The Holocaust Diaries

ITZIK, BE STRONG!



YITZCHAK POMERANTZ

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YITZCHAK POMERANTZ

translated by
Avraham Yaakov Finkel



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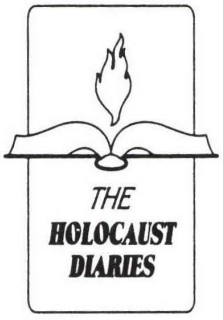
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כָּל זֹאת בָּאַתְנוּ וְלֹא שְׁכַחֲנוּךָ

(תהלים מד:יח)

All this has befallen us
yet we have not forgotten You
(*Tehillim* 44:18)

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

IN THE 1930S, WHEN HITLER REGALED HUGE, CHEERING rallies of Germans with his diabolical plans to rid Europe of the Jewish people, waves of fear and apprehension rippled through the densely populated Jewish communities of Eastern Europe. But the fear was tempered by disbelief. Surely, this was all just propaganda, albeit of the most vicious sort, propaganda designed to unify the German population by stoking the always popular flames of anti-Semitism. Surely, such things could not come to pass in the civilized world of the twentieth century.

And thus, the Jews just beyond the German borders hunkered down to weather the coming storm as they had weathered numerous earlier storms of persecution. They remained in their homes, hoping and praying that the storm

would pass without too much pain and grief and that sanity would return to the world.

But the storm which broke in September, 1939, when the German armies swept across Poland, was unlike any other in the history of mankind. In a mild foretaste of what was to come, the German invaders brutalized and murdered Jews indiscriminately in every town and city they captured. The full impact of the unfolding tragedy began to dawn on the terrified Jews, and belatedly, many thousands abandoned their homes and fled towards the east.

For most, it was an exercise in futility. Families with young children and old people, walking on foot with their meager belongings on their backs or crowded into rickety, horse-drawn wagons, could not have been expected to get very far on the refugee-clogged roads. More often than not, they could only reach the illusory haven of Polish cities further east, where they were overtaken and overwhelmed by the rapid advance of the German invaders. Those fortunate enough to reach the Russian zone found a temporary respite from their headlong flight, but less than two years later, they were once again ensnared when the Germans launched a surprise lightning attack on their erstwhile Soviet ally in the summer of 1941. For these families, there was nowhere left to run; all avenues of escape were sealed.

Nevertheless, some Jews did manage to slip through the tightening noose of German entrapment. For the most part, they were unmarried young men who had been sent off tearfully by families incapable of undertaking the ardors of further flight or who had been arrested by the Soviet authorities and deported to Siberia. These young men were spared the fate of their families at the hands of the murderous Germans, but years of privation and agony awaited them.

The flight of these young men took them into the heart of Russia, a bleeding bear reeling under the shock of the mechanized German onslaught. Poverty and chaos were rampant in war-torn Russia, and its Communist masters looked upon the unwelcome Jewish refugees with undisguised hostility. Food and shelter were scarce, too precious to be shared with these despised and unwanted guests. Life for the refugees became one long search for a crust of bread to still the incessant pangs of hunger and a semblance of a roof under which to lay one's head at night. Countless homeless, threadbare and hungry men roamed across the endless Soviet steppes in great refugee hordes, yet each one was painfully alone, torn away from home and family, tiny boats adrift on a vast, heaving ocean.

Those who had been arrested and deported to prisons in Siberia, condemned to backbreaking labor in scorching heat and mind-numbing cold and forced to live under conditions unfit for beasts, experienced their own particular brand of hellish torture. And when they were finally released during the amnesty for Polish citizens, all that awaited them was the opportunity to join the other desperate refugees wandering aimlessly from place to place, homeless, penniless, hungry and alone. Life had little meaning. The past had been destroyed, and the fate of its remnants, if there were any, was obscured by an opaque curtain of war. The present was a constant and excruciatingly lonely struggle for survival. The future, if there would ever be any, was a terrifying unknown.

Under these dehumanizing conditions, it is not surprising that many people were reduced to little better than scavenging animals whose only thought was to fill their empty bellies. Jewish ideals were unaffordable luxuries pushed into the furthest recesses of the mind, to be exhumed in better

times, should they ever come. But for a few extraordinary individuals, these ideals and beliefs were more precious than life itself, too important to be sacrificed in the interests of mere physical survival.

Itzik, Be Strong is the story of one of these extraordinary individuals. It is the story of a young *yeshivah bachur*, the son of an esteemed *rav* and a member of a prominent family of Gerrer *chassidim* who lived in the small town of Dlugoszodle on the outskirts of Warsaw. Deeply imbued with the values of his saintly father and sanctified home, young Itzik's only ambitions in life were Torah learning and spiritual achievements, which meant more to him than the very air that he breathed. The ideals of the Torah were alive in his soul; when a German officer held a gun to his head, his thoughts, with but the merest tinge of sadness, were focused on giving up his life joyously to sanctify the Name. And when his ordered life lay in shattered ruins, his main concern was to find a way to continue uninterrupted his growth in Torah learning.

When Itzik was arrested by the Russians and deported to a Siberian prison, his personal battle began. Throughout his interrogations by Soviet commissars, his harsh prison term and his lonely wanderings after his release, he clung tenaciously to his Jewish convictions, refusing to compromise for the sake of survival. A pair of *tefillin* and a remembered *perek* of *Mishnayos* meant more to him than a loaf of bread. *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov* were inviolate. Even when he was drafted into the Red Army and sent to the front, he refused to bend, thus gaining the respect and admiration of his fellow soldiers.

This then is the story of a young Jewish boy whose entry into manhood is beset by ceaseless ordeals, who holds strong to his beliefs and perseveres through the strength of his character and the force of his convictions. It is the story of a

soaring spirit sustained and elevated by the struggle to grow as a Jew in any situation life has to offer.

Another remarkable facet of this book is the author's account of his experiences in the Red Army as he fought his way across Europe to the gates of Berlin. The violent explosions of bombs and artillery shells in the heat of furious battle reverberate from the pages of the book, and the author's shock and disbelief at the eerie emptiness of the formerly teeming Jewish towns and cities of Poland linger on in the memory of the reader long after he has turned the last page.

Itzik, Be Strong, the sixth volume in the *Holocaust Diaries* collection, is a veritable *mussar sefer* that pulsates with Torah and Jewish values, and as such, it takes a place of honor alongside the distinguished volumes that preceded it. Several more volumes are presently being prepared for publication, two of which are scheduled for release in the coming months—*Songs of Hope* by David Werdyger and *Counterfeit Lives* by Avraham Krakowski. We would be honored to review submissions from other holocaust survivors for possible inclusion in the *Holocaust Diaries* collection, even if it would involve inordinate editorial efforts on our part. Because we seek to make the collection as broadly representative as possible, we are particularly interested in autobiographical accounts set in the Warsaw Ghetto, Holland, France, Germany, the Scandinavian countries and Shanghai. Nonetheless, an inspiring account of hope and faith in any setting is always of interest to us and to our readers.

While preparing this book for publication, I had the great honor of meeting with the author several times at his home in Yerushalayim, and as difficult as it is to get to know a person even after long acquaintance, I saw immediately that this was a man whose life is the Torah, a true *chassidisher Yid,*

filled with vibrant energy and exuberance, who learns and gives *shiurim* from morning to night, a man whose conversations and thoughts are occupied by Torah and *yiras shamayim*. I would like to thank him for his warmth and cooperation and to wish him long life, good health and much *Yiddishe nachas* from the family he has rebuilt on solid foundations of Torah and *gemillus chassadim* in Eretz Yisrael.

Although *Itzik, Be Strong* is for the most part translated from the Hebrew original, additional information has been incorporated, and the manuscript was painstakingly re-edited. Thus, this edition reflects the efforts and talents of the people who have labored mightily in its preparation: Editorial Director Raizy Kaufman, who conceived the *Holocaust Diaries* collection and continues to guide the production of each volume with a sharp eye and an expert hand; Rabbi Avraham Yaakov Finkel, who produced an excellent translation in his usual professional manner; Staff Editor Gita Grossman, who polished the manuscript until it shone; Art Director Deenee Cohen, whose stellar talents enrich every project she touches; Typographer Nechamie Miller, who prepared the book for publication with meticulous attention to detail; and all the other members of our staff who contributed their skills to bring this book to its final form. May the *Ribono Shel Olam* reward them all in bounteous measure, and may He grant that we can all continue to bring honor to His Name and inspiration to His people.

Y.Y.R.
Menachem Av, 5753 (1993)
Lakewood, New Jersey

ITZIK, BE STRONG!

YITZCHAK POMERANTZ

PROLOGUE

EXUBERANT FACES AND SINGING VOICES FILLED THE crowded hall. I was surrounded by friends and family, their faces radiating genuine happiness as they congratulated me on my engagement. A rousing melody could be heard, its words so appropriate for the occasion. *"Ko amar Hashem, matzah chein bamidbar, am seridei charev . . .* The people who escaped from the sword found favor in the wilderness, when I gave respite to Yisrael." The *Navi's* words touched the young singers' hearts; it gave words to their feelings, and deeply moved, they shouted with joy.

The emotion that pervaded the gathering was palpable. From a distance, I could see the *kallah*, her eyes aglow with excitement, radiating pure rapture. At long last, after enduring so many years of unspeakable hardship, she was finally

experiencing this moment of sheer bliss.

The festive table was decked with a sparkling white tablecloth and laden with delicacies. In the light of the brightly flickering candles, I could make out relatives, friends and acquaintances. The sounds of laughter and the din of animated small talk filled the room.

Somehow, I felt removed from the festivities taking place all around me as my mind wandered off, recalling a childhood that was lost forever. Deep sadness enveloped me as images of parents and loved ones flashed through my mind, members of my family who could not be here to share this hour of happiness. I mused about my long years of agony and loneliness, wandering from place to place, starved and dressed in rags. I saw myself again serving as a slave laborer in Siberia and as a soldier in the Red Army, a lone Jew separated from his people.

And now, the hour I longed for had finally arrived. I was about to be engaged to a true *bas Yisrael*, taking the first step toward raising a family that would carry on the distinguished lineage of forefathers that had been annihilated.

Suddenly, I was jolted back to reality by a light tap on my shoulder. I looked up to find Rabbi Binyamin Mendelson, the Rabbi of Kfar Ata, gazing warmly at me.

"Don't worry, Itzik," he said soothingly, as though he was reading my mind. "Hashem has kept watch over you during your years of wandering, and He surely will continue to stand by your side. Come, my friend, they've finished writing the *tenaim*. It is time for you to sign."

A tear fell on the paper in front of me, and the pen quivered in my hand as I signed my name, Yitzchak Pomerantz. Then, at the urging of Rabbi Mendelson, I arose to address the assembled guests.

"In the merit of the Torah," I began, "Hashem will have mercy on His people, and we will live to see the *geulah sheleimah*.

"In *Parshas Vayeira*, Hashem tells Avraham, 'Take your son, the only one you love, Yitzchak . . . and bring him as a burned offering . . .'

"The Chiddushei Harim explains that Hashem gave Avraham an awesome test. If a father can forget that he is offering his son, then the test is relatively mild. But in this case, Avraham was specifically commanded to offer as a sacrifice his only son, the one that he loved. Avraham was prepared to fulfill this command, fully aware that it was his beloved son he was offering.

"A Jew must serve Hashem in whatever circumstances he finds himself. Regardless of the situation, he cannot forget for one moment his fervent love of Hashem. On the contrary, like Avraham, he must arouse his love for Hashem, no matter how difficult it may be.

"At this moment, I want to awaken the emotions in my heart. I do not have the *zchus* to have my dear parents with me on the day of my *simchah*. I am left, like so many other Jews today, without parents, without a family. *Hashem Yisbarach* placed the task of beginning anew on our shoulders.

"Yet while our hearts are crushed by bitter memories, we take on our assignment with *simchah*. We must build a strong and dynamic Torah life and a *Yiddishkeit* that will emulate that for which our ancestors strived.

"May Hashem send *berachah vehatzlachah*," I concluded fervently, "to all our handiwork."

"*Amein*," the entire assemblage responded. "*Amein*."

BOOK ONE

Chaotic Beginnings

CHAPTER 1

War on the Horizon

ALL THROUGH THE SUMMER OF 1939, RUMORS WERE circulated about an impending German invasion of Poland. Clustered on street corners, people feverishly debated the Polish army's military capabilities to withstand the German onslaught, speculating whether England and France, Poland's allies, could deter Hitler from carrying out his planned aggression.

In the waning days of summer, Poland went into a state of readiness. Draft notices were sent out to all eligible conscripts. I also received an induction notice, but through my father's intervention with the head of the Mobilization Office, I was not sent to basic training. Instead, I was assigned to work at the draft board in the Mobilization Office. From the windows of the building, I was able to observe the tension

that gripped the populace milling about in the street below.

In spite of the near-hysteria that gripped Poland, my father, who was the rabbi of our town, Dlugoszodle, did not deviate from his daily schedule. He continued giving his daily public *shiurim*, receiving petitioners, answering *shailos* and addressing the spiritual needs of the community.

"Don't stand around talking politics," he would tell us. "Since there's nothing you can do about the situation, discussing international developments is just guesswork; it is a waste of valuable time that should be spent on Torah study. Instead of engaging in idle talk, strengthen your *bitachon* in Hashem. Have faith, and believe that He will surely guide the affairs of the world in the best possible way."

On September 1, 1939, the German forces invaded Poland.

It was a Friday. I had gotten up at the crack of dawn and gone as usual to the *beis midrash*. The study hall was quiet, and taking a *Gemara* from the shelf, I immersed myself in the study of *Mesechte Yevamos*.

Suddenly, a commotion shattered my concentration.

"Itzik!" the agitated voice of Reb Avraham Breintchik echoed through the empty *beis midrash*. "You're sitting here and learning? Don't you know that we're at war?"

Closing the *Gemara*, I tried to absorb the fateful news. People slowly began to trickle into the *beis midrash* to *daven Shacharis*. The worshippers donned *tallis* and *tefillin* and began to recite the *Birchos Hashachar*. I, too, put on *tefillin*, but my thoughts strayed to the battlefront.

My mind was racing. Would the Polish army be able to halt the German offensive? Would there be heavy casualties? What if the Germans broke through the Polish lines?

I took off my *tefillin* and tried to steady my nerves so I would be able to *daven* with the proper concentration. Meanwhile, the other worshippers concluded the service, and one by one, they grimly left the *beis midrash*.

Left alone with my thoughts, I began to sob uncontrollably. I was confused and distraught, unable to cope with the sudden depression that weighed upon me. Seeking consolation, I gazed at the *tefillin* lying in front of me. What should I pray for at this critical hour?

Eventually, my weeping spell subsided. Collecting my thoughts, I was able to *daven Shacharis* with the required *kavanah*, and I prayed with all my might that Hashem would bring us through the war safely.

On my way home, I looked up with dread as wave after wave of German bombers flew overhead, the steady drone of their engines reverberating through the air. The downcast faces of the people in the street reflected their fear of the future and concern about their loved ones fighting at the front.

At the entrance to our house a number of men were waiting to see my father, and gathered in the corner, several grief-stricken, red-eyed women waited to ask the rabbi to pray for their husbands and sons in the combat zone. My father had his hands full trying to console them, calm their fears and give them hope.

After everyone had left and things quieted down, the family sat down to have lunch. All conversation naturally revolved around the recent earth-shattering events. Motioning gently with his hand, my father silenced the chatter.

"What will happen to my library of *sifrei kodesh* and holy manuscripts?" he asked.

"What do you mean, Father?" my brother Avraham

asked. He had just returned from *yeshivah* to spend the *Yamim Tovim* at home.

"If, *chas veshalom*, we have to run away from here, we won't be able to take them with us," my father replied. "If we leave them, they may be destroyed or desecrated, *chalilah*. We simply have no choice but to hide them."

We decided to pack the books in a wooden box, wrapping them securely to protect them against moisture and changing weather conditions. We would then bury them underground.

As soon as we finished lunch, Avraham and I began to dig in our neighbor's courtyard, finishing the hole the next day. We then stored the *sefarim* and manuscripts in the wooden box. In the center, we placed the *sefer* containing my father's *chiddushim* and an important *sefer* on *Gittin, Kiddushin* and *Kesuvos* that was written by one of our ancestors. This *sefer* had marginal notes that were inscribed by one of the *chassidic* masters, the illustrious *tzaddik* Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak of Pshischa, known as the Yid Hakadosh, the "Holy Jew." Around these books we arranged all the other *sefarim*. With heavy hearts, we nailed the box shut, lowered it into the hole and covered it with earth, trying not to leave any trace. When the job was done, we firmly fixed the location in our memories: "Beneath the pear tree in Moshe Hirsch's courtyard, four paces from the eastern corner, facing the house."

On Friday, a week after the outbreak of the war, I went for a walk in the forest at the outskirts of town, trying to compose my thoughts. The forest was serene and resplendent with color, the mighty trees reflecting tranquility and beauty. The earth was adorned with a brilliant blanket of herbs and flowers, and the delightful twitter of the birds completed the harmonious symphony of the Creator's nature.

How great are Your works, Hashem, I thought. You make

them all with wisdom; the world is full of Your possessions.*

My reverie was shattered by the sounds of explosions in the distance, and I was jolted back to harsh reality.

The slowly setting sun reminded me of the approaching *Shabbos*, and arriving home, I found Mother standing near the brightly flickering candles, deeply engrossed in prayer.

"May it be Your will, Hashem," she whispered fervently, "that I live to see *nachas* from my children . . ."

Outside, the streets were wrapped in total darkness; the windows of the *shul* were covered with black cloth, so as not to betray our location and make our town a target for the German bombers. The Friday night *davening* ended earlier than usual, and everyone rushed home.

The *Shabbos* table was resplendent with china, crystal and glistening silverware. The warm glow of the candles filled the room. Mother and my sister welcomed us, smiling broadly.

During the meal, my father expounded on the weekly *parshah* with a steady flow of Torah insights, quoting from the giants of *mussar* and *chassidus*. No worldly concerns disrupted our *Shabbos* atmosphere; worrisome thoughts about the outside world were banished from our minds, treated like *muktzah*, untouchable articles.

After the meal, my father sat with us and discussed various themes relating to the Torah portion of the week. We all enjoyed the lively give and take, and as on any regular *Shabbos*, the spirited debate extended late into the night.

Shabbos morning was quiet, as usual. In the *shul*, however, the *davening* was marred by distracting whispers that intruded on the concentration of the worshippers. People could not restrain themselves from talking about the war and their

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* *Tehillim 92:6*

concern over the future.

We had just begun our *Shabbos* meal when, suddenly, there was a loud knock on the door. Moments later, the *shochet* from the town of Rozan burst into the dining room with his entire family. My mother, turning pale as a ghost, stared at them apprehensively.

"All the Jews of Rozan are leaving town," the *shochet* said breathlessly. "Since early morning there has been fierce fighting between the German and Polish forces. The entire town has turned into a battlefield."

"But what about our relatives in Rozan?" I asked anxiously. "What's happening to them?"

"Your grandmother, the *rebbetzin* of Rozan, your Aunt Nechamah and her children, and your Uncle Chaim Binyamin with his family will probably arrive here any minute."

We immediately made room at our table for the *shochet* and his family, and as the hungry refugees were enjoying Mother's delectable dishes, my father soothingly inspired them with *bitachon* and hope, bolstering his message of faith with verses from *Tanach*, the *Gemara* and stories from *Chazal*.

"With the help of Hashem," he concluded, "all this misery will end in happiness."

As the hours passed, Mother became increasingly worried that she had heard nothing about our relatives in Rozan.

Finally, after *Maariv* on *Motzei Shabbos*, refugees from Rozan told us that my uncles had tried to locate a carriage for my sick grandmother that would bring them all to our town, but when they were unable to find transportation, they joined a carriage going to Gaborova.

Mother was relieved. "At least they're out of danger," she said.

CHAPTER 2

Mounting Tensions

"LISTEN, EVERYONE," SHOUTED REB SHABSAI, THE chairman of Zeirei Agudas Yisrael. Pounding his fist on the table, he tried to establish order. "On the agenda for tonight is the question of how we should best use the funds in the treasury of our organization."

It was the first *Motzei Shabbos* during the war, and we were attending a membership meeting of the Zeirei Agudas Yisrael. As soon as everyone was quiet, I asked for the floor.

"There is a substantial amount of money in the treasury," I said. "In these uncertain times, when no one can tell what the future holds, I believe that the sooner we spend the money on worthwhile projects, the better. In my view, there is no greater *mitzvah* we can do today than to help the refugees who have come to our town."

My suggestion was greeted with a round of applause, and after all expressed their agreement, my motion was adopted.

The chairman moved on to other items on the agenda and addressed the gathering. "Does anyone wish to add to tonight's discussion?"

"Yes," I replied. "I'd like to end this meeting with a few words I heard from my father. He explained to us that our situation today is shrouded in darkness, and in order to survive, the Jewish people need a great deal of mercy from Heaven. Therefore, I suggest that all *chaveirim* in our group take it upon themselves to study Torah with greater intensity, so that the merit of our learning will stand the entire Jewish people in good stead. May we live to see the ultimate redemption speedily in our days."

"*Amein*," all the assembled responded from the depths of their hearts.

The next morning, with Poland poised on the brink of disaster, our town, Dlugoszodle, was flooded with a torrent of refugees from Rozan. We had our hands full; living quarters had to be found for the refugees, and we had to supply basic food provisions, beds, dishes and clothing for our destitute brothers. The money from the bank account of our Zeirei Agudas Yisrael organization was put to good use.

We were busy all day, but we did not neglect our *Gemara* studies. Somehow, we found the time to huddle over the challenging words of our Sages. Invigorated by the solution to a knotty Talmudic problem, we would resume our help for the refugees with renewed energy.

To our surprise, our efforts were augmented by assistance from an unexpected source. Towards evening, the mayor of Dlugoszodle surprised us with a visit to our home. He asked to speak with my father, and after the customary

pleasantries, he got down to business.

"Rabbi Pomerantz," he said to my father, "according to the law, every refugee is entitled to receive one *zloty* per day. As soon as possible, I'd like you to prepare a list of all the people who qualify for payment and take care of distributing the funds to them."

My father was happy to oblige. The money from the Dlugoszodle town council would mean a great deal to these hapless people.

Meanwhile, dark clouds continued to gather. Sunday night, the air was filled with tumultuous noise. Tanks, trucks and horse-drawn wagons were rolling through Dlugoszodle, the shouted commands mingling with the whinnying cries of horses. The Polish army was entering our town *en masse*, led by a military band that was playing a lively march to put zest into the stride of the infantry.

Monday morning, the people of our town awoke to the sound of blaring trumpets. The soldiers, standing in formation in the town square, were preparing to take the ceremonial oath of allegiance before going into battle.

"We hereby swear," they proclaimed solemnly, "to fight until death for Poland, our beloved fatherland!"

The next few days would prove how sincere their oath really was.

The following day, Tuesday, the ground shook with the distant explosions of artillery shells. I slipped out of bed that morning and peered out my window. Looking toward the west, I could see that the sky was a fiery red.

After *davening,* the Jews of the town flocked to our house to seek my father's advice. No newspaper had appeared for several days, and wild rumors circulated, each one proclaiming new facts and developments. Among the various "news

items" was one claiming that England had declared war on Germany.

Based only on hearsay, every new development was analyzed, interpreted and then embellished, until the truth was hard to discern. My father instructed us in no uncertain terms to stay away from these rumor-mongers.

"Listening to those people is just a waste of time," he would say. "Rely on *Hashem Yisbarach*, and don't try to assess the future by making worthless calculations.

"As the rabbi of Dlugoszodle, I am compelled to listen to the woeful tales of every heartbroken person that comes to me for help," he continued. "But for you boys, listening to rumors is a shameful way to spend your time. Learn Torah instead!"

On Wednesday, Grandmother and Aunt Itta finally arrived. Mother was greatly relieved, and she did all she could to make their stay with us as comfortable as possible.

Grandmother, a true *tzaddekess*, sat near us in an easy chair as we studied the *Gemara*, listening for hours with obvious delight. We would often overhear her pouring out her heart to Hashem and imploring Him tearfully to lead us on the paths of righteousness.

Towards evening, the streets were in turmoil once again. The Polish soldiers, who had vowed to fight until death, were now running for their lives. Thousands of starving, bedraggled soldiers were fleeing in a wild panic, not knowing which way to turn.

By Thursday, it was obvious that it was only a matter of time until the German forces would enter Dlugoszodle. The town was in an uproar. Crowds of young people, knapsacks strapped to their backs, were leaving town, headed for Warsaw.

"Warsaw is a big city," the young men argued. "The army surely won't surrender it without a fight. Polish forces are going to offer stiff resistance to save the nation's capital, and with Hashem's help, they'll retain it."

Although Grandmother was paralyzed from her waist down, she was mentally alert and fully aware of everything going on around her.

"I'm an old woman, and my life isn't worth much," she pleaded with us. "You children, you are still young and full of energy. Please, I beg of you, save yourselves and run from this place of danger! Leave me and go. Hashem, in His mercy, will watch over me."

My parents and Aunt Itta closeted themselves in the next room to decide what course of action we should take. They emerged after a few moments, and my father addressed my grandmother firmly.

"The three of us have decided that we absolutely cannot leave you here by yourself." Turning to me, my father continued. "As for you, Itzik, you should escape with the other young men to Warsaw. There is no way of knowing how the situation here will develop, and perhaps fleeing to Warsaw is truly the best idea. Go with the others, and may Hashem be with you."

"Please, Father," I pleaded. "I don't want to run away. In these difficult times I want to remain with you and Mother, and somehow, we will face the future together. You just said that there is no sure way of knowing how to act in these circumstances. If that is the case, then *shev ve'al taaseh adif*, it is probably better to sit still and take no action. Therefore, please allow me to stay here with you."

My father embraced me and spoke with emotion.

"You are right, Itzikl. For now, we will all remain together.

However, it is too dangerous to remain at home; the Germans have already begun to bomb the city from the air. Come, help me carry our belongings over to the *mikveh*."

The *mikveh* in our city was built with fortified walls to provide shelter in case of bomb attacks. Slowly but surely, my father, Avremel and I moved some basic provisions from our house to the *mikveh*. At one point, as we were making our way to the building, the Germans began to bomb intensively, aiming to destroy the fleeing Polish army. We threw ourselves to the ground and lay among the corpses of Polish soldiers and horses while the shelling continued. With great difficulty, we finally reached the *mikveh*.

"We can't leave this building again," my father said, gasping for breath. "The conditions outside are life-threatening."

Many other people from our town were already gathered in the *mikveh*, all of them shaking with fear.

Soon after we got there, our small Jewish group was joined by surviving soldiers of the Polish army who flocked to the *mikveh*, begging for food and water. Tired and hungry, they cried out to us for mercy.

The bombing continued as the German warplanes sowed destruction and ruin on the town of Dlugoszodle.

By nightfall, the last remnants of the Polish army had been eradicated, and we remained huddled together in our small shelter, fearfully awaiting the arrival of the Germans. Even the non-observant Jews in our community, who had strayed far from Torah and *mitzvos*, now clung to my father, the *rav* of the town, hoping that in his merit they would be protected from danger.

Friday morning we could hear the birds chirping outside, a sign that peace had temporarily returned to the city. A

strange silence descended in the aftermath of the storm. My father urged everyone to return to his home and prepare for *Shabbos*, and slowly but surely, all the families made their way through the quiet streets to their houses. There was no trace of the Polish army, nor were there any signs of approaching Germans. The fragrant aromas of *Shabbos* cooking began to emanate from the houses, and families went about their normal weekly preparations.

CHAPTER 3

Conditions Worsen

EARLY SUNDAY MORNING THEY STARTED COMING, A steady stream of refugees in tattered clothes, exhausted and hungry, their eyes reflecting pain and dejection.

The downtrodden fugitives cried despairingly. "*Ribono Shel Olam*! Have mercy on Your people Yisrael! Jewish blood is flowing like water! Thousands of Jewish men, women and children are roaming the fields and the highways, with no place to turn!"

They related countless tales of horror, but we could not believe what we heard. Were such things possible?

They described the terrible massacre in Gaborova. There, the Germans had herded all the Jews into the *shul*. Then they set the entire town on fire, burning down the *shul* and all the

people in it. Those who tried to escape were shot on the spot. A few Jews did manage to escape and were now wandering in the fields, homeless and near starvation.

Jolted by the horrifying news, our community immediately sprang into action, dispatching wagons filled with food and clothing to the fields around Gaborova.

The flood of bad tidings continued relentlessly. In Vishkov, too, the Germans slaughtered the Jews mercilessly. Children were butchered in front of their mothers' eyes. There, too, the Jews were herded into the *shul*, which was then put to the torch. The entire Jewish community of Vishkov perished in the flames. Many relatives, friends and acquaintances of our family were brutally killed.

Hashem had concealed His Face, and our enemies were venting their hatred on us. People were fleeing in all directions, unable to find a safe haven. "Where can I flee from Your Presence?"* Indeed, there was no shelter to be found.

The young men of Dlugoszodle were hard at work. We had to furnish food and shelter for the refugees who inundated our town. Father assembled all the men of the *kehillah* in the *shul* and appealed to them to do their utmost to help the unfortunate refugees. His plea was heeded, and within a short time, he had collected a substantial sum of money to buy necessary provisions. Many people opened their homes to the refugees. My parents took in twenty-five guests.

During this time, a distinguished family joined the guests staying in our home. A farmer's wagon had pulled up in front of our house one day, and a distinguished-looking man in rabbinical garb alighted with his family. To our surprise, a bearded young man with long *peyos*, who seemed to be one

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* *Tehillim 139:7*

of his sons, was dressed in threadbare peasant's clothes.

My father immediately recognized the head of the family, and he approached him with deep reverence.

"Polatisker Rav!" he exclaimed, greeting him with outstretched arms. "*Bruchim habaim*! Please do come in."

The family sat down to a nourishing meal, and then the rabbi began to tell his story.

"We experienced many miracles on our way. As we were walking across a bridge, the Germans suddenly threw my nephew Shmerel into the river. Weighed down by his soaking wet clothes, he slowly began to go under. That was the last we saw of him, and we were sure that he had drowned. We had despaired of ever seeing him again when, suddenly, he appeared before us, dressed in peasant's clothes. Somehow, he had managed to remove his clothing in the water, and with his last ounce of strength, he was able to make it to the shore."

"A Polish farmer saw me," Shmerel explained. "He took pity on me and gave me a shirt and a pair of pants."

I glanced at the young man, dressed in the ill-fitting peasant's clothes. His jacket was too big, his pants were held up with string, and his shirt hung from his shoulders.

Suddenly, an idea struck me. I ran into the kitchen.

"Mother," I cried out excitedly, "I want to share my clothes with Shmerel."

Mother smiled at me but did not say a word.

"Mother, please," I begged. "We are both the same size. Isn't it just perfect? Think of all the trouble he went through, and now he doesn't have a thing to wear. It just isn't right for a *yeshivah bachur* like him to wear peasant's clothes. At a time like this, when the sword is hanging over our heads, we must do kind deeds, *lifnim mishuras hadin*, above and beyond the line of strict justice."

"I'll discuss it with your father," she replied.

That evening, my father came over to me and placed his hand on my shoulder.

"Itzikl," he said gravely. "The deed you are considering is a very commendable one, and of course, I would not oppose it. But remember, son, in time of war it is very difficult to obtain new clothes."

"I understand, Father," I explained. "But if it's hard for me to get new clothes, then for Shmerel, who is penniless, it is nearly impossible."

I divided my clothes into two equal piles and called Shmerel to come to my room. I handed him one pile of clothes and kept the other for myself.

Shmerel, who all his life had prayed not to become dependent on others, felt very uncomfortable.

"Don't feel bad," I consoled him. "With Hashem's help, the war will soon be over. Then you'll be able to return everything to me. In the meantime, use the clothes in good health. I only wish that we will always have enough of everything so that we can share our bounty with others."

My brother Avremel and I spent the better part of each day helping the refugees. Some had managed to come with their money, while others arrived with just the clothes on their backs.

Every morning, my friend Hertzke and I made the rounds of all the houses in town, each of us carrying two baskets filled with provisions that were donated by members of the community. As we distributed the food among the poor refugees, we tried to find out what else they needed and what troubled them, so that we could be of further assistance.

Perhaps the new year would bring an end to our troubles.

CHAPTER 4

The Days of Awe

"LET US ALL DO *TESHUVAH*, EACH ACCORDING TO HIS ability," my father exhorted the congregation in a tear-choked voice. "We must do more good deeds, especially toward the refugees who have sought asylum in our city. In return, Hashem will grant us a good year and will send our righteous *Mashiach*, putting an end to all of our *tzaros*."

It was the *Shabbos* before *Selichos*, and my father delivered a powerful *derashah* to the members of our *shul*. As I listened to his moving homily, I observed the expressions on the faces of the audience. All of them, from the strictly observant members to the more lax ones, from scholars to simple people, were listening to my father's sermon with rapt attention. I was reminded of what our Sages said: "The

removal of Achashverosh's signet ring, with which Haman sealed his evil decree, had more impact than the forty-eight prophets and prophetesses who prophesied to Yisrael."*

It was true. The evil decrees that had been pronounced on us had removed every trace of the *yetzer hara* from our souls and redirected our hearts toward our Father in Heaven. During this time, not a word of *lashon hara* was spoken in all of Dlugoszodle; there was no trace of rancor or animosity among the Jewish people of our town. In the face of impending doom, all segments of the community had united to do Hashem's will wholeheartedly.

After midnight on *Motzei Shabbos*, the first night of *Selichos*, the *shul* was filled with worshippers who gathered to pray for Heavenly compassion.

Before the prayers began, my father tearfully addressed the congregation. "Let us do good deeds with all our might, and let us give *tzeddakah* with an open hand. Then *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* will surely bestow His kindness upon us and tear up the evil decree of our verdict."

My father, as a faithful shepherd, always made every effort to save even one sheep that had strayed from the right path. Now, when his entire *kehillah* was facing disaster, how he must have suffered! His calls to do *teshuvah* reflected genuine inner anguish, as he suffered personally with the agony of each member of his *kehillah*.

I listened closely to my father's *derashah*, trying to think of ways to incorporate it into my own life. How could I implement the powerful message contained in his words?

"May it be Your will," I prayed silently, "that my heart always be full of love for every Jew, wherever he may be. May

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* *Megillah 14A*

the fiery ecstasy I have for *kedushah* never be extinguished, come what may."

The *chazan*, Reb Avraham Yismach, solemnly ascended the *bimah* and intoned the sacred words beginning the prayers. "*Lecha Hashem hatzedakah.* With You, Hashem, is all righteousness." The *Selichos* had begun.

With fervent intensity and humble hearts, we *davened* for a good year, each one of us adding his own tearful supplication to the already moving *tefillah*.

Deeply affected, we left the *shul* at the conclusion of the service. On my way home, I met my cousin Naftali, a boy about my age. My heart was overflowing with such feelings of love toward the Jewish people that I grabbed him and embraced him with all my might, just because he was a Jew.

Arriving home, I collapsed into bed, still feeling the same overpowering emotion of love. Inexplicably, I buried my face in my pillow and cried uncontrollably for a long time.

Wednesday night was the first night of *Rosh Hashanah*. Everyone was very tense, terrified of what the future held. Although the Germans had not yet reached our town, we all realized that it was just a matter of time until they would arrive in full force. Once they did, we dreaded to think what would happen. We became paranoid; the slightest noise made our hearts stand still. The sound of the German language being spoken made our blood curdle.

We were in *shul*, listening to the sounds of the *shofar*, when the fearful news broke: "The Germans have arrived!"

Everyone rushed home immediately, and later in the afternoon, the worshippers assembled in our house to conclude the *davening*. My father asked me to sound the *shofar*, and *baruch Hashem*, although my heart was trembling, I

managed to produce the one hundred blasts.

Soon after *Rosh Hashanah*, news reports told of the signing of the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, whereby Hitler and Stalin had agreed to partition Poland. The German troops halted their advance into Poland in order to allow the Russian troops to move in. People were claiming that Dlugoszodle would be included in the Soviet sector, and many pinned their hopes on these rumors.

Meanwhile, I took it upon myself to learn *Mesechte Sanhedrin*. During the *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah*, the Ten Days of Penitence between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, I divided my time between helping the refugees and studying *Gemara*. At my father's behest, I avoided the rumor-mongers.

Regrettably, I noticed that my *bitachon* was not as strong as it should have been. Instead of living up to the *passuk* "I fear no harm, for You are with me,"* I found myself worrying about the future.

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* *Tehillim 23:4*

CHAPTER 5

Comfort in Unity

SEEKING STRENGTH IN UNITY, THE NEIGHBORS ALL assembled in our house. My father sat at the head of the table. To his right, Moshe Hirsh, the *shamash*, was telling anecdotes about *chassidic* masters and at the same time, bemoaning the death of his only surviving son, killed mercilessly by the Germans. Next to him sat Leibel Rosenberg and the Rabbi of Polatisk, who was giving a Talmudic discourse on a responsum of the *Noda Biyehudah*. The dining room was illuminated by an oil lamp, and all the windows were securely covered so that no light would be visible from outside.

The ladies were congregated in the adjacent room. There, Mother and Grandmother were joined by my aunts and several women from the neighborhood. Under the prevailing

circumstances, it was difficult to sit alone in the house; the tension would become unbearable. As the saying goes, "Collective trouble is half a consolation." It was easier to forget oppressive worries and fears when they were shared with others.

Laughter was a thing of the past; even a smile was hard to find. The slightest noise set nerves on edge, and no matter how exhausted we were, sleep did not come easily. If we did manage to doze off, we were haunted by nightmares.

In spite of this, people tried to maintain a semblance of normalcy, going about their everyday business. During the days before *Yom Kippur*, everyone made sure to buy chickens to perform the *kaparos* ceremony.

