who had reached Sweden. Yitschok and Meir were in charge of traditional educational institutions. Most of the survivors were Hungarians Jews from traditional homes. In Sweden there were a large group of German refugees from the Confederation of Religious Pioneers movement who also volunteered to be teachers and leaders. Rabbis like Rabbi Wolpe, an erudite rabbinic figure and Rabbi Wolf Jacobson, the Chief Rabbi of Denmark came to Stockholm and helped set up a school for students to the age of 18. Rabbi Jacobson's wife, an educated, academic woman comparable to Nechama Liebowitz, ran the Haredi institute for girls (the institute with all its students immigrated to Israel and was set up in Haifa). The teachers included Nathan Konigshofer, Norbert Samson Karu and his wife and the emissaries from Israel such as Leah Galai from Tirat Zvi, Yoseph Rosenberg, Dov Kula and ancillary helpers from among the survivors such as Moshe Tratner-Baruchi and his wife Yehudit.

Three other entities were also active as regards education: the liberal Swedish government, which genuinely wished to enable to both the young and the adults to have a free, secular outlook and lifestyle, the Christian missionary movement, which saw the survivors as lost souls to bring "back" to the bosom of the church, and the established Jewish community, which was entirely Reform. The chief Rabbi of Swedish Jewry was Rabbi Ehrenpreis, a Reform Rabbi who had eschewed virtually all the tenets of Judaism. Nevertheless, the strong determination of the Sompolinsky family and their assistants, their inner religious drive, the capacity to endure and a sense of a holy mission overcame all these obstacles,

succeeded in establishing religious educational institutions. They were the first to rehabilitate families. Two Sompolinsky sons married girls who were Holocaust survivors.

Färnabruk

The next stage in the rehabilitation and the revival of the "dry bones" was the establishment of Färnabruk camp near Stockholm. Here, the survivors were able to write to all sorts of organizations to inform them of their survival. They wrote to the World Congress, the Joint Distribution Committee in America, the benevolent associations of the various communities and the Federation of Marmarosh Jews which had been active in the United States for many years. Everybody was looking for relatives who had emigrated overseas. Survivors who had returned to Hungary attempted to reach Sweden and reunite with their relatives who were sent to Färnabruk. The Swedes had established a large residential area that housed boys and girls separately. The Rabbis and the communal activists like Rabbi Jacobson and the Sompolinsky family made sure the kitchen was kosher. They saw to it that the camp should function like a communal unit. The dining hall was communal. The first signs of budding family life grew and blossomed here. A few survivors found their spouses from before the Holocaust, and moved here to plan their future. The son of the Rav of Visho, Meir'l Hager, found his wife who had survived. A large group of us from the village of Schiff decided not to return. We remembered how the peasant boys and girls had danced at the edge of the village near the crucifix when the last of the Jews left the village. From here we wrote a card to the village priest with a list of all the survivors from Schiff. We thought that this way, liberated returnees would know of our survival. We described the "Messianic days" we were enjoying and how good it was with us. This card informed my two sisters, Elka and Malka, aged 15 and 16, that I had survived and was staying in Sweden.

Here we started to feel like free people, masters of their fates. The world was wondrous. The sun shone with special warmth and its rays enveloped us with a mother's love. The murmuring of the water in the lakes, the blossoming of the trees, the rustling of the leaves, the shade of the forest trees and the grooved paths that led to the isolated huts recalled childhood scenes in the Carpathian Mountains. All was tranquil and pristine. Here too I would pause terrified at the sound of my own footsteps. Instinctively I would glance in all directions to make sure I had not been followed. My echoing footsteps would still remind me – that same echo of the wooden clogs marching in unison in rows of five and the echo of the cruel soldiers accompanying us with left-right-left from the camp and to the camp. It was a miraculous novelty to see a whole family, old and young travelling by bike. A baby in a stroller would move us to tears. These were sights that had been uprooted from our memory in the shadow of the selection, but they returned to us here on Swedish soil.

It was here, in camp Färnabruk that the wounds began to heal. The absence of a family and the relatives who had perished made us feel like amputees who experience pain in the missing limb as though it were still attached. There were women of forty who had lost their whole family, and here fate brought them together with a second match. Boys from Poland and girls from Hungary started to weave dreams. There were two Satmar Chassidim from the village of Satmar, Reb Moshe Elia Gross and Reb Shmuel Freund. They were part of the older contingent, approaching the age of fifty. They took upon themselves to be matchmakers. They had a special urge to see couples get married and establish families. Like detectives, they followed couples walking together in the footpaths of the camp, couples whispering with a special closeness, they examined the shine in their eyes and straightaway decided that this a match. At the end of the Sabbath during the "Melave-Malka" feast, which they organized with special joy (as though celebrating with a Chassidic master) they would announce in the presence of the

Chassidic Rabbis, the Jewish and the Swedish kitchen staff and in the presence of hundreds of survivors as follows: "This and that couple...Mazal Tov!!" The deed was done and the wedding was on its way. Straightaway this announcement was accompanied by the traditional breaking of a plate. There was one minor difference – here, not one plate was broken, as customary, but all the plates which were on the tables. The impulse for destruction and the impulse for joy burst forth in a crazy uncontrolled manner. Dozens and dozens of plates went flying from the tables to the floor of the hut with an ear splitting noise. Naturally the well-mannered Swedes stood there shocked. They took the "performance" as part of the behavior of people who had lost their senses in the camps and breaking plates was part of their therapy.

After the congratulations and the singing of "Siman tov u'Mazal tov" a sudden silence prevailed. Restrained crying and a loud choking of hundreds of participants could be heard on all sides. The celebrants remembered the main family members missing at such a celebration. Everyone knew that the bride and the groom would be the bridesmaids and the jesters too. This caused another burst of tears, weeping and merry singing simultaneously.

The Färnabruk commander was a high-ranking officer; a retired colonel named Lagersen, a buttoned up stuffy character, Prussian in his conduct. He may have been prejudiced against Jews. It has to be said to his credit that he was very frank and did not hide it: he was not two faced. A problem arose in the camp concerning carrying objects on the Sabbath. All the inmates of the camp were traditional people who observed the commandments. They wanted to solve the problem of an eruv by putting a fence around the camp area. The Rabbis decided that a delegation of survivors headed by Rabbi Jacobson, who spoke Swedish would ask him to stretch metal wires on wooden poles around the camp. He absolutely refused. He perceived this as a military act of people who wanted to carry out some mysterious conspiratorial activity, which only Jews were capable of inventing.

A special atmosphere was created around the Rabbis who had survived the Holocaust. The Satmar Chassidim, the Chassidim of Vizhnitz, Gur and Mozhitz would organize Sabbath meals and sing their traditional melodies. After the Sabbath they would give Torah lessons. Those from Hungary and Romania would sing sad songs to the tune of sorrowful folk melodies, while those from Poland sang the Chassidic melodies of the courts of Gur and Belz. Between courses they would shut their eyes, sing and trill, while swaying and bursting into gentle crying. The Swedes would stand amazed, unable to understand why we were singing, happy and crying. Rav Me'irel Hager, a descendant of the Vizhnitz dynasty, would talk on the day's issues. I remember that once he opened a Bible and while studying it he threw it with uncontrolled fury to the ground and continued by heart. When afterwards I asked him: "Rabbi – what happened?" He answered me: "They gave me a chumash with Mendelson's Be'ur (Mendelson's commentary on the Pentateuch which was unacceptable to the Orthodox)...". I remember the conclusion of his words of Torah: *"Kinderlach! M'hot undz farshvartzt vie kave, m'hot undz gebroten vie kave, m'hot undz gebrent vie kave m'hot undz gemolen vie kave und – kave el Hashem chazak!!* (My children! They have blackened our faces like coffee! They have roasted us like coffee! They have burnt us like coffee! They have ground us like coffee – and nevertheless: "Hope to the Lord, be strong and He will give your heart courage"...Amen!! (Psalms 27:14) (he was making a pun on the Hebrew 'kave' (hope!) which is pronounced like the Hungarian-Yiddish 'kave' (coffee).

Every Sunday the cleaning staff of the camp found the toilet paper completely attached, not torn by usage but the whole role rolling out of the facility in all its length, stained from wiping, rolling from the cubicle to the corridor and from there to the courtyard, like an inkblot test. It did not occur to the Sabbath observers to cut the paper in preparation for the Sabbath. Naturally, the Swedes deduced that the people from the camps, consequent to their hard labor, had forgotten how to use toilet paper.

The Swedes attempted to involve the survivors in the work of running the camp, and not only in the kitchen. They proclaimed that whoever would volunteer to help with the collection of the rubbish would receive double the amount of pocket money at the end of each month. Naturally, there were not many that showed interest. The slave labor in the camps had made physical labor repulsive to camp veterans. I was one of the few who nevertheless volunteered. I kept the reason for my "good heartedness" strictly to myself. The refuse and food leftovers were collected in metal containers and taken to one of the nearby forests. I wanted to know where the food leftovers and the empty tin cans were thrown away. I marked the spot so I would be able to find these treasures if I were ever starving again. The very thought of the secret stash, hidden in the thick forest, full of all that was good, gave me special pleasure, to the point of slobbering.

A large number of my young friends emigrated from Sweden at the end of 1946 to the USA on the S/S Drottningholm. Rabbi Jacobson obtained emigration papers for them to Yeshiva University. Many found relatives across the sea and left Sweden. About a hundred students from the various institutions went courtesy of the Swedish government to France on a cruise ship. Meir Sompolinsky and other emissaries were among the initiators of this scheme. We all had passports from various countries.

At the beginning of July we sailed to Calais where Habricha men from Aliya Bet were waiting for us. Habricha was a clandestine operation to help survivors get into Palestine illegally, since the British Mandate government had capped Jewish entry to the land of Israel. We boarded a train to Paris and from there to Marseille. From there we had to wait for a boat that would take us to Haifa as illegal immigrants (ma'apilim). It was our good fortune that on the same day we got to France a boat carrying illegal immigrants, the "Exodus" was caught and detained in Haifa. The British placed a maritime blockade on all the ports of the Mediterranean. We remained stuck for about six months on an estate near Marseilles

called Les Quatre Saisons (The Four Seasons). On the December 15, 1947 about 500 of us boarded an illegal ship called "The 29th of November 1947" (named after the famous vote at the UN in favor of establishing a Jewish state in part of Palestine). After hardships and adventures (a breakdown of the ship and storms at sea) we arrived in Haifa surrounded by war ships of His Royal Highness the King of England on the night of December 24, 1947. That night we were transferred, by a British military boat, to the island of Cyprus, as illegal immigrants who had entered the territorial waters of Mandate Palestine. For about two weeks we were tossed by the stormy waves of the Mediterranean until we were captured as "illegal border crossers" by battleships of the Royal Navy. It was December 24, 1947, Christmas Eve. That same night we were put on a British warship named "Ocean Vigor" and were taken to Cyprus, the island of deportation.

Before dawn, on the road from Famagusta to the internment camps we were placed in British trucks covered in grayish-brown tarpaulin, very similar to the trucks which transported us from Buchenwald to Dora-Mittelbau. I peeped out and saw a forest of tents, a camp surrounded by barbed wire fences with watch towers and soldiers armed with machine-guns in them – just as it was then. On the night of the 10th of February 1949, after fourteen months of internment, I arrived at the liberated port of Haifa, on board the Jewish merchant navy ship "Atzma'ut" (Independence). Israel Defense Force jeeps transferred us to military absorption camp Kelet No. 3 in Beit-Lid. The scent of citrus orchards flowed over us, extending their welcome. I enlisted as a soldier of Ga'chal (enlisted soldiers from abroad). I joined, like many of the surviving remnant, the Israel Defense Forces in the land of Israel.

The Lost and the Returning

In addition to the survivors of the extermination camps who had returned to the townships in Marmarosh, which had been emptied

of their Jews, other Jews who were conscripted as auxiliaries to the Hungarian army also returned. Most of these troops perished in the killing fields of the Ukraine. However, those who were not included in Hungary-Romania when Transylvania and Carpatorus were annexed to Hungary in 1940 remained alive. When they reached their townships and villages, they saw the destruction and heard how their loved ones had died, they were shocked. They could not believe what they heard. They felt they were culprits who could receive no forgiveness or atonement. They were convinced that they could have saved the helpless ones. My relative, the author Shemaya Avni (Steinmetz) relates how he came back to Romania to his native village of Strimtere and found the remnants of his extended family that had returned from the camps. All his life he could not forgive himself for not being by his parents' side at that merciless hour.

From the Death March to the March of the Living

The survivors from the region of Marmarosh-Transylvania started to return. A geo-political change took place in the region with the conclusion of the Second World War. Carpatorus was conquered by the Soviets and annexed to the Ukraine. The Hungarian side, beyond the river Tisa, returned to Romania. This change worsened the situation of the survivors in Carpatorus. The Gentile inhabitants, who spoke a local Russian dialect, convinced themselves that the property of the Jews, which they had stolen, had belonged to them from time immemorial. The survivors who knocked on the doors of their old houses were refused entrance. The march from the place of their liberation to the township or village from which they had been deported was full of obstacles and dangers. The roads were in bad repair and filled with libertine troops of the victorious conquerors. They made no distinction between the rulers and the ruled. Some were cruel and primitive. They had

no knowledge of Jewish persecution, they had not heard of the Germans in the concentration and extermination camps. Soldiers from the Soviet Republics knew no foreign languages at all. Female survivors were in danger of rape and murder. Lacking protection and starving, lonely and weak, they were faced an additional new danger by simply being women. They could not travel by train as they lacked the money to buy tickets, so they travelled in freight cars where there was no supervision by ticket inspectors. Here they climbed on coal wagons or hid among sacks of corn or rows of logs. They wandered and protected themselves in groups, clinging to each other. Sometimes they were fortunate enough to meet a Russian Jewish soldier or officer who understood Yiddish and came to their assistance. He advised the girls not to reveal that they were Jewish, to stay in groups and not to walk bareheaded or made up. The girls smeared their faces with coal dust. They wrapped their bodies in dirty, torn, slovenly rags and wrapped their hair in colorful, peasant scarves to look like old, worn-out grandmas.

The survivors' aim was to get home. Perhaps there would be a miracle, and some member of the family would be waiting for them there. They wanted to return to the house where they were born, where they had heard their mother's lullaby as she put her children to sleep, where they would find a bed to rest in from the constant wandering. They arrived and they were dismayed After all the tribulations they reached the village and the township, their heart beating hard. Their eyes filled with tears. Here was the path leading to the house, here was the house of this Jewish neighbor, and there, the house of another neighbor with the steps, the wooden banister and the remains of the paint from previous Passovers. A hesitant knock on the wooden door and the sigh of the hinges with a painful Jewish sigh... and it opens, and the swooning sweaty face is awash with a blast of alienation and hatred. There were peasants who reacted with atavistic, deadly animosity, stand-

ing ready with axes and gardening forks to kill whoever came to take their "ancestral inheritance" and land.

Those who returned to Marmarosh – Sighet and its surroundings

At the end of the Second World War Carpatorus became part of the Ukraine. Those returning there encountered a cruel attitude from the Russanki-speaking local population. On the other side of the Tisa river (Sighet, Ober Visho and Dragomirest and their surroundings), about 60 villages and townships with former Jewish communities were returned to Romania. The inhabitants of these places welcomed those returning with wonder and with expressions of sadness. In the village of Ued next to Schiff, a lone youth of 16, Shmuel Faig, arrived and knocked on the door of his parents' home. That night the peasant who had occupied the house and stole their orchard murdered the youth. The peasants of the village were known for their cruelty and violence towards their Jewish neighbors.

In most cases the survivors could not enter their houses, which were occupied. They wandered around with tearful eyes, remembering their loved ones who had perished. They could smell the aroma of the dishes and recalled the days of their youth. My two sisters, Elka and Malka, aged 16-17 were luckier: they were welcomed with great emotion and weeping by our neighbor Gassia. This was the spontaneous behavior of a simple peasant woman who had lived in close proximity to the Jews for many generations. She, of course, did not grasp what they had endured. Her son, John, my classmate, had become an important official in the Romanian-Russian administration and had acquired our house and the large orchard for a symbolic price. The priest and his wife Viorika, who used to be our teacher in the state school, welcomed us with cordiality and compassion. They apparently had heard

and understood what their Jewish neighbors had endured. They treated us with Jesuit clemency.

Here too the survivors developed a herd instinct for survival. It was out of the question to arrive alone. It was impossible to know what the initial reaction would be during the first encounter between the de facto "heir" and the owner, the "deceased" who had turned up alive and well. Would there be expressions of humane compassion and sympathy, or the emotions of atavistic, primitive peasants, prepared to fight with pitchforks and axes, a fight to the death, over every furrow and clod of earth. The survivors who had reached the village or the township formed themselves into a communal association in an empty house. The first nights passed sleeplessly. The dense darkness outside (in many villages there was no electricity) and the uncertainty, caused fears and fitful sleep. The winds wailing in the garden, the trees moaning in the rainstorm, the barking of the dogs in the peasants' gardens, awakened yearnings to those days when everything bustled with activity and joy. The absence of family members was a constant pain. They would wake up after nights of terror, of loneliness and feelings of helplessness. Each survivor who arrived brought with him new hope.

Aaron the son of Elia Ovitz the blacksmith arrived in Schiff. He was a strapping youngster full of energy and resourcefulness. His sister Rachel, about 17, also returned. They were welcomed with open arms, by of all people, the poorest peasant in the village, Peter the postman. His wife, Sika, used to be a trusted helper in many Jewish homes. She knew Yiddish. The son of the blacksmith started immediately to organize food and other necessities and became a sort of patron and protector for all the returnees. Sarah, the oldest daughter of Reb Moshe Klein from Schiff, also arrived. She still did not know whether any of her family had survived. Her parents were sent to Auschwitz with their grandparents and five children. Menachem-Mendel Gantz from Birsanef, a Yeshiva student of Rav Menachem Hager from Ober Visho, returned to

the village situated at a distance of about five miles from Schiff. He hitched a horse to a wagon and came to participate in the joy of the returnees. One of the oldest survivors (about 53), who had miraculously survived – Reb Mordechai Sabo, the owner of the threshing machine - had returned to the nearby village of Rozavlea. He had left his wife and eleven children in Auschwitz. He survived the death march from Auschwitz to Dora. For two weeks they had travelled in open freight cars with a worn-out blanket spread over his head, flanked by his son Josephand another youth from his village, Eliyahu Indig, about 16. There was neither food nor water. Snowflakes rained over them and the cold wind wailed with the clinking wheels of the train. They arrived in Dora practically frozen. At the end of March 1945 Mordechai and his son were evacuated to Bergen-Belsen and Joseph breathed his last on the day of liberation. After recovering from the initial shock of seeing their houses and the village, the survivors started to re-establish families, a memorial to those who had perished. They felt a strong urge to establish their homes, to forge links that would be a continuation to the long chain that was cut short in Auschwitz.

A community was organized in the regional city, Sighet, where a survivor of family Teitelbaum helped with arranging marriages. Among the first couples were Menachem-Mendel Gantz from Birsanif and Sarah daughter of Moshe Klein. Reb Mordechai Sabo from Rozavlea who was a man of property and the oldest of the returning survivors, came to Schiff and married Rachel, the daughter of the blacksmith Elia. She was a resourceful village girl. Loneliness and the desire to establish a family blurred the large age gap, nearly 35 years, between the bride and the groom. This was happening everywhere. When the first baby was born people came by foot, by car and by wagons hitched to horses and oxen to see the wonder and the miracle: a child was born! The joy of the family was the joy of the community. Each boy and each girl were named after a number of those who had perished.They feared that perhaps no more children would be born, and gave each child

more than one name. I remember that in the fifties a child was born to my friend from the village, Ephraim Tobal from Schiff. The child bore the name Mordechai like his grandfather, Mordechai-Mendel Schol. We never got tired from seeing the living miracle. Unfortunately this child caught polio. His parents found him dead in his cradle. Later, three more children were born to them.

The first survivors arrived at the second largest town after Sighet, the town of Ober Visho. Here the situation was different: almost all the Jewish houses were closed and nailed down with wooden boards. Apparently, the local population did not occupy the houses, but the Hungarian authorities and later the Romanians had looted the contents of the houses, the shops and the food stores. The peasants, scattered at a distance from the township, tilled the fields and the orchards as in the days of old. Market days took place in a reduced form. Of the four markets in Visho, only the big market at the lower end of the township remained active. The small market in front of the synagogue, the livestock market and the hay market were barely active. What were missing were the bubbly, active and enterprising Jewish inhabitants. The building of the Yeshiva of the Admor Menachem-Mendel Hager, where 500 Yeshiva students from all the neighboring towns used to learn, was destroyed, its windows broken, its doors gaping. The walls were still imbued with the humming and the melodies of Gemara study. Pages of Gemarot and holy texts rolled in the rooms and their rustling sounded like a cry. Yitzchok-der-Shwartzer's stall, where he used to sell live carp for the Sabbath, was wrecked. There was no trace of the stall of Fradel de Lange, the popcorn and roasted chestnut seller. Nothing remained of the basement of Reb Yakov Yitzchok Katz ha'Tzadik, which used to be filled with wooden barrels containing Brinza and Urda goat cheese. The figure of the shop owner used to stand out against the backdrop of the white cheeses, with his curly sidelocks long, and black as coal. He used to wrap up a few crumbs of cheese in a piece of paper and hand it secretly to the yeshiva students, so they would have

something to season their bread with before the start of their day of study. His basement stood empty and looted. The tavern of Soro-Esther and Yehoshua Yakobovitz, opposite the great synagogue in the Jewish Street (Yiddishe Gas), was desolate. The glass door was broken. The drinkers, the sons of the peasants, who used to leave there part of their profits had vanished. When the singing of the drunkards became too loud, Reb Yehoshua used to sneak out for a couple of hours, to learn Gemara in the large Beit Hamidrash across the road. His wife, wearing a long white apron, with a deep pocket full of clinking coins, was a true woman of valor. She stood head and shoulders above all the clients of the tavern, observing and watching the drinkers. One glance from her would silence the uproar. Everything was destroyed and desolate. In the large synagogue there remained the brass handles and lion heads over the doors of the house of learning. The decorations and the copper flowers, created to beautify the place according to "This is my G-d and I will beautify His sanctuary" (Exodus, The Song of the Sea), were waiting for someone to open and enter. Inside there was great desolation. Spiders had woven their webs from corner to corner with no hindrance. There was no coming or going from the Houses of prayer and the shtiebelach: "The Trees of Life", the synagogue of the artisans, the shtiebel of the border guards The granitchern, the synagogue of the Admor of Kechniye and the synagogue of the Dayan (religious court judge), Rav Amram Grienvald – all stood wrecked and desolate.

Among the first survivors to reach Visho were the brothers Ganz, Yaakov Tzvi and Mendel, the sons of Berel and Rivka Eidel. Hershi the son of Chaim Dovid Klein, Boruch Tesler son of Yaakov Perl, arrived, for the time being alone out of 11 children. The son in law of R' Yitzchok Moshe Karen, Chaim Leib Shefer arrived. The daughters of Yitzchok Moshe Karen, Baila and Rivka Eidel arrived, and a few more from shtetls near Visho. The son-in-law of the Rabbi of Sekolen arrived from Romania and served as a rabbinic address for the needs of the community. The resting place

of the first survivors was in the large courtyard of Reb Feishel Greenboim and Ze'ev Velvel Reicherd.

The midrash regarding the exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt relates that the Lord appointed for the nation of Israel "a redeemer who will release those bound in fetters, during a month which is fit, with neither harsh sun nor heavy rains, the month of spring". The spring weather helped us a lot. The warm sun brought relief to all those liberated who suffered from weakness and undernourishment. Everyone had a story of his "Exodus from Egypt" with its miracles and dangers. The primeval nature of the region welcomed the survivors with an abundance of blossoms. The fruitless trees were sprouting, and the fruit trees brought forth the first buds of apple and pear. The cherries were the first to bring forth their juicy fruit. Almost in every garden they were standing ready and waiting for the returnees. Lilacs blossomed in white and purple. The fragrance of the Festival of Shavuot, as it used to be, was awakening memories and yearnings. The sheep and the cattle of the peasants of the vicinity were grazing in the empty areas as in the days of old. The orchards in the "wine valley" (Valea Vinului) were covered in dark green colors.