One morning, at the crack of dawn, a gentle nudge woke me from my slumber. Startled, I looked up to see Father's kind eyes smiling at me.

"It's *Erev Yom Kippur*," he said softly. "It is time to get up and go to *shul*."

I was deeply depressed, obsessed with a foreboding of dark days ahead. My father, dressed in his *Shabbos* clothes, radiated a glow of *kedushah* as he searched his soul in preparation for the holy day. Immersed in thought, he gazed through the window, softly humming a *niggun* of *dveikus*, a melody expressing a passionate yearning for closeness to Hashem.

Sitting down beside him, I sensed his longing and his anguish. A heavy responsibility rested on his shoulders. Would he be able to arouse the people to genuine *teshuvah* and save the sinking ship at the last minute?

It was such moments that ingrained in me the elements of *emunah* and *bitachon*, the principles of faith and trust in Hashem that would stand by me always. Then and there, I

vowed to remain faithful to Him, even when faced with the most rigorous tests.

During the previous few days, I had spent hours pondering the extent of my obligations in this world. I knew that difficult times were on the horizon, and I wrote a short *tefillah* entreating Hashem to have mercy on His people.* I thought a great deal about my father, and I tried to engrave in my consciousness his characteristic gestures, his sweet voice when he called me Itzikl, the yearning sing-song voice with which he studied *Gemara* and his sterling *midos*.

I also spent time thinking about Mother. I was so impressed with her unassuming modesty, her simplicity and her sincere *yiras shamayim*. I used to enjoy the stories she told about her ancestors, who were all illustrious *geonim* and *tzaddikim*. I did not always have enough patience to listen to her tales, but now I tried to absorb every detail. These stories would be the provisions that would help me survive the long and difficult journey that lay ahead of me. I had a feeling that my childhood years in my parents' house were coming to an end. Who knew where I would be for *Yom Kippur* one year from now?

After *Minchah* and the final meal before the fast, my father placed his hands on my head to bless me. Although I could not hear his prayer, I knew that his only desire was that I grow up to be a G-d-fearing Jew. Mother was standing close by, praying silently that my father's blessing would be fulfilled. His hand was trembling; I felt as though I was receiving his guidelines for my entire life. How I wished that this moment would last forever!

My father then blessed my brother and my sister Chayale,

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* *For full text of the tefillah, refer to page 373.*

who were also visibly moved. The entire family was in a solemn mood in anticipation of the holy day.

It was a grave and tense *Yom Kippur* that year as each member of our small community searched his soul and poured out his heart to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, praying that the evil decree hanging over our heads would be annulled.

During *Neilah*, the dreaded Germans were spotted in town, and many worshippers left the *shul* to sneak back into their homes. The rest of us proceeded with the *davening*, and at nightfall, after the one long *shofar* blast, we joyfully went home.

CHAPTER 6

Fleeing for Our Lives

SUKKOS THAT YEAR WAS DUTIFULLY OBSERVED, BUT OUR mood was uneasy and apprehensive. Soon after the Germans entered our town, the flour warehouse that the fleeing Polish army had left behind was burglarized, making it an easy target for any Poles who wanted to steal from it. We were all certain that the Germans would accuse the Jews of the crime and seize the opportunity to persecute us.

Nevertheless, in spite of the clouds hanging over us, we made every effort to put our hearts into celebrating the *Yom Tov*, and we went about our *Sukkos* preparations trying to ignore the mounting tensions surrounding us.

On *Chol Hamoed*, the *chassidim* and prominent members of the *kehillah* assembled in our *sukkah* to celebrate *Simchas*

Beis Hashoeivah. We all gathered around a table in the *sukkah* and discussed *divrei Torah*. Outside, fear and terror reigned, while inside our *sukkah*, there was only *bitachon* in Hashem.

Hoshanna Rabbah of that year is also etched indelibly in my mind. The congregation wept as the *chazan* pleaded with Hashem to annul the evil decrees facing His people.

"*Hosha na!*" he chanted. "Please, Hashem, bring our salvation now!"

Suddenly, the door of the synagogue was thrown wide open. German soldiers pushed their way in and ran straight up to my father.

"*Sind sie der Rabbiner hier?*" an officer asked. "Are you the rabbi here?"

"*Jawohl*," my father replied.

"By tomorrow morning, all refugees from other towns must be gone from here," the German barked. "Any refugee who is found after nine o'clock will be shot."

The next morning was *Shemini Atzeres*.

"*Los, los, schnell, schnell!*" German demons on galloping horses, firing their guns into the air, broke the serenity of the *Yom Tov*. Thousands of Germans stampeded into Dlugoszodle, their hobnailed boots clacking on the cobblestone pavement as they shouted and whipped their horses into a frenzy. Bursting into homes, they drove the residents out into the street; men, women and children, the old and the sick, everyone was chased outside.

"*Alle raus!*" they yelled. "Everyone out! Anyone caught inside gets a bullet through his head!"

My father and brother went out into the street, but for some reason, the Germans overlooked my presence, and I remained at home. Moments later, there was another commotion outside, and I ran to hide in the bedroom, sure that

the soldiers had come back for me. I heard the heavy sound of footsteps echoing through the house as the soldiers searched every corner.

I realized that hiding might not be such a good idea. If they would find me hiding, *chalilah*, they would probably suspect me of having disobeyed an order, and then . . . who knew what fate awaited me?

I slowly emerged from my place of concealment.

"So, where were you the first time we came?" the officer shouted angrily.

"I was sleeping," I stammered. "I had no idea that you were here."

To my horror, the officer drew his gun and pointed it at my head.

"I'm still y-young," I said, trembling. "Please spare me."

"Have mercy on him!" cried my mother and sister. "He's just a young boy. What was his crime?"

"What was his crime?" the officer repeated mockingly. "A dog like him should be killed this instant!"

"What do you want from him?" my Aunt Itta cried out in despair. "Is it his fault he was sleeping?"

The German, enjoying the situation immensely, just laughed cruelly.

"He is not guilty!" Aunt Itta shouted, and she positioned herself between me and my oppressor, seizing his outstretched arm to prevent him from shooting.

Just then, another German appeared, bringing the confrontation to an end.

"You there, young rabbi, come with us!" he barked. "And be quick, or you'll be shot."

The German walked quickly, turning into a side street as soon as we left the house. I stayed close behind him, and I was

followed by four heavily armed soldiers.

I knew I was in grave danger and that, at any moment, the Germans could decide to shoot me without thinking twice.

Suddenly, a command rang out.

"Halt, with your hands in the air!"

Dozens of German soldiers crowded around me, staring as if I came from another planet. Some were even taking pictures of the scene from various angles. Every few minutes, another SS officer would approach and remind me that I was about to be killed for disobeying an order.

"You're a liar!" they shouted repeatedly. "For lying to a soldier you deserve to be killed. Prepare yourself to die, you dirty Jew, because your end is very near!"

I continued to stand in the same position, heavily guarded and surrounded by soldiers who were still photographing me as if I was on exhibit in a museum.

I thanked Hashem inwardly for giving me the time to reflect and do *teshuvah* before leaving this world. Only moments before, I could have been killed without having a chance to repent for my deeds and say *Viduy*. In truth, I hadn't really had a chance to commit that many *aveiros* in the few years since I had reached the age of being responsible for my actions, but conversely, I hadn't done too many *mitzvos* either. Now, at least, I was prepared to end my life as a Jew.

It didn't even pay to wonder why the Germans wanted to kill me. I knew that in their eyes, my crime was simply that I had been born a Jew.

Ribono Shel Olam, I vowed silently, if the German beasts offer to pardon me on the condition that I transgress one of Your holy *mitzvos*, *chalilah*, I am prepared to die unconditionally. I rejoice in the fact that I am worthy to be a sacrifice for my people. Let it be Your will, Hashem, that my death should

serve as an atonement for all of *Klal Yisrael*, and that after this, You will put an end to all their *tzaros*.

I looked up to see my Aunt Itta hurrying fearfully toward me, holding a warm coat and a some food.

"Itzik, Itzik!" she cried in a tear-choked voice.

"My dear aunt," I replied calmly. "I truly don't need anything now; you see my situation. Please, comfort my mother and tell her that I am not afraid."

"Dirty Jew!" the Germans shouted menacingly, hurling obscenities at her.

Trembling with fear, my aunt fled, taking the things she had brought with her.

Immediately, I was overcome with regret that I had not revealed to her the location of the valuable *sefarim* we had buried. If I were not to survive, at least the few *chiddushei Torah* I had written would remain as my legacy.

My thoughts returned to repentance and introspection as I tried to prepare myself for impending death. However, I was interrupted by a powerful voice. "Hey, what is the young rabbi doing here?"

An important-looking German officer had ridden up on his horse, and after listening to the soldiers describe my "crime," he turned to me.

"Go home!" he ordered. "Quickly!"

I turned and ran as quickly as my legs would carry me, not caring where I was headed. Finally, I found myself gasping and out of breath in the courtyard of the *shul*. The people standing there were overcome with emotion, and they brought me to my father. Warmly embracing me, my father thanked Hashem tearfully for the miracle He had wrought.

Leading me into the bedroom, my father turned to address the onlookers gathered in our house.

"I would appreciate it if everyone would now go home. This gathering can only increase the danger to Itzik and to yourselves as well. Thank you for your concern."

Later that morning, a *minyan* for *davening* gathered in our house. My father honored me with *maftir*, and then, with great emotion, I *bentched Gomel*, thanking Hashem for my miraculous deliverance from death.

Only later did I learn what had transpired while I was being held by the German soldiers. SS troops had herded all the Jews of our town into the square, ruthlessly grabbing them by their *peyos* and ripping out their beards. They had listened fearfully as a German officer made the dreadful announcement. The only Jews that would be permitted to remain in Dlugoszodle would be those who were willing to work as laborers for minimal salary. All others would have two hours to leave the town. Anyone caught breaking the law would be sentenced to death.

When the officer finished speaking, the Nazis that were gathered there went on a rampage, looting Jewish homes and mercilessly beating any Jew they came upon.

Afraid for their lives, the Jews ran to take shelter inside their homes. After meeting with other prominent members of the community, my father came to a fateful decision—we had to pack up and leave as soon as possible.

My parents gathered up all the valuables in the house that we would be forced to abandon and entrusted them to Nashadka, our gentile neighbor, for safekeeping.

My brother Avremel was sent to find a wagon that would carry us away from our home, and meanwhile, the rest of us sorted through our belongings, knowing that we could take with us only what was absolutely necessary.

A few hours later, Avremel burst into the house, panting.

"I was not able to find any wagons, even for a high price! Even the most run-down wagons have been hired already. With all the money in the world, it would still be impossible to find any means of transportation at this late hour."

"Then what will we do?" cried my sister in a frightened voice. "We can't leave Grandmother, who is sick, all by herself, and she will not be able to make the journey on foot!"

"My children," replied my grandmother tearfully. "Escape quickly and save yourselves! The *Ribono Shel Olam* has watched me until now, and He will not abandon me in the times to come. The situation here is becoming more and more dangerous by the moment, and if you remain here too much longer, the Germans are likely to persecute you mercilessly just because you are the *rav's* family."

Aunt Itta turned to my father and spoke to him quietly. "Don't hesitate another moment. Take your children and escape into the forest. When you are safely across the demarcation line, wait for us there."

"I, too, will remain here," said my mother resolutely, "with Grandmother and Aunt Itta. As soon as we can hire a wagon we will join you."

With tears in our eyes, we bade them farewell, and my father, Avremel, Chayale and I strode quickly towards the forest.

CHAPTER 7

Onward to Russia

SIMCHAS TORAH, 1939. MY FATHER CLASPED A SOBBING Chayale's hand as we marched through the forest, carrying knapsacks filled with provisions. Behind us lay Dlugoszodle, where Grandmother, Mother, Aunt Itta and a house full of beautiful memories had remained.

The forest was swarming with people from our town; nearly the entire Jewish population had taken to the road, embarking on a journey into uncharted territory, with no end in sight. The trail through the forest was strewn with valuable items; abandoned silverware, suitcases and articles of clothing were scattered on the ground. Nearby, Chaim Yaakov, the *shochet*, and his family were trudging along, loaded down with heavy boxes and suitcases. All we had taken with us were the knapsacks, some money and the clothes on our backs.

Our march into the unknown reminded me of the numerous stories I had heard about *tzaddikim* who voluntarily went into *galus* as a means of self-mortification and achieving *dveikus*, attachment to Hashem. To them, *galus* had a profoundly mystical significance. I often felt the desire to emulate them and go into exile to make amends for my failings, to free myself from worldliness and attain closeness to Hashem. Occasionally, I would take long walks alone in the woods, and strolling among the trees, I would recite chapters of *Tehillim*. Inspired with an ecstatic love of Hashem, I would take upon myself a greater commitment to *avodas Hashem*. But after a while, my enthusiasm would fade. I would go back to my drab, ordinary routine, and the ardent excitement would evaporate.

Well, I thought grimly, now Providence has offered me the opportunity to taste real exile. I had no idea how long this *galus* would last, but if it would help me attain *shleimus*, spiritual perfection, then it would be well worth it.

These thoughts inspired me with renewed hope, and the gloom that had come over me lessened somewhat. With newfound energy, I pushed on through the thick forest.

"*Habts rachmanus, Yidden!*" a plaintive voice cried out from amidst the thicket. "Jews, have pity!"

My father veered off toward the undergrowth from where the voice had come, and we all followed him. A Jew with a look of desperation in his eyes was bending over a small, frail child.

"*Yidden, habts rachmanus!*" he pleaded. "My little boy is sick, and I am afraid he isn't going to make it. Could you possibly spare some food?"

I had two apples left. We had a long road ahead of us, and our food supply was dwindling fast. Still, on impulse, I

reached into my pocket, pulled out an apple and gave it to the man, happy to be able to keep a Jewish child alive in the middle of a wilderness at a critical moment like this.

Tired from the long march, we sat down to rest in the cool shade of the tall trees. One by one, other Jews gathered around us until we had a *minyan* to *daven Minchah*. My father was overjoyed, since it was exactly eleven months since the passing of his father. This *Minchah* was the last time in the year of mourning that he was required to say *Kaddish*. And now, in the middle of the forest, Hashem had provided him with a *minyan*.

As the sun slowly began to set, we emerged from the forest. Before us stretched the highway that ran between Wyszkow and Ostrow-Mazowiecka (about forty miles northeast of Warsaw). Silently, clusters of Jews were moving forward along the road as German military vehicles raced by.

In the distance, we could make out the outline of a large building. It turned out to be an abandoned grain silo, its large doors left wide open. We joined the large group of frightened Jews squeezed into the silo, thankful for the roof over our heads that would provide shelter for the night. Trying to ignore the frightening situation around us, we murmured the *Maariv* for *Simchas Torah* and said *Kiddush* over two slices of bread.

Early in the morning, we pressed onward toward the east. Fortunately, we came upon a coachman who agreed to take us to Ostrow, letting us off at the town square. We stood there, not knowing what to do or where to turn.

"Just a short while ago," I murmured to my brother, "we were helping refugees, consoling them and providing all their needs. And now, we ourselves have become homeless and starving, with nowhere to turn."

My father withdrew some money from our small reserves and approached a little girl playing in the street.

"*Maydele,*" he said. "Could you buy us some bread?"

"Today is *Yom Tov*," the girl said with wide-eyed surprise. "We're not allowed to handle money!"

My father's hand shook as he returned the money to his pocket. His face was ashen.

We continued our journey, boarding a coach that was going to Zambrow, a city sixteen miles east of Ostrow. Midway between Ostrow and Zambrow, we would cross the demarcation line dividing the German zone of Poland and Soviet-occupied territory.

At the demarcation line, the Germans searched us with typical thoroughness and confiscated the little money we carried on us. In spite of it all, we were immensely relieved. At long last, we were in the Russian sector.

A Russian soldier astride a fierce-looking stallion suddenly appeared and greeted us in a friendly manner.

"*Zdrastvuyete,*" he said in a sonorous voice. "Hello!"

While my father tried to return the greeting in broken Russian, the soldier generously handed us bread and some strange-looking sugar cubes.

"*Baruch Hashem, geloibt der Oibershter,*" the people in the wagon exclaimed. "Praised is the One on High! Finally, we've turned our backs on the reign of terror, and we've come to a place where the people welcome us with sincere kindness and friendship."

Conflicting thoughts raced through my mind. I worried about Mother, still on the other side of the "border," and I wondered when we would see her again. What awaited us here in this strange city where we were total strangers? Would things really turn out all right, or had we just exchanged the

German brutality for Siberia?

The wagon was moving east, and ahead of us lay the town of Zambrow.

"Now that we are out of danger," my father said, "and we have passed the limitation of the *techum Shabbos*, we must get off this wagon and walk the rest of the way to Zambrow on foot."

The sun slowly descended beneath the horizon, leaving the sky streaked with glorious shades of red. *Simchas Torah* was ending, and *Shabbos Bereishis* was making its entrance.

As we passed through the peaceful streets of Zambrow, we could hear the enchanting melody of *Lecha Dodi* emanating from the *beis midrash*. When we entered the *shul*, the Rabbi of Zambrow immediately came forward to greet us. After welcoming us warmly, he invited my father to sit next to him.

To us, *chassidic* Jews from Dlugoszodle, the pronunciation of the Hebrew and the chant of the *davening* in the *Litvishe shul* was quite unfamiliar to us. By the same token, the Lithuanian Jews of Zambrow looked at us with a mixture of curiosity and respect.

After the *davening*, the president of the *kehillah* invited us to spend *Shabbos* at his house.

"I have a large house," he said, "and I would consider it an honor to have you as my guests. You may stay as long as you wish."

After a lavish *Shabbos* meal, we were besieged by a torrent of questions. Our hosts were curious about the situation in Poland, what was happening to the Jewish population and how we had made it to Zambrow.

We were all fully engrossed in the discussion, when we were alerted by a loud commotion coming from the street.

My sister Chayale jumped up and peered out the window.

"It's a parade!" she shouted excitedly.

The family jumped up and ran outside to watch the ceremony, beckoning us to follow.

In Poland, as soon as a military parade drew near, the Jews would shut themselves up inside their homes, knowing that these parades were accompanied by brutal pogroms. Evidently, here there was no threat of violence. Hesitantly, we went outside, following our host to the main street.

Large numbers of heavy artillery pieces, anti-aircraft guns and massive tanks rolled by. Fearsome cavalry men in black uniforms and sporting long mustaches passed the reviewing stand, their white teeth glistening as they smiled.

"Who are these strange looking men?" we wondered aloud.

"Those are Cossacks," the people near us explained, keeping their eyes on the parade.

The Cossacks waved at the onlookers and winked at the little children. Clearly, they had no intention of harming us. I felt better about the parade and began to relax.

Sukkos was over, and the Jews of Zambrow took down their *sukkos*, returning to their daily activities.

Our thoughts turned to the loved ones we had left behind and we wondered anxiously how they were faring. Then, one bright afternoon, to our amazement, Mother showed up, alive and well.

Chayale hugged her with all her might, weeping with joy.

"Where are Aunt Itta and her children?" Chayale asked. "And where's Grandmother?"

"They stayed in Tchizhava with Aunt Nechamah," Mother replied. "I came across the border by myself. I was homesick for you. I missed you so much." Softly stroking Chayale's hair,

she smiled through her tears.

The next morning, we decided to take the train to Bialystok, a large city thirty-five miles to the east of Zambrow.

The small railroad station in Zambrow was crammed with thousands of poor, homeless refugees with stories similar to ours, but everyone seemed cheerful. Groups of people were singing songs expressing prayer and hope for the redemption and deliverance of the oppressed Jewish people.

CHAPTER 8

Critical Decisions

SLOWLY, THE TRAIN PULLED INTO THE BIALYSTOK station. It was a dark, moonless night, and the large throng of passengers got off the train, rushing to their destinations.

Soon, we were the only ones left lingering on the platform. Without a penny to our names, or any possessions to call our own, we were bewildered, not knowing where to turn. Of course, Bialystok was a big city with a large Jewish population, but we didn't know a soul.

With no clear objectives in mind, we sat down on a bench, staring dejectedly around us. My father's eyes mirrored his loneliness and desperation. Even little Chayale, sensing our mournful mood, placed her head on Mother's lap and kept quiet.

Suddenly, my father straightened up and began to speak.

"Don't worry," he said, his voice gaining confidence as he spoke. "*Hashem Yisbarach* will come to our aid. If we had to depend on human beings to help us, then we would have cause to be worried. But our destiny rests in the Hands of the Almighty, and He has countless ways of assisting us. There's just one thing I ask of Him: that my children will never stop being faithful to the holy Torah, come what may. All my life, one thing was uppermost in my mind: that my children would be steadfast to the Torah and filled with *yiras shamayim*. I hope and pray that you will never deviate from the authentic *chassidic* education you have received."

As my father was speaking, a *yeshivah bachur* approached us.

"Where are you heading?" he inquired. "Can I be of any help?"

"We are refugees from Dlugoszodle," my father replied. "We arrived here about an hour ago. We are penniless and have no friends or relatives in Bialystok. In fact, we don't know anyone here."

"You seem to be a truly *frum*, rabbinical family," the young man said, looking pensive. "You ought to go see Rabbi Pinchas Eisenstadt. He will surely do all he can to help you."

As he was speaking, he pulled a slip of paper out of his pocket and wrote down the rabbi's address. My father thanked the *bachur* warmly and told Mother to wait at the station with Chayale, while Avremel and I went along with him to call on Rabbi Eisenstadt.

We had no money for transportation, so we walked to the distant neighborhood where the rabbi lived.

Rabbi Eisenstadt welcomed us cordially.

"A prominent family like you has nothing to worry

about," he said reassuringly. "There will be many people in the community who will be happy to offer you accommodations in their homes."

His kind words allayed our fears, and it didn't take him long to find us a room in a villa belonging to one of the affluent men in the community. My father quickly brought Mother and Chayale to our new accommodations, and we thanked Hashem for providing us with a roof over our heads.

In *shul* the next morning, we struck up a conversation with a man who was interested in hearing about life under the Germans and the hardships we experienced on our way to Bialystok.

"Would your two sons do me a favor and come live in my house?" he blurted out suddenly, interrupting my father in mid-sentence. "You see, the other day, the Communist authorities ordered my neighbor to give up a room in his house for a homeless family who turned out to be from the lowest class of people. If you would come and stay in my house, the Communists would see that I have already volunteered to give up a room for refugees, and they won't compel me to take in any undesirables. Besides, how can a family of five survive in one crowded room, the way you are now?"

Avremel and I were quite reluctant to separate from our parents, even if only for the night. But my father wanted it this way, and abiding by his wishes, we moved into our new room the same day.

The following morning, as we walked to my parents' lodgings, I had a serious talk with Avremel.

"Look, Avremel," I said. "You know that our money is gone; the Germans took it all at the border. All our valuable possessions were left in Dlugoszodle. As a result, we are now penniless."

"Hm," he mumbled, noncommittal.

"In my opinion, we have to help out by earning some money," I said with determination. "We can't ignore our parents' worries and force them to fend for themselves. If we don't help them, who will?"

Avremel lowered his head with worry and concern.

"Itzik, you are older than me," he murmured. "You've had a chance to learn quite a bit. I'm still young, and I have hardly learned anything."

"I didn't mean we have to work all day," I said soothingly. "We'll work a little–let's say three or four hours a day. That way, we will still have most of the day left for learning. If we don't do it, Father and Mother will really go hungry."

As we walked, we passed long lines of people waiting patiently in front of grocery stores, hoping to obtain some food. The masses of refugees, coupled with the confusion the Communists had provoked with their new regulations, resulted in serious shortages. People stood in line for hours just to buy a loaf of bread and a bottle of milk.

By the time we reached our parents' room, we had reached a firm decision. Each day, we would work for a few hours to earn some money and spend the rest of the day studying diligently.

When we arrived, Mother was busy preparing the meals for *Shabbos*. Their hosts had generously provided her with cooking utensils, dishes and even a closet full of clothes.

After breakfast, we made our way to the Novardoker Yeshivah in Bialystok. To our amazement, we found a number of *bachurim* busily packing their luggage, preparing for a trip.

"The situation in Russia looks grim," they confided. "Each day the Communist authorities issue new decrees

aimed at outlawing Torah study and the observance of *mitzvos*."

"But where could you possibly go?" I asked, puzzled.

"To Vilna. You see, Lithuania has become an independent nation, and the regime there is showing a very tolerant attitude toward Jews. There are no restrictions against the Jews, and they are allowed to live in complete freedom."

There were many other *bachurim*, however, who chose to stay in Bialystok, and from these we chose study partners.

Having grown up in a small *shtetl*, we were not used to the tumultuous noise of the big city. We were dazed by the wide avenues swarming with people, all yelling and screaming, and the frantic hustle and bustle of wagons and trucks. The seething ferment of people, speaking all languages, and the dazzle of flashing colors and images didn't cease to amaze us.

Prominent among all the people coming and going were the Russian soldiers, who seemed to be everywhere we looked. They were constantly in the stores and around the market stands, buying any goods that were for sale.

"Listen, Avremel," I said. "I've got an idea. Do you remember how Aunt Pesya used to weave scarves? Why don't we make those scarves and sell them in the market?"

"Do you think we'll be able to weave scarves?" Avremel asked skeptically.

"Of course. I'm sure it's very simple," I replied confidently. "And we should be able to make a nice profit from it."

We went into a store and purchased some knitting wool for two rubles. At home, we fashioned a small loom using some small boards and a few nails, and we began to weave. After about two hours of work, we had produced a fairly decent scarf. Hoping for the best, we brought it to the market and displayed it to the passersby. To our delighted surprise,

the scarf was sold within minutes—for fifteen rubles! Buoyed by our initial success, we returned home and set to work with redoubled energy.

As time went by, we became quite adept at weaving, and it took no more than half an hour to produce a sweater. The four hours we spent each day at our weaving was enough to generate a handsome profit, and the rest of the day we were able to learn at the Novardoker Yeshivah. We were quite satisfied with ourselves; the proceeds of our work enabled our parents to buy all their needs on the black market, so that the family lacked for nothing. *Baruch Hashem*, things could not be better.

Just as we were settling comfortably into our routine, we received a dramatic visit from Rabbi Plonchik, the Rabbi of Mishnitz. Rabbi Plonchik was the personal emissary of the world-renowned *gaon*, the revered Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinski of Vilna. He brought a crucial message from Rabbi Chaim Ozer urging all *yeshivah bachurim* to leave the Soviet Union as soon as possible and escape to Vilna.

"You *must* leave Russia at once!" he exhorted the students.

"But why should we?" Avremel and I replied. "We are doing very well here, and by all standards, Bialystok can be considered a *makom Torah*. We have suitable study partners and an excellent Torah environment. *Baruch Hashem*, we are making a good income, yet earning our livelihood does not prevent us from learning Torah—"

"Russia is not a suitable place for a *frum* Jew," interrupted Rabbi Plonchik. "Slowly but surely, life is getting more difficult. Before long you will be forced to make very difficult choices, and who can guarantee that you will be able to withstand the pressure? It is your obligation to flee to Vilna,

a haven of Torah. Many prominent *yeshivos* such as Mir, Kletzk, Kaminetz and Baranovich have already left Poland secretly, even travelling on *Shabbos*, in accordance with Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinski's orders."

After speaking to us, Rabbi Plonchik closeted himself with my father, and I discussed the issue with Avremel.

"Avremel," I said anxiously, "we must take a good look at ourselves. Who would have believed that the sons of Rabbi Pomerantz, the Rabbi of Dlugoszodle, would become ordinary businessmen, wasting valuable time weaving and selling ladies' scarves? To be sure, we do set aside a number of hours each day to study Torah, and when we learn, we do so with diligence. But what happened to our *shteigen*? Are we advancing? Are we studying with rapture and enthusiasm? What we need is a Torah atmosphere, something we can find only in a full-fledged *yeshivah*. I am sure that the hours we work affect our learning all day."

"Is it possible?" Rabbi Plonchik's booming voice echoed through the house, drowning out my conversation with Avremel. "Can it be that a rabbi, a leader of a community, does not foresee the coming events? Is it possible that he does not immediately send his sons away from the atheistic Soviet Union, so they can escape from the appalling Russian policy of suppressing the Jewish religion?" Rabbi Plonchik's voice shook with emotion.

The powerful speech left us confused and bewildered, torn by conflicting thoughts, yet knowing in our hearts that the rabbi had spoken wisely.

Avremel and I decided that the only solution was to travel to the Torah climate of Vilna. The complacency of the easy life of Bialystok had lost its allure. We were willing to give it all up and join the *yeshivah* life in Vilna.

Our parents, on the other hand, were tired of wandering from place to place; they craved tranquility and stability. Finally, their lives had taken on a semblance of normalcy, they had a roof over their heads, and their material wants were satisfied. But how would they survive in Bialystok without us?

The dilemma had several *halachic* nuances, and after weighing the various factors, we decided to ask a rabbi to *pasken* the *sheilah* and tell us what course should be followed. Since my father had a personal stake in the outcome, he disqualified himself from the decision, and the three of us, my father, Avremel and I, went to Rabbi Rosenman, the Chief Rabbi of Bialystok, to present our question to him.

After my father explained the situation, Avremel and I proposed an additional *sheilah*.

"If our father does not agree to let us go, are we permitted to disobey him and leave home, in defiance of the *mitzvah* of honoring one's parents?"

After reflecting on the question for several minutes, the rabbi rendered his definitive decision.

"You young men," he said in slow and measured words, "are required, in any event, to remove yourselves to the Torah atmosphere of Vilna. Of course, if your family is able to join you, then by all means, you should travel together."

The three of us made our way back to the house in silence, each absorbed in his own thoughts. We were greeted at the door by my sister Chayale, who was waiting anxiously to hear the decision.

"Well, are you going?" she asked, unable to contain herself.

"We're going!" my father and I answered simultaneously.

"And what's going to happen to us?" she asked.

"We'll see," my father answered abruptly, motioning to Mother to follow him into the kitchen for a private discussion.

The tension mounted as Avremel and I waited anxiously outside the closed door. We knew that our future depended on the outcome of our parents' discussion, and in our minds, we pondered all the uncertainties that lay before us. What if we had to travel alone? How would we manage? How would we obtain food and shelter?

After what seemed like an endless amount of time, the door finally opened and my father appeared with a smile on his face, followed by Mother, who was wiping tears from her eyes.

"Chayale," she whispered, "I need your help to pack our things. We're going to Vilna."

CHAPTER 9

The Journey Begins

JANUARY, 1940. A WAGON STOPPED IN FRONT OF OUR door and Mother, Aunt Nechamah and Chayale gingerly stepped onto the pavement, each carrying a small child wrapped in blankets. Aunt Nechamah and her three small children were going to join us on our journey to Vilna. Her oldest daughter was five years old, the baby barely two.

Aunt Nechamah was the youngest daughter of my grandfather, the Rabbi of Rozan. When my grandfather died in 1933, he bequeathed the rabbinate to his son-in-law Rabbi Shlomo Palatchkovitch, Aunt Nechamah's husband. In 1939, shortly after *Pesach*, Rabbi Shlomo, then only twenty-eight years old, fell seriously ill, and after a month of suffering excruciating pain, he passed away.

My aunt was left with three orphaned children, and a short time later, on the eve of the outbreak of the war, her fourth child, a boy, was born.

When she heard that we had decided to travel to Vilna, Aunt Nechamah made preparations to join us.

Communist police officials, hearing of her plans, advised her to leave her five-month-old baby in a children's home in Bialystok.

"It's dangerous to take a trip like this with a small baby in the dead of winter," they told her. "Moreover, the children's home is run by the Jewish community, so you have nothing to worry about. Your baby will be in good hands and will have the best of care."

Having no alternative, she heeded their advice. After a tearful farewell, she parted with the baby and embarked with us on our trek to Vilna.

From the start, the journey proved a treacherous one. It was snowing hard, and the temperature was a numbing twenty-two degrees below zero. After organizing our meager possessions, we finally boarded the wagon, taking with us some clothing and other basic necessities. The coachman cracked his whip, and we were on our way, each of us wrapped in his own thoughts.

Avremel and I were elated. We thought of the masses of *yeshivah bachurim* we would be joining in Vilna and the Torah atmosphere we would find there.

Mother and Aunt Nechamah, on the other hand, were anxious as they contemplated the hardships our journey was sure to entail.

My father just stared ahead blankly; it was hard to tell what thoughts revolved in his mind.

The biting cold penetrated to the bone. We held the little

ones tightly, trying to shield them from the icy winds. Mother and Aunt Nechamah gazed worriedly at the children, constantly touching them to make sure they had not frozen to death.

The wagon made a stop in the village of Smargon. The streets were deserted; no one was foolhardy enough to venture outside in freezing weather like this.

Suddenly, a simple village Jew, wearing a heavy woolen coat and a fur cap, appeared through the snow and approached our wagon. Looking inside, he shook his head.

"You can't travel with small children in this kind of weather!" he grumbled. "It's treacherous out here! I can't let you risk the lives of these children. *Nu,* hurry up, and come on inside the house!"

As he was speaking, he grabbed two of the little ones with his powerful arms and ran inside. Having no choice, we followed him.

For two full weeks, we stayed in the house of this good-hearted blacksmith, and we were treated royally.

Finally, when weather conditions improved a little, we resumed our journey, heading in the direction of the border town of Oshmina.

CHAPTER 10

Unforeseen Obstacles

OUR WAGON CAME TO A HALT IN FRONT OF THE *SHUL*, but we hesitated to venture outside, feeling like humble beggars once again. Where would we turn, penniless wayfarers in a strange town, with only a few pathetic bundles to call our own?

Just then, a *heimishe Yid*, dressed in the traditional black hat and coat, approached our wagon. Noticing our plight, he warmly invited us into his home. His name was Lapidus, which was derived from *lapid*, a flame. True to his name, he warmed our hearts with his gracious hospitality and made us feel truly welcome.

It did not take long for us to find out that our trip to Vilna was fraught with enormous difficulties. It was not going to be easy to sneak across the border during the bitter winter cold,

and Aunt Nechamah with her three small children would only complicate matters.

It became obvious that it would take a long time before we would be able to cross into Lithuania. Overcome with longing for her baby, Aunt Nechamah decided to return to Bialystok to see the child.

When she arrived at the home, she was horror-stricken to find that her baby was gone. The administrator of the home explained to her that the baby had died.

"Show me his grave," cried the grief-stricken mother.

The only response she received was evasive double-talk and lame explanations. Exasperated, she conducted her own investigation, but under the prevailing conditions in Bialystok, it was impossible to determine the whereabouts of the child and what had happened to him. She had good reason to suspect that he was still alive.

Broken-hearted and overcome with guilt, Aunt Nechamah joined us once again, knowing in her heart that her innocent child had probably been sold or given as a gift to a Russian officer.

Soon after she arrived in Oshmina, Aunt Nechamah secured an apartment for herself and the children, and we remained with the Lapidus family, trusting that Hashem would send us His help.

During this time, Avremel and I diligently continued our *Gemara* studies. In those days, the border town of Oshmina was a way station for a large number of *yeshivah* students en route to Lithuania. Together with the other *bachurim*, we applied ourselves to our Torah studies with passionate intensity.

A short time after our arrival in Oshmina, we met an extraordinary personality. It was late at night, and the *beis*

midrash was virtually empty; almost everyone had gone home. Slowly and hesitantly, the door opened, and an elderly Jew entered with faltering steps. Avremel and I were sitting on a bench, engaged in a lively discussion concerning an intricate *sugya*. The old man walked over to us haltingly, his gentle smile caressing us.

"My dear children," he said in a hoarse voice, "I'm sure that in the *zchus* of your learning, Hashem will annul His fateful decree."

He warmly embraced us and kissed our faces with infinite love. After he left, we asked someone who he was; we were amazed at the emotional display of his obvious love for Torah.

"You've never heard of Reb Meir Vashilsky?" was the astonished reply. "He is the benefactor of all the transient *yeshivah bachurim* here in Oshmina. He feeds them and lets them sleep in his house, risking his life daily to smuggle them across the border into Lithuania. You know, he has close ties to an escape organization. If the Communists would get wind of his activities . . ."

As time went by, my father became good friends with Reb Meir. They enjoyed each other's company, and they would "talk in learning" for hours at a time. Besides being a study partner, Reb Meir was also very helpful in getting us settled in Oshmina and providing our basic needs.

The weeks and months flew by. Spring was drawing near, and the border which was so close, a mere ten miles away, seemed to move further and further away from us.

One morning, as we entered the *beis midrash* to *daven Shacharis*, we found the congregation in an uproar.

"Have you heard the latest news?"

"No, we haven't heard anything," we replied brusquely.

We turned away, trying to avoid the usually misinformed rumor-mongers. Somehow, though, this seemed to be serious news, and we paid attention to the commotion around us.

"This new decree is simply terrible!" the people groaned. "Refugees are forbidden to stay in cities or towns near the Lithuanian border. They must remain at a distance of sixty-five miles from the border!"

At first we did not believe the disastrous report, but later that day, it was officially confirmed. We would indeed have to leave Oshmina. So close to the border and yet so far! Once again, we packed our bundles, this time planning to head for Slonim.

Aunt Nechamah, not willing to travel again with her three small children, ran from one government agency to another until she received the required permit to remain in Oshmina.

That evening, as I sat and learned in the *beis midrash*, trying to forget my troubles, the kind Reb Meir Vashilsky came over to me.

"Listen, Itzik," he said in his rasping but gentle voice. "Why would you want to move away from here? Why abandon the purpose for which you came to Oshmina in the first place?"

"What do you expect me to do?" I asked. "Where would I stay?"

"You can stay in my house," Reb Meir replied unpretentiously, "at least until after *Pesach*. And maybe, by that time, you'll have had a chance to slip across the border to Lithuania."