The river at the lower end of Visho flowed with force and crashed in its course onto large stones, under which the children attempted to fish minnows. The well of "Mineral Rachel" (Rachel di Vorkut Yiddene) stood as of old, before the deportation, and waited for the eve of the Sabbath when all the neighbors would come to fill bottles with the natural mineral water that flowed up in the well. The water was sharp like soda water with a special flavor. Rachel used to welcome all with a pleasant expression and shining eyes grateful that she too had the privilege of giving to others of the bounty of the Lord. She lowered the bucket tied to a lever and a counterweight and lifted the bucket from the depth of the well herself, filling the bottles for whoever needed them.

All the people of the community would sit in the evenings and tell each other the story of their deliverance and survival. The mood

would change like the weather. When a new survivor arrived the mood soared to the sky. Everyone would take the trouble to help him and ease his situation. When clouds hovered and hid the sun with a dark grey coat, they would wrap themselves up and watch the heavens to see the broken flash of lightening and to hear the thunder shaking the flooded street. The ditches besides the houses were filled with water. The band of friends shut themselves in and there was an atmosphere like that of the third meal of the Sabbath, between Mincha and Ma'ariv. In the gloom no one could see the tears. Like in a motion picture all the events of the past year passed before their eyes, the ghetto, the deportation and the ramp.

In the region of Marmarosh there had always existed a special relationship between the living, born to die, and the dead who were about to live, between the tilled fields and the orchards, plowing and sowing, the smell of damp earth that had dried after the melting of the snows and the rumbling noise of the river, and "The field" with the definite article: the cemetery. Here was the fragrance of the field blessed by the Lord with wheat and new wine, while there was a field covered with the graves giving solace, a sort of Wailing Wall. When my grandmother Sarah's neighbors informed her "Tomorrow, G-d willing, we are going to "the field", she went to prepare the candles, the glasses and the Ma'ane Loshon (a special book of prayers to recite in the cemetery). The wording of the Mishna, Avot chapter 4: "The newborn will die; the dead will live again; the living will be judged" took on a unique significance for the survivors. It was a known and natural convention that the orphaned bride and groom, would go out to the cemetery, accompanied by guardians (against evil spirits). They would set out early, on their wedding day, when the dewdrops were still weeping on the tombstones, to invite their deceased dear ones to their wedding.

All the survivors, after they had visited their empty deserted houses, went to visit the family graves. Many were unable to obtain relief through crying. There were survivors whose wellsprings

of tears had run dry in the conflagration. They literally could not cry. In a paradoxical way they felt that the link between those who were led to the fires and those who were spared was the graves in every village and town. Wherever the survivors arrived, they immediately went to visit those who had remained. They declared proudly, triumphantly: "We are here! We have returned to you!" Each visit to the "house of the living" was a sort of family visit. The wonderful euphemisms coined by our sages for the cemetery, like "the house of eternity", "The house of the living", "Those who slumber in the dust", had special significance for the survivors. The survivors drew new vitality from the graves of previous generations. They were a source and a force to wish to live. Here they saw bodies resting "properly" covered with carpets of grass, while in their mind's eye they saw the bodies which had become scattered ash.

After a communal meal and having drunk some liquor to drown their sorrows, the returnees would light a storm lantern and walk from house to house to "awake" the people who were no longer there. They woke up Mendel the beadle with his unique screeching voice with strong knocks "Shteit oif Reb Mendel (get up Reb Mendel – the community is waiting". From the house of the caretaker they would go to Reb Moshe der Beder – the bath attendant. He was a special person, a generous dispenser of charity and acts of loving kindness, who volunteered to dig graves for the deceased. Every Friday he took pains to stoke the mikveh, heat the basalt stones and pour boiling water over them so that the steam would rise, and help the bathers on the eve of the Sabbath. He would distribute the twig brooms and enjoy the fact that there was pleasure and reward for his labors. It was noticed that this Reb Moshe "skipped" the mitzvah of visiting the sick. It was a wonder and a puzzle. When he was asked "how is it that you, Reb Moshe who pursues mitzvot and acts of true loving-kindness do not visit the sick of the Jewish people?" Reb Moshe would contemplate a while, wipe his sweaty brow, with its oily yarmulke perched on

his bald patch, and answer as follows: "Reb Yid, hear me, I don't want to visit a patient lying on his sickbed who would think that I have come to check the length and the width of the grave I will have to dig."

In addition to the digging of graves, he would see to the presence of a quorum of Tehilim (psalm) sayers at the moment of the departure of the soul. He was poverty stricken yet always happy and goodhearted, as if the challa and the fish for the Sabbath were already prepared and ready on his Sabbath table. Reb Moshe left in his trouser pocket a note stating: *"Beveint mich nisht, un loibt mich nisht un klagt mich nisht. Oif mein matzeva shreibt: p"n Moshe der beder, shamesh of the chevra kadisha for thirty five years..."* (Do not mourn me, do not eulogize me and do not praise me, on my gravestone write: 'here lies Moshe the bath attendant, the caretaker of the Burial Society for thirty five years". The gravestone of Reb Moshe is still standing in the cemetery and stuns visitors with these simple words.

They "woke" Reb Feishel Greenboim, then they passed along Mill Street to wake Reb Berish the ritual slaughterer, a well-known and popular cantor and a composer. It is said that on the way from the ramp to the crematorium he sang in a mighty voice, capable of rending the heavens, the Unehanneh Tokef prayer of the Day of Atonement. Now, in a beseeching and crying voice they begged him to arise and go with them to be the cantor in the cemetery. They knocked on the dark windows of Reb Yehoshua Ganz, the man with the magnificent appearance. They awoke the chassid of the Sighety kloise, Reb Velvel Reichard. On the Sabbath he would wear white socks and all his being was aflame with action and study. The doors of his house, with their colored panes of glass, were nailed down and the house was dark. The band was shouting and pleading: "Arise Reb Velvel, we need you for the quorum!" From that street they moved on to the Street of the Jews next to the Great Synagogue. Here they raised their voice and called Reb Yehoshua Yakobovitz: "Arise! Close the Gemara and come with

us." Sometimes they walked to the lower end of the shtetl where Rav Yitzchok Moshe Karn, Velvel Gutman and Shemuel-Abba Cohen lived. They begged Rav Amram the Dayan to arise and wake up and join them. The whole band moved along the road, now filled with ghostly spirits. Running amok, with an uncontrolled urge, like night-moths drawn to light, they went groaning, they went crying, until they reached the cemetery.

Each of the survivors who had reached the cemetery was as happy as if he had met a living relative. The grasses that grew on the gravestones and the breeze, which moved the tops of the reeds, seemed to be made to speak by the deceased. The Visho cemetery was situated at the edge of the township on slopes of orchards, surrounded by trees. During the day, the fragrance of the meadows and the wild flowers mingled with the humming of the bees and the grasshoppers. The band of special visitors arrived at night, when darkness enveloped the place, and only the crickets disturbed the deathly quiet. The liquor they had drunk beforehand started to take effect. Floods of tears broke through all the barriers.

Each man went to visit his parents and his relatives, feeling the letters engraved on the gravestones and the wooden markers in the darkness as though they were the letters which had floated away from that great conflagration and returned here, to this place. Tired and exhausted they would sit on the mounds of the graves, silently weeping and praying, groaning and being comforted. Each one heard the whisper of the lips of the eternal sleepers. Through this ritual there was a sort of recognition of the miracle that happened, not only to the survivors who had lived, but also to the dead. They had remained in their repose without the hand of utter evil reaching out to grind them to dust and ashes in those crematoria.

The candles burned down. The wind-lanterns were covered in soot. The rising sun lit up the letters on the gravestones. The tears dried and dew drops scattered on the gravestones. The sobriety of daylight awakened the survivors to return home, feeling that their

weeping had not been in vain. With a sense of relief they touched the letters of the gravestones once more and parted from their dead relatives. They returned home with energy and hope. They were convinced that all the dead of the cemetery, the remnant of the community, together with the three Patriarchs who are buried in the Cave of the Machpela, in Hebron, would wake from their slumbers and start moving through the hidden underground passages straight to the Land of Israel.

Michel-Itzik Wieder

Among the people who suffered the torments of hell and came back after the war was Michel-Itzik Wieder. Jews would mention his name with the addition of "may his name be blotted out" in a number of variants: "Michel-Itzik the convert", "Michel-Itzik the "galach" (priest) As an orphan, I lived with my many relatives in the village. My grandmother's sister Chana Chaykes née Stern, when she wanted to warn an unruly grandchild who was disobedient to his teacher, would say to him: "A Michel-Itzik you will be yet!"

Michel-Itzik Wieder was the only son of a poor wretched widow from the village of Krieve. He was a prodigy with a phenomenal memory. He was a sharp student at the Yeshiva of the Admor Menachem-Mendel Hager, in Visho and later at the Damesek Eliezer Yeshiva in Grosswardein, with the Admor Rav Yisroel Hager. He brought his widowed mother much joy as compensation for her extreme poverty. All the matchmakers, and ordinary good Jews, were looking for a good match for this genius. Rabbi Yitzchok Meir Wideman from Masif who was also a Dayan and posek, was blessed with an only daughter, who possessed all the gifts important for a daughter of Israel – modest in her ways, obedient and ready for marriage. All those who were involved with matchmaking did their best to bring the match to a successful conclusion. It was agreed, with the full knowledge of the community

of Masif that "after a hundred and twenty" (the passing away) of the Rabbi and out of respect for his entitlement, Reb Michel-Itzik would take over the Rabbinic seat of his father in law.

No one knows what happened during the night of the nuptials. There was pandemonium in the village of Masif. The wagoners who travelled from there to Visho and further on, passed on the news and the whole of Marmarosh was in aferment. The night after the nuptials the bride refused and rejected the genius groom Michel-Itzik. She shut herself in her wooden hut, she would not draw water from the well, nor would she take part in the kitchen work. The shame was great. It took a long time before Michel-Itzik granted his wife a divorce and thus released her from being 'chained'. Michel-Itzik returned to his Yeshiva in Grosswardein disappointed and depressed. He resumed his studies. He became sharper and more biting towards his fellow scholars. He browbeat them with difficult questions and great sharpness. He found no rest. He would disappear from the Yeshiva for lengthy periods. He remarried and wandered from one community to another as an itinerant preacher. He went to Vienna but did not fit in with the Agudat Israel circles. His extraordinary scholarship worked against him, people were afraid to befriend him because he might show off his genius. He even went to London. With his phenomenal memory he learned many languages. In London he started to go off the path. Apparently he was looking for some sort of revenge. Perhaps he felt cheated by the many "do-gooders" who 'took care' of him. He returned to Vienna and was accepted at the Christian Theological Seminary. Here too he got involved with disputes with the clergy. He was a sort of ipcha mistabra, chronically in opposition – he wanted to explain the way of "that man" (a Talmudic reference to Jesus, to avoid Christian censorship) according to Talmudic sources – from there the route to the abyss was not long.

He returned to Romania to the capital. He apparently decided to switch to the Greek Orthodox religion prevailing in Romania.

He learned the Romanian language through and through, just like a yeshiva student who cracks open some Talmudic Tosfos – so he overcame the linguistic difficulties. He made contact with the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate. They welcomed him and befriended him. He started to conduct research into various religions. The sumptuous décor and ceremonies of the church captivated the yeshiva lad Michel-Itzik from Masif. With chassidic fervor he dedicated himself to fulfilling the roles of clergy and preacher to the best of his ability.

No one in the whole of Marmarosh knew where the genius Michel-Itzik had vanished. For the leading hate- filled anti-Semites in Romania of the thirties and forties, the Zhidan (Jew boy) was a precious gift. The clique which ran propaganda against Jews and Judaism including Octavian Goga, Cuza and the men of the Iron Guard with Zelea Codreanu at their head – did not know how to contain their joy for this precious gift of Michel-Itzik.

At that time, articles of hateful poison against the Jews started to appear in the anti-Semitic newspaper Porunka-Vremy (The order of the day), the mouthpiece of the Romanian Minister of Religious Affairs, Nicolae Iorga. An article appeared about Jewish ritual slaughter according to halacha and an article about wedding ceremonies according to Talmudic practice. There were articles describing Chassidic weddings. All the articles were written in a critical tone, sharp poisonous darts with quotes from the sources. One could sense that the articles represented the "voice of Jacob" adapted to the "Ear of Esau". One could sense a knowing, homiletic style. The Jews were greatly perplexed. They started to guess and whisper. Who is this and who dares to do this! There was in the articles a thread of hair-splitting and Chassidic fervor. One could practically visualize the man, trying to persuade, contrary to the spirit of the halacha. He was suspected. Michel-Itzik did not hide his identity. On the contrary, he would appear at meeting places with Jewish journalists and authors and would argue and wrangle like one of the gang... when suspicion fell upon him, the Jewish

genius, he was somewhat embarrassed. He would excuse himself saying that the gentiles are using his name in order to butt the Jews whom they detested. The signature on the defamatory articles was "Baptised Michael" (Michail Voty Zatul) left no room for doubt as to who was the author of the articles.

Through fate and snatches of stories from people who remembered the figure of Michel-Itzik, a tragic, larger than life figure emerged. A tormented figure. A great soul planted in a thin tortured body of a Yeshiva student who had never enjoyed the good life. A Romanian priest related that Michel-Itzik "served" in his church. It transpires, from the words of the priest, that the church establishment suspected Michael of having been sent by the "Elders of Zion" and the communists to undermine the Greek Orthodox and the Catholic religion.

When the Red Army conquered Romania, in August 1944, Michel-Itzik abandoned the church and left his priest's frock behind. He returned to Bucharest and attempted to forge ties with his own people. When the first refugees, liberated from the concentration camps, arrived and gathered at the various synagogues and soup kitchens of the Jewish community, Michel-Itzik Wieder, bearded and with sidelocks, dressed in traditional Chassidic garb, also turned up. No one knows when the second transformation took place. He appeared tortured, skinny, lost in thought and somehow diminished without a sparkle in his gaze. His eyes were deep and dull. He would sit on the side like a beggar at the door. He would listen eagerly to the stories of the survivors. The stories of the peculiar deaths of the transports that reached Auschwitz affected him like whip lashes on a beaten, naked body. The descriptions of the arrival of the ghetto at the ramp, the selection, the flames of fire and the smell of roasting of that night, the dreadful silence afterwards – this description of the final road taken by his relatives and the village people – increased his pangs of conscience. Day and night he would go from place to place, tormenting himself for having spread Christianity and authored articles denigrating the

Talmud at the very time that all his relatives, and his widowed mother, died in the crematoria of Auschwitz.

He resolved to forget the priestly black miter and black cloak. He would wander from one synagogue to another, sleep on the floor with a stone for a pillow, as a sort of repentance for the pillow made for him by his widowed mother from goose down. He only ate and drank so that he would have the strength to hear more and more survivors' stories. Obviously, Michel-Itzik recognized his brethren but they did not recognize him. As more refugees turned up and started to identify him, he actually breathed a sigh of relief. Some wanted to drive him out of the synagogue. They cried out "Michel-Itzik the galach"!" Hot heads raised a hand while Michel-Itzik Wieder would cry out with all his might weeping bitterly: "Yidden" – strike, Jews! Hit me more! I deserve it! Have no pity on me – strike! I deserve it, when you were burning there in Auschwitz I stayed here, sheltered, with none to bother me."

During the large-scale illegal immigration to Israel, Michel-Itzik Wieder turned up among them. The son of the widow from Krieve, the prodigy from the Yeshiva of Ober Visho and Grosswardein, the son-in-law of the Rabbi and Dayan of Massif appeared. He went to Vizhnitz neighborhood of Bnei-Brak. He entered the great hall of learning in the Damesek Eliezer yeshiva as a well experienced great swimmer in the sea of Talmud dressed in a shabby frock, a much used velvet hat in the style of Vizhnitz-Antania, bearded and with sidelocks. He settled into one of the benches on the western side, like any beggar or guest. He smoothed his sparse reddish beard, with some silver threads in it, as well as his unruly sidelocks. His eyes glittered like the eyes of an owl in the dim light of the synagogue, but his face was fallen and tormented. He was waiting to join the afternoon and evening prayers. Some Chassidim with a penetrating gaze noticed the guest. Like sharks that scent a wounded fish from a great distance, they approached him with measured steps. Someone stretched out his hand to greet him with a Shalom Aleichem as is customary and some Chassidim

with eagle eyes and a sniffing nose identified the man, that man... that is Michel-Itzik Wieder. Hatred and jealousy reared their ugly heads like a flame among wood-shavings. The whispering became the hissing of vipers. The silent murmuring became the buzzing of wasps, anger and hatred were stirred, demanding the honor of the Torah from a Jew who had trampled it – Michel-Itzik der meshumad!! The Rabbi arrived. The Admor Rav Chaim Meir son of Rav Yisroel Hager entered accompanied by a retinue of Yeshiva students, leaning on two honorary officers, for the afternoon and evening prayers. With his holy senses and deep insight he felt the unusual atmosphere. With his penetrating gaze he noticed the guest sitting self absorbed like a bird with its wings tucked in, frozen before a python which is about to swallow it.

The Rabbi recognized him. With his observant eyes he penetrated into the depth of the man like He who reads the thoughts of the heart of men. He quickly went up the steps of the central raised platform, struck the table forcefully and silence prevailed. The murmuring ceased and the prayers began. Between Mincha and Ma'ariv he went up to the yielding, tormented guest, stretched out his hand, greeting him with a Shalom Aliechem and took him to sit in a respectable seat. The honorary officer brought him one of the used kaftans of the Rabbi and a prayer shawl. The Rabbi himself handed them to his friend and pupil of old who had returned to the fold – Michel-Itzik Wieder.

Michel-Itzik felt in his pockets for a note he had received from the foremost Rabbis of Romania: the Admor of Sekulen R' Eliezer Zusia Portugal, Rabbi Tzvi Gutman, the dean of the Rabbinical court of Bucharest and Rabbi Moshe David Rosen, dated the month of Av 1956, reading as follows: "To awaken herewith the hearts of our brethren the children of Israel in every location, those who excel in the qualities of loving kindness, towards the person who hands over this note, the Rebbe, Rav Michel Yitzchok Wieder may he live. We have observed that he is a true penitent. He has suffered much and has undertaken harsh mortification and afflictions. For this

reason one should accord him the commandment of "Strengthen him", befriend him and honor him, support him and assist him. Most importantly find him means of sustenance like for example a position of teacher of religious studies to young children, for he is gifted with superior talents. One should see to his livelihood and in the merit of this the words of our sages: "he who has mercy over people the heavens have mercy on him" will come true. You shall be blessed with words of good."

The closeness of the Rabbi did not help him to come close to the community. They did not forgive him his deeds. They acted according to the Babylonian Talmudic saying (Yuma 23): "A scholar who does not take vengeance like a snake – is no scholar". At the end of his life when he approached 70, sated with anger and bitterness, he left Bnei-Brak and moved to Tiberias. The Vizhnitz neighborhood and its Chassidim reminded him too much of the Jews of Massif and its environment. Every obstacle and shortage constituted a trial. In Tiberias he lived in one of the catacombs close to the cemetery. Compassionate women who saw the caftan- clad ascetic, with his silver ball-shaped topped walking stick, constantly learning and mumbling his prayers with great concentration and weeping, brought him food and fruit. He found the paths of repentance among the paths of the tombstones. In the holy city of Tiberias he breathed his last as a perfect penitent.

Israel: the will to Live

In 1947, within a year and a half of liberation, the survivors left the old ruined house and parted from the dead. Many got married. "The dry rod" sprouted buds and ripened almonds. The first children were born. They streamed through uncertain borders and destroyed countries. The direction was the land of Israel. The awakening increased from day to day and it blew strength and wind into the sails of hope. The survivors felt that Solomon's words in his prayers at the completion of the building of the First

Temple were aimed at them: "... and they shall return to you with all their heart and all their might in the land of their enemies... and they shall pray to you through their land" (Kings I:5). The striving and the powerful pull to reach the land of Israel were the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire. The exhausted survivors reached the DP camps in Germany. From there they moved through forests and borders on to Austria, Italy and France accompanied by the men of the Bricha, the escape organization that took them to towns along the Mediterranean coast. Dozens of boats and ships took the survivors toward land of Israel. Some made it but many failed to evade the maritime blockade imposed by the British Navy and were held in Cyprus, from where they were able to observe their dream from afar.

The will to live and the aspiration to build a family on the foundation of a destroyed home was the revenge of the veterans of the concentration camps since as Jews we were unable to take revenge against the tormentors. The Gentile friends did it simply and devoutly. In Bergen-Belsen the Russian prisoners killed all the kapos and the blockaltesters who were in Dora. Kapo Willi Ulsen from the gartnerai kommando 135, who was known and famous for his wickedness and cruelty, was murdered while hiding in a pit. He was cut to pieces without any compunction. We too took on the spirit of vengeance. One day we decided to take our friend the Yiddish author from Sighet, Yechezkel Ring with us. We joined a group that would raid a village near Bergen-Belsen. We entered with sure steps and acted like robbers and highwaymen. We opened a door with a strong kick as befitting brave prisoners. In one of the houses we opened the door forcefully and noisily. We encountered an elderly couple, shaking with fear like rabbits before the hunters. Angrily we opened the cupboards and rummaged in search of food. Suddenly I heard a scream of distress from the old man, catching the hand of his old wife and shouting at her in German: "Come quickly! Let's run away from here. Don't you see that the Russians have come!" My friend Ring saw

the distress of the frightened old people and started to shout to me: "Why did you bring me? I cannot watch these old wretched people!" He ran off and returned to the camp.

The real heroes, who aroused wonder and admiration, were those men who reached Mengele's ramp and yet withstood all. The urge to restore and to re-establish the ruins of the Jewish people were a miracle. Reb Mordechai Sabo from the village of Rozavlea, was 53 years old. He married a 17-years old Holocaust survivor and five sons were born to them, who were heroic pioneers. This country Jew, a simple believer, arrived at the selection on the 24th of Iyar 1944, and stood at the entrance of the cattle truck with a wife, ten sons and a daughter of their old age, Henya'le. They all went up in the conflagration. He was left alone with his son Joseph who breathed his last in Bergen-Belsen at the camp's liberation. Mordechai had the strength, the courage and the faith to establish a home. Sometimes the unbelievable would happen among the women, the mothers who arrived at the gateway to hell with little children. An SS man controlling the line who saw a young mother holding her baby in her arms would grab the child from her and pass it on to a grandmother or a little sister. He would push the mother into the line of the workers. Assistants to Dr. Joseph Mengele, real heroines who had do carry out sterilization experiments on Jewish women prisoners, "failed" in their task so that these women were able, after the war, to conceive and to embrace children.

The Bible tells that Jacob was about to fulfill the destiny of the people of Israel when suddenly he faced the danger of annihilation. Esau, his brother, came accompanied by four hundred armed men. Jacob expressed his fear in just five words: "Lest he come and strike me down, the mother with her young" (Genesis, 32:12). He does not sleep a wink. He spends that night in fear and in hope. He prays and makes plans of rescue and partial survival. The skies over the land of Israel are studded with glittering stars. There is no ladder positioned there nor ascending or descending angels, only

the echo of the hobnailed sandals of the soldiers of Esau, echoing, menacing from a distance. Then the ministering angel of utter evil, the ministering Angel of Esau, comes and wrestles with Jacob at the crossing of the Yabbok. The sense of the approaching end of existence of a person in narrow straits may be an allusion to the concealing of the countenance. Jacob felt that he was abandoned to his fate. This was what was written on the gates of the concentration and extermination camp of Buchenwald: "Each man to his fate". A cruel slogan which rammed down the heads of the prisoners, on entering and leaving, like the beat of a sledge-hammer on a steel anvil, a slogan condensed like the drops of poison of the viper: here there is no mercy, no compassion and no hope.

The survivors of that day and that night of the selection were alone, left to their fate. Singly they returned to their hostile villages and townships. They struggled with themselves, overcame all and rebuilt their destroyed homes. The magnitude of the miracle that took place can be illustrated by one small photo taken at the wedding of my sister Elka in 1949, about four years after Auschwitz. She was about 19 and the groom, Shraga was about 20. He and his cousin, Joseph Burnstein were detained in the township of Yanov-Lubelski, in Poland when they were thirteen years old. They lived through concentration and extermination camps like Majdanek, Treblinka, Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen. They alone were left from large extended families. Elka and Shraga met in the detention camp for illegal immigrants in Cyprus. With the establishment of the State of Israel the wedding was scheduled for the 15th of Av 1949. I was a soldier and was granted half a day off. In Tel-Aviv, on Shenkin Street the owner had converted his empty shop called Asher Hall into a wedding hall. One could cram around 40 people around the long table in the middle of the shop. I counted the guests, including the bride and the groom, an uncle and aunt, friends – Holocaust survivors, altogether 26 people (an important Kabbalistic number). There were only a few sausages in the sandwiches, due to the rationing. There was plenty of soda

water. There was no photographer, or a band; no badchan (jester) or father or mother to accompany them. Yet one generation later, for the wedding of their sons or daughters it took my sister a full week to compile the list of guests for her side of the family – no less than 300 people. Regretfully she had to remove a few dozen people, who were offended that they were not invited. Thus the survivors were fortunate to experience the miracle that happened to Jacob on his way home. "For with my staff I crossed this Jordan and now I have become two camps" (Genesis, 32:1), "From the valley of the dry bones they have turned into a very great legion" (Ezekiel, 37:1, 10).