Two weeks before *Pesach*, my parents, my brother Avremel and my sister Chayale mounted a horse-drawn carriage, setting out for Slonim, a city that was ninety miles east of

Bialystok. I could not have imagined how difficult saying good-bye to them would be. Embracing my father, I cried like a little boy, and when the carriage began to move, I stood transfixed on the road, watching it roll away in a cloud of dust. I followed it with my eyes until it disappeared behind the horizon.

I slowly made my way back to the *beis midrash* and opened the *Gemara*, but the letters danced before my eyes. A profound sense of sadness came over me. I was surprised at my utter depression; I felt like all the happiness had faded from my life. A heavy feeling of foreboding settled upon me, and with great fear I wondered if I would ever see my parents again.

The home of Reb Meir Vashilsky was a "lodging for Torah" in the true sense of the words. I lived there among *yeshivah* students who were dedicated to Torah studies with every fiber of their beings. Aside for various essential conversations, we discussed no worldly topics at all. All we talked about was Torah and *yiras shamayim*.

From early morning until late at night, I sat in the *beis midrash* studying intensely, hoping that I would soon be able to travel to Vilna, where I could advance to higher levels of learning.

"*Ribono Shel Olam*," I prayed. "If I make it to Vilna, I'm going to enroll in one of the great *yeshivos*. I will forget the outside world and immerse myself completely in the study of Your holy Torah. I will apply myself to this task tenaciously and singlemindedly."

Pesach was at hand. I had really wanted to celebrate the *sedarim* in the company of Reb Meir and my friends, to recount with them the story of the Exodus until daybreak, but Aunt Nechamah begged me to lead the *seder* for her. At the

direction of Reb Meir, I agreed to join her. I made a valiant effort not to let my memories get the better of me, and I banished my thoughts from the magnificent *sedarim* I had experienced at home together with my family.

BOOK TWO

Circumstances of Captivity

CHAPTER 11

So Near Yet So Far

PESACH PASSED UNEVENTFULLY, AND THE MONTH OF *Iyar* arrived, bringing with it an unusual kind of excitement.

It was *Motzei Shabbos*, and with the emergence of the twinkling stars, the people of Oshmina were making *Havdalah* and preparing to resume their normal weekly activities. From the windows of the Jewish homes one could hear the clatter of silverware, glasses and plates as women packed away the special *Shabbos* utensils.

My friends and I were sitting and learning in the *beis midrash* when suddenly, Reb Meir burst through the door with a strange expression on his face. He pointed a finger at Shalom Shumsky, Yitzchak Izbitzer and myself, signaling that he wanted to speak with us. We closed our *Gemaras* and

stepped into the corner where he was standing. I had an odd feeling that momentous events were in the offing. It was obvious that Reb Meir had something serious on his mind.

"*Kinderlach*, get ready to travel," Reb Meir said, his voice trembling with excitement. "*B'ezras Hashem*, tonight you are going to Vilna."

We quickly followed him back to the house where we donned layers of warm clothing and hurriedly packed a minimal amount of provisions. I stuffed my *tefillin* and two apples into my coat pockets, and in a few minutes, we were all ready.

Reb Meir quickly introduced us to our Lithuanian guide, and we stepped out into the cold. Accompanied by Reb Meir, our small group marched in silence, filled with excitement and apprehension about what lay ahead in the hours to come. Trying to build up our morale, Reb Meir spoke to us with words of encouragement and inspiration. Then, when we reached the edge of town, he turned to bid us farewell.

"*Zeit matzliach*," he declared fervently, shaking hands with each of us. "Your trip should be truly successful! And may Hashem be with you!" With that, he embraced us warmly and vanished into the darkness.

All that night we marched without letup, approaching the border at the crack of dawn. An abandoned barn loomed ahead in the early morning light. The Lithuanian entered it, and we followed him inside. Seemingly out of nowhere, he produced a loaf of bread and a bottle of water, and after stilling our gnawing hunger and thirst, we sat down in a corner to rest. Quietly, the three of us discussed the *sugya* we had been studying.

We remained hidden in the barn all that day. At dusk, as the last rays of the sun descended behind the wheat fields of

the border region, we took to the road once again. After marching for an hour, our hawk-eyed Lithuanian guide spied two mounted Russian border guards galloping at a fast pace in our direction.

"Run!" he hissed through clenched teeth, bolting for the forest like a streak of lightning. I followed closely after him, but Shalom and Yitzchak trailed far behind.

"Where are my friends?" I asked the guide, trying to catch my breath.

"They must have been caught," he answered tersely.

"*Oy vey*," I sighed, with a sinking feeling in my stomach. "May Hashem have mercy on them."

I had no time to contemplate their fate. The guide and I continued to march, hoping to reach the border without further incident. Suddenly, right before the border, I was dismayed to discover that our path was blocked by a deep, swiftly flowing river.

"Hurry up, we don't have time to get undressed," the Lithuanian said curtly. "We'll go in with our clothes and swim across."

It was a chilly night in early spring, and the icy water made my teeth chatter. After a few minutes, we reached the other bank, shivering with cold. Our clothes were sopping wet, and the water weighed us down.

We trudged onward with difficulty for about a thousand feet, until at last, the guide sat down on a rock.

"We made it!" he said with a genuine smile. "We've finally crossed over to the Lithuanian side. Let's take a short rest, and then we'll continue on our way."

From his pocket he pulled out a pint of vodka and took a long drink, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He generously offered me the bottle, and I accepted, hoping to

warm myself and fortify my energy. After the tedious journey, the vodka made me feel drowsy, but my respite did not last long.

"All right, let's go!" the guide ordered, leading the way up a steep hill. Laboriously, I trudged behind him.

"*Baruch Hashem*," I mumbled faintly when we reached the top. "We finally made it."

The way down was easier, and again, I followed closely behind my guide.

Suddenly, a shot rang out, piercing the silence.

"Stop! Hold it right there!"

We were confronted by two Lithuanian soldiers, their rifles pointed straight at us. My knees were shaking. I looked at my formerly exuberant guide, who was now frozen in his tracks, trembling with fear.

The soldiers slowly approached, firing into the air. At the sound of gunfire, more soldiers appeared, converging on us from all sides. Grimly, they marched us off to the border patrol building.

For hours on end we were interrogated, separately and together, in order to verify our statements. By noon, we were given the distressing news: Headquarters had ruled that we were to be returned to Russia, our place of origin. And the worst part was that we were to be extradited to the Russian police authorities.

I tried desperately to think of a way to stay in Lithuania—even in a Lithuanian prison. At least I would be closer to Vilna, the destination for which I had gone through all this trouble.

As I pondered our predicament, the full impact of our punishment suddenly struck me. I remembered crossing from Poland into Russia and wondering if I was doomed to

end up in Siberia. Now it seemed that my premonitions were about to be fulfilled.

Feelings of sadness and deep disappointment filled my heart. Still, I tried to maintain my faith that whatever *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* decreed was for the best.

At the Russian border crossing station, we were offered plates of thick, hot soup. The Lithuanian gulped down the dish with gusto, but although I was quite hungry, I did not touch the food.

"Why don't you have some soup?" the guide asked, smacking his lips with obvious delight. "It's quite tasty. Not bad at all."

There was no way to explain to a Lithuanian peasant that I didn't want to eat non-kosher food, so I just remained quiet. After several hours, when the Russians noticed that I was not eating the soup, they brought me some bread.

Two more days elapsed before we were transferred to jail. On the way to the prison, I glanced through the window of the police wagon and noticed with surprise that we were back in Oshmina.

I surveyed the streets, hoping to detect an acquaintance. Would anyone recognize me? Would they take the trouble to tell Reb Meir that I had been arrested? He surely would do his utmost to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *pidyon shevuyim*, ransoming prisoners.

My hopes were not dashed, and the news of my arrest spread like wildfire. Even my father, who had moved to Slonim, learned that I was being held in the Oshmina jail. Nevertheless, although many people did their utmost to gain my release, their efforts failed, and I remained behind bars.

CHAPTER 12

Behind Bars

FEELING LIKE A CAGED BIRD, I PACED RESTLESSLY FROM one side of my cell to the other, pining for freedom. I had not yet resigned myself to my new situation, and I was obsessed with an overwhelming drive to tear loose. One day followed another in deadly monotony; the bare concrete walls of my cell felt like they were closing in on me. Only a tiny window high up on the wall allowed me a minuscule view of the sky.

I sat on the stool in my cell and tried to organize the multitude of thoughts that barraged my mind. I yearned for my *tefillin* that had been taken away from me. Most importantly, I had to think of a way to get in touch with my parents.

Angrily, I kept asking myself the same question: Why did I wind up in this miserable cell?

Deep down, I knew the answer to this question. The root cause of it all was my hunger to learn Torah and my desire to study at an advanced *yeshivah* in Vilna. Perhaps I was unworthy, and therefore I had been arrested and imprisoned in the Oshmina jail.

All prisoners were held in separate cells. I, too, was kept in solitary confinement. That alone should have given me ample reason to be depressed and worried about the future. However, I was fortified by the unshakeable faith my parents had worked so hard to ingrain in us as children. The upbringing I had in our home that was steeped in *yiras shamayim* and *chassidus* combined with my years of diligent study at the *yeshivah* in Warsaw sustained me in standing up to the severe trials that lay ahead. I only prayed that, come what may, I would remain a faithful Torah-observant Jew.

The days seemed endless, and the boredom was oppressive; only my thoughts saved me from becoming gloomy and despondent. I imagined sitting in front of my *rebbi* in *yeshivah*, listening to him expound a Torah thought. I remembered an illuminating *derashah* on the story of Yosef our forefather that was so pertinent to my situation, and in my mind's eye, my *rebbi* was talking directly to me.

"Potifar arrested Yosef on the basis of his wife's trumped-up charges and placed him in the dungeon. And the Torah attests that 'Hashem was with Yosef, and He showed him kindness.'* The steel bars of the cell are a barrier only to the physical body, but *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* is with the prisoner inside his cell. After all, 'The whole world is filled with His glory.'"**

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* *Bereishis 39:21*
** *Yeshayahu 6:3*

Yes, I thought to myself, Hashem is with me, right here in my jail cell. I just have to develop the right attitude and perspective. An insight came to mind that I had heard from the Gerrer Rebbe. He said that Hashem is present all over, except in those places where He is chased away. And we chase Him away if we defile our minds with improper thoughts. As it is written in the Torah, "I will keep My sanctuary in your midst."* *Chazal* interpret this to mean, "within each and every one of you." Indeed, the heart of every Jew is a dwelling place for Hashem.

As I pondered my situation, I realized that even in the most difficult of times one could always be comforted by the holy words of the Torah.

Even as I was running from my enemies, I was not alone, for in *Koheles* it says clearly, "G-d seeks the pursued."** And although my predicament seemed depressing, it is stated in *Tehillim*, "Hashem is close to the brokenhearted."***

The hours stretched on endlessly, and I passed the time observing the routine prison activities, hoping to find some way to establish contact with the outside world.

Eventually, I noticed that each day the guard sent one prisoner outside with a pail to draw water from the well in the courtyard. Hoping I would be able to glimpse a familiar face beyond the prison walls, I immediately volunteered for this activity.

Finally, after many days of trying, my persistence paid off, and I was sent to the well in the courtyard to draw water. Shivering with excitement, my imagination ran wild.

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* *Vayikra 26:11*
** *Koheles 3:15*
*** *Tehillim 34:19*

I yearned to see my father again and hoped that he would be standing outside the prison gate, waiting to see me. I knew, though, that he wouldn't stand there day after day, once he realized that I was never permitted outside. Even if I could not see him, I sustained the hope that he was doing everything in his power to gain my release. In my mind, I pictured him in Moscow, conferring with high government officials and pleading with them on my behalf.

When I finally reached the long-awaited courtyard I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with the pure spring air. The warm rays of the sun gently stroked my face, a face that had not seen daylight for more than a week. But this was not the time to enjoy the weather. I carefully surveyed the entire courtyard, hoping to find a familiar face, or any Jewish person with whom I could send a message to my parents telling them that I was still alive. But except for an elderly peasant woman, I did not see anyone.

Time after time, I came out to the courtyard with my pail, always searching the faces around me, but each time my efforts proved futile.

Give up, Itzik, I berated myself. You might as well stop thinking about freedom and resign yourself to your fate. There's nothing you can do to breach the walls of this prison. Hashem is the One Who sent you here, and in reality, whatever Hashem does is for the best. Place your trust in Hashem. Be steadfast and firm like a rock. Keep the *mitzvos* and be aware that He is with you at all times and that He will support you under any circumstances.

I worked on improving my attitude, trying to accept the conditions that Hashem had imposed upon me. I began to feel like a child whose father is standing beside him, concerned about his welfare. I found within myself a hidden

source of inner strength I never knew I possessed. Feelings of anxiety and alarm were placated by my *simchah* over the knowledge that Hashem had allowed me to come close to Him. True, the police had succeeded in separating me from my father and mother, but they would never be able to cause a rift between me and my Creator.

Still, I knew that my father and mother were probably worrying about me, and I sat down to write them a letter, trying to assure them of my well-being and to calm their fears.

Dear Father, *shlita*,

I have been thrown into jail, and you are probably worried that I am in the company of people who are estranged from Hashem and His Torah.

Do not be concerned, Father. With the Torah education you have given me, I have been ingrained with *yiras shamayim*, a deep love and yearning for the Creator and a powerful desire to improve my character. In your merit, Father, Hashem will give me the strength to overcome all obstacles and withstand any tests that may confront me.

I promise you, Father, that I will not abandon the right path that you have carved out for me. I will always make every effort to observe everything you have taught me. Whenever I will have to make a decision I will ask myself, "What would Father want me to do now? How would he have acted if he were in my place?" And I will try to act accordingly.

I feel that I will have to undergo severe trials, but by keeping your image in front of my eyes, I will emerge victorious. May we soon be *zocheh* to the *geulah sheleimah*.

Dear Mother, *tichyeh*,

Try to find strength and *emunah* in Hashem and have *bitachon* that He will not desert me. And may you live to see the day that you will lead me, your son Yitzchak, under the

chupah to marry a girl like Rivkah Imeinu.
My warmest regards to Avremel and Chayale.

Your loving son,
Yitzchak

When I finished writing the letter, I felt as though a heavy burden had been lifted from my shoulders. Putting my resolution into writing strengthened my determination to live up to the promises I had made.

Now that the letter was written, I had to come up with a way to deliver it to its destination.

I folded the sheet of paper around a small pebble and tied it inside my handkerchief. Then, concealing the unobtrusive bundle, I waited for an opportunity to fling it across the outside wall of the jail.

That night, I had a remarkable dream. I saw myself in prison poring over a *Sefer Tehillim* that was open to Chapter 130. I was reading and clearly enunciating the words.

"*Shir hamaalos, mimaamakim* . . . Out of the depths I call to You, Hashem." Each verse suddenly seemed directly applicable to my predicament.

"I am more eager for Hashem than watchmen who wait for the morning . . ." A G-d-fearing Jew must feel a yearning to do Hashem's will, like a watchman who looks forward with anticipation for the sun to rise.

"O Yisrael, hope for Hashem, for with Hashem is steadfast love and great power to redeem. . ." My middle name is Yisrael, and these words spoke directly to me. Yisrael, hope for Hashem, for with Hashem is kindness. If you place your hope in Hashem, you will experience His kindness.

"*Veharbei imo fedus*. . ." A novel interpretation came to me in the dream. "On the day that Hashem will free you from

prison, *harbei imo*, many others will be liberated along with you."

Waking up with a start, I lay on my bed with my eyes wide open in amazement, exhilarated by the astonishing dream.

Itzik, I said to myself excitedly, here's your answer. You will not be released any time soon. Prepare yourself for a long imprisonment, and be patient. Only when there will be a general liberation of all prisoners will you be set free. You were told so in your dream: "*Veharbei imo fedus*," you will only be freed when many others will be liberated along with you.

Through the small window near the ceiling, I could discern the faint glow of daylight. The guard who brought me my breakfast ordered me to go to the courtyard to draw water.

I took my time outside, pumping very slowly as I enjoyed the fresh air and the sunshine. As I worked, I surveyed the street outside the prison gate, trying to detect a familiar face.

Suddenly, an astonishing sight caught my eye, and I blinked several times to make sure I was not imagining things. Could it be true? Were my eyes deceiving me? Right outside the gate Mother and Chayale were passing by, walking as if on a leisurely stroll. They gazed at me with obvious excitement.

I glanced behind me. The guards were joking with each other and were not paying attention to me. I quickly pulled my handkerchief from my pocket and hurled it with all my might across the prison wall.

Chayale ran to pick it up and brought it to Mother. *Baruch Hashem*, the guards did not notice anything.

Unable to utter a word, I riveted my eyes on them, gazing at them longingly. Not wanting to alert the guards, I slowly picked up the pail of water and carried it back into jail,

grateful to Hashem for allowing me to communicate with my parents.

Could it be that only two weeks had gone by since my arrest, that only one month had passed since *Pesach*? The humdrum monotony of prison life made it seem more like a year.

Then, one night, after everyone was asleep, we were suddenly awakened by a loud commotion outside our cell.

"Get up! Get up! Wake up, everybody!" Guards ran along the corridors, shouting and banging on the cells. The clanging of keys turning and the sound of squeaking hinges signaled the opening of the gates. Soldiers, their guns cocked, were waiting to lead us outside to the dark courtyard.

"Forward, march!" the officer's voice boomed through the night. "Anyone stepping out of line, anyone moving after being told to stop, will be shot on the spot! No warning given!"

All the prisoners were loaded onto a waiting truck, which came to an abrupt halt after a short ride.

"Get off the truck quickly, and line up facing the wall across the road!" the command rang out.

We jumped down as quickly as we could and ran toward the wall. By the light of the moon, I was able to make out the Oshmina railroad station.

A passing Jew stopped to watch the commotion, obviously fascinated. Speaking in Yiddish, I managed to whisper a few words to him.

"I am Itzik Pomerantz. Please let my parents in Slonim know that they are shipping me out. I have no idea where they're taking me."

The Jew nodded, assuring me that he would fulfill my request.

We were loaded onto a train, and we travelled for hours, not having a clue as to what our destination would be. Finally, after a seemingly endless ride, the train came to a screeching halt at a small station. A huge sign announced the name of the town as Old Vileka. From there we were taken by truck to a large prison.

Well, I thought resignedly, it seems that I've arrived at my new home. Who knows what's in store for me here?

CHAPTER 13

The Ordeals of Confinement

IT WAS EARLY MORNING WHEN THE ARDUOUS JOURNEY from Oshmina finally ended in the prison of Vileka. Keeping pace with the warden, I walked along the endless corridors until he stopped at cell number one-thirty-one. As he rattled the keys hanging on a large ring and opened the heavy steel door, thirty-two pairs of eyes scrutinized me inquisitively. I entered the cell hesitantly and heard the door slam shut and the key turn in the lock.

I observed the faces of my thirty-two cellmates. They were miserable, bitter faces, reflecting hopelessness and despair. All of them bore pronounced Polish features, clearly gentile faces. One thing was certain: there was not one Jew among the thirty-two prisoners.

"Hello," I said in the friendliest voice I could muster.

"What's your name?"

"Where are you from?"

"How did you get caught?"

The questions were hurled at me in quick succession.

"My name is Yitzchak Pomerantz," I answered straightforwardly. "I am a Jew, a religious Jew. I crossed over into Russia from Poland to get away from the Nazis, but the Russian Communists don't allow us to observe the laws of our religion. So I tried to sneak across the border into Lithuania, and that's when I got caught. After holding me in jail in Oshmina for two weeks, they brought me here."

Then each prisoner told me his story. What emerged from their tales was that most of my cellmates were educated Poles, high-ranking officers in the Polish army or important executives in the Polish government. Among them there was also a judge and a Catholic priest. They had all been imprisoned by the Communists on the charge of being wealthy capitalists, opponents of the socialist ideal of a classless society. The undisputed leader of the cell inmates was Waldemars, the brother of the Lithuanian President.

The majority of the men had belonged to the Polish elite, and in one blow, they had tumbled from the loftiest station in society to the lowest abyss. Unable to deal with the humiliation, they were like deflated balloons. Their spirits had evaporated, and they were completely drained, left without a shred of self-esteem or confidence.

I glanced at each of my new cellmates, amazed at the picture they presented.

The celebrated Polish general, a tall, broad-shouldered giant of a man, sat on his stool with his head bowed. He stared at the rough concrete floor with an expression of total dejection, wringing his hands in desperation.

With an air of resignation, the judge and the priest gazed into the empty space, their minds seemingly devoid of any thought.

Others carried on animated discussions, fantasizing about sumptuous dinners and reminiscing about parties and dances they had attended before their imprisonment.

Suddenly, there was absolute silence. Everyone grew tense, like troops getting ready for battle. The sound of clattering plates could be heard from the end of the corridor.

"Quiet, everyone! He's on his way!"

"Who's coming?" I asked innocently.

"The guard who dishes out the food, of course," came the answer.

They all strained their ears, listening to the heavy footsteps approaching through the hallway. Their entire beings were absorbed by the thought of food.

The scene that followed was a shocking one. I was amazed to see how the prison conditions had turned the cream of Polish aristocracy into a pack of hungry wolves. These people, who were accustomed to a life of ease and affluence, had suddenly lost all self-control.

The key was inserted into the lock, and the screeching sound of the opening bolt broke the silence in the cell. Two large pots were brought in, and instantly, the thirty-two inmates jumped from their stools to form a circle around them. Slowly, the guard stirred the soup with his ladle, making sure that everyone would receive soup of equal thickness. Thirty-two pairs of tense eyes followed his circular motions. It was obvious from the way they watched the guard that if he would show the slightest preference to one of the men they would tear him apart limb by limb.

The guard began to dish out the soup.

"That idiot!" someone yelled. "Just look at my plate! Not one piece of vegetable. All I got is a mess of muddy water!"

Then there erupted a detailed analysis regarding the number of kernels of barley floating in each plate of soup, a debate which sometimes developed into a heated argument.

I sat quietly in my corner, immersed in my own thoughts. The soup was *treif*, and back at the station at the Lithuanian border I had made up my mind not to eat any non-kosher food.

Looking out the window high up on the wall, I noticed that it was getting dark. I turned to the wall to *daven*. I was cut off from my family, my friends in the *yeshivah*, my neighbors and my Jewish environment. I had been cast among strangers, among sons of a different nation whose manner of speech and character were foreign to me, totally removed from my outlook on life. Was there anyone who was still close to me?

I directed my thoughts to Hashem. Only You, *Ribono Shel Olam* are with me, as it says in *Tehillim*,* "*Karov Hashem lenishberei leiv*. Hashem is close to the broken-hearted." Never before had I felt such a profound feeling of closeness to Hashem as at that moment, and I was sure that He was listening to my *tefillah*.

I finished *davening*. Somehow, I felt completely at ease, and a feeling of *simchah* came over me. I sent up a silent prayer of gratitude to Hashem.

A sudden commotion startled me out of my reverie. The inmates were setting up their cots, preparing to go to sleep. The cell monitor assigned a space for my hard cot.

"*Nu*, comfortable enough for you in our hotel?" asked my

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* *Tehillim 34:19*

neighbor on the next cot, a Polish gentile named Yanovsky. He smiled at me. "*A gezunter bet,* eh?" he added with a grin. "A fine bed, wouldn't you say?"

He struck up a conversation with me, trying to throw in a few Yiddish words from time to time. During the course of the discussion, I learned that he had been arrested for belonging to the right-wing fascist party.

Well, that makes him an outright Jew-hater, I thought.

I *davened* to Hashem that He should protect me, the one lamb among thirty-two wolves, and that I should come out of this lions' den unscathed.

At dawn, I woke up with a start. Terrible screams erupted as men punched and fought in front of the cell door as a bag containing the bread rations for breakfast was brought into our cell.

The distribution of the bread was accompanied by a violent fight. Everything was permissible in this daily battle, and the victor was the one who got the best slice of bread. I soon learned that the fighting centered around the end slices of the square loaves, which were always slightly thicker than the middle slices.

After a few bloody brawls among the aristocratic gentlemen of our cell, fights which miraculously did not end in serious injuries, the prisoners arranged a fair distribution system, one that was acceptable to all. One of the prisoners, Pavel, stood in the corner, blindfolded and facing the wall. Another prisoner would pull a ration of bread out of the bag, and Pavel, who absolutely could not see the bread, would call out the name of the prisoner who would receive that portion. The whole procedure took quite a while, but everyone was happy with it.

"Let's do the same with the soup distribution," Waldemars

suggested. "That way, no one will complain about being shortchanged."

After each meal, the men would sit around with nothing to do, and they passed the time talking about all kinds of nonsense. They discussed the food at the banquets they used to attend, the fun they used to have and other senseless drivel.

The days passed in mind-numbing boredom. A new prisoner always caused a flurry of excitement. If he carried some food in his bundle, he was required by the prisoners' rules to divide it among all the inmates. If he would refuse to part with his provisions, then at night, when he was sound asleep, the prisoners would steal his bundle and distribute the food among the others. Of course, the theft was committed in the name of justice.

As I watched the proceedings, I felt pride well up in my heart, "Praised is Hashem, *shelo asani goy*, for not having made me a gentile."

These Polish intellectuals, university graduates, scholars and scientists had lost all their ideals. They stole and gulped down their food, and with clear consciences, they clawed at each other like rabid dogs, fighting over a morsel of bread. They observed the "laws of the prison," a system that was instituted long ago by members of the underworld. People who used to speak eloquently about the ideals of justice and equality forgot all of their sophisticated resolutions at the sight of a grimy plate of soup. It became all the more clear to me that only the words of the Torah held the immense power to harness the desires of the physical body. Only these Torah concepts could provide for the Jewish people the strength to overcome the trials and tribulations they were facing.

Throughout my incarceration, I had only one dream: to

obtain a pair of *tefillin* and a *Gemara*. If I would have these holy items, I would be the happiest man on earth. I could forget what was going on around me and engross myself in the words of the Sages.

But I had no way of getting a *Gemara*, so I just sat in my corner, trying to recall the sayings of *Chazal*, as I delved into the *Mishnayos* that were etched indelibly in my mind. The Polish intellectuals, the priest and the judge included, listened with growing fascination to my explanations of the *mitzvos* and the fundamental principle of *Torah min hashamayim*, the G-d-given origin of Torah.

"Marvelous," they exclaimed excitedly. "We've never heard such beautiful and lucid expositions before. Our entire way of thinking about Judaism and the Jewish people was all wrong!"

Although I was the youngest among the cell inmates, they all treated me with awe and respect and even sometimes with a touch of envy. I once overheard one of the old men make a significant confession to his colleagues.

"I'll admit that before the war I was active in the fascist party and was a violent anti-Semite," the old man said. "Even now, I hate the Jews, but not the kind like our young rabbi."

The prisoners confided in me, telling me about their personal problems.

"Rabbi Isaac, I must talk to you about a serious matter," a prisoner named Boris said to me one day. "Please, hear me out, and don't interrupt me until I finish my story."

We sat down together in the far corner of our cell. Boris cast a stern look at the others, making sure that they would not eavesdrop or intrude on our conversation.

"I was born in White Russia," he began in a soft voice, "to a family that was estranged from Torah and *mitzvos*. Both my

parents came from assimilated homes and were totally ignorant of Judaism. I lived my entire life among gentiles, and when I entered the university, I met a Christian Polish girl to whom I became very close.

"After my graduation, I was faced with a dilemma. I was offered an attractive position, which was accompanied by an impressive salary. There was only one drawback. Jews were strictly excluded from employment in this company. On top of that, my girlfriend's parents pressured me to get married, on the condition that I would not disgrace their family with my Jewishness.

"These two enticements were too much for me to resist, so I converted to Christianity. Since that time, more than twenty-two years ago, I have had no contact with Jews or Judaism. But deep in my heart, within my soul, there was something that was bothering me. On *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov*, I felt a certain disgust with my non-Jewish family. Somehow, I felt a strange sense of isolation while I was among them. I was the head of the household, and yet, I was different, a Jew. And now, ever since I got to know you here in prison—" He burst into tears, unable to control his emotions.

After a few moments he regained his composure and continued remorsefully. "A crisis has been brewing inside me, and now I've come to the moment of truth. Oh, what a wonderful world I have thrown away . . . I promise, if G-d helps me to get out of this alive, I will return to my Jewishness, even if my wife and children remain behind."

"It's okay, Boris," I replied sympathetically. "It's never too late to repent. G-d reaches out toward His children and invites them to return to Him. As long as a person is alive, he has the opportunity to repent for his failings, and G-d lovingly accepts him."

From that day on, I was not alone. I had a new friend who clung to me and eagerly absorbed every aspect of *Yiddishkeit* I could teach him. With consuming curiosity, he learned about *halachos, minhagim*, the Jewish outlook on the world and Jewish history. Most of all, he wanted to know what he was required to do to become a faithful Jew. I spared no effort and explained it to him as well as I could.

Sadly, after several weeks, Boris was shipped off to Siberia, and I never heard from him again.

CHAPTER 14

The Interrogation

IT WAS PAST MIDNIGHT, AND OUR CELL WAS PITCH DARK. All prisoners were asleep. Some of them slept fitfully, tossing and turning on their hard cots, as they muttered unintelligibly in a crude Polish. Others slept deeply, temporarily oblivious to their predicaments.

Suddenly, I heard the telltale rattling of keys, and the beam of a flashlight pierced the darkness. Stopping at the first row of cots, the guard's gruff voice rang out.

"Where is the prisoner whose name starts with a P?"

The Russian guards had difficulty pronouncing Pomerantz. Therefore, every time I was summoned to the NKVD, the Russian Secret Police, they identified me as "prisoner P."

"Listen well!" the guard barked. "I'm taking you to

headquarters for interrogation. One wrong step from you, and I'll shoot you without further warning. Understand?"

I certainly understood. My situation was precarious; my life was hanging by a thread. We marched a long distance in the dark, freezing cold night. I was led by an officer and followed by two heavily armed soldiers. Finally, we arrived at an imposing building. The guards led me through a number of long hallways until we stopped at one of the offices. The guard knocked on the door.

"*Zakhoditye*!" a booming voice called out. "Come in!"

I found myself face to face with a burly officer who was seated behind a heavy wooden desk. Everyone left the room, except for one soldier who guarded me warily, his gun pointed in my direction.

"Sit down," the officer ordered.

Numbly, I sat down opposite him.

There was absolute silence. Suddenly, the officer jumped up from his chair, pulled out his gun and aimed it at my forehead.

"Talk! Talk!" he shouted, gesticulating with his weapon.

"Wh . . . wh . . . what do you want me to say?" I stammered.

"You know very well, you dirty dog!"

"I have no idea what you want from me," I muttered, completely baffled.

The officer collapsed into his chair.

"*Vy kto?*" he asked quietly. "Who are you? What's your name?"

"Yitzchak Pomerantz."

"Your father's name?"

"David."

"What kind of work did you do in Poland, and what did your father do?"

"I was a student in a religious high school. My father was the rabbi of our town."

"Do you know how to write Russian?"

"No, I never studied Russian."

"That's no problem. I'll teach you."

The officer wrote the Cyrillic alphabet on a sheet of paper and handed it to me.

"Okay, now try to spell your name in Russian."

I quickly wrote my name.

"Beautiful," he said with a big smile, offering me a cigarette.

"Now, I want you to fill out the questions on this form."

I completed the questionnaire, and he signed it with obvious delight.

Well, I thought, if it's that easy to please the Russians, then I have reason to hope I will get out of here alive.

"Is there anything in particular you want?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied eagerly. "When I arrived at the prison they confiscated my *tefillin*. I'd like to have them returned to me to cell number one-thirty-one. I'm a religious Jew, and I have to wear them during my daily prayers."

"Don't worry, my friend," he said with a smile. "We'll take care of it right away."

The Russian's smile heartened me. These Russians were not so bad, after all. I was sure that by tomorrow I'd have my *tefillin* back again.

I returned to the cell, accompanied again by soldiers and guards. By the time I lay down on my cot, it was early morning.

A few days passed, and once again, the inmates of our cell were rudely awakened in the middle of the night. Once again, I was the object of their mission.

We repeated the long hike to NKVD headquarters. The interrogator, pointing his gun at me, started the questioning. This time, in response to every answer I gave, he pounded his fist on his desk.

"Liar!" he bellowed. "Nothing but lies!"

During the following six weeks, I was called in for interrogation eight times, each time before a different questioner. The scenario became familiar. The interrogator would start the procedure by frightening me with his drawn gun, and each ordeal would end with kind words and promises that I would get my *tefillin* back and be set free soon. Of course, they did not keep any of their promises.

During my last two interrogations, a new name suddenly cropped up.

"Do you know a Jew by the name of Meir Vashilsky?"

Of course I knew him. He was the man who was working for Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinski, trying to save Torah-observant Jews in Poland and Russia and helping *yeshivah bachurim* escape to Lithuania. It was he who had helped me in my abortive attempt to sneak across the border. Naturally, I denied that I had anything to do with him, telling the interrogator that I did not know him at all.

"I left Oshmina on my own initiative," I declared. "Going to Vilna was my idea, and I got in touch with the Lithuanian guide all by myself. I did it because I wanted to study at the Academy for Advanced Talmudic Studies in Vilna."

When the questioning was over, I signed the report and returned to my cell, hoping to be released in the near future.

CHAPTER 15

Sacrifice for Shabbos

IT WAS *SHABBOS* MORNING, JUNE 29, 1940. ON THIS GLORIOUS summer morning the sun was shining brightly, and the birds were singing their hymns to Hashem. The radiance of *Shabbos* enveloped the entire world, its glimmer penetrating even into the grim, murky prison. I was standing in my corner, deeply immersed in *Shacharis*.

The sound of the key turning in the lock alerted us to the arrival of the guard. It was too early for breakfast. Two prison guards entered the cell, and their eyes searched out their victim.

"Hey, you over there, the *zhid* in the corner. Your last name starts with a P, right? *Pashli samnoy!*" the guard ordered. "Come with me!"

My mind was working very feverishly. This couldn't be

another interrogation. Interrogations were always conducted during the night. What could they want from me this time?

I was led into the office of the prison warden.

"Don't be afraid. This is no interrogation," said the warden. "All we need from you is a set of your fingerprints."

Grabbing my hand, he dipped my fingers into the ink and, one by one, pressed them onto the allotted boxes on the card.

"Now sign here," he ordered.

"I can't," I said apologetically. "Today is the Sabbath. I can only sign tonight or tomorrow morning."

"What?" he asked, his eyes wide open in utter disbelief. "What are you talking about?"

"I am a Jew," I tried to explain. "I observe the Torah and the divine laws. G-d gave us the Torah and commanded us to refrain from working on the Sabbath day."

I told him about the Ten Commandments the people of Israel received on Mount Sinai.

"I cannot sign today, because it is the Sabbath," I repeated. "I'll be more than happy to sign tonight or tomorrow."

The warden was furious, and his face turned crimson.

"Have you lost your mind?" he yelled. "You're guilty of insubordination! You're not a free man, you know. In this prison you do as you are told. Sabbath. Mount Sinai. Are you crazy? I've never seen such insolence!"

I remained impassive. "T oday is the Sabbath, and G-d has told us to keep it holy. He is the supreme Lawgiver on earth, and I obey His command."

The warden stepped out into the hall.

"Boris! Come over here!" he called at the top of his voice, cupping his hands.

A tall soldier stepped into the office, and I was surprised

to notice his distinctly Jewish features. Briefly, the warden summed up the details of my obstinacy for Boris. The soldier, evidently a Jew, began to speak to me in Yiddish.

"What's the use of being stubborn? Don't you know the NKVD? Here in prison, it's no sin to violate the *Shabbos*. You know that refusal to cooperate is punishable by death, and if you really are an observant Jew, you surely know that preservation of life overrides the laws of *Shabbos*."

"Don't try to entice me to commit an *aveirah*," I said resolutely. "It's a waste of time. I'm not going to sign on *Shabbos*!"

The warden did not understand what I said, but the tone of my voice left no doubt as to what my attitude was.

"You crazy, dirty Jew!" The Russian officer let loose a string of obscenities in Russian and thrust the paper and pen at me once more.

"Are you going to sign or not?"

I remained silent. There was nothing more for me to say. I told myself to be strong and remained steadfast in my resolution.

The Russian suddenly adopted a warm tone of voice. "Come on, my friend, why don't you sign? If you sign, you'll be released all the sooner, and in the meantime, I'll see to it that you are treated much better. You will get a liter of milk each day and all the vegetables you want. I'll even put you in a comfortable room . . . So, what do you say, *boychickl*? Will you pick up the pen and just sign?"

My hands remained folded in my lap.

"You stubborn fool!" he screamed angrily. "Stop giving me a hard time. Sign already!"

I kept quiet.

"Are you going to sign, yes or no?"

"No!"

My answer made him seethe with rage.

"Soldiers!" he called out, sputtering angrily. "Throw him in the dungeon!"

It was a long way from the upper floor of the administration offices down to the cellar where the dungeon was.

The dungeon consisted of a number of punishing cells, which were small rooms whose walls, floors and ceilings were made of concrete. The cells had no windows, and heavy steel doors opened from each one to a long hallway. In each door there was a small peephole through which the guard could look inside the cell to see if the prisoner in the suffocating dungeon was still alive.

The soldier who pushed me into the dungeon gave me a sound thrashing all over my body, and helplessly, I started to cry.

"Get a rag and stuff it into this bawling man's mouth!" the officer ordered.

"N-n-no," I stammered. "Do with me what you want. I promise I'll stop crying."

"Okay, never mind," the officer said to the soldier.

Instead of the rag, he gave me a few slaps in the face that sent me reeling. Still, I kept my promise. Although tears kept streaming down my cheeks, I did not utter a sound.