This is the revenge and the consolation.

Appendix

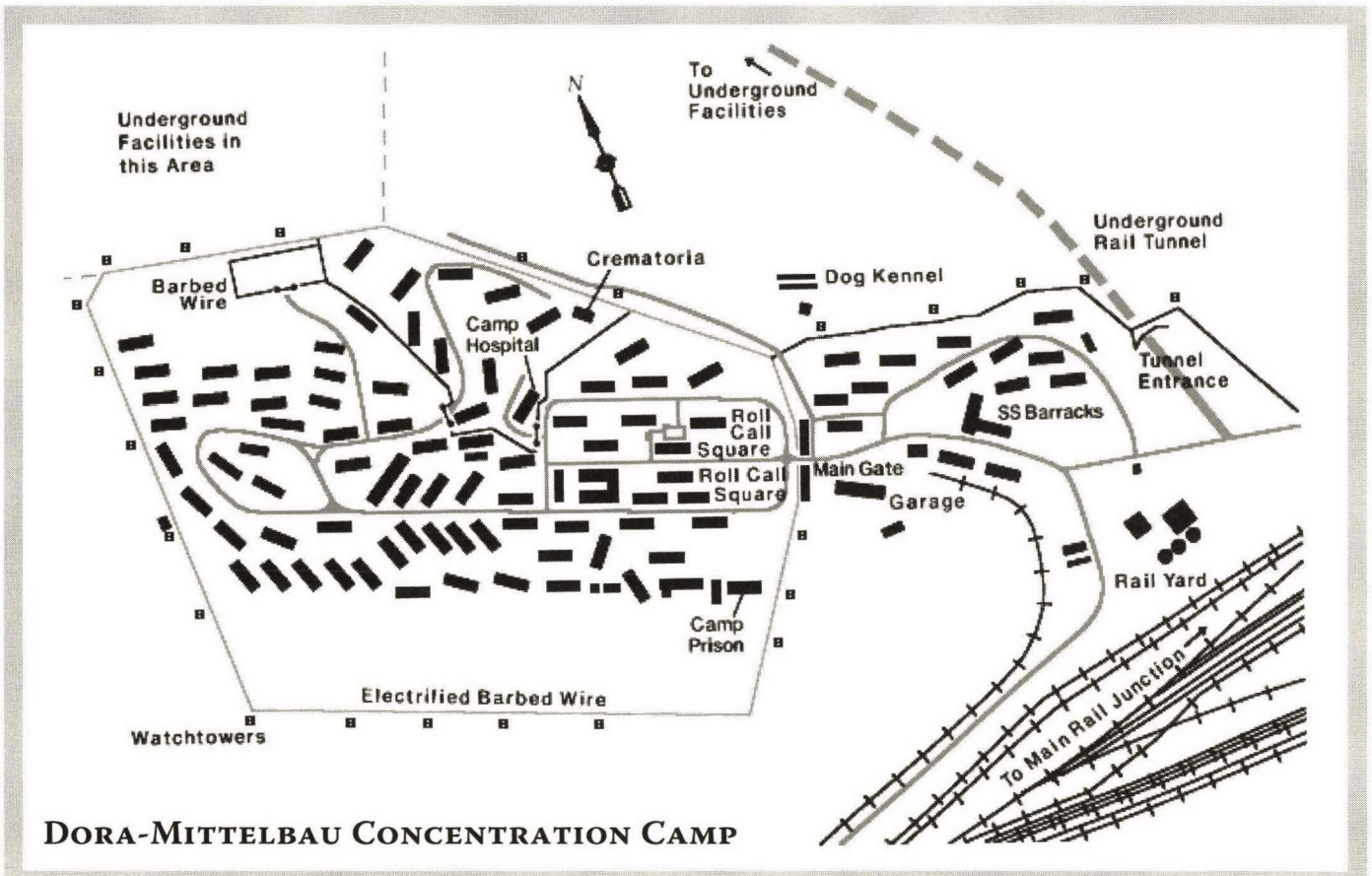
Maps

Documents

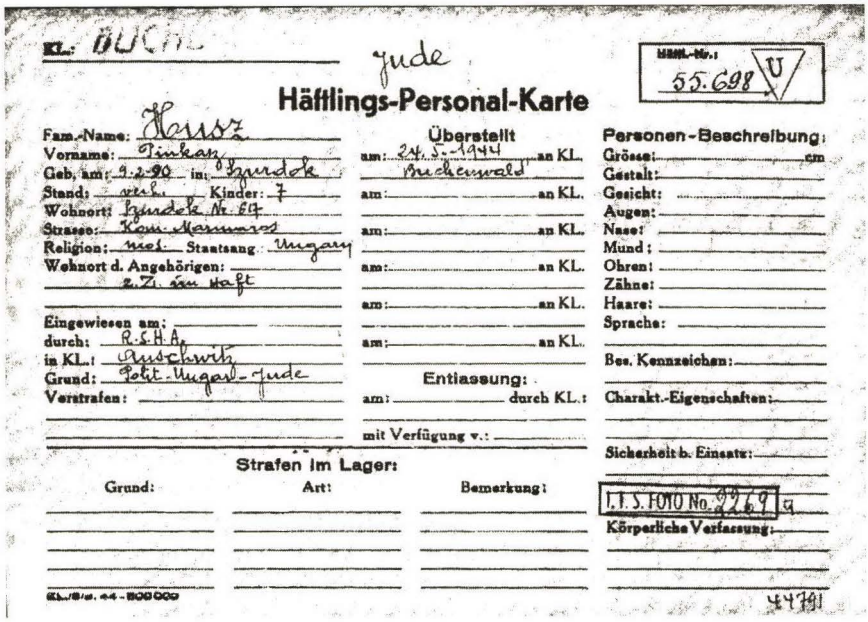
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Yoid
Butiza
Selist
Sitsel
Dragomirest Ghetto Zone
Barczánfalva
Petrova
Borsa
Majszin
SZOLNOK-DOBOKA VÁRM.
BESZTERCZE-NA



Dora-Mittelbau Concentration Camp


KL. BUCH. Jude

55.698 U

Häftlings-Personal-Karte

Fam.-Name: Huz
Vorname: Pinkas
Geb. am: 9.2.90 in: Szudek
Stand: verh. Kinder: 7
Wohnort: Szudek Nr. 64
Strasse: Kom. Marmaros
Religion: mos. Staatsang. Ungarn
Wohnort d. Angehörigen: z.Zt. im Haft

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durch: R.S.H.A.
in KL.: Auschwitz
Grund: Polit.-Ungarn-Jude
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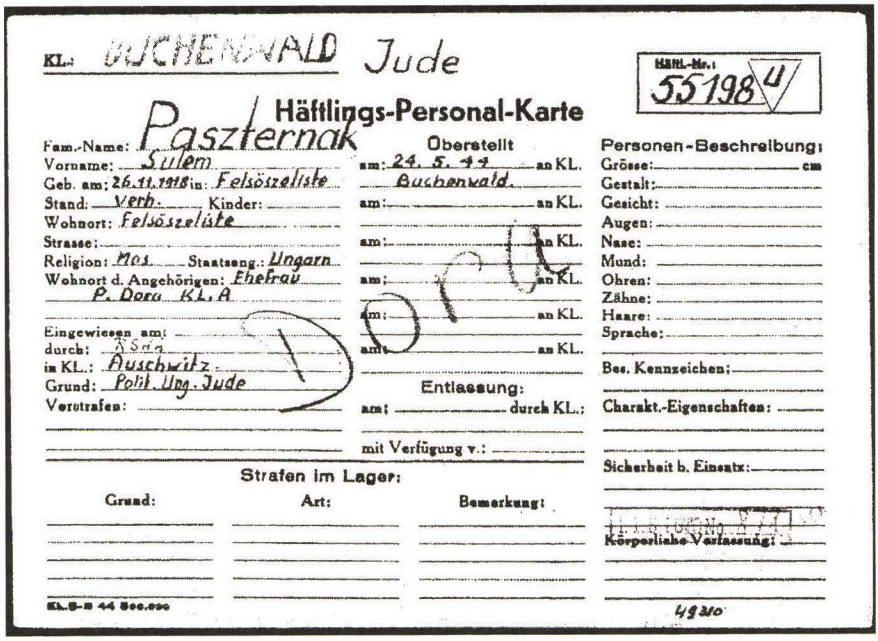
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Haare:
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Bes. Kennzeichen:
Charakt.-Eigenschaften:
Sicherheit b. Einsatz:
I.T.S. FOTO No. 9269
Körperliche Verfassung:

44781

Prisoner's personal card belonging to Pinhas Huz, land owner and the employer of Vassily, the Gentile laborer (Chapter 5).
Pinhas Huz, born in 1890, was one of the oldest prisoners in Dora. He was one of R' Alter Shmaya's sons; his brothers Itzik, Hirsh, Mordechai and Ba'arel all perished in the Holocaust. His wife, a Spitzer, was from Dragomirest. He was sent to Auschwitz with seven children and died there in early 1944.



KL.: BUCHENWALD Jude

Häftlings-Personal-Karte

Häftl.-Nr.: 55198 U

Fam.-Name: Pasztternak
Vorname: Sulem
Geb. am: 26.11.1918 in: Felsöszeliste
Stand: Verh. Kinder:
Wohnort: Felsöszeliste
Strasse:
Religion: Mos. Staatsang.: Ungarn
Wohnort d. Angehörigen: Ehefrau P. Dora KL.A

Eingewiesen am:
durch:
in KL.: Auschwitz
Grund: Polit. Ung. Jude
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Charakt.-Eigenschaften:
Sicherheit b. Einsatz:
Körperliche Verfassung:

49310

Prisoner's personal card belonging to Shalom Pasternak, who was sent to the ghetto two days after his wedding (Chapter 7). He "celebrated" his honeymoon with his wife Deborah by travelling to Auschwitz in a cattle car. They both survived Dora and were one of the first people to return to the village of Salistea.

KL. BUCHENWALD Jude

HSK.-Nr.: 55.577 U

Häftlings-Personal-Karte

Fam.-Name: Maged
Vorname: Kurt
Geb. am: 6.2.04 in: Petrovo
Stand: verh. Kinder: 7
Wohnort: Szuadek
Strasse:
Religion: mos. Staatsang.: Ungarn
Wohnort d. Angehörigen:
z. Z. im Haft

Eingewiesen am:
durch: RSHA.
in KL.: Auschwitz
Grund: Polit. Ungar-Jude
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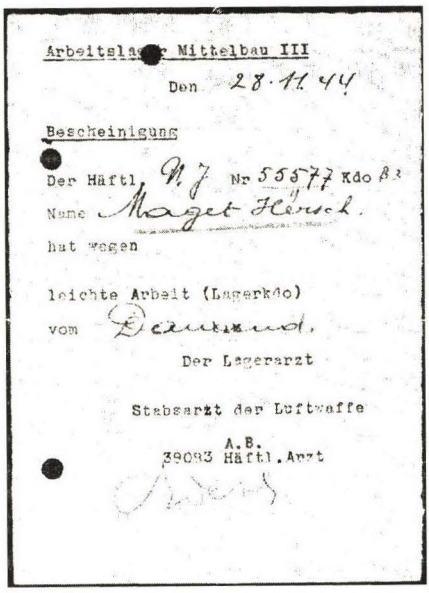
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U.S. FOTO No. 1637
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SS-B-B 44 Bes.Abt. 1 4791

Prisoner's personal card belonging to Rabbi Tzvi Hirsh Kahana, the Rabbi of Strimtere and the head of Beit Aharon yeshiva, listed under his mother's name of Maged. He was sent to Auschwitz with his wife Zissel and seven children. He was assigned the cleaners' brigade. At the end of 1944 he was sent to Hartzungen, near Dora, where he was beaten and brought to Dora hospital. On the night of January 13, 1945 he died (Chapter 9). Of his seven children, only his daughter Ita, 16, and his youngest son Zanvil, age 14, survived. On the left is an official "sick leave" which authorizes exemption from hard labor.



Arbeitslager Mittelbau III

Den 28.11.44

Bescheinigung

Der Häftl. N.J. Nr 55577 Kdo B3

Name Maged Hirsch.

hat wegen

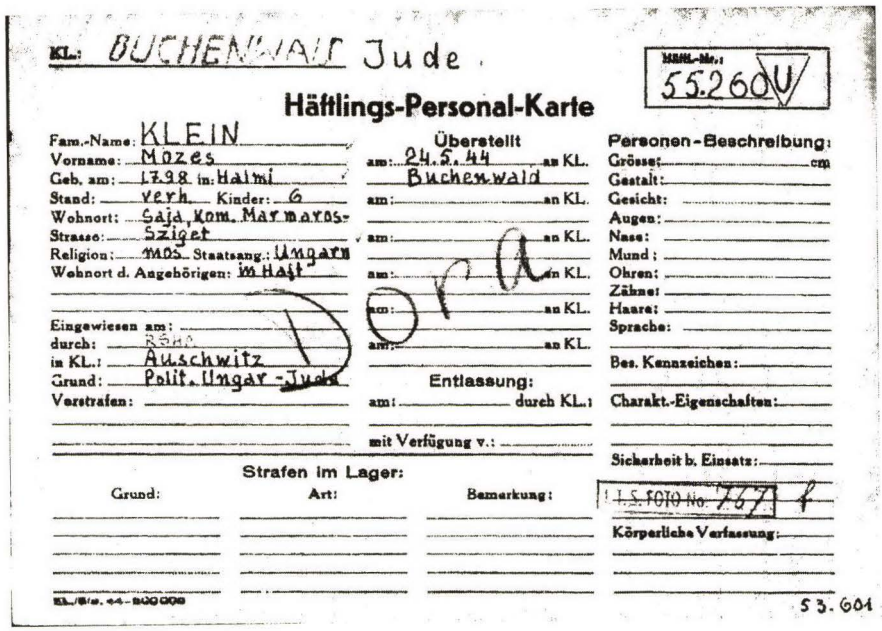
leichte Arbeit (Lagerkdo)

vom Dezember.

Der Lagerarzt

Stabsarzt der Luftwaffe

A.B.
39093 Häftl. Arzt



KL.: BUCHENWALD Jude.

HSHL.-Nr.: 55.260 V

Häftlings-Personal-Karte

Fam.-Name: KLEIN
Vorname: Mozes
Geb. am: 1898 in: Halmi
Stand: verh. Kinder: 6
Wohnort: Saja, kom. Marmaros-
Strasse: Sziget
Religion: mos. Staatsang.: Ungarn
Wohnort d. Angehörigen: in Haft

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durch: RSHA
in KL.: Auschwitz
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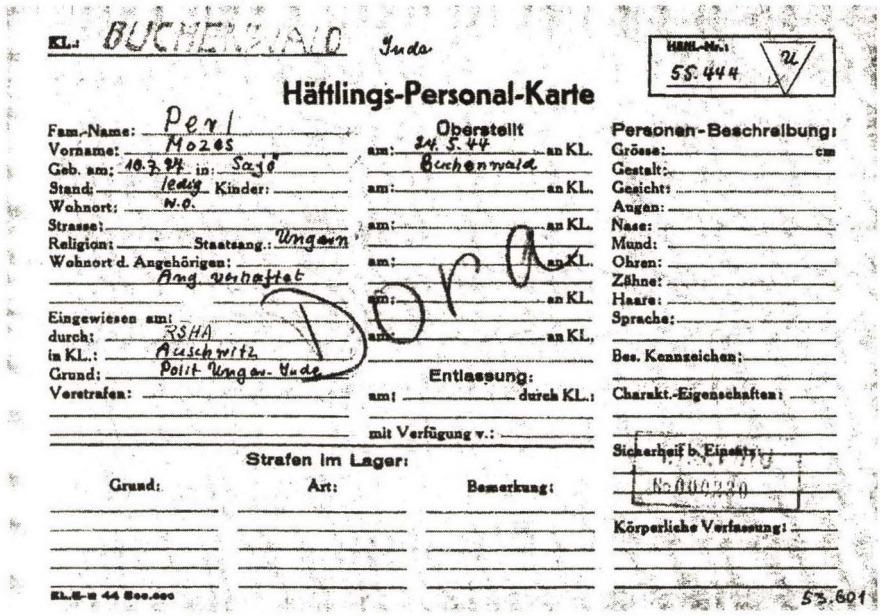
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I.S. FOTO No. 767
Körperliche Verfassung:

53.601

Prisoner's personal card belonging to Reb. Moshe Klein, from Holmin (Chapter 3). He married the daughter of Raziel Wiesel in the village of Schiff. He was sent to Auschwitz with his wife Ita and six children, of which only his two daughters Elka and Sarah and his son Nehamia survived. Reb Moshe Klein was liberated from Dora and made aliya to Israel.


KL.: BUCHENWALD Jude

Häftlings-Personal-Karte

HäftL.-Nr.: 55.444 U

Fam.-Name: Perl
Vorname: Mozes
Geb. am: 10.7.24 in: Sajó
Stand: ledig Kinder:
Wohnort: N.O.
Strasse:
Religion: Staatsang.: Ungarn
Wohnort d. Angehörigen:
Ang. verhaftet
Eingewiesen am:
durch: RSHA
in KL.: Auschwitz
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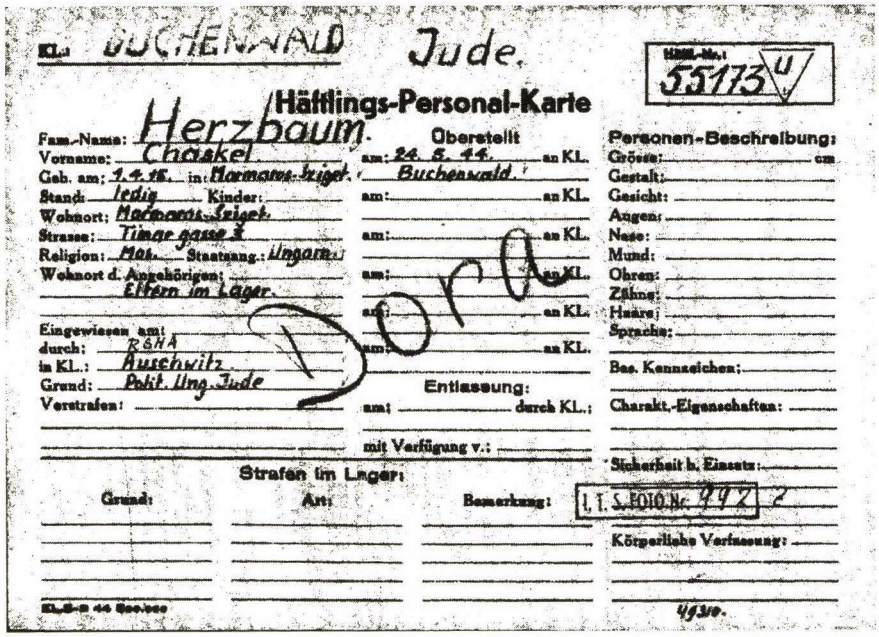
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Körperliche Verfassung:

Bl.-B-u 44 Bes.-ooo 53.601

Prisoner's personal card belonging to Moshe Perl, whose full name was Zeidel Moshe ben Neha and Alter Perl, the boy in "Old Moishe and his assistant Zeidel" (Chapter 9). He was 17 years old and, out of survival instinct, he listed his profession as a metal worker despite his inexperience. After the Liberation he went to London where he started a family.


KL. BUCHENWALD Jude.

Häftlings-Personal-Karte

55173 U

Fam.-Name: Herzbaum
Vorname: Chaskel
Geb. am: 1.4.15. in: Marmaros-Sziget
Stand: ledig Kinder:
Wohnort: Marmaros-Sziget
Strasse: Tinge gasse 8
Religion: Mos. Staatsang.: Ungarn
Wohnort d. Angehörigen: Eltern im Lager.

Eingewiesen am:
durch: RSHA
in KL.: Auschwitz
Grund: Polit. Ung. Jude

Versetzt: am: 24. 8. 44. an KL. Buchenwald.
am: an KL.
am: an KL.
am: an KL.
am: an KL.
am: an KL.

Entlassung:
am: durch KL.:
mit Verfügung v.:

Strafen im Lager:
Grund: Art: Bemerkung:

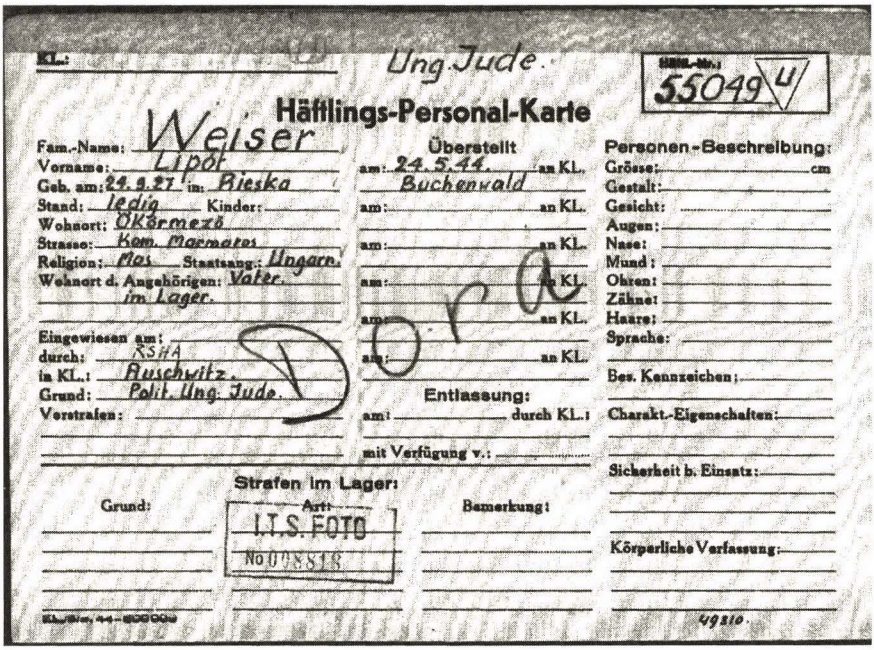
I. T. S. FOTO Nr. 942 2

Personen-Beschreibung:
Größe: cm
Gestalt:
Gesicht:
Augen:
Nase:
Mund:
Ohren:
Zähne:
Haare:
Sprache:
Bes. Kennzeichen:
Charakt.-Eigenschaften:
Sicherheit b. Einsatz:
Körperliche Verfassung:

49/10.

Prisoner's personal card belonging to Yechezkel Ring. He is listed as "Herzbaum", his mother's name. Most of the Jews in Marmorosh did not bother to register their marriage at a notary's, which why most of them are listed under their mother's name.

Ring was a Yiddish writer (Chapter 9). In Auschwitz he was listed as a printing press worker and brush expert. His father, Leibusch Ring, had a brush and broom factory. Brush maker – a barshtbunder – was considered a Jewish profession. After his release met his wife, Tzippora Bloch, who was freed from Bergen-Belsen at the age of 16. They were married in Sweden and had two children, Hadassah and Abraham.



KL.: (D) Ung. Jude.

55049 U

Häftlings-Personal-Karte

Fam.-Name: Weiser
Vorname: Lipót
Geb. am: 24.9.27 in: Bieska
Stand: ledig Kinder:
Wohnort: Ökörmezö
Strasse: Kom. Marmaros
Religion: Mos Staatsang.: Ungarn
Wohnort d. Angehörigen: Vater im Lager.

Eingewiesen am:
durch: RSHA
in KL.: Auschwitz
Grund: Polit. Ung. Jude.
Vorstrafen:

Überstellt
am: 24.5.44. an KL. Buchenwald
am: an KL.
am: an KL.
am: an KL.
am: an KL.
am: an KL.