"Now, sign!" he screamed, waving his threatening finger between my eyes.

"No, I won't."

"Put him in the straitjacket!"

Minutes later, a soldier appeared, carrying a strange looking shirt. It reached all the way to the floor and had unusually long sleeves. The soldiers undressed me and wrapped me in this odd shirt. I could not understand why its

sleeves dragged on the floor, but it was not long before I found out. Suddenly, I was thrown on the floor, and my hands and feet were tied together behind my back with the long shirt and sleeves. The officer picked me up like a sack of potatoes and violently tossed me down onto the hard concrete floor. I landed on my stomach, tied up like an ox prepared for slaughter. The officer, cursing angrily, left the dungeon and slammed the door behind him.

A strange calm came over me, and various thoughts crossed my mind. As I pondered my situation, I realized that even in this dungeon, I had so much to be grateful for.

Did I ever dream I would arrive at this point? I asked myself in amazement. I now had the tremendous *zchus* to suffer for *Shabbos Hamalkah*, the *Shabbos* Queen! Observing *Shabbos* in my father's house certainly didn't take much of an effort. The *Shabbos* table was set with the finest delicacies; I enjoyed delicious meals that my mother had prepared for the day. But to keep the *Shabbos* here in this dungeon was really pure spiritual joy!

I whispered a *tefillah* of praise and thanksgiving to Hashem for giving me the strength to keep the *Shabbos* under these distressing circumstances.

The hours passed as I lay there on the hard floor, bound and tied. From time to time, a guard peered through the peephole.

"Well, are you going to sign?" he would ask.

"No," my answer rang out unambiguously.

On one of these occasions, I asked to go to the bathroom. When I came back, the guard called the warden to tie me up again. The warden was still furious, and he tied me up so tightly I could not even move a finger. I was barely able to breathe.

No matter how difficult it had been until then, things now became a hundred times worse.

Gradually my body went limp, but to my surprise, my mind remained clear. I reminded myself of Rabbi Akiva and took inspiration from his example. When the Romans flailed his skin with iron combs, his *talmidim* asked him, "*Rabbeinu, ad kaan?* Rabbi, must you suffer this much?" To which Rabbi Akiva replied, "All my life I have been troubled by the *passuk*, 'Love Hashem your G-d . . . with all your soul.'* I always wondered if I would ever have the opportunity to fulfill this *mitzvah*, and now I have finally been given the chance."

I never understood the meaning of the *talmidim's* question. After all, they lived in a time of forced conversions. The Romans were trying to wipe out the last trace of Torah. Under these circumstances, it is clear that a Jew must sacrifice his life for the sake of Hashem. Rabbi Akiva's response is also perplexing, since it does not answer his disciples' question. Suddenly, the answer came to me.

"That's it," I whispered to myself. It was all crystal clear. When the students saw their saintly *rebbi* in such agony they asked, "Rabbi, must you suffer this much? It is quite true that you must give up your life *al kiddush Hashem*, but why couldn't you die a painless death? Why was it decreed in Heaven that you must martyr yourself with such unbearable torment?"

And I recalled Rabbi Akiva's explanation. Just as the human body is comprised of two hundred and forty-eight limbs and three hundred and sixty-five veins, so is the soul composed of the same number of corresponding spiritual limbs and veins. All his life he was troubled, wondering when he would be able to carry out the *mitzvah* of loving Hashem

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* *Devarim 6:5*

"with all your soul," with each limb and vein.

I found solace in these thoughts. Like Rabbi Akiva, I, too, had been afforded the opportunity to become a martyr *al kiddush Hashem* and die with anguish.

After a while, my heartbeat began to slow, and my blood circulation almost came to a halt. A thought flashed through my mind.

Think carefully, Itzik, I told myself as a cold shiver ran down my spine. What rabbinical authority decided that you must sacrifice your life? How can you be so sure that the NKVD is trying to convert you? All they want is your signature, and their demand that you sign on *Shabbos* is completely incidental. They only want to compel you to do their bidding; they don't care whether it is *Shabbos* or any other day of the week.

But on the other hand, I reasoned, this was not Czarist Russia. This was the Communist regime that had declared war against Hashem and the Torah.

Conflicting thoughts raced through my head. One voice told me to sign, and another cried out not to yield. My strength was waning rapidly. My heart was still beating, but who knew how many minutes of life in this world were left to me? Just then, the guard peeked through the peephole. Itzik, be strong, I told myself in desperation.

"Well, what will it be? Are you going to sign your name or not?"

"N-no . . . no."

As I spoke, I tried to deal with the confusion in my mind. What was I doing to myself? How many more minutes did I think I could hold out?

I heard the footsteps of the guard receding down the corridor.

"Guard! Come back!" I shouted with my last ounce of strength.

No one answered. The guard's steps sounded further and further away; he had probably reached the far end of the hallway.

In the tiny cell, my voice resounded loudly, stirring up the fibers of my soul. I burst into tears. Itzik, I asked myself, were you really prepared to desecrate the *Shabbos*?

Trembling with emotion, I cried out to Hashem, "Oh, *Ribono Shel Olam,* please help me! I can't take any more of this! I've done all I could, but now my strength is ebbing. You are omnipotent. There is nothing You cannot do. Give me the strength to survive without violating the *Shabbos*." Closing my eyes, I whispered a verse from *Tehillim* that suddenly came to mind. "He brings them out of the deepest darkness and breaks their bonds asunder."*

I concluded my prayer and tried once more to move my limbs. Suddenly, the cord which had bound me so tightly fell to the ground. I tried to raise my hand, and amazingly, my arm lifted! I stretched my other arm and discovered that it too moved freely. With my two hands untied, I unfastened the rope around my legs. I stretched my aching legs, took a deep breath and felt as though life was slowly flowing back into my limbs.

Overcome with relief, I quickly folded my hands and legs again, fearing that the guard might discover my newfound freedom. Tears of joy rolled down my cheeks as I offered praise to Hashem for performing this manifest miracle for me.

I waited anxiously, alternately sitting and lying down,

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* *Tehillim 107:14*

until I was sure that *Shabbos* had ended. Then, I shouted to the guard at the top of my lungs, my voice reverberating through the long corridor.

"Comrade guard! Listen to me, I'm ready to sign!"

A few minutes later, the keys rattled in the lock, and the warden appeared in the doorway. I was doubled over on the floor as though I were tied hand and foot. The warden came over to me and bent down to untie the ropes. Suddenly, he stood up straight, staring at me dumbfounded.

"You dirty *zhid*," he roared. "Who untied the rope? Your G-d always helps you people when you're in trouble."

I kept quiet. How could I explain to this depraved *goy* that Hashem lends an ear to the *tefillah* that emanates from a broken heart?

At midnight, I came back to cell number one-thirty-one. The reports of the miracle of my *akeidah*, my "binding," spread like wildfire. The non-Jews looked at me with astonishment and admiration. They could hardly believe what they were hearing.

Still, the long hours I spent in the dungeon left their mark. The following day, I came down with a high fever that lasted for five consecutive days.

On Friday morning, seven weeks after my imprisonment in cell one-thirty-one, the gate was opened, and a new inmate joined our midst. The newcomer, assessing his cellmates with a sweeping glance, let his eyes rest on me.

"*Amcha*," he said, uttering the universal code word used by Eastern European Jews to reveal their identity to each other in hostile environments. "*Amcha*, your people. I am a Jew."

CHAPTER 16

A Companion of Sorts

I INVITED THE NEWCOMER TO SIT NEXT TO ME, AND immediately we became involved in an animated conversation. He introduced himself as Max Dessler and began to tell me the story of his life, starting with the circumstances of his arrest.

We soon established a schedule which would help us pass the interminable hours of the days in prison. Overjoyed that I was not to be alone any longer, I thanked Hashem for sending me a Jewish cellmate. However, my joy was short-lived.

As the sun began to set, I prepared to *daven Minchah, Kabbalas Shabbos* and *Maariv*. With ardent feeling, I recited *Shalom Aleichem*, welcoming the heavenly angels who had come down to join me in my "vale of tears." In the past, I had

been reluctant to see the angels leave, and I would implore them to stay with me a little longer, knowing with what kind of companions I would be spending the remainder of the *Shabbos*. But this time I felt much better. There was another Jew to keep me company, a genuine *chavrusa*. I was not alone any more.

I washed, recited *Kiddush* over my bread ration and sat down to eat my *Shabbos* meal. This consisted of a mere slice of bread, but it was enhanced by the singing of *zemiros*.

Glancing at the other end of the cell, I caught sight of my new friend Max, whose arrival had made me so happy. I was dismayed to see him lighting up a cigarette. A Jew desecrating the *Shabbos*! The precious *Shabbos* for which I was ready to give up my life was being violated right before my eyes! The shock was unbearable, but what could I do? He wouldn't listen to me anyway. He was more than twenty years my senior. On the other hand, how could I be friends with a Jew who was a *mechallel Shabbos*? My heart ached, and tears filled my eyes.

"Itzik, what's the matter?" the fellow sitting next to me asked in amazement. "Why are you crying?"

"Oh, it's nothing," I mumbled.

"Don't tell me you're crying without a reason," he persisted. "Please, tell me what's bothering you. Are you in pain?"

Having no choice, I told him the reason for my sadness. The fellow jumped up from his stool and dashed over to Max. Less than five minutes later, Max was standing in front of me with his head bowed, making a solemn declaration.

"Itzik, I swear to you," he earnestly pledged, "that as long as we are together in this cell I will never again desecrate the *Shabbos*."

I wiped away my tears, smiling at him and offering him my hand in a conciliatory gesture.

"Th-thanks, my friend," I stammered.

"I hope you're not angry with me," Max said, softly squeezing my arm. "I don't want to hurt your feelings. I want us to be good friends. I really mean it!"

For seven months, Max and I stayed together in that cell, and throughout that time, he kept his promise. He stood next to me when I *davened*, and he asked me to enunciate the words slowly and loudly so he could hear me. He would follow along with me, his lips uttering the words of the *tefillos*. He conscientiously observed the *Shabbos* and even tried to abstain from eating non-kosher food whenever possible.

The month of *Elul* arrived, and *Rosh Hashanah* of 1941 was just around the corner. Even as a young boy my constitution had been rather frail, but now I was completely run-down. For six months I had not tasted any hot food or drink; even the tea that the prison kitchen provided was forbidden to me, since it was boiled in soup kettles. The only nourishment I took was bread and cold water. As a result of this meager diet I came down with dysentery, and the severe loss of body fluids drained me of my strength.

On *Rosh Hashanah*, I was so weak that I could not even drag myself to take the weekly walk around the prison courtyard.

Max stood next to me as I prayed, begging me to *daven* loudly so he could repeat the *tefillos* after me. I recited the *Shemoneh Esrei* and the *piyutim* from memory as well as I could.

The oldest member of our cell, a Pole by the name of Labranovitz, was elected to represent the cell inmates before the prison administration, and he formally requested that I

be given a special dairy diet. Meanwhile, my condition deteriorated from day to day.

Erev Yom Kippur arrived.

"Itzik, look what the guard brought for you!" Max exclaimed happily, presenting me with a plate of steaming food.

I glanced at the plate and saw that it was filled with boiled potatoes covered with sour cream. I turned away.

"This was definitely cooked in a non-kosher pot," I muttered, pushing away the plate.

"Itzik, just take a look at yourself," Yanovsky, who had observed the scene, scolded me. "You're nothing but skin and bones. You'll never survive like this. You've got to eat!"

"That's right," Labranovitz joined him. "How much longer do you think you can go on without proteins and vitamins? If you want to live, you have to eat like a human being!"

Max, still holding the steaming plate, tried to convince me with *halachic* arguments.

"It's a case of *pikuach nefesh*," he argued. "According to *Halachah*, in life-threatening situations you must set aside the laws of *Shabbos* and *kashrus*. You certainly cannot deny that your condition falls into the category of *pikuach nefesh*. Remember, it says, '*Venishmartem meod lenafshoseichem,** Watch your health very carefully.' This is a *mitzvah* in the Torah. Besides, have you forgotten? Tomorrow is *Yom Kippur*. In your present condition you surely won't be able to fast!"

Max's last argument tipped the scale. The flavor of the non-kosher food was seasoned with the salty tang of my tears. Still, I had to admit that after finishing the meal and drinking a glass of piping hot tea my eyes lit up, and invigorated with renewed energy, I prepared for *Yom Kippur*.

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* *Devarim 4:15*

Two more months went by, when one day there was a surprise awaiting me.

"Itzik," Labranovitz announced with a mysterious smile on his face, "there's a package for you from home."

A package from home! The word "home" evoked fond memories of the not too distant past. With trembling hands, I untied the string and feasted my eyes on a cornucopia of delicacies and gifts. There were jars of preserved foods, dried fruit, woolen socks, a fur-lined coat and a box of matches. My eyes became misty at the sight of this unexpected bounty.

"Itzik!" a startled Max exclaimed. "What happened? Are you upset?"

"Don't you see, Max," I whispered, holding up the box of matches. "*Chanukah* will be here soon, and we'll be needing these. Also, my parents must realize that they cannot gain my release, so they sent me a warm coat to protect me from the icy Siberian winter."

CHAPTER 17

The Road to Siberia

JANUARY, 1941. A BITTER, COLD HAD COME TO RUSSIA, chilling my soul as well as my body. I wondered what the future could possibly bring, where I would find myself the next winter.

One day, several guards came to the entrance of our cell and shouted my name.

"Yitzchak Pomerantz! Who is Yitzchak Pomerantz?"

I approached and presented myself.

"On orders of the NKVD you are summoned to appear before the Soviet People's District Court of Justice for sentencing."

I put on my new coat and went along with them.

The Soviet court system was a farce. Hundreds of convicts and prisoners waited patiently in line in the hallway of the

court building. One by one, they entered the courtroom where a young court official was sitting behind a table. The wall behind him was decorated with a portrait of Stalin, "the glorious sun of the Soviet people," flanked by a large red flag of the Soviet Union.

"Come in, prisoner Yitzchak Pomerantz," the young judge announced, reading from a prepared paper. "You stand convicted of infraction number one-twenty-two. You are hereby sentenced to five years of re-education in Siberia."

I smiled.

"Why are you smiling?" the judge growled angrily.

"Because with G-d's help, I won't be in Siberia for five years."

Minutes later, I was outside, and the next prisoner on line was led in to receive an identical verdict.

I was immediately transferred to cell forty-two in the prison wing that housed the sentenced convicts. I never saw the occupants of cell one-thirty-one again.

My nerves were on edge as I worried about what the next day would bring. Where would I be tomorrow? I certainly was not looking forward to my forthcoming trip to Siberia.

In the world of the NKVD, all surprises occur in the middle of the night. And so it was at midnight that the guards made the rounds, rousing the convicts with their wake-up calls.

"*Padyom!* Get up, everybody!"

Pandemonium broke loose; the entire wing was in an uproar. We quickly packed our meager personal belongings and marched into the prison courtyard. There we were lined up in rows of four and given the standard warning to which we had become accustomed: "Anyone leaving the column will be shot on the spot. There will be no further warnings!"

The cold of the Russian winter nights was bone-chilling. NKVD men, their guns at the ready, circled us, barely able to restrain the frenzied bloodhounds tugging on their leashes. We marched in lock step, and the rhythmic sound of our tread echoed through the pitch dark night.

The highway seemed endless, and it felt like ages before we finally stopped at a railroad station. A freight train was waiting for us in the dark, ready to receive its human cargo. After we were loaded aboard, the wagon doors were slammed shut and locked from the outside.

With the hissing of the engine, the train moved out of the station, accompanied by the monotonous clacking of the wheels. Surveying our surroundings, we noticed that there were no benches or chairs; only an empty pail stood in the corner.

"Hey, nothing to eat," one of the convicts called out in disgust.

"Anybody find some water?" another convict asked.

There was not a drop of water or a morsel of bread to be found on the entire train.

"How long is this trip going to take?" another convict asked.

"I'll bet it will be only a few hours; a day at the most," he was told. "They won't leave us without food and drink for longer than that."

Morning came, followed by another night and another sunrise; still, the wheels kept rolling. Thirty-six hours went by without a drop of water or a crumb of bread.

After a full two days of uninterrupted travel, the train finally came to a halt, and we were ordered to jump out of the cars. Famished, we looked desperately around for anything edible. There was nothing at all to eat. Since we had to wait

for orders in a crouched position, we filled our parched mouths with handfuls of snow.

After a few hours of waiting, we were ordered to board another freight train.

"Hurry up, *pashol von*," the soldiers goaded us on. "Faster, faster, you lazy bums!"

We ran to the wagons as fast as our legs would carry us.

I spotted a soldier with decidedly Jewish features, and I addressed him in Yiddish.

"Are you planning to starve us to death?"

"*Zorg zich nisht*," the soldier replied in Yiddish. "Don't worry. In a little while, you'll get food and drink."

The Russian people are known to be a nation with a great deal of patience, and the soldier's "little while" lasted twenty-four hours. After another full day of travelling, the train came to a screeching halt, the doors were thrown wide open, and each convict received a loaf of bread and a salted herring.

"How about some water?" we asked.

"You'll get water very soon."

By now, we were experienced. "Very soon" in Russian meant a minimum of twenty-four hours. Our train kept moving, but no water was to be had. On the horizon, we could make out the Moscow skyline. As we passed through the city, our cries pierced the air.

"*Voda! Voda!*" we screamed. "Water, water!"

The train picked up speed so the Muscovites would not hear our desperate wailing. A short distance east of Moscow we finally stopped, and each wagon received a huge kettle full of boiling hot water.

"What about cups and a ladle?" we asked.

"There are none!"

It had been thirty hours since we had our last taste of

snow, and now that we had a pot of boiling water standing in front of us, a cup or ladle was nowhere to be found. Some of the desperate prisoners standing around the pot eagerly put their mouths into it and slurped the boiling water, only to withdraw instantly with scalded tongues and lips. The rest of us surrounded the pot and cast wistful looks at the water, but waited for the kettle to cool off.

And so we gradually approached the gulag, our prison camp in Siberia. A few days later, the train stopped at the station of Sachi Bezvadni, in the district of Gorki, two hundred and seventy-five miles east of Moscow. We had arrived at our gulag, the camp for people who needed to be "re-educated."

All the convicts pounced on the water pump in the camp as if it held a rare treasure and quenched their thirst gratefully.

The gulag was a complex of several forced labor camps, and I was assigned to Camp Number Three. My new home was a large barracks that held one hundred and fifty prisoners. My fellow inmates looked almost like animals, with their long, unkempt hair and slovenly beards; their ragged clothes hung pathetically on their gaunt frames. From their three-tiered bunks they stared at me with wide-eyed amazement.

I soon learned that these men literally behaved like wild animals; all their thoughts focused on their empty stomachs. Tearing at each other like mad dogs at the slightest provocation and pouncing viciously on the slightest morsels of food, they debased themselves thoroughly. All day they cursed and swore, fighting with each other in wild brawls that often did not end until one of the contenders killed the other. This was called "re-education" in the Communist lexicon.

CHAPTER 18

In the Gulag

"DO YOU THINK YOU'VE COME HERE TO RELAX AND enjoy yourselves? Remember, this is no health resort. We haven't brought you all the way out here for a pleasure trip!"

It was our first day in the new camp, and we were standing at attention in the square near the barracks. We were lined up in straight rows, facing the camp commandant who was "addressing" us. Actually, his speech was more like a roar, and the message he imparted gave us a good idea of what was in store for us.

"You've come here to pay for the crimes you committed against the hard-working Soviet people," the commandant continued. "You've come here to work, to toil and to learn what it means to be a true proletarian. Each one of you has

a quota to fill. You must produce four and a half cubic meters of finished wood each day. Your assignment includes the following: cutting the trees, sawing the timber into sections of two meters, cleaning the lumber, scuffing the bark and burning the chips, shavings and the waste.

"At the end of each day, an inspector will come to check if you have filled your quota. Those who produce their quota will receive 1,450 grams of bread the next day. Those who do not fill their assignment must make do with only 400 grams."

The commandant chuckled as he finished his speech, but we did not find the joke very amusing.

I was assigned to a work detail made up mostly of Poles and a sprinkling of Russians. Our foreman was a Russian named Pachodin. One of the members of our work gang was a tall heavyset Pole, an accountant from Vilna. For some reason, he took a liking to me, and we struck up a friendship.

After listening to the commandant's fiery speech, the Pole sized me up with a critical eye and came up with an ominous prediction.

"You'll never make it in this camp," he said bluntly. "It is obvious that in no time you'll be a dead man."

"We are not the masters of our destiny," I answered calmly. "There is a G-d in Heaven. He is the One Who grants life. If the Almighty wants me to live, then I'll live, regardless of starvation and hard labor."

The Pole chuckled. "What fascinates me most about you is your peace of mind and your naive faith that is so totally unrealistic."

The life of this well-meaning Pole ended in tragedy. After seven weeks in the gulag, he died of starvation, and the commandant ordered me to bury him in the forest. While digging his grave, I marveled at the powerful lesson before

my eyes. It was not food that sustained man, and a strong constitution alone could not keep him alive. Only Hashem had the power to give life and to take it away.

Each day, I went to work before sunrise and returned to the barracks at sunset. Then, as the end of the week drew near, I knew I would have to come up with a way to avoid working on *Shabbos*.

Friday night arrived, and I had to devise a plan that would enable me to live through *Shabbos* without desecrating it. The prison in Oshmina had provided excellent preparation for life in the slave labor camps. It was there that I learned a variety of methods for getting out of doing a job. The most effective one was the salt treatment.

I had learned the trick from an old, toothless jailbird, and it was really quite simple. All it involved was obtaining some salt and rubbing it under the armpits. It was a little unpleasant but guaranteed to work.

On Friday evening, I managed to get hold of some salt, and after rubbing it forcefully under my arm, I went to the infirmary.

"Comrade doctor," I whispered faintly, "I'm not feeling well. I think I'm running a fever."

"Hello, Itzik, how are you doing?" the doctor exclaimed with unusual cordiality.

I took a closer look at him. Why, he had been one of my thirty-two cellmates in the Oshmina prison, Dr. Pomokalsky from Warsaw!

"Itzik, be frank with me," he said. "Tell me what the problem is. You know we are old friends, and I'll be glad to help you if I can."

"I'm sure you remember that I am a religious Jew," I said candidly. "G-d gave the Jewish people the Sabbath day as a

holy day of rest. Tomorrow is the Sabbath, and I will not be permitted to do any work."

Dr. Pomokalsky pulled out his pad. "I don't think this will present too much of a problem," he said, looking straight at me. "Here's what we'll do. I'm going to write you a note releasing you from work for tomorrow because of influenza with high temperature. Some time next week, you tell your foreman that you're sick, and he'll instruct you to go to the medical examiner's board. There, I'll have to check you out in the presence of the camp commander and confirm that you are indeed in poor health. It's likely that they may not reduce your daily ration even if you fill only one quarter of your quota, or produce nothing at all. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand," I replied, smiling gratefully. "Thank you so very much, Dr. Pomokalsky. *Bolshoi spassiba.*"

For me, the first *Shabbos* in the gulag was a day of mixed feelings. On the one hand, I was elated at not being forced to desecrate the *Shabbos*. On the other hand, I longed for my parents and the *Shabbos* atmosphere of *kedushah*. I missed my *rebbi* and the beloved pages of the *Gemara*. I sensed, as never before, how strongly attached I was to my parents, my family, my *rebbi* and my studies. My noble father's entire being was permeated with Torah and *chassidus*. Whatever I knew, whatever spiritual treasures I had acquired, I owed to my father.

I also owed a great deal to the Gerrer Rebbe. Although I had known him for only a few years, the few times that I had the privilege of visiting Ger I had derived much encouragement and inspiration from his words, and I gained much from the advice he gave me on my Torah studies and my *yiras shamayim*. Did I dare hope to see him again?

If only I had a *Gemara*, I thought wistfully, I would be

overjoyed. I would forget all my troubles and immerse myself in the *Yam Hatalmud*, delighting in the study of its holy words.

Facing reality, I reminded myself that I still had the capability to learn. After all, I had studied quite a bit, and surely much of it remained in my mind. I could sit down every night and recall a *mishnah*, some *pesukim* from the Torah and *sugyos* from the *Gemara*. Otherwise, I would become apathetic, and the hunger and suffering would turn me into a senseless being. Like the others, I would lose my identity and my will to live. Only through Torah study could I remain a vibrant human being.

That *Shabbos*, lying on my bunk bed, I resolved not to let a day go by without Torah study. And it was these precious minutes of learning every day that protected me from plunging into lethargy, dullness and despair. They kept me from losing my humanity and character, from becoming like the other prisoners.

At work that Sunday, I pretended to feel very weak.

"Comrade Pachodin," I mumbled, "I feel terrible . . . I simply don't have an ounce of strength left in me . . ." As I spoke, I dropped my saw and slumped down on a tree stump, presenting a picture of total exhaustion.

On Tuesday, I was called before the medical examiner's board meeting at the office of my friend Dr. Pomokalsky. I was full of confidence, but upon entering the room, I had a rude letdown.

"You lazy, useless liar!" the doctor yelled at me. "You think you're sick? Why, you're strong as an ox! Shame on you, parasite! Come over here so we can get the examination over with. You're wasting my time!"

I shivered with fright. What did the doctor have up his sleeve? Into what kind of trap was he leading me?

He placed the stethoscope on my back, and suddenly his expression changed completely.

"Listen," he murmured to the commandant, "the *zhid* is right. He is completely worn out; even his heartbeat is unstable. They must have worked him over pretty badly in prison."

The doctor then examined me from top to bottom.

"No question about it," he said, turning to the commandant. "If we don't take care of the physical condition of this Jew, he won't survive. We must list him as incapacitated for at least one month. A month from now we'll examine him again. If his condition has improved, he'll go back to full duty. Otherwise we'll have to put him on part-time for another month."

I breathed a sigh of relief. Pomokalsky was a shrewd man, a benevolent messenger sent by Hashem.

I remained in the work detail under Pachodin. Although I took it very easy and occasionally skipped a day's work, my ration was never reduced.

The daily schedule in the slave labor camp was a back-breaking routine. At four o'clock each morning, three strikes on the gong resounded through the camp. Instantly, all prisoners would jump out of their bunk beds and quickly get ready for the line-up. The group leaders would burst into our barracks, roaring and screaming, "You dirty parasites! Lazy tramps! *Padyom*! Get up already!"

At four-fifteen, we lined up for roll call in the freezing Siberian cold, and as soon as the procedure was over, we hurried to breakfast.

Equipped with bowls and spoons, the prisoners ran to the mess hall and formed a line. After waiting patiently for half an hour, everyone received some watery soup with a few

noodles and traces of rancid fat floating on the surface.

By the time we lined up for work, it was five o'clock. Each prisoner received an ax and a saw, lined up for another extended roll call and, at six o'clock, marched off to work. At that hour the sun had not risen yet, and the huge landmass of Siberia was still wrapped in darkness as our gang of miserable prisoners who had to be "re-educated" set out for the Siberian wilderness to cut trees in the forest. We were surrounded by guards training their rifles on us, and the shrill yelps of their bloodthirsty dogs rang ominously in our ears. We had to stay on the trail and were not permitted to leave the column, even to avoid fallen trees, puddles or other obstacles. Anyone stepping off the trail received a bullet through his head or was torn to pieces by the bloodhounds.

We marched on through stinging thorns, undergrowth, dead branches and pits. Often, a prisoner weighed down with tools would lose his balance and tumble to the ground. If he didn't get up right away, the men behind him would trample him underfoot. After all, if they would step aside to avoid him, they would be endangering their own lives.

Finally, we would arrive at a clearing in the forest. By this time, it was about eight-thirty, and the gentle rays of the morning sun would greet us warmly.

The whacking sounds of the axes against the wood and the whining of the saws reverberated across the forest. We had a long day of hard labor ahead of us. Our bruised hands were sore and weak from exertion, and we ached all over, but we had to go on relentlessly. The sun on its majestic course across the sky would slowly descend toward the western horizon.

"Six o'clock!" The eagerly awaited hour would finally arrive. Another roll call was conducted to make sure no one

had escaped. Once again, we faced the long march through the forest, running the obstacle course of the trail at twilight with the ever-present rifles to remind us that "anyone leaving the trail . . ."

Back in camp there was another endless wait on line for a ration of bread and soup. By that time, it was ten-thirty at night.

Every bone in the body hurt, the head still echoed from the whacks of the ax, and every muscle cried out for a little rest. Our legs plodded along automatically toward the barracks. Each prisoner collapsed onto his bunk and tried to fall asleep, but tired as we were, it was still not an easy task.

In the center of the large barracks there were two large iron stoves, but the heat did not radiate very far. I did not have a blanket, so each night I would toss and turn, rubbing my body to generate some warmth. I tried with all my might to fall asleep, but the piercing cold made my teeth chatter and kept away the blessed slumber. Quietly, I would climb down from my bunk and tiptoe over to the stove. In the warm glow of the burning wood, I instantly fell fast asleep. Often though, these reprieves would be rudely interrupted. A sudden burning sensation would mean that a spark from the stove had landed on me, burning holes through my coat and searing my skin.

In this way, the nights went by, half-awake, half-asleep, occasionally improved by trips to the stove.

With the passage of time, I became, like all the others, a lethargic, unfeeling creature. I lost all my will power. By the grace of Hashem I remained with only one strong desire: to do everything I could to keep *Shabbos* and to refrain from eating *treif* food. As a result, I lived in a constant state of hunger.

Almost a year had gone by since my imprisonment, and *Pesach* was rapidly approaching. My parents wrote that they had mailed me a package for *Pesach*.

Rosh Chodesh Nissan came, and still my daily trip to the post office yielded nothing. How would I survive for eight days without bread? Bread was the only food I ate every day. And how would I fulfill the *mitzvah* of eating a *kezayis* of *matzah*?

One thing I knew: *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* nourishes and sustains all, and if one really wants to keep His *mitzvos*, there is a way.

On the night of the thirteenth of *Nissan*, every prisoner received three pounds of sugar cubes. This proved to be my salvation. I traded my bread rations for the eight days of *Pesach*, exchanging a daily ration of bread for one pound of sugar. I subsisted on one pound of sugar and water each day of *Pesach*. *Baruch Hashem*, in this way I was saved from having to eat *chametz*.

Two days after *Pesach*, I was summoned to the Post Office.

"Are you Yitzchak Pomerantz?"

"*Kanyechna*," I said, surprised. "Certainly, that's me."

"Package from your parents," the clerk said brusquely, handing me a large parcel.

Evidently, they had intentionally withheld the package at the Post Office to force me to eat *chametz* on *Pesach*.

My hands trembled with excitement as I opened the package. Inside, I found *matzos*, meat and honey, all strictly kosher for *Pesach*. Tears welled up in my eyes. No doubt, my generous parents had denied themselves this food to send it to me. I left the Post Office carrying the precious package, filled with gratitude towards my dear parents.

A violent blow to my shoulders shocked me out of my

reverie. Amid cries of glee, a group of prisoners grabbed my package and ran off with it.

"*Karapchuk!*" I cried out. "Thief!"

No one reacted. I was left with a few broken *matzos* and a broken heart.

A few days later I was again called to the Post Office. This time it was a package from Aunt Nechamah, and now I knew better than to take it with me. I left it in storage, and once every few days I picked up a small supply of food.

Summer arrived. The days were beginning to get warmer, and at night we were able to catch some restful sleep. One *Shabbos*, as I was dozing on my bunk, resting from the toil and drudgery of the week, vague thoughts passed through my mind.

Itzik, I said to myself, it is true that the doctor listed you as infirm. But it must look suspicious that you so regularly become sick, always on the same day of the week. One day, the supervisor will realize that something is amiss, and when that happens, your *Shabbos* will be in jeopardy.

I decided that I had to become friendly with my supervisor. To achieve this, the package full of goodies from Aunt Nechamah could be put to good use. If I could win over the supervisor, I might be able to persuade him, for a few cigarettes and some butter, to look the other way when it came to my rest on *Shabbos*.

Shortly thereafter, I tried to strike up a conversation with the supervisor. One evening, as he was making the rounds, marking in his notebook the quota of work everyone had produced that day, I saw my opportunity. When he got to me, I greeted him with a friendly smile.

"Where do you come from?" I asked him.

"I'm from Sverdlovsk," he replied amiably.

I pulled a cigarette out of my pocket and handed it to him.

"Do you have a slice of bread?" I said. "You see, I have some butter here."

"*Maslo!*" he exclaimed with delight. "Butter!"

It was not long before he came back with his ration of bread and spread a thick layer of my butter on it.

"Listen, you are an interesting fellow," he said. "Come here, let's sit down by the stove and get to know each other. We still have fifteen minutes until line-up."

We talked about one thing and another, about our previous lives, about Germany and about the progress of the war. The time flew by.

"Is there anything in particular you'd like me to do?" he suddenly asked.

"Let me start by telling you that I am a religious Jew," I said cautiously. "In the Torah that G-d gave us it is written that we are forbidden to work on the Sabbath. Could you exempt me from work on the Sabbath?"

"It is not a problem," the supervisor said. "This is what you do. You go to work with the labor detail, and I'll arrange it so your foreman will excuse you from labor. When the day is over he will write in the notebook that you filled your entire quota."

"And what shall I do in the forest all day long?" I asked anxiously.

"What should you do?" He burst out laughing. "You just sit by the fire and relax!"

My friendship with the supervisor did indeed cost me the delicacies from home, but he kept his word. Throughout my stay in this labor camp I never had to work on *Shabbos*.

I was certainly not the only Jew in Siberia. In my barracks there were many other Jews, but regrettably, they were not

observant. As a matter of fact, I soon learned that their attitude toward *Yiddishkeit* was more disgraceful than that of the non-Jews.

During our lunch break one day in the forest, I was lying under a tree trying to take a nap, when I was rudely awakened by a slap on the back. Sleepy-eyed, I gazed up at a grinning face whose mischievous eyes taunted me.

"Hey, Rabbi Itzik," a mocking voice said, "they've sent me some smoked ham from home. Would you like to have a slice?" I recognized Yaakov Brisker, surrounded by a group of laughing *goyim*.

"Leave me alone," I stammered faintly. "What do you want from me?"

I tried to close my eyes and continue my nap, but it was useless.

"You fool!" he shouted. "Because of your stupidity we all have to suffer. All those reactionaries who insist on observing the outdated and antiquated Torah laws cause the Jews to be hated all over the world."

I became accustomed to the taunts and insults Yaakov would hurl at me, and usually, I would simply ignore him. But one day, I just could not swallow the humiliation any longer. Yaakov had noticed that the *zhatnik*, the supervisor, was backing me, and he became insanely jealous. Furiously, he began to stir up the other prisoners against me.

It happened on a *Shabbos*. We were all sitting around the fire which had a boiling pot of tea hanging over it.

"Rabbi Itzik," Yaakov began with a sneer. "So you don't want to work on *Shabbos*. Okay, that's the arrangement you have with the *zhatnik*. But I think that it's unfair that on your day off you should sit by the fire and not contribute anything toward our detail. Why don't you at least gather up some

firewood and start the fire, instead of sitting around and doing absolutely nothing? Why do we have to do all that on our lunch break, while you don't even bother to get up to find a dry branch for kindling?"

"He's right," the other prisoners nodded in agreement. "Who does he think he is, royalty? If he doesn't do any work, at least let him take care of the fire!"

"Yaakov the *zhid* is right," a fat Ukrainian loudly joined the chorus. "The rotten, lazy bum. It's just not fair!"

I was seething. This Yaakov was an insolent, Torah-hating rascal! The Poles and Russians didn't know about the laws of *Shabbos*, but Yaakov knew them all too well. He knew that just as I was forbidden to work, I was also prohibited from gathering wood and kindling fire! In his hatred and jealousy, he was just trying to incite the *goyim* into breaking my bones.

My face became flushed with fury as the *goyim* continued to jeer at me, expressing their support for Yaakov, who was speaking in the name of "justice and truth."

I knew quite well that justice and truth did not mean much to these vulgar Russians, Poles and Ukrainians. They understood only one language, that of the fist.

I jumped up, and clutching a block of wood, I bounded toward Yaakov, grabbing him by his collar.

"You vile sinner!" I screamed. "If you don't stop stirring everyone up against me I'll crack your skull wide open. I have suffered enough from your poisonous talk. Stop now, or I'll finish you off!"

Yaakov, whose collar was held firmly in my grip, stared at me with his eyes wide-open in terror. I released my hold, put down the block of wood and returned to my corner.

My angry outburst was greeted by respectful silence. The men now looked at me with admiration and esteem. Once

again, I realized how in the absence of Torah there is no justice. In its place, only the power of physical strength is understood.

From that *Shabbos* on, my status changed remarkably. Until that time, I, as the youngest on the detail, had always carried out the job of drawing water from the pump. I was everyone's errand boy. Now that they had glimpsed a show of physical courage, my position improved considerably, and even Yaakov Brisker did not dare make fun of me again.

The days wore on interminably. Every so often, I was pleasantly surprised by a letter or a package from my parents. I would write back in my broken Russian, so that the censor would let the letter go through.

Dear Father and Mother,

Everything is fine here. I am working hard, but thank Heaven, I am feeling well, due to your packages. I am in the best of health and have no physical problems.

I feel very homesick for you and pray that one day we will be reunited. Then I will tell you everything in our own language.

Don't worry about me. Spiritually, I have not deviated from the way I used to be. Hashem is helping me to keep many of the 613 commandments.

Regards to Chayale and Avraham.

Love, Itzik

One day, upon returning from the Post Office, I began to read a letter I had just received. As I scanned the page, my heart skipped a beat with excitement. Again and again, I pored over the lines, unable to believe what I was reading.

Dear Itzik,

How are you? We are still here in Slonim, thinking of

you all the time. We are all fine, *baruch Hashem*, but we miss you very much. Father is in Moscow at the present time, working on your case. He was told that if he would have a declaration from your camp commandant certifying that you are working under his command, we might receive a permit to visit you in the camp. Please send us the declaration as soon as possible.

Longing to seeing you soon and praying for you always.

Regards from Chayale and Avremel.

Mother

The letter was quivering in my hand. My dear parents were doing everything in their power and working so hard for my sake. Mother dear, I thought wistfully, will I ever feel your embrace again?

Without wasting a minute, I ran to the camp commandant, received the declaration and mailed it home, my heart filled with hope and anticipation.

CHAPTER 19

Time for Change

IT WAS DARK OUTSIDE AS WE STOOD IN LINE FOR THE morning roll call. Chilled to the bone, we jumped from one foot to the other, trying to warm our shivering bodies.

"Attention!" roared the supervisor. "At ease!"

"I'm going to read a list of names. Those whose names I read will return to the barracks, gather up their belongings, come to the main office and wait for instructions."

"Andreyev, Chortkov, Grybanov . . . Pomerantz . . ."

Since they told us to pack our things, it probably meant that they were going to transfer us. All prisoners whose names were read were elated. Just the thought of not having to go to work was a joyous one, and for the prisoners, every change had the potential for improvement. Maybe in the new

camp the work would be easier, or the food would be better. And within each prisoner's heart was the hope that maybe they were going to set us free.

Only I was disconsolate. What about the commandant's declaration and my parents' forthcoming visit? It was all a fleeting dream.

From early morning until evening, we sat next to the main office with our bundles, until finally, at night, we were sent back to our barracks. The same routine continued for a whole week. Day after day, after morning roll call we were told to sit by the main office, where we had nothing to do but gaze at the slowly moving clouds, waiting and waiting for instructions that never materialized.

Rumors circulated about a new camp that was being erected in the heart of Siberia. It was supposed that we would be its "charter members." Others thought that we were being drafted and sent to the front, but deep in all of our hearts there was the hope that we might be released.

It was the dead of night. In the barracks, a grave-like silence reigned; all prisoners, without exception, were deeply asleep.

"All those being transferred, get up! *Padyom!* Immediately!"

It was still before four in the morning, a half-hour before the general reveille. After a thorough check under the cold, star-studded sky we began a march that lasted nine hours and ended at a railroad station. We were loaded onto a freight train and, to our relief, supplied with a crate full of bread and several huge pitchers filled with water. This time, travel conditions were comparatively humane. For a full three weeks we lived on that train, until we reached Solikamsk, a city in the western foothills of the Ural Mountains. This was

the seat of the Supreme Headquarters of all "re-education camps."

Solikamsk is situated on the Kama River, a very wide tributary of the Volga River. Its waters were a crystal clear blue, and its banks were overgrown with tall reeds in which ducks frolicked. We boarded river boats and sailed for an entire week. There were a good many Jews on my boat, including Polish Jews who were being transferred from another camp to a new location in Central Siberia. Although the Kama was a river of supreme beauty, our cruise turned out to be a very unpleasant experience.

Siberian summers are blessed with all kinds of flies and mosquitoes. Before long, my entire body swelled up, and my eyelids and lips grew swollen from countless insect bites. We sat on the boat deck with puffy faces, speculating about conditions in our new camp. No one could tell where it was located, what it was called, and what kind of work we would have to do there. It was all left to our imagination.

CHAPTER 20

Foreman Prokofiev

IT WAS EARLY FRIDAY MORNING WHEN WE FINALLY REACHED the new camp. I strolled slowly through the camp, surveying my new surroundings. I tried to figure out what was in store for us and what type of companions we were joining.

To my great joy, I soon met a bearded man, wearing a tattered old cloth cap on his head.

"*Mishelanu?*" I asked him. "Are you one of ours?"

"*Mishelanu,*" he confirmed, adding, "*Ehrlicher*, I'm a religious Jew."

I was elated to hear his answer; only embarrassment prevented me from hugging and kissing him. At long last, after a whole year of loneliness I had found a person after my own heart. We found ourselves a quiet corner and sat down

to exchange Torah insights. His name was Yaakov Pag.

"Look," said Yaakov, pointing at a long line of men standing outside. "Everyone is registering for a work detail. Come, let's also register and get our names on the list."

"It says in the *Gemara,*" I replied cautiously, "'Don't rush headlong into a calamity.' You can be sure that the work here will not be too pleasurable. As I see it, this whole camp represents misery, both from a physical and a spiritual angle. So let's not hurry and register for what promises to be nothing but a sea of troubles. Remember, *shev ve'al taaseh adif*, one is better off remaining passive. Hashem will lead us on the right path."

By then it was noontime. Exhausted from our trip, we entered the barracks and lay down to sleep, unaware that in the camp square an assembly for all inmates was in progress. After sleeping for a few hours we came outside and noticed a long line of prisoners queuing up in front of the mess hall.

"What are they standing in line for?" we asked.

"Bread," was the curt reply.

We positioned ourselves at the end of the line and after waiting quite a while, we finally reached the food distributor.

"Let me see your card," he demanded.

"What card?" I asked with surprise.

"Your labor detail card, you fool," he sneered. "Move over, you parasite. You're holding up the line!"

"Now we have no alternative," I said to my friend. "We'll just have to register."

We turned to two Jewish prisoners who had been picked as foremen of labor units, but they could not help us, since they had already submitted the list of their workers. We each went our separate ways, trying to find a work gang we still could join. As I walked through the camp, I was approached

by a tall, hefty Russian who was holding a list in his hand.

"I'm looking for a few people to work in my detail," he said. "How about joining my unit?"

"Okay, I haven't registered for work yet," I answered. "Believe me, I'm starving."

"Glad to have you with us," he replied. "My name is Prokofiev, and I'm going to be your foreman. Here's your card. When you show it to the food distributor, he'll give you your ration of bread."

Yaakov also found a labor unit to join, and we ended up with an adequate supply of bread for our *Shabbos* meals.

Our assignment consisted of laying new railroad tracks and repairing the old ones that had been ruined by the melting snow. The work was not easy, but compared to the lumbering I had done in the previous camp, it was child's play.

Sizing up my labor detail, I discovered that I was the only Jew among thirty gentiles. I was consumed with remorse. Why hadn't I joined a Jewish detail? Was my failure to register motivated by the sayings of *Chazal*, or was it laziness and fatigue that prompted me to go to sleep instead?

I comforted myself by saying, "*Gam zu letovah*. It's all for the best." And indeed, the kindness Prokofiev would show me proved to be essential to my survival.

Shabbos arrived, and already quite experienced, I rubbed salt into my armpits. My temperature duly rose, and I was placed on sick leave for the day. A whole month went by like this with each *Shabbos* passing uneventfully.

One Friday afternoon, just as I was making my preparations for *Shabbos*, someone called my name.

"Itzik, Itzik! You're wanted at the main office!"

"What's the matter?" I asked nervously.

"They want to pay you the salary of five rubles that they owe you."

I was strapped financially, and I knew very well that if I did not pick up the money now I would never get it. But *Shabbos* was nearing, and I hoped I wouldn't have to sign a voucher. Still, I went to the office, trusting that Hashem would protect me from any pitfalls. Naturally, there was a forbiddingly long line in front of the office. When my turn came, the stars were already twinkling in the sky.

"Sign here!" the clerk said dryly.

"I d-don't know how to sign my name," I stammered.

Just then, someone approached the desk, and I heard a familiar voice speak to the clerk.

"That's all right. I'll sign for him."

It was my foreman Prokofiev. I placed the rubles into my pocket and returned to my barracks. (Under the prevailing circumstances, the *halachic* prohibition against *muktzah* was lifted.)

That Sunday, while we were all hard at work under the blazing sun, Prokofiev ambled over to me.

"Tell me, Itzik, is it true?" he asked with wonderment. "How can it be that a smart fellow like you really doesn't know how to read or write?"

I was at a loss for words.

"I think you're playing dumb," Prokofiev said.

I looked down and felt my face turning red as a beet. I had no way out.

"You are right, I do know how to read and write," I said. "But, you see, I'm not a Christian. I'm a Jew who observes all the laws of the Bible. Yesterday, Saturday, was the Jewish Sabbath day, and the Bible forbids Jews to do any kind of work on the Sabbath. We are not allowed to write, to light a

fire or to do any kind of labor."

"Oh, I see," Prokofiev exclaimed, scratching his bald head. "Now I understand why you're always sick on Saturday."

I was gripped with anxiety and regret. All because of a few rubles, I wouldn't be able to keep *Shabbos* with ease any more.

"Don't worry," Prokofiev said warmly, patting me on the shoulder. "I won't keep you from observing the laws of your religion. Quite the opposite. I'm going to help you. When you come to work on Saturday, I'll make sure you won't have to do anything that is forbidden to you."

An amazing transformation occurred at that moment. After my revelation, Prokofiev began to treat me as if I were the foreman and he my underling.

"Listen, Itzik," Prokofiev said to me one day. "I volunteered to help build a cinder block plant."

"That means that you won't be our foreman any more," I said with a crestfallen expression.

"I'll be the foreman of a new detail," he replied. "Of course, you'll be one of my workers."

From that day on, instead of marching for miles into the wilderness each day to lay tracks, I stayed right in camp. We built a huge barn where the wet cinder blocks would be dried, and we also built a large kiln for baking them. The work progressed at a leisurely pace. Prokofiev would often sit down and talk with me about the fundamentals of Judaism. He especially relished the stories of *Tanach* and the *Gemara*, and of course, he kept his promise. Every *Shabbos*, I would sit close to him, not doing any work, telling him one story after another. In my heart, I thanked and praised Hashem for letting me find favor in the eyes of this kindhearted Russian.

After a short time, I was placed in charge of drying the

cinder blocks. All day long, I would stay in the shady barn arranging the blocks on wooden shelves for drying.

I exulted in my new position. The work was easy, I could enjoy the peace and quiet of the cool barn, and I didn't have to listen to people talking nonsense all day. The best part of it all was that *baruch Hashem*, my work did not entail any *chillul Shabbos*. While I worked, I would turn over in my mind *mishnayos* and *sugyos* from the *Gemara* and recite chapters of *Tehillim* by heart.

One day, just as I was ending *Shacharis*, a Russian army officer entered the barn. After a few routine questions in Russian, he switched to Yiddish.

"My name is Satokin," he said. "I come from Odessa, and I grew up in a non-observant family. I don't know why, but suddenly I feel a strong desire to find out about the Torah and Judaism."

Delighted, I began to explain to the officer the basic principles of *Yiddishkeit*. Soon we became close friends. Almost every day he would come to the barn and listen with great interest to my expositions. I told him about the *mitzvos* and *minhagim* and related stories of the Torah and the *Gemara*. For hours I would describe Talmudic debates and discuss many other relevant subjects.

Unfortunately, our friendship did not last long. One day, Satokin disappeared and did not come back. I missed him and thought about him a great deal, but I did not dare inquire about him. I kept hoping that some day he would secretly reappear in my barn.

The month of *Elul* was approaching, and the frosty Siberian winter would not be far off. I worried about the winter, but on reflection, I decided to dismiss from my mind all discouraging thoughts.

I asked myself how I could be afraid after all I'd gone through since my first imprisonment in Oshmina. *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* had indeed protected me every step of the way. I thought of the miracle that had occurred in the Oshmina jail in the *zchus* of keeping *Shabbos*. I had never been compelled to violate the Biblical laws of *Shabbos*, and Hashem clearly saved me from having to eat non-kosher food and *chametz* on *Pesach*.

In reality, I was experiencing miracles every day. In the previous camp, Hashem had sent Dr. Pomokalsky my way, and here, too, I had to be thankful for my foreman Prokofiev. Those Jewish labor details that I had regretted not joining had proved to be the most unfortunate ones. The men in those units were given impossible quotas to fill, and when they did not produce the required quantities, their bread rations were cut and many died of starvation. I had to be grateful to Hashem for preventing me from joining a labor detail until the end of that fateful day.

"Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no harm, for You are with me."* I whispered the verse from *Tehillim* fervently. In truth, Hashem was watching over me like a merciful father, holding my hand and leading me safely along a path full of obstacles.

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* *Tehillim 23:4*

CHAPTER 21

Freedom Beckons

"HAVE YOU HEARD THE LATEST DEVELOPMENT?" OUR "newsman" cried out one day. He was one of those prisoners who knew the news as soon as it happened. "Liberation Day is just around the corner!"

"How do you know?" we asked incredulously.

"Don't be so pessimistic," he said scornfully. "Haven't you heard about the pact that was concluded between the Soviet government and General Sikorsky? Nobody can understand how it happened, but it actually went through."

There were always rumors circulating about an impending release of prisoners, but this time the report was accurate. A pact had indeed been signed by Russia and Poland, and one of its terms stipulated that Russia was to release all Polish citizens interned in Siberia.

A few days later, I and a number of other Polish prisoners were told that we were being sent away to an unknown destination.

Carrying all our possessions, we assembled in the camp square in front of the administration building. In accordance with the usual camp procedure, we were told to do nothing but wait. As I sat there, my eyes caught sight of a familiar face. I could hardly believe my eyes. It was none other than my good friend Satokin, the Jewish officer whose daily visits to the barn had inexplicably ended.

I showered him with a torrent of questions. "What are you doing here? Where have you been? Where did you suddenly disappear to?"

"Calm down, Itzik," he answered with a smile. "First of all, how are you doing? You know, I missed you a lot. I'm certainly happy to see that you are on your way to freedom."

Satokin then told me that he had been sent on a top secret military mission to a distant location, and that was the reason he had left without saying good-bye.

"And now," he said with obvious glee, "I have been assigned the task of transferring prisoners to a liberation camp. I cannot tell you how happy I am that I am in charge of the transport you are part of. Get ready, Itzik, for departure time is imminent!"

Satokin, who was involved in making the technical decisions, was right, and two hours later, we were on our way.

As a good friend of the officer in charge, I stepped alongside Satokin at the head of the column, with the rest of the group following behind us. Guarding the end of the column were two armed soldiers, the barrels of their Kalatchnikov rifles pointing straight at us. In spite of everything, we were not free yet.

All through the march, Satokin and I talked about Torah thoughts and various *mitzvos*, as though we had parted company only yesterday. When we reached the main camp, Satokin conducted a head count to make sure that we all had arrived safely, then handed the checklist to the commandant of the camp.

"Liberation Day is at hand," he said. "In the meantime, until the release order arrives from Solikamsk Headquarters, you continue working as usual."

With that, he bid us farewell.

The next morning, our spirits were quickly deflated. We were back to chopping trees in the Siberian forests swarming with mosquitoes, back to quotas and bread rations and back to feeling hungry. We had not taken the Russian mentality into account, and we had forgotten that their promises required an endless amount of patience.

A few days later, we were ordered to the river port to unload sacks of flour and sugar from the hold of a freighter and carry them to a warehouse.

"Terrific," exclaimed a prisoner who still had a sense of humor. "Our backs are aching, but at least our stomachs will feel a little better."

That characterization of our situation was perfectly accurate. The work was backbreaking. We had to carry hundred pound sacks over a long, rough and dangerous trail, but at least we would be able to supplement our menu with all sorts of cakes that we could now make from the flour and sugar we kept for ourselves.

One day, as I was standing in line for bread, I felt someone tapping my back. I turned around and saw a bearded Jew wearing a shabby old cap and smiling broadly.

He introduced himself with a few brief words that told me

everything. "Naftali Dubinsky. Kiev. Lubavitcher *chassid.*"

"Itzik Pomerantz. Dlugoszodle. Gerrer *chassid.*" I replied, echoing his curt phraseology.

After receiving our bread ration, we retreated to a distant corner and sat down to eat. It had been a long time since I enjoyed a meal like this, spiced with the wisdom of Torah and *chassidus*, thoughts of *mussar* and *yiras shamayim*. Reb Naftali told me that he had been sentenced to ten years at hard labor for having the audacity to berate his nephew who had stopped observing *Shabbos* and putting on *tefillin*.

"And now I'm working as a tailor," he smiled. "It is an easy job and not very demanding. You know something, I have a good idea. When I stand on line for bread I'll also claim your ration, so we can always eat together. Remember, the number of my barracks is one-eighty-five."

Thereafter, every night, after a grueling day of work in the forest, I went to Reb Naftali's barracks where we washed our hands and ate together, adding the spice of *divrei Torah* to our dry bread. Occasionally, I would come back from work carrying a bag of flour in my pocket. When that happened, we supplemented our portion of dry bread with fresh, tasty rolls, home-baked by my friend Reb Naftali.

CHAPTER 22

Yamim Noraim in Siberia

"B' *ROSH HASHANAH YIKASEIVUN* . . . ON *ROSH HASHANAH* it will be inscribed and on *Yom Kippur* it will be sealed . . . who will live and who will die, who will die at his predestined time, and who before his time . . . who will rest and who will wander, who will live in harmony and who will be harried . . . who will be degraded and who will be exalted . . ."

Rosh Hashanah, 1941. Reb Naftali and I were sitting in a quiet corner, reciting together the *piyutim* of the *Yom Hadin*, the Day of Judgment.

"*Adam yesodo me'afar* . . . A man's origin is from dust, and his destiny is back to dust; at the risk of his life he earns his bread; he is likened to a broken shard, withering grass, a fading flower, a passing shade, a dissipating cloud, a blowing

wind, flying dust and a fleeting dream . . ."

We *davened* for a long time and parted at a very late hour. That night I lay on my bed tossing and turning from side to side. I was unable to fall asleep. Worry about the future combined with homesickness for my family kept me awake. I tried to direct my thoughts to more positive ideas, and these soon gave me solace.

How fortunate I was to have grown up in a home dedicated to the Torah. Without that Torah education, I would have lost all traces of humanity long ago.

I thought of the assimilated doctor I had met, who stooped to eating mice in order to still his hunger. Thousands like him starved to death. I felt sorry for those poor souls who perished without ever having had a taste of Torah.

Ever since I had left home, I always did my best not to become like the others. I isolated myself so as not to associate with the *goyim* and stoop to their standards. I did not want to listen to their inanities and obscene language, or fight like an animal over a piece of bread. I did not want to lose my Jewish *eidelkeit* with which I was endowed by my Creator, and I did not want to give up my integrity. Each morning, in my prayers, I would say, "My G-d, the soul You placed within me is pure." I tried my utmost not to defile it by adopting their depraved ways.

I knew full well that, as a *yeshivah bachur*, my chances of survival were very slim. However, I was ready to sacrifice my life for the sake of my beliefs. I was given the task to preserve my *tzelem Elokim*, my divine image, and I would resist with all my power the tendency to assimilate with the savages around me.

Keeping *Shabbos* in this camp was not easy. Since the work I was doing involved many problems with desecrating the

Shabbos, I had no choice but to avoid work completely on that day. At least in this camp I would not be punished with solitary confinement, as in the previous camp, but since I did not produce any work I did not get my bread ration.

It was *Erev Yom Kippur*, 1941. Aside from thoughts of *teshuvah*, my mind was occupied with a more mundane, down-to-earth question: Without a morsel of food, what was I going to eat for the *seudah hamafsekes*, the final meal before the onset of the fast? The hours ticked away, and the sun was slowly descending in the western sky, when suddenly, a Russian truck driver, a giant of a man, entered the barracks.

"Anyone interested in playing a game of chess?" he roared. He spotted me standing in the corner and called out, "You look like a bright boy. I'm sure you know how to play chess. Come, let's have a game!"

I agreed. He graciously offered me the choice of color, and I began by moving my pawn forward. Just as I was about to launch an attack on his queen, he suddenly stepped outside, pulled a bag of potatoes off his truck and stuck them into the big stove in the center of the barracks.

Now the Russian went on the attack, taking my knight and then my bishop, while the luscious aroma of roasted potatoes wafted in our direction. He pulled the potatoes out of the stove and placed them on the table.

"Go ahead, my friend, help yourself," he said, pointing at the pile of potatoes. "Take as much as you want."

I don't remember whether I won or lost the game, but one thing is certain. I ate my fill at that *seudah hamafsekes*, and I finished eating half an hour before the onset of *Yom Kippur*.

To this day, when I remember this incident, I have no natural explanation for what happened that *Erev Yom Kippur*. How did the driver of a truck with a load of potatoes arrive

exactly at the right moment? Why, out of all the people in the barracks, did he choose me to play a game of chess? It remains a mystery to me. The only explanation I can fathom is that it was Hashem Who was sending me the food, as it says in *Tehillim*, "The eye of Hashem is on those who fear Him . . . *lechayosam baraav*, to sustain them in famine."*

I sat on my bed and prepared for the holy day, all the while brooding over my fate. I lacked everything. I had no *minyan* and no *machzor*. I was a lonely lamb, lost in the Siberian tundra. My sole possession was a broken and crushed heart.

In my mind's eye, I could see Father placing his hands on my head, *bentching* me. His hands tremble as he commands me to follow the path of righteousness. Mother is standing by the *Yom Kippur* candles, her hands covering her eyes, praying that Father's *berachos* should be fulfilled. My brother Avraham stands with his head bowed, his face reflecting the seriousness of the moment. Chayale is looking at me with questioning eyes, wondering what the new year will bring and if our family will finally be reunited.

I stepped outside into the cool night, escaping the suffocating atmosphere of the barracks. The moon and the stars were my companions as I stood alone, surrounded by Hashem's pristine creation, so far removed from the riotous laughter of the *goyim* inside. With the firmament as my roof and no barrier between me and Hashem's heavenly expanse, the *tefillos* would rise aloft unencumbered, and perhaps the evil decree of our verdict would be torn up. Perhaps it would not be long before I was able to return home to my family.

A powerful gust of wind jolted me back to reality, and I noticed dark clouds obscuring the moon. The brewing storm

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* *Tehillim 33:19*

forced me to go back into the barracks, where I was greeted by boisterous laughter, crude curses and all types of vulgarities. I quickly lay down on my cot, pulled my blanket over my head and plugged my ears.

"Man is where his thoughts are," the Gerrer Rebbe used to say. This being so, I was not in Siberia, but in a place far removed from there. And so I made every effort throughout *Yom Kippur* to concentrate my thoughts on spiritual matters.

On *Motzei Yom Kippur*, I went over to my friend Reb Naftali. We stayed up until late at night, exchanging Torah thoughts and heartening each other.

The next morning I was back at work. As always, the day started with roll call and an interminable wait in front of the administration building. Suddenly, a soldier bolted out of the main office.

"You there, over on that side," he called out, pointing at me. "Take this detail into the forest to cut timber. Make sure, Comrade Foreman, that no one wastes time. If you produce less than one hundred cubic meters, it'll cost you dearly!"

With this, I was officially appointed foreman of a labor gang of twenty-eight prisoners, including five women. I did not care for the appointment at all, and on the way to the forest, many questions raced through my mind.

What would I do if people didn't do their job? Would I yell at them, beat them or report them? Heaven forbid! That was not the way a decent Jew behaved.

I uttered a brief prayer to Hashem. "*Ribono Shel Olam*, You are putting me to the test. Please help me behave properly and act the right way in my new position."

When we arrived at the work site in the forest, the prisoners formed a circle and looked at me impassively, waiting for my orders. I just stood there tongue-tied, not

knowing what I should say.

Suddenly, an idea came to mind. Without saying a word, I reached for an ax and started chopping vigorously. When the workers saw what I was doing they all followed suit. Within minutes, the forest reverberated with the sounds of axes and saws as trees were felled and came crashing to the ground. All that day I worked harder than I ever did before, and when it was time to take a break I was totally exhausted.

On the first days of *Sukkos* I did not work, but on *Chol Hamoed* I put in full days of labor. On *Simchas Torah* (which is *Yom Tov sheini shel galuyos* and not Biblically ordained), I could not avoid working.

The pounding of the axes echoed rhythmically through the air, and together with the other sounds of the forest formed a beautiful symphony of nature.

"*Toras Hashem temimah* . . . Hashem's Torah is perfect . . ." The forest was dancing with joy, and I swung my ax to the beat of the melody.

That evening, when I paid my customary visit to Reb Naftali's barracks, I could not refrain from crying.

"Reb Naftali, just look at me," I sobbed. "Is this any way to spend *Simchas Torah*? Working from morning till night, with no *davening*, no *simchah*, no *Kiddush*, no *dvar Torah*!" I wept uncontrollably.

"Do you know when the *geulah* will arrive?" Reb Naftali asked, gently stroking my head. "When the night of *galus* is at its very darkest, when the agony becomes unbearable, that's when Hashem will send His *geulah*. *Yeshuas Hashem keheref ayin*. Hashem sends His redemption in the twinkling of an eye."

"I have no strength left; I am drained," I sighed. "Until now I was able to endure it, but now I feel that I can't put up

with it any longer; my patience has run out."

"That's exactly what the Kotzker Rebbe said. It is written, 'I will take you out of the *sivlos Mitzrayim*, your forced labor in Egypt.'* The word *sivlos* stems from the root *saval*, to tolerate, to endure. Said the Kotzker Rebbe: 'As long as the Jewish people are resigned to being slaves and tolerating the *galus*, as long as they reconcile themselves to being oppressed, they cannot be redeemed. But when they cannot endure it any longer, that's when the *geulah* will come.'"

By the time I lay down to sleep, I had calmed down somewhat, and reflecting on Reb Naftali's words, I even managed a faint smile.

The earsplitting ringing of the camp bell woke us up early in the morning. The prisoners jumped out of bed, stuck their feet into their threadbare boots, buttoned up their ragged, patchy coats and pushed their way toward the door.

Just then, an administration official approached.

"If there are any prisoners here whose names start with the letter P, they should come immediately to the main office to be released."

Two or three prisoners ran to the administration building. I walked over to Reb Naftali's barracks.

"Are you being released?" he asked with genuine delight.

I embraced him, crying with happiness. I felt bad leaving my friend, but I firmly believed that some day we would meet again in Eretz Yisrael.

"May we meet again at the coming of the *Goel Tzedek*, the Righteous Redeemer, speedily in our days."

With these words, Reb Naftali bade me farewell.

"*Amein*," I whispered, deeply moved.

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* *Shemos 6:6*

BOOK THREE

Aspects of Transition

CHAPTER 23

Free at Last

WE PACKED OUR SQUALID BUNDLES, AND AS WE LEFT, we were each given three big loaves of bread and two cans of beans. Shuffling along in torn rubber boots that were stuffed with rags, we were a wretched, disheveled lot. Still, we were free! Free at last! Gone was the constant fear of the prison cell, the beatings and the screams of the slave drivers. All that horror lay behind us, and now we were free to do as we pleased, to go wherever fate would lead us.

But even as free men we were not to have it easy.

"Remember, we are at war," the commandant said. "We cannot provide transportation to gulag headquarters. You have to travel to Solikamsk to get your release documents and some money, but you will have to get there on your own.

Once you have your papers you are free to go where you please."

"How many miles is it to Solikamsk?" I asked boldly.

"Oh, it's not too far. Only about a hundred miles or so," the commandant replied nonchalantly. "Remember, the faster you get there, the sooner you'll be free."

Our contingent, in which I was the only Jew, was led by a Russian guide. The gentiles finished their provisions on the first day; my food supply ran out after two days. By that time we found ourselves on the banks of a wide river.

"How are we going to get across?"

"We have to wait for a river boat," the guide replied.

"How about using those little rowboats that are tied up over there?" someone suggested, pointing to a ramshackle wooden jetty.

Instantly, a group of men dashed over to the jetty to unfasten the boats.

"Wait!" the guide called out anxiously. "You can't use those boats. The river current is very swift at this spot. These little boats would surely capsize, and you would have no chance of surviving!"

A short distance down the river, we found an abandoned old shack where we took shelter while we waited for a ferry.

The days dragged on in listless boredom and gnawing hunger, and no relief was in sight. The prisoners languished in the small hut, massaging their empty stomachs and aching for a piece of bread. Two prisoners starved to death and were buried in an unmarked grave somewhere in the woods.

From time to time, the guide disappeared for several hours. Each time he returned, the prisoners ran to greet him, hoping for good news.

"Well, is the boat on the way?"

"*Nyet.* No."

"What will be with us?"

"We'll just have to sit and wait."

"We're all going to die, and we are only a step away from freedom," the men groaned despairingly.

"Just be patient," was the only reply.

On Friday afternoon, I mustered up my last ounce of strength and stepped outside the shack to *daven Kabbalas Shabbos*. The dreary, overcast sky matched my somber mood. A wintry chill penetrated my bones.

"*Lechu neranenah Lashem* . . . Come, let us sing joyously to Hashem, let us call out to the Rock of our salvation. For a great G-d is Hashem, and a great King above all heavenly powers."*

I looked up, and in the distance, I made out a dark speck on the horizon that seemed to be approaching ever so slowly. It turned out to be a large river boat carrying two big army vans. The boat slowed down and moored at the jetty. Soldiers jumped out of the trucks to do some exercise and stretch their frozen legs.

"Hup, two, three! Hup, two, three!" Running in place, they alternately raised and lowered their arms with vigorous motions.

Suddenly, I heard a familiar voice calling over the sounds of the rhythmic commands.

"Itzik, Itzik, what are you doing here?"

It was my friend Satokin, the Jewish officer who had accompanied me on the first leg of my road to freedom. He embraced me warmly and instantly noticed the look of hunger in my eyes. Without saying a word, he ran back to the

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* *Tehillim 95:1*

truck and returned with a huge loaf of bread. Before I had a chance to thank him, he was off.

"I must go," he said, waving good-bye. "They unloaded the trucks already, and now they're ready to take my outfit to the front."

Thanks to the wonderful loaf of bread, I was able to say *Kiddush,* and our entire group survived until Sunday morning, when a truck finally arrived to take us to Solikamsk.

After the customary long wait and bureaucratic red tape, I received my identification papers certifying that I was released from the Siberian gulag. I was also given a hundred and forty-seven rubles, five big loaves of bread and one herring. Each ex-prisoner was instructed to go to a specific *kolkhoz,* communal farm. I was dispatched to a *kolkhoz* in the "Jewish Republic of Birobidjan," located on the Sino-Soviet border.

The Solikamsk station was not a very busy railroad junction; only once every few days did a train make a stop there. I was fortunate, though, and I arrived there just as a train was about to leave. I rushed to board the train, together with a Pole named Piekarsky with whom I had become acquainted on our long trek to Solikamsk.

An officer in the Polish army, Piekarsky was a bright, soft-spoken dignified man, who showed not the slightest trace of anti-Semitism. Although we enjoyed each other's company, I was really yearning for Jewish friends, and I hoped that I would soon come across a pair of *tefillin.*

Seated comfortably on the train, Piekarsky looked around, making sure that no one was listening.

"I'm no fool," he declared. "I won't let the Communists manage my life. Why should I go to a *kolkhoz*? I hear that the work there is difficult, and the people are all starving. The

farmers on the *kolkhoz* are the unofficial slaves of the Communist government. The harder they work, the more money the government makes, and they are paid a mere pittance for their labor."

"Well, what do you propose to do?" I asked curiously.

"I'm getting off at Zlota-Hust," he replied. "I'm going to stay there and try my luck."

We continued to talk about various things, exhilarating in our newfound freedom. At eight o'clock, the train stopped for an hour, and I took the opportunity to go into town and stock up on food.

When I returned to my seat on the train, my heart sank. Someone had gone through my belongings, and all the money I had received at gulag headquarters had been stolen.

"Oh, you poor man," Piekarsky said, shaking his head compassionately.

I thought for a moment and then answered him with a smile.

"You're calling me poor?" I asked. "You are absolutely mistaken. Imagine that I had won one million rubles and subsequently lost a hundred and forty. Would you still feel sorry for me?" Not waiting for an answer, I continued. "Of course, you wouldn't, because I would still have plenty of money left to live in luxury. Today, I won much more than a million rubles—I gained my freedom. The Almighty Who freed me from prison will see to it that I have food and clothes. It would be a shame to get upset about such a thing. Money comes and money goes; the important thing is that I escaped any harm."

Two days later, early in the morning, our train rolled into the city of Zlota-Hust. As it reduced speed, we admired the beautiful homes and clean streets. Piekarsky was excited.

"Come, Itzik, let's get off here," he exclaimed. "Just look at this beautiful place. I'm sure we'll be able to make a living here."

Without saying a word, I exited the train together with Piekarsky. Perhaps I would be able to settle here, and maybe it would be easy to earn a living if we worked together.

What I really wanted was to be with other Jews, and I was sure that there must be many of them wandering around. After all, a large number of Polish Jews had been imprisoned in Siberia, and all of them were set free in the last few days. If I would look for them, I would find them, and maybe I would even get hold of a pair of *tefillin* and a *Gemara*.

Piekarsky went into town while I strolled up and down the platform, pondering what my next move should be.

"Hello, my friend, would you like to join me?"

I looked around. A young fellow was sitting with his bundles in the freight train across the platform and beckoning to me.

I entered the wagon, and at once the train set into motion.

The neighborly Russian opened his bag, pulled out a loaf of bread and an assortment of fruits and invited me to share his meal.

"You've got some delicious food here," I mumbled, savoring a juicy apple.

"Ha, ha, ha," the Russian roared, slapping his thigh with glee. "There was a woman riding in this wagon, and this food belonged to her. So while the train was moving fast I just pushed her out of this window. Now, all the food is mine, mine! Well, go ahead and eat! What's the matter? Why do you look at me like that, all of a sudden?"

"N-n-nothing, it's nothing at all," I stammered, trying hard to swallow the piece of apple that was stuck in my throat.

My knees were shaking with fear.

I was grateful that my money had been stolen already, and that I did not have any belongings or food. Otherwise, I might have followed the same fate as that poor woman. What a cold-blooded murderer this man was! His conscience did not seem to bother him in the least; he acted as if he had killed a mosquito or a roach.

The train was speeding at a furious pace, and my heart was beating even faster.

"Please, *Ribono Shel Olam,*" I pleaded. "Let this train stop, let it stop already . . ."

Finally, toward evening, the train began to slow down, coming to a halt.

"Eh . . . eh . . . ," I muttered. "I have to get off for just a minute. I'll be right back."

"Okay, go right ahead."

I vaulted out of the open door, running for my life. Looking back, I saw the train disappear toward the horizon. When the last wagon was out of sight I breathed easier and thanked Hashem for extricating me from my predicament.

CHAPTER 24

A Pair of Tefillin

I MADE MY WAY TO CHELYABINSK, A LARGE CITY ON THE eastern slopes of the Ural Mountains located one hundred miles north of the Kazakhstan Republic. With measured steps, I disembarked from the freight train that I had been travelling on. Taking stock of my situation, I concluded that my future looked bleak. Here I was, alone in the world, without a home or any possessions to call my own. I was a Jew without a *sefer* or even a pair of *tefillin*.

Forlorn, I stood on the platform, deliberating about which way to turn, when suddenly, a familiar sound reached my ears. Was I dreaming, or was I really hearing a *niggun* in Yiddish, here on the Chelyabinsk station? Looking around, I saw that the platform was swarming with Jews returning from Siberia who were changing trains on their way to Tashkent,

a city that was a hundred and fifty miles north of Afghanistan.

Surveying the crowd, I tried to spy a familiar face, or at least a person who looked *frum*. There, among the hundreds of ex-prisoners milling about on the platform, I spotted a bearded Jew. Shivering with excitement, I ran over to him.

I spotted a *siddur* bound in shiny leather sticking out of his pocket. Impulsively, I pulled it out, brought it to my quivering lips and burst into tears, trembling all over. People standing nearby looked at me quizzically, but I was unable to control myself. All the pent-up agonizing emotions of the previous two years seemed to find release at the sight of this *siddur*.

"Who are you?" the startled Jew asked.

"Does it make a difference who I am?" I replied. "I'm just a desolate Jew, a wanderer, just like all the other Jews here. The only thing that matters is that it has been fully two years since I last saw a *siddur* or any holy book, and that's why I was so overcome with emotion. Would you, by any chance, also have a pair of *tefillin*?" I asked breathlessly. "You see, they stole mine when I was put in jail."

"Yes, I do," the man replied, "but before we go on, please tell me your name."

"Yitzchak Pomerantz, the son of the Rabbi of Dlugoszodle."

"*Ribono Shel Olam,*" the man exclaimed ecstatically, clapping his hands. "Your father and I are old friends. We learned together in *yeshivah*, and I know him for years. Come with me and meet my family."

He introduced himself as Reb Meshullam Rosner-Rushnik. I followed him into the large waiting room where his wife and daughters were guarding a pile of packages and bundles.

"Reb Meshullam," I asked, after meeting the family, "could I have your *tefillin* for a short while?"

"*Tefillin* he wants?" His daughters laughed. "Father, give

him some bread instead. He must be starved."

"*Ribono Shel Olam*," his wife cried. "How in the world are we going to find your *tefillin*? We stashed them away deep inside one of the bundles so they would not get damaged. Here, *bachur*, have a slice of bread, or perhaps a delicious apple."

"Thank you, but I'm not hungry. I don't want anything. The only thing I need is a pair of *tefillin*." Unable to control my emotions, I sobbed bitterly.

Without saying a word, Reb Meshullam opened a large sack and rummaged through it. He pulled out a few things and then handed me a *tefillin* bag. Overjoyed, I immediately put them on and began to *daven*.

People must have looked at me strangely as I prayed with the *tefillin* in the middle of the station, sobbing emotionally all the while. I do not know if I shed tears of pain or happiness. Oblivious to everything going on around me, I poured out my heart to the *Ribono Shel Olam*. Once again, I renewed my pact with Hashem to be a faithful champion of His holy Torah.

"I am ready for anything You demand of me," I pledged. "I will give my life *al kiddush Hashem* or live my life according to Your will."

After *davening*, I felt spiritually uplifted.