Dora

Entlassung:
am: durch KL.:
mit Verfügung v.:

Strafen im Lager:
Grund: Art: Bemerkung:

I.T.S. FOTO
No 078818

Personen-Beschreibung:
Grösse: cm
Gestalt:
Gesicht:
Augen:
Nase:
Mund:
Ohren:
Zähne:
Haare:
Sprache:
Bes. Kennzeichen:
Charakt.-Eigenschaften:
Sicherheit b. Einsatz:
Körperliche Verfassung:

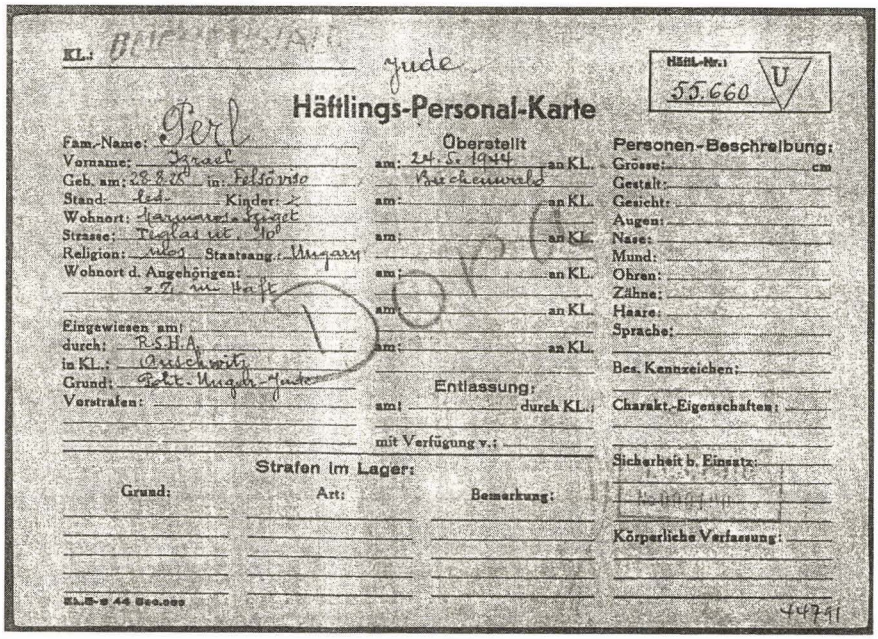
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Prisoner's personal card belonging to Lipa Vizer (Chapter 9).





Meir Appelboim (left), the hidden "monkey-child" from Radum (Chapter 9).



KL.: BUCHENWALD

jude

HSHL-Nr.: 55.660 U

Häftlings-Personal-Karte

Fam.-Name: Perl
Vorname: Israel
Geb. am: 28.8.25 in: Felsövize
Stand: led. Kinder: 2
Wohnort: Hajmáskér Izrael
Strasse: Tiglad ut. 10
Religion: rkat. Staatsang.: Ungarn
Wohnort d. Angehörigen:
z.Z. im Haft

Eingewiesen am:
durch: R.S.H.A.
in KL.: Auschwitz
Grund: Polit. Ungar-Jude
Vorstrafen:

Überstellt
am: 24.8.1944 an KL. Buchenwald
am: an KL.
am: an KL.
am: an KL.
am: an KL.
am: an KL.

Entlassung:
am: durch KL.:
mit Verfügung v.:

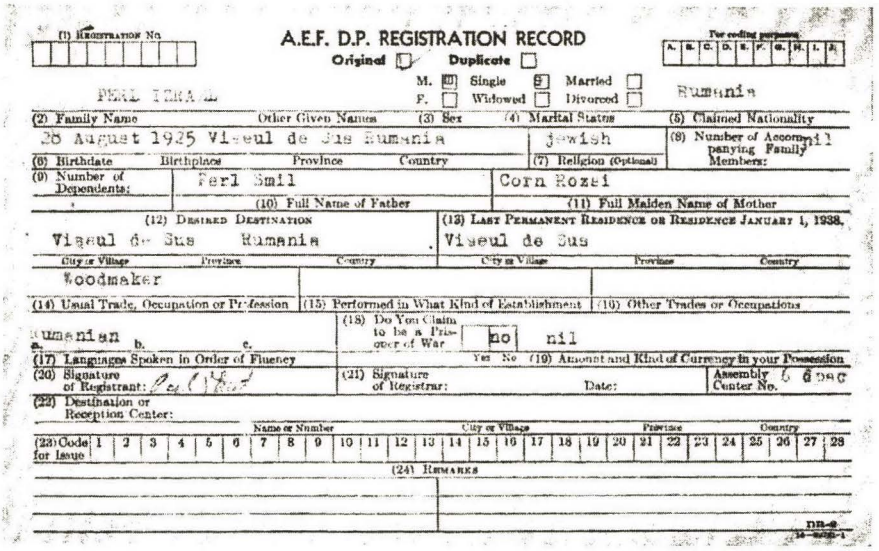
Strafen im Lager:

Grund:	Art:	Bemerkung:

Personen-Beschreibung:
Grösse: cm
Gestalt:
Gesicht:
Augen:
Nase:
Mund:
Ohren:
Zähne:
Haare:
Sprache:
Bes. Kennzeichen:
Charakt.-Eigenschaften:
Sicherheit b. Einsatz:
Körperliche Verfassung:

44741

Prisoner's personal card of the author Chayim Israel Perl.



(1) Registration No.

A.E.F. D.P. REGISTRATION RECORD

Original ☒ Duplicate ☐

For coding purposes: A. B. C. D. E. F. G. H. I. J.

PERL ISRAEL

M. ☒ Single ☒ Married ☐
F. ☐ Widowed ☐ Divorced ☐

Rumania

(2) Family Name | Other Given Names | (3) Sex | (4) Marital Status | (5) Claimed Nationality

28 August 1925 Viseul de Jus Rumania | jewish | (8) Number of Accompanying Family Members: nil

(6) Birthdate | Birthplace | Province | Country | (7) Religion (Optional)

(9) Number of Dependents: Perl Smil | Corn Rozsi

(10) Full Name of Father | (11) Full Maiden Name of Mother

(12) Desired Destination: Viseul de Sus Rumania

(13) Last Permanent Residence or Residence January 1, 1938: Viseul de Sus

City or Village | Province | Country

Woodmaker

(14) Usual Trade, Occupation or Profession | (15) Performed in What Kind of Establishment | (16) Other Trades or Occupations

a. Rumanian b. c.

(17) Languages Spoken in Order of Fluency

(18) Do You Claim to be a Prisoner of War: Yes ☐ No ☒

(19) Amount and Kind of Currency in your Possession: nil

(20) Signature of Registrant: Perl Israel

(21) Signature of Registrant: Date:

Assembly Center No. 6 DPC

(22) Destination or Reception Center:

(23) Code for Issue	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28
	Name or Number									City or Village										Province					Country			

(24) Remarks

nn-6

A Displaced Person's card delivered by the Allied Occupying Powers, British Zone.

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Notes to Part I

Arba-kanfoth (literally four corners): Jewish religious garment with fringes (tzitzit) at the corners, smaller than the prayer shawl (*tallit*).

Ashamnu, Bagadnu confession recited repeatedly during Yom Kippur, when we ask G-d for forgiveness for all our sins: "We have been guilty, Awe have betrayed G-d..."

Barchi Nafshi Psalms 104, where all creation praises G-d.

Barchu: call to worship before the *Shema*

Bein ha'metzarim: before Tisha BeAv, the three weeks of mourning for the destruction of the two Temples of Jerusalem.

Bil'am: the seer who is called upon by the Moabite king Balak to curse the children of Israel. Bilam asserts repeatedly that he cannot speak a word that G-d has not commanded and his curses turned into blessing.

Chana's prayer: Chana was childless and went to Shiloh to pray for a child. Eli, the high priest, thought she was drunk because only her lips moved. She gave birth to a son whom she vowed to dedicate to the service of G-d. He became the prophet Samuel. Chana's prayer is considered one of the key Biblical sources for the concept of prayer.

Cuza, Alexandru C.: November 8, 1857—1947) was a Romanian far right politician and theorist and antisemite.

Elu Metziot: Chapter of Bava Metzi'a tractate of the Talmud dealing with the obligation to return lost objects to their owner.

Goga, Octavian (April 1, 1881–May 7, 1938) a Romanian politician, poet, playwright, journalist, and translator. Goga was

mostly known for the first anti-Semitic laws which were passed. On January 12, 1938 his government stripped Romanian Jews of their citizenship.

Hakafa (Hakafot): carrying of the torah scrolls at Simchat Torah in a series of seven circuits around the sanctuary. Each circuit is announced by invocations imploring God to *Hoshiah Na* ("Save us") and ending with the refrain, *Aneinu B'yom Koreinu* ("Answer us on the day we call").

Ha'Mafkid "the depositor"; third Chapter in Bava Metziah, dealing with the laws of guardianship

Hosha'na Rabba: seventh day of Sukkot. This day is marked by a special synagogue service in which seven circuits are made by the worshippers holding the lulav and etrog, while the congregation recites *Hoshanot* (supplication).Hoshana Rabba is known as the last of the Days of Judgment which began on Rosh Hashana. The judgment for the new year is sealed on Yom Kippur, but it is not "delivered" until Hoshana Rabba, the last day of Sukkot), during which time one can still alter the verdict and decree for the new year.

Ke'gavna: prayer from the Zohar that focuses on the spiritual aspects of the Sabbath.

Kedusha: the high point of the *Amidah*, which itself is the central prayer of the service

Kitzur Shulchan Aruch brief guide to Jewish Law (*halacha*) in the form of an abridgment and updating of Joseph Caro's Shulchan Aruch (the normative work of halacha).

Knocking Haman: on Purim, when the book of Esther (the Megilla) is read, the crowd whistles and claps whenever the name of evil Haman is mentioned.

Machzor: prayer book used by Jews on the High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, as well as the three "pilgrimage festivals" of Passover, Shavuot, and Succoth.

Marshlek or **badchen**: joker or clown, a scholarly comedian who traditionally entertains the audience at Jewish weddings.

Neila: the closing prayer of Yom Kippur, Neila literally means a *closing* of the gates. Neila service offers one last chance to gain Divine Mercy and throughout this prayer, the doors of the Ark (in which the bible scrolls are kept) remain open all the time. This symbolizes the belief that God is listening to our prayers, and that the gates of heaven are open

Poskim: the term in Jewish law for "decider" – a legal scholar who decides the Halacha in cases where previous authorities are inconclusive or in those situations where no halakhic precedent exists.

Rashi, Shlomo Yitzhaki (1040 –1105), better known by the acronym **Rashi** (**RA**bbi **SH**lomo **I**tzhaki): a medieval French rabbi famed as the author of the first comprehensive commentary on the Talmud, as well as a comprehensive commentary on the *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible).

Seder Night: The Seder, on the 14th of Nisan marks the beginning of the Passover. It involves a retelling of the story of the liberation of the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Families and friends gather in the evening to read the text of the Haggadah. The Seder evokes the twin themes of the evening: slavery and freedom. At the beginning of the 15th of Nisan in Egypt, the Jewish people were enslaved to Pharaoh. After the tenth plague struck Egypt at midnight, killing all the first-born of Pharaoh to the first born of captive who was in the dungeon, and all the first born of livestock (Exodus 12:29), in the land. Pharaoh

let the Hebrew nation go, effectively making them free people for the second half of the night.

Sefer HaYashar (The Book of Righteousness"), an anonymous work, probably written in the 13th century, one of the most popular ethical books in the Middle Ages. It describes the creation and explains why the wicked were created together with the righteous, and is concerned with Jewish ethics-love and fear of God, repentance, prayer, and good deeds.

Serach: Asher's daughter, Jacob's grand-daughter. The most well known *midrash* about her tells of how she was the first to inform Jacob that his son Joseph was still alive. Fearing that the news will be too much of a shock for the old man, however, she informs Jacob by playing a harp for him, gently mixing in the words that Joseph is "alive and the ruler of all Egypt".

Simchat Torah: Holiday celebrating the conclusion of the annual cycle of Torah readings, immediately after Sukkot. Worshippers dance and sing with the Torah scrolls during the evening and morning services.

Spies: When the Children of Israel were in the desert of Paran, Moses sent out 12 spies, one from each tribe. Caleb and Joshua brought back a good report of the land but, because the other 10 spies reported the land was populated by giants, and people did not want to enter the Promised Land. As a result, the Israelites stayed another 37 years in the desert.

Tze'nah Ur'enah: Rabbi Yaakov Ashkenazi's classic combining Torah commentary, Midrashic insights, and ethical teachings in Yiddish, very popular among women (1610).

Tzitzit: specially knotted ritual fringes worn by observant Jewish males. Tzitzit are attached to the four corners of the

tallit (prayer shawl) and the smaller garment, *tallit katan*. Wearing tzitzit is a biblical commandment to remind Jews of their religious obligations.