"We are headed for Samarkand in Uzbekistan, near the Afghanistan border," Reb Meshullam said. "Why don't you join us and stay on with us after we get there? I would be very happy to have a *frum bachur* near me. You know that our Sages said '*O chavrusa, o misusa*. Give me a friend or give me death.' I cannot imagine a better *chavrusa* for me than you."

I certainly could not go to Slonim where my family lived; that city had been occupied by the Germans. I really did not

have a clear destination, and I had decided to go wherever Hashem sent me. Hashem obviously wanted me to put on *tefillin* every day. Thus, I was tied to Reb Meshullam by the straps of the *tefillin*. Wherever he was going that's where I would go, unless, of course, circumstances prevented me from joining him.

We all hurried aboard a freight train and began our journey together. The food I had with me was long since gone; I actually had nothing to call my own.

Meanwhile, the war was raging with blinding fury. The German *Panzer* divisions had penetrated the vast Russian heartland with murderous savagery. With *blitzkrieg* pincers movements they had captured the Ukraine and White Russia, and their armored columns were heading for Moscow. The majority of young Jewish men from these regions were drafted into the Russian army. The women, children and the elderly that were fleeing from the advancing Germans joined us on our wanderings through the Siberian wasteland, carrying their belongings in a few small bundles.

On Friday, the train neared the town of Cheklov. A young woman with a brood of little children asked me if I could go into town to buy some food for her when the train stopped. She offered to pay me for the favor, but I asked her to give me some bread instead.

I thought it would be a good idea to explore the town. Maybe it would be a good place to stay. After all, without a penny to my name, how long could I go on travelling? Reb Meshullam too, was finding the travelling hard, and he did not have enough food to feed his own family. As for *tefillin*, I heard that there were a good many Jews living in Cheklov, and I would be able to get hold of a pair of *tefillin* there, too.

As we neared Cheklov, I reminded myself that I had

promised a prisoner in Siberia to look up a brother of his who was living there.

The train stopped at the depot shortly before the onset of *Shabbos*, and experienced travellers told us that we would have a three-day stop in Cheklov. I bought some food for the woman and received a few slices of bread for my trouble. I said *Kiddush* and went to sleep on the train.

In the middle of the night, I woke up with a start. Was I dreaming, or was the train actually moving? Looking out the window, I saw immediately that we were travelling at a dizzying speed. Trees and farmhouses flashed by. Vast fields of grain extended to the right and left, and Cheklov was out of sight.

"We are now entering the huge desert of Kazakhstan," one of the passengers explained to his children. "For the next two weeks, we won't see any towns or villages. There are just a few tiny settlements of wild uncivilized Kazakhs and Tatars scattered along the way to Tashkent."

What was I going to eat? I didn't even have a morsel of food, and there was no way for me to earn a slice of bread by running errands or carrying packages for other people. It certainly wouldn't be right to depend on Reb Meshullam.

On *Shabbos*, I recited *Kiddush* on the little piece of bread that I had left. The next day I got up early, and after *davening* with Reb Meshullam's *tefillin,* I sneaked into a different wagon. Knowing that Reb Meshullam had insufficient food for his own family, I did not want him to feel responsible for feeding me as well. That night, I returned to the wagon, and the next morning, I left in the same manner. In the afternoon I stood on the platform behind the wagon, and the blowing wind stilled my hunger pangs somewhat. We were surrounded by an endless expanse of wheat fields.

Suddenly, the train slowed down, coming to a stop at a desolate spot. Approaching the train were two hefty Kazakh peasant women. As they drew closer, I saw that they were carrying three enormous loaves of bread, each weighing at least six pounds.

"Is that bread for sale?" I asked hopefully.

"Yes, but you can't pay us with money. We'll only trade it for something of value."

"All right, I'll trade."

The women looked me up and down.

"What will you give us in return for the bread?"

"Here, take my shirt," I said. "Look, it's brand new."

It was the shirt I had received when we were released from the camp, before going to Solikamsk.

"Do you have anything else?" they asked. "Perhaps a pair of shoes, a bag, or a pair of pants?"

"No, this shirt is all I have."

"We'll give you two loaves of bread for it," the older woman said.

"But this is a fine shirt," I protested. "This is no cheap rag."

After some more haggling we settled on two and a half loaves of bread. I took off my shirt and handed it to the peasant women.

When I returned to Reb Meshullam's wagon he embraced me, misty-eyed.

With great feeling he murmured, "*Naar hayisi, gam zakanti* . . . I have been young and am now old, but I have never seen a righteous man abandoned or his children seeking bread."*

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* *Tehillim 37:25*

CHAPTER 25

Hunger and Deprivation

THE TRAIN RACING TOWARD TASHKENT WAS FULL OF Jews. Some were ex-prisoners, but there were also many who had abandoned their homes, fleeing before the advancing Germans. Among this group of refugees there was an assimilated Jew by the name of Goldin, who for some reason formed an attachment to me. Perhaps a hidden spark in his soul was thirsty for Torah, or maybe he just felt lonely among the Russian peasants.

Goldin greatly respected my *emunah* and devotion to Torah and *mitzvos*, and the discussions we had were not simply debates for the sake of matching wits; he really wanted to learn. When I retired one evening after hours of animated give-and-take, I found in my bag two ten-ruble bills.

Goldin wants to fulfill the *mitzvah* of giving anonymously,

I thought to myself, smiling. "A Jew remains a Jew, no matter how far he has gone astray."

The train was hurtling along, racing through the sparsely settled Russian tundra. For hundreds of miles there was not even a farmhouse to be seen. At last, the long ride came to an end as we pulled into the Tashkent railroad station.

"Are you coming along with us?" Goldin asked me as he gathered up his family and bundles.

"What are you going to do here in Tashkent?" Reb Meshullam spoke up. "There is no Torah, *Yiddishkeit, tefillin* or *minyan*! Samarkand is only four hundred miles southwest of here, and remember, you promised you'd come along with us."

It did not take long for me to make up my mind. To me, Reb Meshullam represented *tefillin* and a life of Torah. I therefore decided to stay with him. But since I had no money or food, I was forced to work as a porter in order to continue on to Samarkand. Standing on the platform, I offered to carry bags and packages for a few slices of bread, until the shrill sound of the whistle announced the departure of the train.

By the time we reached Kagan, the next stop, my bread had run out. Again I found work, this time carrying heavy sacks. It was hard work, and I almost collapsed under the weight. After a few hours of this labor, I returned to the platform with a few slices of bread to stave off my hunger.

To my utter dismay, the station was deserted; the train had left! Reb Meshullam, the *tefillin* and the *siddur* were all gone.

"*Ribono Shel Olam*," I said in desperation. "Now I am really left without anything, a lonesome stranger in a faraway land."

The station was deserted, and I was unemployed; without

passengers there was no need for a porter. No work also meant that I would have no food.

Toward evening, I went looking for a place to sleep and found an abandoned goat stable whose owner had taken the goats into his house, afraid that thieves might steal them.

Two days went by without a bite to eat, and my stomach swelled up from hunger. I told myself to remain strong and steadfastly resolved that I would not resort to begging for handouts. After all, everything came from Hashem, and He evidently wanted to test my faith in Him. If I placed my trust in Him, He would surely help me.

I walked up and down the streets in search of work, and I came upon a store that seemed to be abandoned. People were pushing their way in through the open door, taking everything in sight. I immediately entered, hoping to find something to still my frightful hunger pangs. In a corner, I found a barrel of sesame seed preserves. I ate a handful of the mixture, but minutes later I felt a terrible headache. Weak and famished, I returned to the barn.

Thursday was my third day in Kagan without food. I had only one *tefillah* to Hashem which I constantly repeated. "I am not asking for a lavish meal, or even for clothing or shoes. All I want is some bread to stay alive. You performed so many *nissim* to get me to this point. Don't let me die now of hunger!"

I knew that every man must realize that the entire universe was created for his sake and believe that Hashem opens His Hand to satisfy the desire of every living thing. Why then was the channel of Heavenly abundance leading to me stopped up? I begged the *Ribono Shel Olam* not to let me die there all alone, without a Jewish soul to say *Viduy* with me in my last moments and see to it that I got a Jewish burial.

Unable to sleep, I spent the night scrounging around for scraps of food and thinking all kinds of dismal thoughts.

I was standing in front of a pile of boxes when suddenly, I looked up to see a bearded Jew with an astonished look on his face peering at me.

Hesitantly, I approached him.

"*Ver bist du? Vos willst du?*" he asked in Yiddish. "Who are you? What are you looking for?"

"N-nothing," I stammered. "I'm just surprised to find a Jew here."

"In these chaotic times you can find Jews wherever you go," he said, smiling. "Tell me, where are you from?"

"Before the war I used to live in Dlugoszodle, Poland."

"What's your father's name?"

"Rabbi Dovid Pomerantz. He is the Rabbi of Dlugoszodle."

"I don't believe it!" he exclaimed excitedly. "You are the son of the Rabbi of Dlugoszodle? Your father and I have been friends for a long time." He turned to his wife. "Did you hear that, Baila? Do you know who this *bachur* is? He's the son of the Rabbi of Dlugoszodle, a real *tzaddik*."

The man introduced himself as Chaim Dov Rosen.

"Since *Hashgachah* has brought us together," he said, "why don't you travel with us to the *kolkhoz* in the district of Shparkan where we are headed?"

"When is the train scheduled to arrive?" I asked.

"In just a short while," he replied. "Oh, I almost forgot. You'll need a special permit from the office to travel to the *kolkhoz*. I'll take the train that's due in now, and we'll wait for you at the Shparkan station. Meanwhile you take care of the permit and catch the next train."

Mrs. Rosen offered me a plate of plump fresh grapes. After three days without food I was ravenous, and I almost

jumped on the fruit, but I controlled my appetite and slowly reached for the grapes, eating them unhurriedly, one by one. The train pulled into the station, and I helped the kind family with their luggage. I then returned to the barn and fell asleep.

In the morning, I went to the office to obtain the permit to travel to the *kolkhoz*. Quite unexpectedly, the clerk handed me two slices of bread with the permit. I devoured them within minutes, feeling truly revived.

The train was due to depart on *Shabbos*, and once again I was penniless and near starvation.

"If I board the train before the onset of *Shabbos*, and the wagon is more than ten handbreadths away from the ground, then I am not desecrating the *Shabbos*," I said to myself, quoting the *halachah* from memory.

I sat alone in the small train compartment without a train ticket. The sun was setting, and my stomach was grumbling. After a three-day fast, a bunch of grapes and two slices of bread were not enough to satisfy my hunger.

I stepped out onto the platform of the train to say *Kabbalas Shabbos*. Before my eyes, a sea of golden wheat extended to the horizon.

"*Ribono Shel Olam*," I whispered. "You created such a great and beautiful world, and for a lowly creature like me, You don't even have a slice of bread for *Kiddush*?"

The cold wind forced me back into the warm passenger car. It was completely empty, but lying on the bench was a package wrapped in newspapers. I opened the package, and my heart skipped a beat. Inside was a loaf of bread. Had my prayer really been answered? Perhaps the bread belonged to someone, and at any moment he would come and claim his package.

I sat and waited. A long time passed, but the owner did

not show up. My stomach was moaning, my head was aching, and the loaf of bread on the seat next to me beckoned temptingly.

A woman's voice jolted me out of my reverie. "Ticket please?"

"I . . . I don't have a ticket," I murmured.

"Sitting there arrogantly, without a ticket," she huffed. "You have some nerve!"

I got up and stepped outside into the corridor.

"Don't forget to take your bread," she called out.

I smiled. She had given me permission to take the bread, so it was mine.

I made my way to the noisy public car and said *Kiddush* over the bread. True, I was a lowly creature, but Hashem had answered my prayer.

On *Motzei Shabbos* I arrived in Shparkan, and Reb Chaim Dov was delighted to see me. The next morning, a horse-driven wagon came to take us to Kolkhoz Stalina.

A small two-room house surrounded by a small plot of farmland was to be our home. Mrs. Rosen entered and inspected the new quarters with the eyes of a housewife, and before long she found space for all her belongings. The house became a home.

"Go and wash up," she urged us. "Itzik, you put on these clothes, and give me yours so I can wash them."

My eyes filled with tears. I had a home again. For more than a year I had not changed my clothes. Occasionally, I used to wash my clothes in the river, wait until they dried and put them on again. I finally had a home, a normal life, a mattress and a blanket, cooked food and a warm and loving family.

Every morning, Reb Chaim Dov, his son and I went out into the fields to pick radishes and beans. When we came

back at four o'clock, Mrs. Rosen and her daughter had a hot meal waiting for us. After a short nap, the three men would sit down to learn *Gemara*.

"It's been two years since I last saw a *Gemara*," I said, lovingly placing my arms around the *sefer*. I was overjoyed.

Shabbos came, bringing with it the holy atmosphere and the *Shabbos* table. All cares and worries vanished, and the entire *Shabbos* was spent discussing Torah thoughts and singing *zemiros* and *niggunim*. It was truly a beautiful *Shabbos*, a semblance of *Olam Haba*.

We spent two peaceful weeks in the *kolkhoz* enjoying the *Gemara, tefillin* and *Shabbos*, until one day, our serenity was disrupted.

"All Polish citizens must pack up their belongings and report to the railroad station!" the secretary of the *kolkhoz* announced.

"Have you heard?" one of the Polish Jews asked excitedly. "They're sending us to Iran and, from there, to Eretz Yisrael!"

The head of the *kolkhoz*, a kindly Russian, procured a wagon to take us to the Shparkan railroad station with all our belongings. There we waited and waited, but we were not able to leave.

Although trains bursting with refugees kept passing through, for us, a family of five with baggage, there was no room. The days went by, and hunger made itself felt. Mrs. Rosen bought a head of cabbage and made some soup with it, but knowing how poor they were and how little food there was to go around, I sneaked away and stilled my hunger eating apricot pits. Two weeks went by like this. Each time we heard the sound of a train in the distance our hopes rose, but they were quickly dashed. All the trains were crowded with refugees, and there was no room for us.

"Well, those are the pains of getting to Eretz Yisrael," Reb Chaim Dov said, trying to comfort us.

My hunger pangs became unbearable, and I was not consoled. It was a shame to have to part with such a good-hearted and caring family, to remain without *tefillin* and a *daf Gemara*, but I simply had no choice. With tears in my eyes, I jumped on one of the passing trains, travelling to an unknown destination.

I wormed my way into one of the passenger cars and lay down beneath one of the benches. The car was crammed with men, women and children, and I went to sleep beneath their legs, too weak to move. Suddenly, the train stopped, and since I had nothing to grasp, I rolled against the legs of a woman passenger. I peered out from underneath the bench.

"A thief, a thief!" the woman shrieked.

"Where?" a man asked.

"Over there! Under the bench!"

Four powerful arms grabbed my hands and feet, and within seconds, I was rolling in the middle of the desert, alone in the dark of night.

The train began to move again, and I quickly jumped onto another wagon. This time, having learned from experience, I remained outside on the platform all night.

In the morning, I opened the door, entered the corridor and peeked inside the compartments. There was not one *frum* face in sight. I stood motionless, dejected and heartbroken. Would anyone invite me into a compartment? Would anyone even smile at me?

As I pondered my predicament, an elderly Pole came over to me and declared pompously, "There is no vacant space here for additional persons!"

"Sir," I replied, raising myself to my full height, "don't

look at my tattered clothes. Fate has been cruel to all of us. We are all victims, so let us not be callous to one another. Instead, let's help each other, and with G-d's help we will overcome and be saved!"

"He's right, he's right," the passengers muttered.

The Pole, without saying another word, extended his hand and invited me into the compartment.

"What's your name?" he asked. "I'll put you on the list so that you can get one pound of bread each day."

I found myself in the company of a group of young Jews comprised of three men and four women. They pretended not to understand Yiddish and only spoke a cultured Polish. I soon discovered that they all belonged to the Jewish underworld in Poland. They were long-haired Bohemians and artists who had no Jewish education and a compulsive hatred for the Torah.

The train was speeding toward Dzhambul, which was near the southern border of Kazakhstan and two hundred miles northeast of Tashkent. Our destination was the *kolkhoz* named Kaidanov.

CHAPTER 26

Rancor and Ridicule

THE HORSE-DRAWN WAGONS ENTERED KOLKHOZ Kaidanov. A warm welcome awaited the Poles, but we, the Jewish newcomers, were treated to a decidedly cool reception.

"This is where you're going to live, *zhids*," the leader of the *kolkhoz* said coldly as he showed us a small house containing one room and a kitchen.

Before settling down, we were summoned to an assembly of the *kolkhoz*. The leader delivered a fiery speech, and everyone listened impassively.

"This *kolkhoz* is in the business of raising cotton, among other things. Right now it is harvesting time. Your hours for picking cotton are from seven o'clock in the morning until four in the afternoon. After work, everyone will receive one

pound of flour. For the time being, that's all we can pay."

Returning home, we found the house in total darkness; there was not one light bulb to be found.

I just have to get away from these anti-religious Jews, I thought to myself as I bedded down in the kitchen on some dry cotton plants.

"Our religious friend is opening a *yeshivah* in the kitchen," my companions sneered, taunting me disdainfully.

This too is a test, I thought bitterly. Until now, only my body was tested, but now my soul is suffering. I'll say *Krias Shema*, and that will help me endure their taunts.

In the morning, my seven companions roamed about the house singing vulgar songs. I ran outside quickly, taking the opportunity to explore the countryside. After walking for fifteen minutes, I came upon a lovely spring that was surrounded by an abundance of colorful flowers. There, listening to the calming sound of the rushing water, I poured out my heart to Hashem, finding comfort in the words of *Tehillim*.

"Hashem, You will not despise a contrite and crushed heart . . ."*

The next day, instead of going to work, I decided to do some trading. Under the Communist system, a trader could earn two and a half pounds of flour in a few hours of buying and selling, much more than could be made from several days of farm labor.

I made my way to a cluster of Cossack farmhouses and began to peddle my wares.

"How much do you want for these needles?" a Cossack asked me.

"One pound of flour."

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* *Tehillim 51:19*

"That's much too expensive. Be realistic!"

As I haggled with the Cossack over the price of the merchandise I was offering, I suddenly burst into tears, unable to control myself.

"What happened to you?" the Cossack asked, distraught.

I shrugged. My lips were trembling as I sobbed softly. The stunned Cossack patted me on the back, trying to calm me down, while his wife poured me a cup of hot tea. Unable to be comforted, I began to weep even harder.

"The poor lad must be hungry," the Cossack's wife said tenderly. "Just look how skinny he is; he was probably in Siberia. Well, these things happen sometimes. The starvation and the suffering made his nerves snap."

"Listen, young fellow," the kind Cossack said. "Yesterday we managed to get a bag of sugar, and my wife baked a delicious cake. Here, have a piece."

"Give him some vodka," his wife suggested, pulling a bottle from the cabinet.

Shaking my head, I declined both offers and continued crying. No, I was not hungry; something else was bothering me. For four full hours I cried and cried until slowly, the weeping subsided. I thanked the kind Cossack couple, said good-bye and left.

I was mystified by my own behavior. What had gotten into me? I had long since reconciled myself to my situation, and I had experienced all kinds of crises and miracles without ever breaking down like that.

Absorbed in my thoughts I walked on, confused. Suddenly, I had a clear sense of foreboding. I was sure something had happened back home, and I prayed tearfully.

"Oh, Father, Mother, may Hashem protect you . . ."

Impulsively, I was drawn to the spring. I sat there for

many hours contemplating the pristine water as I *davened* to Hashem. The *tefillah* relieved me of the burden that was weighing heavily on my heart. It was the instrument with which I expressed my yearnings and my anxieties. I *davened* for myself, for my family and for *Klal Yisrael* in general, who were all suffering under the terrible circumstances.

"The heart alone knows its bitterness."* It was only after the war that I discovered that on the very day that I had been gripped by my uncontrollable crying spell, my dear parents, brother and sister were killed by the vicious Nazis, *yimach shemam*. It was the twelfth day of *Kislev*, 5702/1942. May their souls be bound in the Book of Life.

It was *Erev Shabbos*, and I returned to the house. After baking small rolls I went to the spring to welcome the *Shabbos* and say *Kiddush* over my freshly baked bread. The next morning, my companions went to work, and I stayed alone in the house. It was perfectly quiet, with no one to disturb my *davening* and my *seudah*.

Raucous laughter heralded the return of the others.

"Let's see if the *tzaddik* is in the house."

"If only he knew what we are carrying in this bag."

"I hope he's not at home. Then we won't have any problem feeding it to him in his soup."

"*Basar vedagim vechol matamim*," one of the gang chanted scornfully. "Meat and fish and all types of delicacies. We certainly have some *Shabbos* meal in store for us today."

I shuddered. What were they up to? What were they planning to cook?

The door to the kitchen opened.

"What a shame," one of the men called out. "Our little

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* *Mishlei 14:10*

religious friend is home today."

"*Du willst essen a ketzele auf Shabbos*?" they asked me, laughing uproariously. "Would you like to eat a little cat for *Shabbos*?"

"What?" I jumped out of my seat.

"A *ketzele*. What's the matter?" he asked derisively, pulling a dead cat out of his bag. "It doesn't taste good? I don't think you believe that we're going to cook it."

The entire gang exploded with boisterous laughter.

Overcome with nausea and disgust, I ran out of the house. As I was walking toward the spring, I ran into the brother of the *kolkhoz* leader.

"Where are you going?" he asked me. "I'm on my way to pay you a visit and discuss how we can improve things here. Don't run away."

"Really, Comrade Michael?" I said, feigning disappointment. "Why, if I knew you were coming I would have prepared a royal meal."

I had no choice but to accompany him to our house.

I took a seat next to Comrade Michael, opposite the others. The odor from the vile soup wafted in from the kitchen, and the foul smell blended with the putrid stench of cigarette smoke.

"*Shabbos hayom Lashem*. . ." The melody that Father used to sing echoed in my mind, depressing me even further.

Comrade Michael bombarded us with questions. He wanted to hear all our problems and suggestions for improvements. At last, it was my turn.

"Comrade Isaac," he asked. "Why aren't you sitting with the others? I understand that all of you are Jewish."

"I am different," I responded. "They reject our religion, whereas I observe the laws of the Bible. Today is the Jewish

Sabbath, yet they are cooking, baking and smoking, all things that are forbidden on the Sabbath. That's why I don't associate with them."

"Why does your religion give you so many difficult commandments to observe?" asked Comrade Michael.

I explained that we were given the commandments as a means of purifying ourselves, and that each commandment corresponded to a part of our bodies. I also explained to him that our actions affected our thinking processes, and how seemingly insignificant physical acts cleansed a man's soul.

Comrade Michael listened attentively.

"I had no idea that your Bible made so much sense," he said with admiration. "The things you just said are very interesting, and you touched on some very fundamental principles of education. I have to go now, Comrade Isaac, but I'm coming back and we'll talk some more. Farewell!"

He left, waving his hand and smiling at me. No sooner did he depart than the gang of seven pounced on me.

"You fool! Don't you know that religion is against the law in the Soviet Union? Because of you, we'll all land in jail." Their tirade was vehement.

"I understand," I answered. "I did not say that you observe the *mitzvos*. On the contrary, I stressed that I am the only one who is religious, and that although the people in this house follow the Soviet law, I continue to abide by my tradition."

"Still, according to the law we should have denounced you," they protested. "And for protecting you, we might all wind up in jail!"

It was no use arguing; their virulent hatred of Torah and *mitzvos* distorted their common sense.

I couldn't bear it any more. As they continued to rant and

rave, I resolved to pack my things and run away. I had to escape from these loathsome people. No matter where I'd end up, I'd be better off than in their company.

At midnight, my companions went to sleep, and at four o'clock I left the house, carrying my bundle and the eight pounds of flour that I had earned doing "business." Following the railroad tracks, I walked in the direction of Dzhambul, a district capital in Kazakhstan, sleeping on the concrete floors of the station platforms en route.

On one such night, soon after I had lain down to sleep in an empty station, I was suddenly awakened.

"What are you doing here?" The bright beam of a flashlight shone into my face, blinding me momentarily. It was a local policeman patrolling the station.

"So, you're running from the army!" he roared. "I'm taking you in."

I groped in my pocket and pulled out my identification card that showed I was honorably discharged from service in Siberia. Quietly, he returned the card to me and continued on his way.

Finally, after marching for three days, the houses of Dzhambul came into view. The train station was in an uproar, and I could see a train crammed with refugees standing on the platform. I approached one of the cars and noticed a young girl standing in the open door.

"Where are you from, and where are you going?" I asked her.

"All the passengers on this train are Polish Jews who have been released from Siberia," she answered. "Where are we going? Nobody really knows."

"Any chance of me getting on this train?" I inquired.

"This train is so overcrowded, we are like sardines in a

can," she said, smiling apologetically.

"*Kum, kum aher!*" a man called to me in Yiddish from the next car. "Come over here. You're a *yeshivah bachur*, aren't you?" he asked, smiling. "Come aboard. Don't worry, we'll make room for you."

He introduced himself as Avraham Kristal and warmly shook hands with me.

"You know, you look exactly like my oldest son Yankele who remained at home in Chelm together with my wife and my other children. I just felt I had to help you."

"When are we leaving?" I asked.

"You have plenty of time. We're only pulling out at eight o'clock this evening."

I went into town and sold my flour for twelve rubles. I then bought bread and sold it, making a profit of five rubles. In this way, I turned over my merchandise four times and ended up with thirty-two rubles, twenty pounds of beets and a sack of bread crumbs, enough food to last me for a long trip.

The other passengers on the train were very decent, and I detected no anti-religious sentiments among them. On the contrary, they appreciated my being *frum* under these difficult circumstances, and many of them clung to me and asked me to impart some Torah thoughts.

Baruch Hashem, I have left that accursed *kolkhoz*, I thought to myself. My only regret was that I had no *tefillin*.

It was late in the afternoon, and the train advanced rapidly through the wide open spaces of Kazakhstan. We all huddled together and discussed various subjects. Although they were not observant Jews, they all had sparks of *Yiddishkeit* left within them.

Suddenly, someone entered our car and excitedly waved his arms.

"Avraham Kristal!" he called out above the din.

"Shmuel Birnbaum!" came the happy cry of recognition.

The two men embraced, and after Kristal invited his friend to sit next to him, a torrent of memories began to flow.

At one point in Birnbaum's account, I sat up and took notice.

"Yes, I too was an observant Jew once," Birnbaum related. "As a matter of fact, I still carry my *tefillin* with me in my luggage. But you know how it is, the war caused many people to drift away, and this trend has not passed me by either."

"Are you saying that you own a pair of *tefillin*?" I exclaimed, my heart beating rapidly. "I'd like to buy them."

"Okay," he replied calmly. "For a hundred rubles they are yours."

"I don't have that much, but I'll give you whatever I own if you'll agree to sell them to me."

"Well, how much do you have?"

"Thirty-two rubles is all I have," I said dejectedly. "You probably won't want to sell them to me. *Ribono Shel Olam*, if only I had more money!"

"All right," I heard him say. "It's a deal. You give me thirty-two rubles, and the *tefillin* are yours."

Sensing how anxious I was to get hold of the *tefillin*, Birnbaum went back to his car at once and returned with the velvet bag. I quickly handed him the money, and without further delay, I found a small corner in the car where I put on my new *tefillin*.

"*Ribono Shel Olam*," I whispered passionately. "Now I have carried out the *mitzvah* of loving Hashem *bechol meodecha*, with all of one's resources. I gave away all my money in order to fulfill the *mitzvah* of putting on *tefillin*."

CHAPTER 27

Life on the Kolkhoz

THE DESTINATION OF OUR TRAIN WAS KOLKHOZ Krupskaya in the Osh district of Kirghiziaia, fifty miles north of the Chinese border. Soon after we arrived, we were assigned the degrading duty of collecting manure in the cow barns. Included in our group of manure collectors were lawyers, college professors, journalists and other prominent personalities. The Communist system guaranteed equal rights for everyone, and indeed, within a few days, we were all standing shoulder to shoulder in the barns, working knee-deep in cow dung.

After a few days of this work, I was promoted. I was given a horse and cart, and my new job was to haul cow dung from the barns to the fields. The work was backbreaking, and the pay was not enough to buy a pair of pants or a shirt. I

continued to wear my old pair of torn, rubber boots stuffed with rags.

Passing a store one day, I was horrified to see the image reflected in the window. I stared at the gaunt, disheveled creature facing me, amazed at the changes that had come over my appearance. My beard was long and scraggly, my shirt was tattered, and my coat was threadbare and full of holes.

I looked away from the window and scrutinized my apparel. Smiling grimly, I shook my head. No, the reflection had not lied; I really did look like the scarecrow I had just seen. Well, one thing I did not have to worry about was succumbing to vanity.

Perhaps there had been a decree in Heaven that I should die, and mercifully, Hashem had commuted my death sentence to poverty and exile. After all, *ani chashuv kameis*, a pauper is compared to one who is dead.

Although I realized that it was important to take care of myself, the labor was harsh and the pay next to nothing. I didn't have enough money to buy a shirt or even a piece of soap. Even if I would be able to get some soap, how could I wash my shirt if it was the only one I had?

In addition to these practical difficulties, I knew that physically, I was growing weaker by the day.

I reminded myself of a *vort* I had heard from Rabbi Moshe Eisenberg. It says in *Tehillim*, "*Lehatzil mimaves nafsham* . . . To save them from death and to keep them alive in famine."* Instead of saying "to give them food in famine," it specifically says "to keep them alive in famine." We learn from this that Hashem gives life to the hungry, and He, being Omnipotent,

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* *Tehillim 33:19*

can do so even without food. He does not necessarily sustain the hungry with food; He sometimes performs a miracle to keep them alive.

Desperate to improve my condition, I began to pay attention to some of the other members of my group who did not seem to be suffering as much as I was. I soon noticed that my roommates did not go out to work on the *kolkhoz* every day, and after a little investigation, I discovered the source of their wealth. Realizing how difficult it was to subsist on the meager wages of the standard worker, these enterprising individuals had turned to the black market.

Under Communist rule, the worst crime was *spekulatzia*, black marketeering. Stealing and cheating were acceptable, but black marketeering "undermined the foundations of Communist society."

I weighed the alternatives and came to my decision. It was impossible for me to exist on the wages I was being paid, and working on the black market seemed to be the only viable alternative. Stealing, of course, was something I wouldn't consider, but according to the Torah, speculating or trading on the black market was a permissible business.

The next morning, I did not go to work. Instead, I made my way to the market.

"I see you also became a dealer," a Jewish friend joked, pressing a package of tea into my hands.

I waited with my "merchandise" for one hour and then another, but no customers appeared.

"Have patience," the old-timers told me. "You'll see, in the end you'll make money."

Finally, an Uzbek tribesman bought the tea for two loaves of bread. I sold one of the loaves to pay for the tea, and the other one I kept for myself.

A few days later, my friend Kristal suggested that I try my hand at selling home-made soap. I quickly learned the "trade" and thereafter, my profits rose considerably. I still did not have enough money to buy a pair of shoes, but I was quite pleased with the way things were going. I spent my days in the company of fellow Jews instead of wallowing in cow manure doing backbreaking labor. As time went by, I made the acquaintance of several *frum* Jews, and I had the opportunities to "talk in learning" with them. Business was flourishing, and eventually, I became one of the main soap suppliers on the market.

With my financial difficulties basically taken care of, I turned to the new problems that faced me. *Pesach* was just around the corner, and with the prevailing shortages, it would be difficult to make it through the *Yom Tov*.

Fortunately, Reb Yosef Kravat, a *frum* Jew from Dlugoszodle, came to my aid and invited me to celebrate *Yom Tov* with him. I contributed corn starch, oil and *matzos*, which I had baked myself, and between us, we were able to come up with everything else we would need. Thus, we spent the eight days of *Pesach* in exalted spirits, grateful to Hashem for His obvious assistance.

Before we knew it, the heat of summer was upon us. Preferring to spend my time learning Torah, I no longer actively sought business. I only traded if I happened to come across a useful batch of merchandise. My food consisted of prune pits, but I was satisfied with that; the only thing I still wanted was a pair of shoes.

One day, I met a man in the market who had a batch of salt for sale. I knew this was very profitable merchandise, and I already saw myself wearing a new pair of shoes. The next day, I took up a position on the black market displaying a

sixteen-pound sack of salt.

Local Kirghiziaians approached and began to negotiate for my goods. Suddenly, a policeman jumped out from behind one of the houses where he had been waiting to catch someone trading illegally.

He immediately handcuffed me and escorted me to the police station, taking along the sack of salt as evidence.

"I see, another *spekulant*," the police inspector said scornfully. "Throw him into prison!"

The *kolkhoz* prison was not too bad, and after three days, I was released.

"If I catch you again engaging in *spekulatzia*, you're going straight to Siberia," the inspector warned sternly. He returned the sack of salt and sent me on my way.

The inspector's admonition did not really frighten me. I knew the black market was the only venue of survival, and I trusted in Hashem, knowing that He would protect me. After all, this was the only way I could refrain from working on *Shabbos* and spend my time in the company of other Jews. Hashem knew that I was not working on the black market in order to become rich, but to live my life in as much of a Torah environment as possible. Therefore, I continued to go to the market every day, meeting with friends who were eager to hear the words of *Chazal* that my father had taught me.

CHAPTER 28

Business Opportunities

AS I APPROACHED THE MARKET ONE MORNING , I SAW everyone clustered around a large announcement that was posted on the wall. I quickly ran over and read the sign.

> "To all members of the *kolkhoz*:
> As of today, each *kolkhoz* member is required to carry a work certificate from his place of work. Anyone who is found without a work certificate will be imprisoned immediately."

"Well," murmured Kristal, "the good days are over."

"This will mean the end of our daily chats under the tree in the market square," Birnbaum lamented.

"We've got to find jobs and go to work."

Gam zu letovah, it's all for the best, I thought. Just as Hashem took care of me until now, so will He provide for me in the future.

Before I could even think of planning my next step, a Jew by the name of Scharf came up to me.

"How about becoming the night watchman in my warehouse? The pay is minimal, but I'll give you a work certificate, and you'll have all day to make some extra money."

His offer sounded ideal. At night I would be able to sleep in the warehouse, so I wouldn't have to worry about shelter or be bothered by undesirable roommates. The certificate would verify that I was doing productive work, and the best part of it was that I had the entire day to do as I pleased.

I began working for Scharf immediately, and the job proved to be perfect for my situation. The nights were generally peaceful, and there was only one criminal incident during the time that I worked there. Fortunately, the police had been informed of the planned burglary, and they approached me that evening so I would assist them in apprehending the thieves.

I waited with the policemen in a vacant apartment across the street, keeping a close watch on the warehouse. Sure enough, after several hours of tense observation, we spotted the burglars trying to break in. The policemen quickly converged on the thieves and led them away in handcuffs.

Thereafter, there were no further attempts to steal from the warehouse, and the nights passed uneventfully.

With the passage of time, I became friendly with Scharf, my employer. An engineer by profession and an avowed Communist, he held an important post in the Party. Only as a result of the turmoil of war did he wind up in the remote district of Osh in Kirghizia.

Of course, over the years, his devotion to Communism developed a few cracks. His yearning for *Yiddishkeit* gnawed at his commitment to the Communist ideology, and somehow, the theory of a classless society did not seem all that perfect. While the tenets of Communism declared all men equal, Scharf soon realized that some people were more equal than others.

As our friendship developed, Scharf's appreciation for the Torah caused the wide gap between us to narrow. Whenever I quoted a saying of *Chazal* he became excited about the profound wisdom it revealed.

I decided to tell him about the illegal soap business I was engaged in. After listening for a few moments, he abruptly interrupted me.

"I could manufacture soap for you," he blurted out.

"What?" I shot back in stunned disbelief. "You, the devoted Communist, are going to trade on the black market and practice *spekulatzia*?"

"Look here, my friend," he said calmly and deliberately. "I may be old and gray, but I know what's going on. If I had not been born a Jew I would be one of the top officials in the Soviet government today. Very few people have an academic background as broad as mine. It's true that I hold a responsible position in the Party. However, if it were not for my religion, I would be in charge of revamping the industry in one of the Soviet republics, or perhaps be a manager of the national program of technical education. One thing is certain: I would not be here in this miserable *kolkhoz*, and I would not have been allocated the dismal one-room apartment I have in Leningrad. Therefore, since I did not get my share legally, I plan to secure illegally at least part of what is coming to me. Now, to get down to specifics. I have resolved to

engage in black marketeering, and I am relying on you to be discreet. Only my wife and the two of us can know about this project. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly."

"My wife and I will produce the soap, and you will sell it on the black market, at a twenty percent share of the profits. How does that sound?"

"Fair enough," I replied. "Go ahead and prepare ten containers of soap, and I will try to sell them. If the people like the merchandise, I think we will make a rather nice profit."

Two days later, I went to the market with ten containers of soap. The soap was of excellent quality. It had a pleasant fragrance and adequately removed dirt and stains. The merchandise was sold immediately, and as a result, our income rose sharply.

During those summer days, I walked barefoot to and from the warehouse. My rubber boots were almost completely shredded, and in order to save them for the winter, I chose not to wear them while the weather was warm. I walked slowly, carefully stepping on the railroad ties. The fields were full of prickly thorns, poison ivy and snakes, and the spaces between the ties were filled with small sharp-edged pebbles. As I jumped from tie to tie to avoid cutting my feet, I spied a small package wrapped in a handkerchief lying on the ground. I carefully picked it up and opened it, amazed at the treasure I found inside. I held in my hand a complete book of bread rations! Each coupon entitled the bearer to five pounds of bread, and the book held thirty coupons!

I thanked Hashem for sending this fortune my way. For a few coupons I could buy a pair of shoes and a shirt, and I would still have enough left to provide for any unforeseen emergency.

CHAPTER 29

Hostile Encounter

IT WAS A SULTRY, LAZY SUMMER AFTERNOON, AND THE SUN beat down mercilessly; even the crickets were silent. My roommates and I were relaxing in our stuffy room, resting from the day's work. The windows were wide open, and perspiration streamed down our foreheads in small rivulets. Suddenly, a noisy commotion coming from outside stirred us out of our stupor.

"Down with this government and that Jew-loving Stalin! Do you know why he's sending us to fight against Hitler? Because of the Jews! Those dirty Jews caused this war! It's all their fault! They took all our money and turned us into a bunch of paupers. If I get hold of a Jew I'm going to break his bones! It's because of them that I have to go to war, to get killed!"

We looked out the window. The tirade was coming from a drunken Ukrainian policeman who was staggering through the street, swearing and cursing at the top of his voice.

"Get me a Jew!" he roared hoarsely. "Just give me a Jew, and I'll beat his brains out!"

"Hey there, Stephen," the Russian woman living across the street called out, pointing at our door. "Over there you have a whole house full of Jews!"

The Ukrainian instantly picked up two heavy rocks and came running toward our house.

"Dirty Jews, I'm going to crack your skulls!"

"Come on, men," Ginzburg called to us. "Let's hide here behind this wall, and when he comes in, we'll grab him!"

We hid behind the wall of the courtyard, and as the Ukrainian staggered inside, Feivel and Ginzburg pounced on him and gave him a thorough thrashing.

"*Haba lehorgecha, hashkeim lehorgo*," Feivel called out. "If someone comes to kill you, be quick and kill him first."

We all rushed to help him. The Ukrainian howled with fury, but we beat him soundly. We wanted to show him that Jewish blood is not cheap.

"Enough!" I called out. "I think the thick-headed drunkard got the message."

"We'll let him go," said Feivel, "and then run into the fields as fast as we can! He's going to call his friends, and they'll want revenge. If they catch us, we'll be in big trouble."

We released him and instantly dispersed into the corn fields.

Hunched down among the corn stalks, I sat as quietly as possible. I was afraid of the Ukrainians and worried about my friends. That policeman had left us with no choice. If we had not beaten him up, he would have broken into our house, and

we would have been the ones to suffer. As I crouched on the ground I quietly whispered a few chapters of *Tehillim*.

Suddenly, I heard footsteps.

"The Ukrainians," I muttered with a shudder. "*Ribono Shel Olam*, save us from these beasts."

However, these were not the Ukrainians. It was the Uzbek woman who owned the cornfield.

"*Karapchuk! Karapchuk!*" she cried out in panic, as she spotted me hiding in the field. "A thief, a thief!"

"I'm no thief," I mumbled, still terrified.

Her husband and son, two enormous Uzbeks, grabbed me and dragged me to their courtyard.

"What were you doing hiding in that field?" the farmer asked in Russian.

"N-nothing," I stammered.

"He wanted to steal corn," the wife interjected. "Why else would he be hiding in the field?"

Inside the courtyard where we were standing, there was a small house where the Goldreich family lived. They were friends of mine from the market.

"Itzik, what are you doing here?" Mr. Goldreich exclaimed.

"The dirty *zhid* wanted to steal our corn," the Uzbek woman screamed.

"You are all wrong. This fellow is no thief. We know him very well." The entire Goldreich family came to my aid.

"If so, what was he doing in my field?" the farmer asked angrily.

I turned to the Goldreichs, and in Yiddish, I quickly related the escapade that had occurred with the drunken Ukrainian policeman.

"He's no thief," said Mr. Goldreich calmly. "I'll vouch for

him. He was simply hiding from his roommates, who wanted to beat him up. Come, Itzik," he continued, turning to me. "Spend the night with us, and Hashem will take care of tomorrow."

The next morning, I went to my house to get my *tefillin*. As I came near, I smelled smoke. My friends were there already, gazing silently at the ruins that had been our house. The building was now burned down to the ground.

"So that's how they got their revenge," murmured Ginzburg sadly.

"They must have thought that we were inside," Feivel hissed.

"*Oy vey,* my *tefillin*!" I cried out, scurrying into the charred ruins of the house. Blackened pots and pans were scattered among the ashes; I stepped across burned leftover food, bent bed frames and torn clothes. Amidst the piles of ashes I spotted the gold embroidery on a soot-covered, scorched bag.

"My *tefillin*!" I whispered, pressing the soiled bag to my heart. Mercifully, the *tefillin* were not damaged.

"*Chasdei Hashem ki lo samnu.* Hashem's kindness has not ended, His mercies are not exhausted."*

"If we don't do something drastic," said Ginzburg, "the Ukrainian will get us again."

"So what do you suggest we do?" I asked.

"Let's go to the police," said Feivel. "We'll report the entire incident. After all, we are penniless now, and we don't even have a roof over our heads."

"Who should be our spokesman?"

"The ones who have the best command of the Russian

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* *Eichah 3:22*

language," Feivel decided. "That would mean Itzik and my brother."

As we drew near the menacing gray building that housed the Russian police station, we could hear pitiful cries emanating from inside. My heart began to beat faster. I was gripped with revulsion and fear at the thought of the dreaded NKVD, the secret police. We were about to enter a lion's den. This time, I was the plaintiff, but what would be my role the next time I entered this building?

The investigator, a nice fellow with pronounced Jewish features, questioned us about the Ukrainian drunkard and the fire that destroyed our house.

"Don't worry," he said, patting us on our shoulders. "We'll do our best to take quick action. This anti-Semite will wind up behind bars."

A few days later, we were called in for questioning. To my surprise, the officer of the NKVD, Samsonovitz, asked me a number of questions about my past, my father's occupation and other details that were irrelevant to the case. I gave straightforward answers to all his queries, unsure of what he wanted from me. The investigation developed into a long philosophical discussion about Torah ideology.

"My friend," Samsonovitz said with a meaningful wink as he concluded the conversation, "I'll be seeing you again!"

CHAPTER 30

Justice Prevails

THE JUDGE POUNDED THE MALLET ON HER HEAVY mahogany desk.

"Silence! This court is in session!"

"Isaac Pomerantz is called to the witness stand."

The attorney of the accused cross-examined me, trying to find contradictions in my testimony. My friend had been questioned two hours earlier, and now it was my turn.

"How did the accused vilify the Communist government?" the defense lawyer asked.

"He said that the Communist government should be brought down," I replied.

"What exactly did he say?" he said, looking straight into my eyes.

I searched my memory.

"I think he said, 'Down with this government.'"

"Are you sure those were his words? Try to remember."

I thought for another minute and then replied, "Yes, I'm sure that's what he said."

"Did he mention our revered leader?"

"Yes, sir, but I don't know if what he said is considered derogatory. He said that Stalin loves the Jews, and that he is sending the Russian people to fight against Hitler because of the Jews."

"And what happened next?"

"He then threw two heavy rocks at us, trying to kill us."

"How do you know what he had in mind?" the attorney sneered angrily.

"If a man throws a rock as big as a chair at someone else and yells, 'I'm going to smash your brains,' you don't have to be too brilliant to know what his intentions are."

"And when you were beating him, didn't you intend to kill him?"

"How can you say a thing like that?" I asked in amazement. "After all, we let him go in good health. We just wanted to teach him a lesson not to start up with Jews."

With that, my testimony was concluded, and the next witness was called to the stand.

"We will now hear from Paulina Karenina," the judge announced.

"Where were you during the incident under discussion?" asked the attorney for the defense.

"I was visiting a friend of mine who lives in the house across the street from the Jewish boys. When we heard the commotion, we moved closer to the window and watched."

"And what did you see?"

"The accused man was drunk and was tottering across the

courtyard. Then he ran into one of the young men who is not present in this courtroom. The Jew became very angry and slapped him hard. There was great turmoil following this, and then the drunken man was dragged into the house and severely beaten. If it had not been for my friend's brother, who broke up the fight and saved the Ukrainian, they would have killed him."

"Did he curse the government?"

"Of course not. He did not say a word."

"Did he mention Hitler?"

"No. He did not curse anyone. All he did was cry out, 'Leave me alone, you dirty *zhids*! Let me go!'"

The prosecuting attorney then addressed the woman.

"Paulina Karenina, what is the name of your friend who lives across the street from the young men?"

"Yekatrina Pavlova."

"How old is she?"

"She's my age, eighteen years old."

"Yekatrina, come into the courtroom!" the prosecutor called out.

The door opened, and amid the raucous laughter of the people gathered in the courtroom, a hunchbacked, elderly woman entered, leaning heavily on a cane.

"Where do you live?" asked the prosecutor.

"Across the street from the Jewish boys, in a one-story building."

"Could you see what went on from your window?"

"I certainly could," the old woman said emphatically. "The dirty Jew was actually telling the truth. And the following night, the Ukrainian and his friends came back and set fire to the house of the Jews. The truth is, they deserved it."

Moments later, the trial ended, and the Ukrainian was

sentenced to ten years of hard labor in Siberia. Paulina was sentenced to one month in jail for committing perjury and rendering false information to the court.

My friends and I were pleased with the results of the trial, and we hoped we had heard the last from the Ukrainian and his violent cohorts. Unfortunately, we were mistaken.

A few of us were walking home from the market one day, when all of a sudden, my friend leaned over to me and whispered in my ear.

"Have you noticed?" he asked anxiously. "For the last half hour, there has been a woman following us."

I turned my head, and to my consternation, I saw that a Ukrainian woman was trailing us. Why was she pursuing us? What could she want?

Her face looked vaguely familiar, and after searching my memory for a few moments, I realized she was none other than the wife of the Ukrainian policeman who had recently attacked us.

I warned myself to be careful, knowing that she was probably looking for a way to avenge her husband's incarceration. I knew that it would be prudent to stay away from the black market, where she would easily be able to incriminate me. But how long could I go on living without the added income? My watchman's salary was minimal, and if I stopped doing business, I'd starve.

After weighing the options, I decided that avoiding my business would not be the solution to the problem. After all, even if the Ukrainian woman could not pin an actual crime on me, she could just as easily accuse me of a fabricated crime. I probably would not be able to prove my innocence in any case.

Once again, I recalled the dictum in the Torah about

defending oneself. "If someone wants to kill you, be quick and kill him first." A friend of mine worked at the same cotton mill as the Ukrainian woman, and he informed me of the illegal smuggling activities they all practiced. After observing the woman for some time, I saw that it would not be difficult to incriminate her before she had a chance to point a finger at me.

Several days later, I spotted her in the market and saw my opportunity. I approached an Uzbek policeman that I had befriended.

"You see that woman over there at the corner?" I whispered confidentially. "She steals cotton oil from the processing plant at the mill where she works, and she is making a lot of money selling it on the black market."

"How do you know?" the Uzbek asked in amazement.

"Would you like proof?" I asked, smiling self-assuredly. "Just wait at the gate to the plant at five o'clock when all the workers leave for the day, and search her. You'll see that what I told you is the truth."

By the next day, the woman was in jail, and the policeman was decorated for finding three stolen bottles of oil in her basket.

CHAPTER 31

An Undesirable Invitation

A TRAGIC YEAR ON THE JEWISH CALENDAR WAS COMING to an end, and the year 5703/1943 was beckoning. We all wondered what the new year held in store for us. That *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* we were able to *daven* with a *minyan*, and each of us prayed fervently that the new year would bring peace and redemption.

Shortly after the *Yamim Noraim*, a new directive was issued to the members of the *kolkhoz*: "All Polish citizens are required to come to the main office of the *kolkhoz* and fill out an application for Soviet citizenship."

This latest announcement was the sole topic of conversation among us, being that, until then, we all bore only Polish citizenship.

"What does this mean?" asked Bratfeld. "I absolutely will

not renounce my Polish citizenship!"

"If they catch you without Soviet papers, you'll be sorry! They might even deny you a work certificate."

"And if they expel you from the country, where would you go? Back to a Poland under Nazi occupation?"

"But if you accept a Soviet identification card, you automatically give up your Polish citizenship," replied Bratfeld defensively. "And when the war is over, the Russians will not permit any of their citizens to leave the worker's paradise!"

"In my opinion," I said pensively, "it does not make any sense to risk the present because of a farfetched concern over what might occur after the war. Regulations keep changing so rapidly, it's impossible to predict what will happen after the war. When the Allies sign a peace agreement, perhaps one of the provisions will be beneficial to the Jews. In the meantime, a Russian identification card affords us some protection."

A short time later, I received an official-looking letter from the NKVD. With trembling hands I opened the envelope and read its contents.

> Dear Comrade Pomerantz,
>
> You are requested to appear at my office at the NKVD on Friday, at twelve o'clock sharp, to receive an identification card.
>
> Please be punctual.
>
> The Secretariat of the NKVD

The seemingly routine request allayed my fears, and on the appointed day, I took my place at the end of the long line, suspecting nothing unusual. The line moved slowly as each person waited for the secretary to issue him his identification

card. Finally, it was my turn.

"What's your name?" the secretary asked routinely.

"Isaac Pomerantz."

After searching through the file, she pulled out my card.

"Just a minute," she suddenly said. "It says on this note that before you receive your card you have to talk to the administrator. Wait one moment, and I'll see if he's available."

After a few minutes, she came back.

"He'll see you shortly," she said. "Wait near the door until he calls you."

As usual, "shortly" meant a full hour. The door eventually opened, and the NKVD administrator, Samsonovitz, greeted me warmly.

"Itzik!" he called out in a cordial tone. He evidently remembered me from the episode with the Ukrainian policeman. "How are you doing? I told you we would meet again, didn't I?"

Putting his arm around my shoulders, he ushered me into his office and offered me a seat.

His graciousness made me slightly uncomfortable. What did he want from me? The strange questions he began to ask only served to make me more and more wary.

"Have you heard from your parents lately?"

"No," I replied sadly.

"And how are you getting along financially? Enough food?"

"The same as everyone else," I replied, without going into detail.

My mind worked feverishly. Various theories occurred to me, but I dismissed them all. Over and over, the words of *Chazal* rang in my ears: *Al tisvada larashus*. Do not become

overly familiar with the government.*

"Listen, Itzik," he said in a serious tone. "I'm sure you know a little about history. During the Czarist regime, the economy was stagnant. The landowners were wealthy and prosperous, and they exploited the poverty-stricken peasants. There was neither justice nor fairness; they held the reins of power.

"Then came Lenin and, after him, Stalin, the sun of the nations. They began a drastic revolution. Right now, the revolution is still in its infancy. There are many obstacles to overcome. But if the masses cooperate, justice will triumph. Each man will work according to his ability and receive according to his needs. We will have a classless society; no one will be rich or poor. Everyone will be gloriously happy."

I lowered my head and kept quiet.

"The Soviet Union," he continued, "in spite of its tremendous internal difficulties, is waging a ferocious war against the Nazis in order to save the world from this scourge . . ."

Samsonovitz spoke at length, and I had no choice but to listen. I made some noncommittal comments, but I still could not figure out what he was after.

"Itzik, my boy," he suddenly said. "I've known you for quite a while. I have checked you out, and I appreciate your intelligence and your capabilities. I think you can make an important contribution toward the progress of the Communist revolution and benefit all of society. I have therefore decided to offer you an important job in the secret service."

I shuddered inwardly. Don't become overly familiar with the government, I repeated to myself.

"There are many Jews here who criticize the Soviet

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* *Avos 1:10*

government and Communism in general," Samsonovitz continued. "If they complain because they are hungry, that's understandable. But there are others who have an excess of wealth and who undermine the Communist economy by dealing on the black market. These people then have the nerve to vilify Communism and incite others to hate the government.

"These are the kind of ungrateful people we have to fight against. If they would have remained in Poland, the Germans would have killed them. Russia mercifully opened her borders and took them in. Yes, these people have to be taught a lesson in the Siberian wastelands."

Samsonovitz rose from his seat and handed me a piece of paper and a pen.

"Now I want you to sign the following statement: I, the undersigned, Isaac Pomerantz, herewith declare that I will assist the NKVD and carry out any assignment that I will be given. My code name in the party will be Pamir."

"No, I won't sign this!" I said emphatically.

"Why not?" a shocked Samsonovitz replied. "What is the problem?"

"I understand your arguments very well," I said. "I even agree with them. But there are things that cannot be decided merely on the basis of pure logic. There are feelings that are dictated by the heart. If I were to sign this, I would not be at peace with myself. Emotionally, I am just not prepared to become an informer."

"Itzik, you are so naive," Samsonovitz said, smiling condescendingly. "Don't you realize what a wonderful career this position opens up for you? You have no hope of ever finding your parents alive. You must begin a new chapter in your life; start over again with the party as your father and your

mother. You have a lot of talent, Itzik, and I sincerely believe that you will advance to high office.

"I know all about your dealings on the black market. Until now, I have looked away, but there will come a day when you will have to answer for this. If you would be working in the service of the party you'd earn a decent salary, and you would be able to support your family comfortably."

"Samsonovitz," I countered, "the Jewish people are living through very difficult times right now. The threat of total annihilation is hanging over our heads, and I just cannot give any thought to my personal welfare. In these times of distress, I feel that I cannot separate from the community and from the Jewish people."

"Listen, Itzik," Samsonovitz said with finality. "I'll give you until eleven o'clock tomorrow morning. Think it over, and we'll continue our talk tomorrow."

I got up to leave.

"One more thing," Samsonovitz added, looking serious. "I'm warning you, Itzik, don't talk about our conversation to anyone. Be careful; the streets are full of informers. If you so much as breathe a word about it to anyone, we'll find out about it. And then you'll never see freedom again."

CHAPTER 32

The Test

WALKING UNSTEADILY, I LEFT THE BUILDING. THE sun was shining brightly, but I barely noticed it. I felt as if a heavy weight was resting on my shoulders.

I noticed two youngsters in the street, laughing and playing without a care in the world.

How lucky they are, I thought, that they can laugh so easily, while I am so miserable.

I could not take my mind off my encounter with Samsonovitz. Many people would probably be delighted to receive a similar proposition. Why, then, did it have to be offered to me? The thought of becoming an informer was utterly revolting!

Ribono Shel Olam, help me, I cried silently. Why am I being

subjected to this difficult test?

I wandered through the streets, not wanting to go home. I could not meet any acquaintances now. I was not allowed to reveal what was in my heart, and I would not be able to keep such a depressing piece of news bottled up for too long.

"Hey, Itzikl!" Kristal's familiar voice shook me out of my deep thoughts. "What happened? Why do you look so serious today?"

"Nothing, it's nothing," I muttered, turning away dispiritedly.

I walked aimlessly past the last houses in town, and I found myself at the foot of a high mountain which the local Uzbeks called "King Solomon's Mountain." According to their legend, Shlomo Hamelech died on this mountain when he was banished from Yerushalayim by Ashmedai, the king of the demons.

After an arduous climb, I reached the summit of the mountain and was greeted by a breathtaking panorama.

"*Ribono Shel Olam*," I whispered fervently. "You have created such a beautiful world, yet I feel so miserable, so heartbroken."

I sat there for many hours, contemplating my bitter lot.

The next morning, *Shabbos*, I simply could not concentrate on *Shacharis*, and I was unable to eat, thinking only of the upcoming meeting with Samsonovitz at the NKVD office.

On the way to the meeting, I prepared myself for any eventuality; I might be shipped off to Siberia, thrown in prison or even be killed, in which case I would die *al kiddush Hashem*. Itzik, be strong, I told myself.

The clock struck eleven as the door of Samsonovitz's office opened.

"Well, what do you say?" he asked abruptly.

"The answer is no," I said solemnly.

"Give me your identification card!" he ordered.

I knew that this meant I was under arrest. Without hesitating, I handed him my card. I was ready for anything.

"Go straight to the police station," he said. "I'll meet you there shortly. Don't try to run away; there are guns trained on you all along the way."

The sun-drenched street appeared somber to me as I made my way to the station. On the way, I met a Jewish shoemaker rushing to his shop. In those days, repairing shoes was a very good business, since new shoes were very hard to come by.

"Look at this," I said to him contemptuously. "You are rushing to work to desecrate the *Shabbos*, while I am hurrying to give my life because I didn't want to violate Hashem's commandments. Shame on you!"

The police station was a drab gray building. I waited at the entrance until Samsonovitz arrived.

"What did you tell the shoemaker?" he asked angrily.

"I didn't tell him anything."

"Follow me!"

He strode through the long corridor and stopped in front of a door that bore a small but prominent sign reading: Chief of Police.

Samsonovitz entered, and I followed closely.

"I need your room for a few minutes," he said curtly to the Chief of Police.

When we were alone, Samsonovitz turned and stared at me penetratingly from behind the heavy oak desk.

"Itzik," he whispered, "this is your last chance. Tell me, yes or no? Think it over before you answer, and keep in mind what we discussed yesterday. What is your final answer?"

"No!" I replied confidently.

His face turned red with fury. He abruptly left the room and returned with the Chief of Police.

"Lock him up!"

Two policemen appeared out of nowhere. One cut the buttons off my shirt while the other placed handcuffs around my wrists. Within minutes, I was thrown into a cell that was crowded with men and women from all walks of life.

"Well, look who's here!" a derisive voice called out. A familiar-looking woman came toward me, and I recognized the wife of the Ukrainian policeman who had tried to kill us.

"The dirty Jew denounced my husband and then informed against me! Now he got what he deserved." She laughed uproariously.

It was *Shabbos*, and I had not eaten a *seudah* yet. I noticed that all the other prisoners were sitting in their corners enjoying their bread, and I realized that I had probably missed the daily ration distribution.

"I just got here," I explained to the guard, "and I did not get any bread yet."

"So wait until tomorrow," he replied nonchalantly, blowing a cloud of cigarette smoke into the fetid air of the cell.

"What kind of justice is this?" I cried out. "First they throw me into jail for no reason, and now they want to starve me to death! They don't even give one slice of bread to a prisoner who is being held innocently!"

My screams stirred the guard out of his apathy, and he rushed to the kitchen to bring me my daily bread ration.

"Today is *Shabbos*," I mumbled to myself in despair, as tears streamed down my cheeks. I finally fell asleep on the dirty floor of the jail cell, only to be awakened by a kick in my back. It took me a few moments to remember where I was.

"You there!" the other prisoners called. "Get up. They want you."

"Isaac Pomerantz, Isaac Pomerantz," the guards called repeatedly.

I jumped up and followed the guards outside. It was freezing cold, and I was shivering. One guard motioned with his cocked gun towards the NKVD building.

"Go forward!" he commanded.

It was midnight, and the menacing shadow of the NKVD building stood out in the dark.

"Prisoner Isaac Pomerantz is here!" my guard announced to the soldiers at the entrance. The cold was numbing, and the biting wind penetrated the thin shirt I was wearing. I paced back and forth in the cold to keep from freezing and tried to maintain my courage, not knowing what fate awaited me.

Itzik, I told myself, be strong. Hashem has helped you miraculously in the past, and surely, He will watch over you now.

Finally, Samsonovitz appeared at the door.

"Come in," he said tonelessly.

I entered the same frightful room I had been in previously and wondered what would happen this time.

Samsonovitz closed the door behind us, and my heart sank. My imagination ran wild as I pictured the horrors that surely awaited me. Would I be beaten and sent to Siberia for refusing to cooperate with Mother Russia?

Samsonovitz interrupted my thoughts and began speaking warmly. He wore a broad smile on his face and did not seem angry with me at all.

"Itzik, you are a *chevrah-man*," he said, patting me on the shoulders in a friendly manner. "I have to admit that your

courage and tenacious adherence to your convictions are to be admired."

I looked at him in disbelief. Was he making fun of me? What did he have planned?

"Don't worry," he said. "I promise you, no harm will befall you. We just wanted to test you, to see whether you were sincere or whether you could be tempted."

"*Gam ki eileich begei tzalmaves* . . . Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no harm for You are with me,"* I whispered under my breath.

"Now," he continued, "I want two favors from you. First of all, that you won't tell a soul about what has happened to you here, and second, that we will stay good friends. I want you to know that even though we hold opposite views, I admire you with all my heart. And now, come with me."

We walked outside in the direction of the police station.

"This young fellow is free to go," he said to the policemen on duty, "but I want you to let him sleep in the policemen's quarters until morning."

"Yes, sir!" they replied, saluting smartly.

When I woke up the next morning, the sun was smiling at me through the policemen's windows. Yesterday was only a bad dream, and now the nightmare was over. I recalled the verse from *Tehillim*, "Your rod and Your staff comfort me."**

From that day on, every time I met Samsonovitz in the street, he stopped to chat with me. Occasionally, he would invite me to have a drink with him and exchange views on ideology and philosophy.

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* *Tehillim 23:4*

** *ibid.*

This friendship was not at all to my liking. After all, our Sages said, "Do not become overly familiar with the government." I was afraid that the day might come when I would find myself behind bars. Samsonovitz was fully aware that I could not exist on a watchman's salary and that I was active on the black market. However, although he made me uneasy, I saw no way of getting out of the dangerous friendship.

CHAPTER 33

A Place Called Home

I TRIED TO PUT THE NKVD INCIDENT OUT OF MY MIND AND return to my old routine. A friend of mine who worked at the cotton mill knew that I was active on the black market, and he approached me with an interesting business proposition.

"Listen, Itzik," he said. "I could supply you with oil from the mill, and you would be able to sell it on the black market. We'll split the profits evenly."

The proposal was a good one, and we began immediately. The black market was full of Jews, and Yiddish was spoken all over. I spent my days doing business and discussing Torah.

It was in the market that I met Avraham Sofer, a *frum* young man who was very scrupulous in the observance of all *mitzvos*.

"Please come and spend the *Shabbos* in our house," he begged me. "My mother would be delighted to make your acquaintance. We can learn together, and my brother Yosef would be thrilled to join us."

That Friday night I entered the Sofer home, and my heart skipped a beat. A sparkling white tablecloth graced the *Shabbos* table, the candles were burning, and the *challos* were covered with an embroidered cloth. My eyes filled with tears; the *Shabbos* was smiling at me from all corners. Mrs. Sofer sat with her daughters as her two sons, Yosef and Avraham, sang *Shalom Aleichem*. It had been a long time since I had seen a *Shabbos* like this.

"What are you planning to do tomorrow?" Mrs. Sofer asked me at the end of the meal.

"Nothing in particular," I answered innocently. "It's *Shabbos*, and of course, on *Shabbos* I don't go to the market."

"You are not working tomorrow?" Mrs. Sofer asked with glistening eyes. "Do you mean to say that you are a real *shomer Shabbos*?"

I nodded my head affirmatively.

"Please consider our house as your own," she said warmly. "You are invited to be with us every *Shabbos*. I am anxious to hear another voice singing with my sons and to see my sons learning Torah with you. And above all, I am delighted to meet another *shomer Shabbos*. Please be sure to come."

I became a regular guest each week at the Sofer home, and the warmth I experienced each *Shabbos* stayed with me throughout the week.

Winter faded into spring, and *Pesach* was just ahead. Without a proper home, it would be very difficult for me to be meticulous about all the laws of *Pesach*. I hesitated to ask the Sofer family to invite me for the eight days of *Yom Tov*,

knowing how hard they were working just to scrape up enough for themselves. The more I thought about it, though, the more I realized that the Sofer home was really the only place where I would be able to find a true *Yom Tov* atmosphere.

It was difficult to reach a decision. On the one hand, if I joined them for *Pesach*, I could probably contribute many needed supplies. But I also realized that once I asked, they would feel bad turning me down, even if it was difficult for them to have me.

One day, while I was visiting the family, I mentioned offhandedly how much I would enjoy spending the *Yom Tov* at their home.

"*Nu*, Itzik, how could you have thought otherwise?" Mrs. Sofer reassured me immediately. "You are part of our family now, and *Pesach* wouldn't be the same without you."

I was overjoyed. Not only did I have a place to spend *Pesach*, but I had been accepted into a warm and loving home here in Osh.

Shortly before *Pesach*, the warehouse received a large shipment of potatoes. I helped myself to two full pails and also procured a few bottles of oil.

"Now we have to do something about *matzos*," I said to Yosef and Avraham. "I once lived with a few boys in a house that had a baking oven. Let's ask them if we can use it."

The owner, who was Jewish, gave us permission to use the oven, and I managed to trade a number of bottles of oil for flour on the black market. Several boys came to help with the baking, and we began the cleaning and preparations.

"*Leshem matzos mitzvah!*" we called out as we flattened the little wads of dough. "For the sake of the *mitzvah* of *matzah*!" The aroma of fresh-baked *matzos* filled the air. As I watched

the first *matzos* being taken out of the ovens, my eyes filled with tears of joy. This year I would have a real *seder* with *matzos* and cooked food. I couldn't believe it was really possible.

We produced a good many *matzos*, most of which we divided among the people who helped with the baking. I sold the remaining *matzos* on the market to people who were totally estranged from Torah and *mitzvos*. Even the most notorious anti-religious agitator secretly requested three *matzos* to be able to fulfill the *mitzvah*, and he didn't mention a word about the stiff price.

I gave five pounds of *matzos* to Mrs. Sofer, and she thanked me profusely for all the supplies I had brought.

It was finally *Erev Pesach*, and my excitement knew no bounds. Memories from home flooded my mind: the smell of the burning *chametz*, the fragrances of the various *Yom Tov* dishes being prepared and the biting aroma of the freshly ground *chrein*. I pictured the new suit Mother had bought me that last *Pesach*, and in my mind's eye, I saw Father, dressed in a sparkling white *kittel*, presiding over the table.

The *seder* night of 1943 arrived. I sat at the head of the table, and before me were the *seder* platter and three *matzos* wrapped in the traditional *matzah* bag. The pungent aroma of the *chrein* and *charoses* mingled with the sweet fragrance of the wine. We did not have a *Haggadah*, but with our combined efforts, we drew the words from our memories. I told the story of *Yetzias Mitzrayim* woven with *Midrashim* of *Chazal*, the way I had heard Father do it so many times.

All eight days of *Pesach* I ate with the Sofer family, and I had the opportunity to really get to know them. They lived from hand to mouth, never certain where their next meal would come from, but even under the most trying circumstances, it would never occur to them to work on *Shabbos*.

Unfortunately, there were many others who could not withstand this difficult test, and slowly, they drifted away from their religion.

"We should not judge other people who go to work on *Shabbos*," the noble Mrs. Sofer said. "Their financial situation must be much worse than ours. *Baruch Hashem*, we are not dying of starvation. If we save during the week, we'll have food for *Shabbos*."

As time went by, I became more and more impressed with the genuine *yiras shamayim* and *ahavas Torah* the Sofer family displayed.

The doors of their home were always open to every downtrodden and needy Jew, and they shared their meager rations with any guests who dropped in. Mrs. Sofer would mend their torn clothes and help them in any way she could, always in a quiet, unassuming manner. Many people insisted that Mrs. Sofer personally saved them from starvation.

I discovered that Mr. Sofer had died of hunger in Siberia, because he insisted on not eating any food that was not absolutely kosher. His family had truly inherited his tenacious adherence to Torah and *mitzvos*.

A few weeks after *Pesach*, I received a draft notice in the mail. I was being inducted into the security forces.

I went to register at the draft board, and there I learned that I was being sent to Moscow.

Returning home, I tried to sort out my thoughts and the conflicting emotions I was feeling. In Osh I was in my element, like a fish in water. Here I had friends who were *shomrei Torah*, and I had a warm and affectionate home, suffused with *yiras shamayim*. Even financially, my situation was satisfactory. Although I did not work on *Shabbos*, I had enough to eat and decent clothes and shoes to wear. Under

the current precarious conditions, I could not expect to fare any better.

On the other hand, I wanted to put an end to my dangerous association with Samsonovitz. In spite of all the pain my departure would entail, this factor prevented me from trying to get the draft notice rescinded. Once again, I decided that *shev ve'al taaseh adif*; when in doubt, it is better to sit still and do nothing. Wherever Hashem wanted to send me, I would go.

The draft notice did not state when I would be called to serve, but I knew it could happen any day. I had to be prepared for a long trip.

CHAPTER 34

A Surprising Proposal

I HAD A GOOD MANY FRIENDS IN OSH, AND NOW IT WAS TIME to say farewell to all of them. I began by saying good-bye to my dear friends, the Sofer family.

I savored the warm and friendly atmosphere that permeated the house, knowing how much I would miss it. As usual, we sat around the old table drinking tea and talked about anything that came to mind. When it was time for me to leave, Mrs. Sofer approached me.

"Let me walk you to the corner," she said. "I think of you as a son, and I want to have a little talk with you before you leave us."

A cold wind shook the pear tree, and she smiled as she adjusted her kerchief.

"My husband," she continued, "was an outstanding *talmid*

chacham and a *yarei shamayim*. His only ambition was to raise his children to be Torah-observant Jews and derive *Yiddishe nachas* from seeing them build homes of their own.

"Now I am left alone, and the burden is almost too heavy to carry. One thought is uppermost in my mind: How will I be able to reach the goals we have set for ourselves? How will my children remain *frum*, and how will I find suitable matches for them that my husband would have approved of?

"During the past six months, I have gotten to know you, Itzik. I saw how you dealt with different taxing situations, and how you passed some very demanding tests. I know that you have very strong roots and that you received a superb education. In spite of all your tribulations, you remained steadfast to the Torah.

"Therefore, I have the following proposal: Become engaged to my daughter and build a true Jewish home together with her. I am quite certain that it will be a home of which I can be proud, and my husband, in his heavenly abode, will send you his *berachah*. Perhaps in this way, I will have the *zchus* that my other children will also remain faithful to the ways of our fathers."

Mrs. Sofer stopped speaking, and we continued to walk in silence. Only our footsteps echoed through the street.

I was utterly confused. Grateful for the darkness outside, I tried to think clearly about the astonishing words I had just heard.

"Eh . . . eh . . . I have never given this any thought," I began. "Your proposal is really taking me completely by surprise. The truth is, I have not given up hope of returning home, and my parents would be the ones who would select my partner for life. . . Still, I will give your suggestion serious consideration. Let me think about it, and I will give you an answer."

"Of course, think about it," she said with a smile. "And now . . . good night!"

That night, I lay awake for many hours, staring at the ceiling and trying to make sense out of the conflicting thoughts that raced through my mind.

Maybe Mrs. Sofer's advice was right, after all. I reflected on my experiences over the last few years. In the Siberian prison camp, the ties to my parents began to loosen. When I was freed, the bonds with my beloved family were severed altogether. Unbearably lonely, I roamed from place to place through the vast wastelands of Siberia, with no personal attachments whatsoever. . . And now I was about to begin my travels again, not knowing where I was going or how long I would be gone. How would I survive the terrible loneliness, and how could I carry on without a friend or relative in the world?

I thought seriously about the matter. Heaven was offering me an opportunity to bind myself to a pure Jewish soul. Whenever I would be alone among strangers and non-Jews, I would always have the feeling that someone was thinking of me, caring for me. Somewhere in the world there would be someone to whom I could write a letter, and from whom I could expect an answer.

After a difficult week of agonizing thoughts and conflicting emotions, I reached a conclusion.

That Friday night, I went to the Sofer house as usual. The *Shabbos* meal was pleasant, accompanied by singing and Torah insights. After the meal, I asked Mrs. Sofer to come with me for a short walk. A gentle wind caressed my face. I swallowed hard, trying to organize my thoughts.

"I did a lot of thinking on the matter," I began hesitatingly, "and a saying of *Chazal* came to mind. 'Some people

must go out in search of their mate, and others are found by their mate.'* Both your family and mine hail from central Poland, and Hashem arranged that we meet in this forsaken place."

As I spoke I gained confidence, and I continued more steadily.

"During my stay at your house I became aware of your unflinching *emunah* and your admirable character. Your conduct reminded me of my father's house, and that is why I came to the conclusion that I would appreciate becoming a member of your family.

"I must add a small detail, though. You know of course about my draft notice. I sincerely hope that Hashem will help me return safely and that you will continue to live here in peace and tranquility, so that we can bring our plans to fruition. However, under the present circumstances, nothing is stable, and we cannot make commitments that might lead to disaster. Therefore, let us agree that whatever we decide today should not be binding on either party. If Hashem grants us life and good health, and we will be able to rebuild our lives after the war, then we will try to find each other and establish a home together. But *chalilah*, if for some reason we cannot carry out our plans, neither of us will bear ill will toward the other."

When I finished speaking I felt relieved. The greatest joy is when one resolves his doubts.

Mrs. Sofer looked at me affectionately, nodding in agreement. "Very well said," she replied warmly. "I think that my husband would be satisfied with my choice."

A week later, I was informed of all the details of my

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* *Bereishis Rabbah Chapter 68*

departure. On Sunday, at seven o'clock in the morning, a train would be going to Moscow, and I was to present myself at the station. I spent my last *Shabbos* in Osh in the company of the Sofer family, trying to preserve the *kedushah* and the gracious atmosphere for the days ahead. After the meal, I told the family that I would be leaving for Moscow the next day.

"What time?" Yosef and Avraham exclaimed in shock.

"The train leaves at seven in the morning. Farewell, and may we meet again in Eretz Yisrael," I said, feeling a lump rising in my throat.

The next day, at six-thirty in the morning, I closed the door behind me for the last time.

"Farewell house and farewell Osh, my home for the last year. May Hashem assist me through all my wanderings until I reach Eretz Yisrael to keep the *mitzvos* just as I did here in Osh."

The station was crowded when I got there, the air filled with tumultuous noise. Tearful embraces and cries of farewell could be heard from all directions.

I stood on the platform all alone. Who would come at this early hour to say good-bye to me? Suddenly, I heard a familiar voice.

"Itzik! Itzik!"

I scanned the crowds around me. Who could be calling my name?

In the distance, I spotted Mrs. Sofer standing with her sons Yosef and Avraham. She was holding a large basket, stuffed with all kinds of food.

"Did you think we would not come?" they asked. "Would we let our son leave without food and a *tzeischem leshalom* sendoff?"

Just then, the train sounded its shrill whistle.

"Dear Itzik," Yosef and Avraham cried, as they embraced me. "We'll really miss you."