Yedid Nefesh: poem sung by many Jews during the third meal on the Sabbath, written by the sixteenth century kabbalist, Rabbi Elazar Azikri.

Yissachar and Zevulun: descendants of two of the sons of Jacob, the tribe of Zevulun were merchants, and supported the tribe Yissachar, whose occupation was to study Torah.

Notes to Part II

Admor: the acronym for *Adonenu, Morenu, Verabbenu,* (our master, teacher and rabbi) and is a honorific Chassidic title meaning master and teacher.

Akdamut: a prominent Aramaic liturgical poem recited annually on the Jewish holiday of Shavuot by Ashkenazi Jews. It was penned by Rabbi Meir bar Yitzchak of Worms, Germany, who lived in the 11th century. *Akdamut* consists of praise for God, His Torah, and His people.

Aliyah Bet: *Aliyah Bet* was the code name given to illegal immigration by Jews to the British Mandate for Palestine in violation of British White Paper of 1939 restrictions, in the years 1934-1948.

Auschwitz Death Book: The 'death books' contained information about registered prisoners, not about those who were sent immediately to the crematoria (see http:// en.auschwitz.org).

Chaim Rumkowski: Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski (February 27, 1877 - August 28, 1944) was a Polish Jew and functioned as the German Nazi-nominated head of the *Judenrat*, or Jewish authorities in the Łódź Ghetto.

(personal communication, Mr. Vidbeski, the head of the organization of former Lodz residents in Israel).

Concealment of the Countenance: times when the presence of G-d is not manifested. Psalm 13:1 " How long will you hide your face from me... How long will the enemies have the upper hand?"

Cyprus camps: Cyprus internment camps were operated by the British for internment of Jewish immigrants who attempted to immigrate to the Mandatory Palestine during the 1940s in violation of immigration quotas set for Jews. In spite of repeated requests to lift restrictions to save lives otherwise lost in the Holocaust, and later the plight of thousands of displaced Holocaust survivors, the British still enforced the quotas set in the White Paper of 1939. Jews escaping Europe in the *Beriha* and attempting *Aliyah Bet* were detained at sea or after landing, and held indefinitely and without trial in prison camps on nearby British-controlled Cyprus.

General Badoglio: In the summer of 1943 Mussolini was dismissed by the Italian king and was arrested. General Badoglio was appointed head of state in his place. He continued the war on the side of Nazi Germany, while at the same time conducting negotiations with the Allies for a cease-fire agreement.

Guderian: Heinz Wilhelm Guderian (1888 –1954) was a military theorist and General in the German Army during the Second World War.

Hallel: Hallel ("Praise") is a verbatim recitation from Psalms 113–118, which is used for praise and thanksgiving that is recited by observant Jews on Jewish holidays.

Joseph in the house of Potiphar: Joseph, sold into slavery by his brothers, is taken to Egypt where he is sold to Potiphar as a household slave. Potiphar makes Joseph the head

of his household, but Potiphar's wife, furious at Joseph for resisting her attempts to seduce him into sleeping with her, accuses him falsely of attempting to rape her. Potiphar casts Joseph into prison, where he comes to the notice of Pharaoh through his ability to interpret the dreams of other prisoners.

Julius Schtreicher: (12 February 1885 – 16 October 1946) was a prominent Nazi prior to World War II. He was the founder and publisher of *Der Stürmer* newspaper, which became a central element of the Nazi propaganda machine. His publishing firm also released three anti-Semitic books for children.

Kapo: Kapos were prisoners who worked inside German Nazi concentration camps during WWII in certain lower administrative positions. The official Nazi word was *Funktionshäftling*, or "prisoner functionary", but the Nazis commonly referred to them as kapos. Kapos received more privileges than normal prisoners, towards whom they were often brutal. They were often convicts who were offered this work in exchange for a reduced sentence or parole.

Kedusha: "You are holy and your Name is holy, and they are holy who praise You daily, Blessed are You, O Lord, the Holy God". Central part of the *Amida* (*Shmoneh Esreh*) prayer, the main prayer in Jewish liturgy.

Kitzur Shulchan Aruch: brief guide to Jewish law (*halacha*) in the form of an abridgment and updating of Joseph Caro's (Toledo, 1488 – Safed, 1575) Shulchan Aruch (the last great codification of Jewish law).

Lamed Vavniks: In Jewish tradition, the world continues to exist through the good deeds of 36 hidden righteous men. The numerical value of the letters lamed and vav together add up to 36.

Leon Blum: André Leon Blum was a French politician and three times the Prime Minister of France. When the Germans occupied France in June of 1940, Blum made no effort to leave despite the extreme danger as a Jew and a socialist leader. He was one of the few politicians who refused to grant full powers to the Vichy, collaborationist government. In April 1943 he was deported to Germany and was imprisoned in Buchenwald until April 1945.

Ma'ane-Lashon: Prayer book for mourning and burial.

Omer: a Biblical measure of volume of grain. Each of the forty-nine days between the Jewish holidays of Passover and Shavuot is counted. The idea of counting each day represents spiritual preparation and anticipation for the giving of the Torah.

Rambam: Moses Maimonides, also known as Rambam (acronym of Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon), was a preeminent medieval Jewish philosopher; one of the greatest Torah scholars of the Middle Ages.

Rashi: Shlomo Yitzhaki (February 22, 1040 – July 13, 1105), better known by the acronym Rashi (RAbbi SHlomo Itzhaki), was a medieval French rabbi famed as the author of the first comprehensive commentary on the Talmud, as well as a comprehensive commentary on the Bible.

Satmar: Hassidic movement founded and led by Grand Rebbe Yoel Teitelbaum (1887-1979), who was the rabbi of Szatmárnémeti, Hungary (currently Satu Mare, Romania)

Sefer ha-yashar ("The Book of Righteousness"), an anonymous work, probably written in the 13th century. Most of the unusual ideas are found in the first part of the work which describes the creation and explains why the wicked were created together with the righteous.

Shavuot: Holiday commemorating the day G-d gave the Torah to the entire Israelite nation assembled at Mount Sinai. The date of Shavuot is directly linked to that of Passover. The Torah mandates the seven-week counting of the Omer, beginning on the second day of Passover and immediately followed by Shavuot. This counting of days and weeks is understood to express anticipation and desire for the Giving of the Torah.

Shevet Mussar: Book of ethics by R. Elijah ha-Kohen ha-Itamari (1732).

Shovaim: Shovaim is a season in the Jewish calendar, the weeks when, the first six chapters of the Book of Exodus are read in the synagogue, when the Kabbalists teach that it is auspicious to repent of sins. Some have the customs of fasting and giving extra *tzedakah* during this time, and of reciting *slichot* and other Kabbalistic prayers.

SS: The Schutzstaffel *Protection Squadron*, abbreviated SS was a major Nazi organization. The SS is without a doubt most closely associated with Nazi Germany's concentration camp system. After 1934, the running of Germany's concentration camps was placed under the total authority of the SS and an SS formation known as the *SS-Totenkopfverbände* (SS-TV).

The Auschwitz barracks: in one depiction: "There are row after row of dilapidated wooden buildings that look like barns or stables. These were the barracks that housed the prisoners here. Inside, you can see the three-tiered wooden racks that were constructed as "beds". Hundreds of people were crammed into each of these barns, sharing the filthy sleeping racks and huddled together for warmth during the fierce winters. The only source of heat would have been a simple brick fireplace located at the end of

each building, with a brick duct running from it along the center of the floor".

The Kastner train: the Kastner train was a trainload of almost? 1,684 Jews who, on June 30, 1944, escaped from Nazi-controlled Hungary, and eventually arrived in Switzerland. The train was named after Rudolf Kastner, one of the leaders of the Hungarian Aid and Rescue Committee, who negotiated with senior SS officer Adolf Eichmann to allow a number of Jews to escape in exchange for money, gold, and diamonds.

The Sambatyon: According to rabbinic literature, the Sambatyon is the river beyond which the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel were exiled by the Assyrian King Shalmaneser V; its waters are restless during the week and quiet down on Sabbath.

Titus Flavius Vespasianus: was Roman Emperor from 79 to 81. In 70, he successfully laid siege to and destroyed the city and Temple of Jerusalem.

Tzena-U'Re'ena : A rendering in Yiddish of the Pentateuch, the *Megillot* (Five Scrolls of the Bible) and the Prophets (*Haftarot*).

V1,V2: V-1, V for Vengeance, was the pilotless radio-controlled aircraft carrying a high-explosive bomb, put into operation a week after D-Da. V-2 was worse and more effective, the world's first medium-range ballistic missile. This long-dreaded "secret weapon" of Hitler, launched from Holland, first hit London on 8 September, 1944. The factory was two miles in length, with two large tunnels approximately fifty feet in width and height, connected laterally by forty-eight smaller tunnels. From 1943 until 1945, 60,000 prisoners produced V-1 and V-2 bombs. Of these, 20,000 died from various causes including starvation, fatigue and execution. Workers were executed at the slightest suggestion of sabotage. No workers were

ever been allowed to leave the camp and when they became too weak to work, they were abandoned to die and their bodies burned at the crematorium within the grounds.

Western Wall: The remainder of the wall surrounding the Temple Mount in Jerusalem (also, the Wailing Wall).

Zidduk ha-din (Justification of Judgment), in which "man is required to give praise for the evil which befalls him even as he gives praise for the good." (Mishna Berachot (9:5).

Notes to the Epilogue

Badchan: jester

Dry rod: reference to Aaron' staff which overnight sprouted and bore ripened fruit (Numbers 17:8)

Ha'Bricha: a Zionist organization which arranged the illegal Jewish immigration to Palestine.

Rabbi Shlomo Wolpe: When the Soviet armies overran the town of Mir in the opening weeks of World War Two, the Yeshiva fled to Lithuania. Rav Wolpe, who was a German national, was forced to separate from the Yeshiva and spent the war years in neutral Sweden. While in Sweden, Rav Wolpe taught Torah to the local Jewish population. He and Rabbi Wolf Jacobson became the Swedish contacts for the Vaad Hatzalah Rescue Committee and also created a seminary for young women who had survived the inferno of Europe. During this period of his life, Rav Wolpe authored books in both Swedish and German for outreach purposes.

Vaad Hatzala: (Rescue children, Inc) The Holocaust left thousands of children in Europe orphaned and homeless. One of the organizations which dealt with this major problem was the Vaad Hatzala, an emergency committee created by

the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada on November 13, 1939, for the purpose of relief, religious rehabilitation and reconstruction. By the end of World War II, the Vaad Hatzala succeeded in rescuing over two thousand Jewish orphans from the Holocaust and placing them in homes throughout Europe. The Vaad Hatzala, however, could not afford to support these children. In 1946, the Vaad Hatzala approached Herbert Tenzer and other members of its Executive Committee with a proposal to organize a special committee to deal with the children. In response to the request, Herbert Tenzer formed Rescue Children, Inc. in June 1946 as an independent organization. The Executive Committee, however, was comprised of board members of the Vaad Hatzala.

Yabbok. River crossed by Jacob on his way back from his exile with Laban to Canaan. In Kabbala the transition from sickness to death is referred to as "The crossing of Yabbok".

Chayim Israel Perl was born in 1925 in the little town of Visho and at the age of four moved to the village of Schiff in Maramureş County in Romania. In early May 1944 he was expelled with the rest of the Dargomirest ghetto to Auschwitz, and after the selection he was transferred from Auschwitz to Buchenwald, Dora-Mittelbau, and was finally liberated from Bergen Belsen in April 1945. He was sent to Sweden by the Red Cross. In December 1947 he set sail for Palestine on the immigrant ("Ma'apilim") ship known as the " 29th of November 1946". After several unsuccessful attempts to land, he was arrested as an illegal immigrant by the British Royal Navy and deported to a DP camp in Cyprus. In February 1949 he finally reached the "haven of peace" and shortly after joined the Israel Defense Forces. He studied education at The Teachers' Seminar in Jerusalem and worked in teaching and education for 30 years. He currently resides in Ramat Gan.



The reader who becomes absorbed into Chayim Perl's book will discover a vanished world as well as a new-ancient dawn, which a young generation built with its dreams and sacrifices. I recommend these memoirs from the bottom of my heart. I am confident that they will find their way to tens of thousands of readers near and far.

From the Foreword by Nobel Prize Laureate Elie Wiesel

ISBN 978-965-91874-0-9
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