"Good-bye, Itzik," Mrs. Sofer cried, tears streaming from her eyes. "We'll meet again in Eretz Yisrael. And may Hashem fulfill all our hearts' wishes!"

"*Amein*," I whispered.

BOOK FOUR

Weapons of War

CHAPTER 35

The Stalin Works

THE TRAIN MADE A STOP AT A SMALL VILLAGE IN Kazakhstan. Stiff from sitting in one place for so long, I got off to stretch my legs. My fellow travellers rushed into the village and returned carrying large buckets.

"Itzik, are you not buying?" my acquaintances from Osh asked, knowing how eager I always was for a good business deal.

"What do you have there?" I asked curiously.

"Salt!"

"Salt?" I asked, astonished. "What are you going to do with four buckets of salt? If you lived to be eighty you would not be able to eat so much salt."

"Don't you know by now how the efficient Russian system

operates?" they replied, laughing. "Whenever there is a surplus of goods in one location, there is a shortage in another. Here there is an abundance of salt, and it is inexpensive, while in Moscow, we heard that a small bag of salt sells for ten rubles. Why don't you go buy some, too?"

"Of course." I accepted their advice and walked through the streets of the village.

"Excuse me, would you know where I can buy large quantities of salt?" I asked an old Kazakh.

"Salt?" His eyes lit up. "I have plenty. How much do you want?"

"Four or six buckets," I murmured.

"All right, I'll sell you six buckets at ten rubles a bucket."

"Ten rubles?" I asked, shocked.

"Yes, yes, young fellow," he laughed. "Don't you worry. In Moscow you'll become a rich man."

And so it was. When we arrived in Moscow, every bucket was sold right at the station. We sold the salt at twenty-two rubles per cup, and overnight we became rich!

Nevertheless, material gain was not my only concern; I worried about *Yiddishkeit*. I asked David Goldreich, a friend of mine from Osh, if he knew of any *frum* Jews still in Moscow. Unfortunately, he had no idea.

Soon after we arrived, we were driven to the barracks for draftees to the military ordinance industry. The barracks had large sleeping quarters, with each room housing seventeen beds. Adjacent to each bed was a small nightstand, and a clothes closet was assigned to every two beds. In the center of the room there was a large table with a radio on it. The physical conveniences were quite adequate.

I looked around and selected a bed in the corner, close to the wall.

"*Zer gut, wel'n mir zein sh'cheinim,*" I heard someone say in Yiddish.

I looked around. Near the bed I had chosen I saw a bearded *bachur* wearing a large *yarmulka.*

"My name is Chaim Liss," he said, smiling. "A close neighbor is better than a distant brother."*

I was overjoyed to meet another frum Jew, and I spoke with him at length while we waited for instructions from our superiors.

After we settled in, we were driven to our place of work. At the entrance to the gigantic plant there was a huge sign that read "Stalin Works."

"Comrades," the foreman called out. "You have been drafted to do an extremely important job. This plant produces military vehicles, cannons and long-range guns. Your work here is an assignment of the highest national priority. Each worker actively contributes to the War of Liberation against the dark forces of Nazism. Therefore, any laziness, negligence, tardiness or absence from work is tantamount to treason! Three cases of tardiness without a valid excuse will cost you dearly; conviction carries a penalty of one year in prison.

"The work itself is not that hard. The management tries to meet the workers halfway. A diligent worker is amply rewarded. Speak to any of the thousands of workers here at the plant, and you will be convinced that every one of them loves the work, and there are few complaints. Every worker feels like a partner in the national effort."

I was assigned to the carpentry shop. My job was to construct wooden parts on an automatic lathe to be inserted

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* *Mishlei 27:10*

into the vehicles that were produced in the plant.

One question remained on my mind. What was I going to do about *Shabbos*? I tried to discern the character of my foreman, a Russian by the name of Shainkin. He was a gray-haired, middle-aged man who gave the impression of being well-educated. He always spoke in a soft tone of voice; I never saw him lose his temper or display anger. Fortunately, from the very start there seemed to be a spark of understanding between us.

Each worker was given a number. Behind a small desk in the entrance hall to the plant sat a woman clerk who checked attendance. Along the wall, time-charts for all workers were displayed. Each morning, upon entering the plant, we had to turn over our time-chart, and every hour, the clerk would write down the names of those workers who had not turned over their cards. That way the management kept track of those who showed up late for work or did not show up at all.

The week passed slowly, and the problem of *Shabbos* became acute. I thought about it intensely, searching for all kinds of schemes to avoid desecrating the *Shabbos*. If I would be absent from the plant on the same day each week, they would figure it out within a month, and I would end up in a Siberian camp. To play truant was out of the question. What was I to do?

After much deliberation, I realized that there simply was no way out. I had to talk to Shainkin and tell him frankly what my problem was. It might mean the end of our friendship, but maybe by some miracle he would agree to help me.

I approached Shainkin tentatively and told him what was on my mind.

"Don't worry about it," Shainkin said soothingly. "Come to the entrance hall tomorrow morning and just turn over

your card. Then you'll be free from work. You can go to the synagogue or do anything you want. I'll take care of the rest. By the way, on Sunday, when everyone has their day off, you are invited to come to my house. Take down the address: 22 Prokofiev Street."

That Sunday, I took him up on his invitation. The address was in a poor neighborhood in one of the soot-covered industrial districts of Moscow. The houses were grimy and overcrowded; children played in the street, and cats poked around the trash bins, vainly burrowing for a bone.

I entered a drab-looking building and knocked on the door of the apartment. Mr. Shainkin received me with obvious delight.

"Bronislava," he called out to his wife. "Bring out the vodka in honor of our guest!"

"Don't worry," he said, noting my surprised look. "I won't get drunk."

Our conversation was animated, and Shainkin eagerly listened to the stories of *Tanach* and *Gemara* that I recounted. Afterwards, the discussion shifted to current events.

"Those Communists," he said angrily, "are ruining everything. They promised food to the poor, and that things would get better. And what is the outcome? They took away our religion, but we still don't have food. The men in power are rolling in wealth, just as in the days of the Czar, while we, the ordinary people, can't make ends meet. Before the revolution, there was more money around, and if you conducted a little extra business, you could make some money on the side. It was also much easier then, because everything was cheaper. Now, you have to be a millionaire to buy some tea or vodka."

I kept quiet. In the communist chaos you could not trust anyone. If he was trying to trap me into saying something that

would get me into trouble, I had to be careful not to incriminate myself.

My visits to Shainkin's home were infrequent, but we remained friendly, and I was able to avoid working on *Shabbos*. Still, I always made sure to arrive at work punctually during the rest of the week, not wanting to take advantage of our relationship.

One of my jobs in the "Stalin Works" was polishing blocks of wood in the carpentry shop, and the noise level there was deafening.

One day, as I was working, I heard my voice being called above the din of the machinery. Afraid that I was finally getting into trouble for my absences each week, I stood up hesitantly and hoped for the best.

I was approached by a foreman from a different department in the factory.

"Are you Isaac Pomerantz? Your foreman, Comrade Shainkin, told me that you came from Uzbekistan, from the Osh region. Do you speak a little Uzbek?"

I breathed easier. I had been afraid that the administration had discovered the special relationship between me and Shainkin and had decided to move me to a different department.

"Listen," the foreman continued. "A few workers from Uzbekistan were assigned to my shop today, and I don't know what to do with them. They don't speak a word of Russian, and all day long, they jabber in that funny language of theirs. I don't know how I'll be able to turn them into productive workers. Could you help me?"

I struggled to remember as much of the language as I could, and using sign language and hand signals I explained to them the work they had to do. Much to my delight and the

delight of the foreman, the five giant Uzbeks understood me and began to do their job efficiently and diligently.

This incident made me the official interpreter for all the Uzbeks who worked at the huge plant.

"Itzik," a broad-shouldered Uzbek said to me one day, "do you want to buy some ration cards?"

Once a month we would receive ration coupons, which allowed us to buy groceries at the official government-controlled price. The Uzbeks, because of their different eating habits, used only the bread coupons. They preferred to buy their groceries on the black market, and for that they needed money.

Another Uzbek overheard our conversation and offered me his ration coupons, too. Naturally, I accepted their offers and bought thirty cards. These I swapped for three small pails of vodka, some sugar, oil and other groceries.

As I was walking with my purchases, I met Mr. Goldreich, my acquaintance from Osh.

"Itzik," he asked, startled. "What happened? Did you take to drinking?"

"Of course not," I replied laughingly. "This is business!"

I filled some empty bottles with the vodka, closed them tight and went out to sell them. I sold each bottle for two hundred and fifty rubles, and I also managed to sell the other supplies for a very good price.

Until now, I said to myself, Hashem has tested me with poverty. I clearly remembered the sesame seeds I was forced to eat when I almost starved to death and the dilapidated rubber shoes I wore. Now, as a result of my recent transactions, I would have the opportunity to submit to the trials of wealth.

CHAPTER 36

Temporary Leisure

I *DAVENED* REGULARLY AT THE GREAT SYNAGOGUE IN Moscow, and there I made quite a few acquaintances. One man in particular, Reb Yaakov, stood out as an outstanding *talmid chacham* and *yarei shamayim*. Each Friday night, I joined him at his house, where we spent the evening learning together.

One Friday night, Reb Yaakov interrupted our learning to offer me a cup of tea. He entered the small kitchen and automatically reached for the cord of the electric teapot to plug it into the outlet in the wall.

"Reb Yaakov!" I cried out in shock. "*Shabbos!*"

Stunned by my outcry, Reb Yaakov broke into tears.

"*Ribono Shel Olam*, how could I forget?" he wept. "You know, Itzik, every *Shabbos* I have to go to work in the

bookkeeping department of the factory. If I didn't go, I would be sent to Siberia. *Oy*, how I took the *Shabbos* and turned it into a weekday!"

My heart went out to this pure Jew whose traditions had been broken by the Communist regime, and I *davened* to Hashem that I would never succumb to the trials that each day brought.

Rosh Hashanah was just around the corner. For four years, I had been a homeless wanderer, and it was three-and-a-half years since I last saw my dear parents.

With the approach of the *Yamim Noraim*, the Jews in the plant began to think about the upcoming Day of Judgment. Each Jew was immersed in his private thoughts, longings and deep introspection. In the carpentry shop, one worker sang *Vechol Maaminim* and then *Avinu Malkeinu* as he sat before his machine.

"If only we could go to *shul*," a worker sighed during the lunch break. "If only we could get to a *shul* to *daven*."

"Why shouldn't we?" another exclaimed. "According to the communist ideology, all citizens have equal rights, without regard to race or religion. The Christians are off every Sunday and can go to church on all their holidays. If we are forced to work on *Shabbos*, at least they should excuse us on the *Yamim Noraim*."

"He's right, he's right," the others chimed in.

"Come on, let's ask the manager for the day off," I said. "What have we got to lose? It doesn't cost anything to ask. They won't send us to Siberia for that."

True, I would be able to refrain from working on *Rosh Hashanah* like I did every *Shabbos*, but I felt responsible for the others, and I wanted to fight for the right of all Jews to be released from work.

Mr. Rotter, a *frum* Jew who was a friend of mine, sat down with me to draw up a petition. We requested to be excused from work in order to *daven*, and it was signed by the thirty-four workers who wanted to be included.

The next day, Mr. Rotter and I went to the administration office during the lunch break with our petition in hand. Mr. Schmidt, the chief engineer, received us in his office.

"The Jewish workers of the Stalin Works," I said, "are asking permission to go to the synagogue in order to pray on the two days of *Rosh Hashanah* and on the day of *Yom Kippur*."

Mr. Schmidt took the petition and studied the signatures, immersed in thought.

"You probably don't know it, but I am also a Jew . . . I'll do my very best to get your petition approved."

Two days later, we were told that our petition had been accepted. That year, 1943, on the two days of *Rosh Hashanah* and on *Yom Kippur*, thirty-four Jews were excused from work in the Stalin Works.

Erev Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish workers crowded into the entrance hall and handed the clerk the special exemption notice issued by the management.

"I can't believe all of you are Jewish!" she said, raising her eyebrows in astonishment. "You all work so diligently!"

"What do you mean?" I asked her.

"I always thought that Jews were lazy and didn't want to work," she mumbled sheepishly.

That year, an enormous crowd filled the cavernous building of the Great Synagogue of Moscow on Archipova Street. Among them were Jews who did not go to *shul* all year, some voluntarily and some because they were unable to, and there were those who had managed to hold on to their traditions under all circumstances. Some of the worshippers held high

positions in the Soviet hierarchy, and they stood shoulder to shoulder with workers, freedom fighters, and common laborers, all united in prayer on the holy day.

After *Shacharis*, I stepped into the front hall to get some fresh air. I spent some time pondering the events that had brought me to Moscow and trying to understand the purpose of my existence.

For *Mussaf*, I walked over to the small Lubavitcher *beis midrash* which was not far from the Great Synagogue. The *chazan* was *davening* with such ardor and feeling that the entire congregation was moved to tears. I was overwhelmed, and I felt as if I had been transported to the *shul* back home in Dlugoszodle, surrounded by my friends and neighbors.

When *davening* was over, I was reluctant to leave.

"Who is that *chazan*?" I asked the man sitting next to me. "That was such a marvelous *davening*, with so much feeling and warmth."

"Don't you know?" the man replied, smiling. "He is the chief surgeon at the military hospital!"

When I went over to the *chazan* to thank him for his inspiring *davening*, he grasped my hands tightly.

"Please, come to my house and join me for the *Yom Tov* meal," he pleaded.

I felt uncomfortable, because I did not really know the man. However, I had been told that he held a high official post, so I didn't have to worry about his financial situation, and I assumed that being an ardent *chassid* of Chabad, he was probably scrupulous about *kashrus*. I was still hesitant, but I went along with him.

At his house, the table was covered with a gleaming white tablecloth and decorated with a lovely bouquet of flowers. Children dressed in *Yom Tov* clothes sat around the table, and

the conversation centered on thoughts of Torah and *chassidus*. I felt at home in this environment and greatly enjoyed the visit.

Yom Kippur passed and then *Sukkos*, and my life returned to its routine.

One morning in the factory, Shainkin came over to me holding a note aloft.

"I've got good news for you, Itzik," he beamed. "Out of the thousands of factory workers, you have been chosen as one of twenty qualified and educated workers to take part in an operator's course."

"What do I have to do?" I asked apprehensively.

"Don't worry. Life will be easy from now on." He chuckled. "Tomorrow you will be released from working in the plant. This memo has a schedule of all the courses you will be required to take: mechanical theory and practical application in the field, and then the program for exercises and tests. After you finish the course, you will become a professional test-driver. You will have to test-drive each vehicle and piece of equipment before it leaves the factory."

My life became easy. I spent some time each day taking cursory lessons in mechanical theory and driving courses with easygoing instructors, and the rest of the day I was free to do as I pleased.

One morning, our group of privileged students was lounging in the large sitting room when, all of a sudden, there was a loud knock on the door. We jumped out of our chairs.

"Open up! Police!"

Startled, we looked at each other. Had one of us been spotted doing business on the black market? My heart skipped a beat, and I wondered if the Uzbeks had informed on me.

We didn't have much time to wonder. Policemen burst

into the room and began to berate us loudly.

"What are you doing here? A bunch of loafers you are!" the officers barked. "You ought to be ashamed of yourselves! Your comrades are getting killed at the front, and you strong young men are sitting here doing nothing!"

As they shouted, they handed each one of us a draft notice.

"If you want to be exempt from the draft you must bring in a certificate from the management stating that your work is essential to the war effort!"

With that, they turned around and left as fast as they had come. We were left in a state of confusion, holding notices in our hands that would send us straight to the battlefront.

I realized that I would never be able to get a certificate of exemption. No one could say that what I was doing was essential to the war effort; I was basically attending a few boring courses and living a life of leisure.

I grimly admitted that the trial of wealth was not proving to be that easy. There were people of dubious character seeking to befriend me, and it was difficult to push them away. I asked Hashem each day not to challenge me and not to bring me to scorn.

Now that I had my draft notice, I would soon discover which was the greater challenge—the test of riches and comfort or that of the rigors of war. Not knowing how to deal with my new situation, I reminded myself that when in doubt it is better to sit still and do nothing. I would leave it to Hashem to decide what was best for me.

CHAPTER 37

Basic Training

IN DECEMBER OF 1943, I FOUND MYSELF IN DIVAVA, A SMALL hamlet located about a hundred miles from Moscow, which was the Headquarters of the Third Artillery Division of 120 millimeter guns. My friend Nachman Rotter and I had both been dispatched there for basic training.

Seeing ourselves dressed in full army uniform and toting heavy rifles, we laughed out loud. Until now, we had simply been roaming *yeshivah bachurim*; in a matter of days, we were transformed into fighting men in the Russian army.

"Just wait," Nachman whispered to me. "We have a rough ordeal ahead of us. That's how it is in training camp. The drill sergeant does all he can to break the spirit of the recruits, training them in military discipline."

"We've lived through the Siberian training exercise, and

now we'll experience the rigors of army basic training," I answered, smiling. "By the time we finish, we'll be honor students."

Each recruit was assigned a cot in a four-tiered bunk in the barracks, and at a late hour we went to sleep. Suddenly, in the middle of the night, terrifying shouts woke us up.

"Get up this instant, you lazy good-for-nothings!" shouted a fierce-looking corporal. "A big artillery gun has to be towed in from the field! Hurry up and get dressed! You have one minute to line up in full battle gear. You'd better be there if you know what's good for you."

Within one minute, we were all standing ramrod straight at attention, lined up in rows. The bombastic corporal passed along the line, pen and pad in hand, writing down all the names, checking our gear and our posture and tapping our backs to make us stand straight.

"Follow me!" he commanded.

We obediently trotted behind him into the forest. After running for one-and-a-half hours, we came to the big gun. It was a heavy artillery piece that was meant to be transported on a flatbed truck, but this time it was to be pulled by twenty-five unhappy recruits weighted down with straps of hand-grenades across their chests and heavy rifles on their backs.

"Come on! Faster! If you pull a little harder you still might catch some sleep before morning roll call. Hey, hup! Hey, hup!"

We were already insensitive to the biting cold, and even the darkness did not affect us too much. All we wanted to do was get back to camp and sleep, sleep, sleep.

By four in the morning, we reached the barracks, bathed in perspiration. Exhausted, we dropped onto our hard cots, and within seconds everyone around me was fast asleep. I

stayed awake, worried that I would not have a chance to *daven Shacharis*.

At the crack of dawn I jumped out of my high bunk, washed up and put on my *tefillin*.

While I was still absorbed in *Krias Shema*, I heard loud hollering.

"*Povodka*! Get up!"

Everyone quickly got dressed, and the barracks emptied as the recruits rushed outside for roll call.

I don't care, I said to myself. I'm not moving until I finish *Shemoneh Esrei*. After all, I am standing before the King of Kings; how can I interrupt my *tefillah*?

I continued *davening* fervently, trying to be oblivious of what was going on around me and the punishment that surely lay ahead. I was about to begin the *Shemoneh Esrei*, when I heard my name being called.

"Isaac Pomerantz, Isaac Pomerantz, where are you?"

The corporal ran into the barracks and stared at me in utter disbelief. Sitting on one of the bunks, I was concentrating on my *davening*, as if all the turmoil did not concern me in the least.

Like a man possessed, he ran to the office and called to the other officers. Together, they dashed to my barracks to see the spectacle for themselves. They had never come across such a bizarre sight.

As they watched, they burst out laughing. "The crazy *zhid* strapped black boxes to his head and stands there praying. He must think he came here for a little vacation, or maybe that the barracks are a synagogue!"

"This is no laughing matter," others joined in. "Let's teach this arrogant fellow a lesson. Let's show him what it means to be in the army, so he'll remember that this isn't a Jew

shul, and you can't just do anything you want."

"Here's what we're going to do," my corporal decided. "We'll hand him over to the commandant of boot camp, and he'll knock some sense into his head. I have a feeling he'll throw the Jew into prison and make him lose his appetite for strapping boxes to his head!"

The officers all left the barracks while I finished *davening Shemoneh Esrei*. After *Aleinu*, I rolled up my *tefillin* and stowed them away deep inside my duffel bag. The corporal returned shortly, obviously fuming.

"You parasite! The commandant is going to let you have it, you fool!"

"Please," I said, smiling pleasantly. "Now that I finished my prayers, I'm willing to go anywhere you tell me."

"Okay," he agreed, appearing somewhat soothed. "Go and eat breakfast, and when you are finished, report to the commandant."

The commandant of the training camp, a middle-aged, gloomy-looking Russian, was sitting behind his massive desk when I entered.

"Yes, what is it you want?" he asked impassively, scrutinizing me from top to bottom.

"The corporal sent me here."

"Why? What have you done wrong?"

"I was praying during morning roll call," I answered candidly.

"Look here, young fellow," he said, leaning back in his threadbare armchair. "You've just been drafted into the army. You should know that once you are in the army you are not your own boss any more. This is serious business. You've got to follow orders and do what you're told to do. Otherwise, you'll be punished. Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

"Yes, sir," I said, looking him straight in the eye. "I am an observant Jew, and I keep all the commandments that G-d has given us. I'd like to ask you something, sir. By Russian law, am I allowed to pray?"

"Certainly," the commandant replied, "but not when you're on duty."

"But I'm on duty all day long. I don't have a moment of spare time!"

The commandant bent forward. "How much time do you need to pray?"

"Twenty minutes in the morning."

He lowered his head, stroking his forehead in deep thought.

"Okay," he muttered. "Under the circumstances, I'm going to allow you to pray during morning gymnastics."

"Thank you very much," I said warmly, remaining at attention.

"Anything else?" he asked.

"No, sir!"

"At ease. You can go now."

I turned around smartly and left.

Nu, nu, Itzik, I murmured to myself. Out of the strong came something sweet.*

The training at the camp kept me very busy; one course followed another, and in between were countless exercises. We were taught to identify every part of the 120 millimeter artillery gun, how to load it and how to direct the turret for the shells to hit the target. We learned how to use a rifle, a handgun and a machine gun, how to throw hand grenades and how to conceal land mines.

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* *Shoftim 14:14*

My company was made up of a cross-section of people: businessmen, factory workers and professionals. The majority, of course, were non-Jews who had given up studying years before. They found it difficult to concentrate on the lessons and retain the material. During the lectures on communist theory, almost everyone was asleep. I constantly tried to remain alert, intently focusing my eyes on the instructor and paying as much attention as I could muster. When the instructor would ask questions at the end of the lecture to test the comprehension of the audience, I was usually the only one who was able to answer. For all practical purposes, he was basically giving his lecture only for my sake.

After countless courses and much serious studying, our program came to an end. Tension in my outfit ran high as all of us reviewed the material for the tests. Those who passed the examination on the following day would be promoted.

"Isaac, please explain it to me once more," pleaded Ivan, a husky Kazakh.

"And then tell me again the parts of a hand grenade," begged Pavel, a successful Polish lawyer, for the hundredth time.

Over and over I explained the various facts we were responsible for, but most of my fellow trainees just could not grasp it.

With no great difficulty, I passed the test, and I was promoted to corporal. Thereafter, I was sent to a course in communication.

Once again, I was an eager student who listened attentively to all the lectures. The wireless field telephone R13 was disassembled and laid out in front of the class so we could see all its parts. We learned how to use it and how to encode and decode messages.

Every so often, I would receive letters from my *kallah* and her family, the Sofers. I treasured these letters and reread them numerous times, knowing that once I was sent to the fighting front, communication would become almost impossible.

After passing the finals, I was promoted to the rank of *politnovar*, sergeant, and sent to take a high-level course in topography. It was considered an intricate course, and only servicemen who had completed high school were admitted. Among my fellow students there were quite a few college graduates.

After ten days, I had mastered most of the material, and I had even drawn a topographical map using field glasses and other equipment. It was strange that among all the highly educated college graduates participating in the course, I, a simple *yeshivah bachur* who had never seen a map in my life, was at the head of my class. While most of the class failed the final examination, I was fortunate to be one of the three that passed.

Now that I had achieved such high marks on the tests, my peers respected me, and it would be easier for me to keep the *mitzvos*. The men who used to ridicule me when I *davened* now remained silent.

The *Yamim Tovim* went by, and we completed all the courses we were required to attend. I was now a regular soldier in the Russian Army, and it was time to move out to the front and push westward into Poland.

Most of the officers were Russians, with a sprinkling of some Poles and Jews. Each morning at roll call the soldiers sang a hymn, asking G-d to help them vanquish the German oppressors. The Polish officers had requested that a Catholic prayer be included, and their request was granted, with the

stipulation that anyone wishing to leave during the Catholic service was permitted to do so. Grateful for this turn of events, I took advantage of this proviso and avoided the prayer each day.

One morning, the Catholic prayer was attended by a *politruk*, a political indoctrinator, who was a high-ranking colonel by the name of Borochovsky. He protested that it was not proper to show disrespect to the Catholic faith by leaving during the service, and he proposed that everyone remain in place during the Catholic service with the right to remain silent.

To my dismay, his proposal was accepted, leaving me in a difficult quandary. I asked to speak to Borochovsky, and he agreed to see me.

As our meeting drew near, I grew increasingly frightened. I realized that it would not be easy to confront a colonel during wartime with an issue that was of seemingly minor importance. He might very well become enraged at the audacity of a wretched Jew.

When it was my turn to enter his office, I felt my knees trembling, and I uttered a silent *tefillah* that I would be able to convince the colonel how important it was to me to avoid attending a Catholic mass.

I respectfully explained to Borochovsky that I was a dutiful soldier who had passed all his courses successfully. Under no circumstances, however, could I abide by the order to attend the Catholic religious service.

"I am an observant Jew, and this would violate my most fundamental beliefs. You might classify me as a conscientious objector."

Borochovsky listened attentively and promised to think about the matter. Less than an hour later, the colonel issued

an amended directive stating that all service personnel were required to attend the Catholic prayer session, with the exception of Sergeant Isaac Pomerantz.

I thanked Hashem from the bottom of my heart.

CHAPTER 38

To the Front!

THE TURRETS OF THE BIG ARTILLERY GUNS JUTTED OUT from under the tarpaulin covering the flatbed freight cars. We sat in the passenger cars surrounded by piles of duffel bags, rifles and trunks, listening to the clattering of the train wheels and the pounding of our hearts.

Forward to the front!

We were going home, to Poland. As much as I tried to avoid it, my thoughts kept returning to home, and a silent fear crept into my heart.

"In a short while we should be getting to the Polish border," I said to the officer. "You can probably already see the town of Kovel."

"What town did you say?" asked the officer, peering

through his binoculars. "I don't see any town."

I took the binoculars.

"You're right," I mumbled. "But it's right here on the map!"

Slowly, the realization dawned on me. It was obvious that there had once been a city on the border named Kovel, but there was nothing left of it now. It had been completely destroyed during the war.

The train stopped at a sign that bore the name Kovel in large letters, and the guns were unloaded to the side of the road. I stepped off the train, and suddenly, I shuddered involuntarily. Lying in the dirt next to my wagon was a human head. I drew back, cringing with utter revulsion.

Just then, a thought crossed my mind. Perhaps this was the head of a Jew! If so, a great *mitzvah* had fallen into my lap. Burying a *meis mitzvah*, an abandoned corpse, was a *mitzvah* of such surpassing importance that even a *kohein gadol*, who was supposed to remain pure at all times, was obligated to perform the burial.

I overcame my disgust and picked up the head. Seeing a group of Poles approaching, I placed it on a bench at the station and waited until they passed.

"Hey, Sergei, look over there," a burly Pole chuckled to his friend. "There's a head of a dead Jew. That's what should happen to all of them!"

When they were a distance away, I picked up the head and buried it.

We were very close to the front, and the air was filled with the sound of German warplanes droning across the sky. We dug into the forest, waiting for orders.

Time was moving swiftly. I realized that *Pesach* was coming up, and I was stranded in the middle of nowhere at the

edge of a battlefront. During my spare time, I wandered about the ruins of Kovel, trying to scrape up sugar, potatoes and cabbage, but *matzos* were not to be had.

On the night of *Pesach*, 1944, I celebrated the *seder* in a bunker with Shlomo Bosol, a *talmid* of Reb Elchonon Wasserman. There were no *matzos* or wine, but it surely was a *leil shimurim*, a guarded night. All through the night, we recited pieces of the *Haggadah* from memory, recounting *Midrashim* and expositions we had heard at home.

"I think we fulfilled our obligation," said Shlomo, as we concluded our *seder* early the next morning.

In the days that followed, we slowly advanced into Poland, and by *Shavuos*, we had reached the town of Josefov. This had once been a prominent Jewish *shtetl*, a town saturated with Torah and *mitzvos*, and now, like so many others across Poland, it was a pile of ruins.

"For the next two hours," announced the officer in charge, "you are off duty. Roll call will be at eight o'clock, and then there will be a weapons and equipment check."

It was the festival of *Matan Torah*, and my heart was thirsting for a *beis midrash* and the warmth of a Jewish home.

I was with Shlomo Bosol and a few other Jewish friends, and somehow, we felt drawn into the town. Deathlike silence enveloped the streets, and the only sound to be heard was the echo of our footsteps as we carefully made our way through the ruins. Scattered among the wreckage we found broken *leichter*, a bent and blackened *becher*, torn pages of a *siddur* and assorted pieces of *sefarim*, all covered with dirt.

As we walked, we were each absorbed in private thoughts, painful memories, fears and dark premonitions. Not a word was spoken until we reached the cemetery, where we softly whispered the names that were engraved on the tombstones.

We sat down under a tree near the fence of the cemetery and were surprised to realize that we were not alone. Standing not far from us were about eighty Jewish soldiers bearing anguished looks on their faces. Who had gathered us all to this spot? What impelled these non-observant Jewish young men to gather at a devastated Jewish cemetery that *Shavuos* before sunset?

We all looked at each other. None of the soldiers had a *siddur* or knew the *davening* by heart. Assessing the situation, I thought of the *Mishnah*: "In a place where there are no leaders, strive to be a leader."*

I stood up and gazed at the Jewish eyes that were eagerly focused on me.

"*Rabbosai*," I announced. "We are standing at the gates of Poland, a land that has been a *makom Torah*, a lodging of Torah, for hundreds of years, the bastion of *Yiddishkeit* in Eastern Europe. We do not know exactly what has happened in Poland during the upheaval that has seized the world. Yet, as survivors of our great nation, we have been sent by Heaven to rescue our brothers from the claws of the Germans who aim to destroy the Jewish people. We have a divine promise that Yisrael will endure forever. Our hearts are all full of worries and misgivings. May we all find peace and tranquility, and may we all soon be able to live as true Jews in Eretz Yisrael.

"Today is *Shavuos*, the *Yom Tov* commemorating the giving of the Torah. In *Devarim* it is written, '*Ki lo sishachach mipi zaro*, that it will never be lost from the mouths of their offspring.'** At this twilight hour, let us pledge to be faithful

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* *Avos 2:6*

** *Devarim 31:21*

to our Creator and to be good sons to our grieving nation. May we soon live to see the *geulah. Yisgadal veyiskadash shemei rabbah!*"

There was not a dry eye in the crowd. Each soldier opened his heart and let his emotions flow freely. Never had the earth of Josefov been drenched with tears more pure than these.

I *davened Maariv* aloud, and eighty voices responded to my *tefillos* with a thundering, tear-choked *Amein.*

The next morning, I was summoned to headquarters.

"Hello, my friend. Have a seat," the commanding officer said, smiling cordially. "Would you be interested in transferring to a different section?"

"I don't know what you mean," I said, taken aback.

"Yesterday I heard some very nice things about your work among the Jewish soldiers," he said amiably. "It occurred to me that you would be the perfect Jewish chaplain for our division."

The offer took me totally by surprise. On the one hand, the proposal was marvelous. It was a "Jewish profession," and a chance to influence and inspire a large number of Jewish soldiers. But on the other hand, I thought again of the maxim, "Do not become overly friendly with the government." At this moment, the officer's offer sounded like a good opportunity, but who could tell what it would entail in the future? Maybe they would turn me into a "government-sponsored rabbi" and force me to endorse communist policies and rules. The offer definitely had potential for danger. I looked at the officer and replied frankly.

"I really like my present job, sir. I think I am very good at the topographical work I do. I have discovered many important enemy targets, and when I guide an artillery barrage it almost always results in a direct hit. We've destroyed many

enemy artillery positions and shot down a number of enemy aircraft. I can even say that, through the directions I've given to our gunners, we've saved the lives of many of our men. Let me ask you, do you have a better topographer than me?"

"I am happy that you are so devoted to your work," he replied. "There are not many soldiers who are motivated by a sense of mission. It would indeed be a pity to take you away from your present assignment. You are right, young man. Go back to your post, and keep in touch with me."

He shook hands with me and gave me a friendly tap on the shoulder, leaving me feeling relieved; a load was taken off my mind.

As the days passed, the tension mounted visibly. One morning, after roll call, the officer in charge made a chilling announcement.

"Comrades," he said, as the veins stood out prominently on his forehead. "We know from reliable sources that the Germans are in full readiness and armed heavily. We can expect a heavy attack in the near future. Get ready to move out, quickly!"

Within the hour we were on our way. Clouds of dust flew up all around us as our convoy sped down the unpaved roads. The officer riding in the lead vehicle glanced repeatedly from his binoculars to the large map that was spread out on his knees. Suddenly, he stopped his jeep, and the entire convoy lurched to a halt.

"Artillery guns ahead! Prepare for action! Scout patrols with field glasses comb the area! Signals man, prepare a map with selected targets!"

Dusk fell. The sky around us was a bloody red, ablaze with artillery fire. Exploding bombs rained down from German bombers above and shook the earth. Bullets whistled by,

shrieking across the tumultuous scene. All of us lay flat on our bellies, shaking with terror. Russian rockets thundered overhead with a deafening roar.

In the midst of this pandemonium, I positioned myself near a tree and *davened Minchah*. From the depth of my heart I cried out the words of the *tefillah, "Sim shalom tovah uverachah* . . . Establish peace, goodness, graciousness and compassion upon us and upon all of Your people Yisrael."

Suddenly, I heard someone whisper in my ear.

"Menachem Sandivsky ben Beilah. Include me for a *berachah* in your *tefillah*."

I would never have dreamed that the commanding officer who whispered these words was a Jew.

Throughout the night, we dug in to conceal our presence from the enemy. Our big guns were placed below ground level, and the soldiers crawled on hands and knees between weapon pits.

For four days, I worked without a moment's sleep, except for a few brief naps. My topographical map was full of red dots signifying targets for our artillery shells and green dots that symbolized suspected targets to be reconnoitered by the scout patrols.

On Thursday morning, pandemonium broke loose. Tens of thousands of artillery shells rained down on the enemy while mortar fire blasted through the air. The sky turned crimson as machine gun bullets screeched overhead.

I was quivering like a fish that had been pulled out of the water. Hunched over deep within the trench, I wished that the earth would swallow me up and give me peace and security.

After a few minutes, I calmed down, realizing that the enemy fire was not coming in our direction any more. I was

thankful that my troop was hitting all the targets I had prepared for them. I set up my field glass and surveyed the horizon. The entire German camp was going up in flames, and they were too preoccupied with their own damage to return our fire. Black dots could be seen speeding off toward the red horizon. The Germans were running for their lives before our soldiers, and our fighting men were in hot pursuit.

"Forward!" our officer called out. "Knock out the enemy command post and all enemy positions!"

The infantry troops advanced in full force, and we, the artillery men, followed. My job was to prepare a new topographical map indicating targets for our guns to aim at. However, there really was nothing left for me to do. The Germans beat a dismal retreat across the Bug River toward Lublin and stopped firing their guns altogether.

CHAPTER 39

Destruction and Despair

WE CONTINUED TO ADVANCE INTO POLAND, HORROR-stricken at the devastation and ruins that we encountered. At one point, we came upon a large site that was surrounded by an immense steel gate. At the entrance was a prominent sign that read, "Majdanek." A pungent smell of charred flesh emanated from within.

"What kind of place do you think this is?" I asked a soldier that was standing near me.

"I don't know. Just look at this heavy steel gate. Maybe the Germans used it as a retreat for their troops."

We entered the compound and saw a series of long windowless stables situated alongside the paved roads. Everything seemed neat, clean and well-kept; we witnessed a demonstration of typical German efficiency.

"Showers for Disinfection," read a sign pointing to a brick building. We entered. The bare concrete walls bore the telltale scratches of fingernails. The showerheads hung loosely from the ceiling, not attached to any pipes.

"*Oy, Ribono Shel Olam!*" a Jewish soldier cried out. "This is no shower room. This is a death chamber!"

In a room at the back we found rows upon rows of metal cans stacked to the ceiling. They were marked: "*Zyklon B.* Handle with care. Contents: Poison!"

Nauseated, we exited the building, only to come upon a crematorium nearby. This removed the last vestige of doubt from our minds.

"Whom did they kill in this place?" we wondered aloud. "Were they prisoners? Criminals?"

No one knew the answer.

In the warehouses, we found huge piles of children's shoes, silver artifacts, boxes filled with gold teeth and human hair. Everything was neatly sorted and classified with methodical precision. We walked over to another warehouse. This one contained all types of jewelry.

"Look at all the *Magen David* pendants and wedding rings they have here!" someone exclaimed.

I felt the blood drain from my head as, slowly, an awful realization dawned on me.

"Shlomo," I whispered, squeezing my friend's hand with all my might, "they killed Jews in this place."

As I gazed at the scene before me, a curtain of tears blurred my vision. The German orderliness and their systematic program of mass murder and robbery seemed like a chapter taken from a monstrous tale of horror.

"This cannot be true," I murmured. "This simply cannot be real."

The scratches on the walls of the gas chamber haunted me. Reverberating in my ears were the imagined screams of victims choking to death, crying out *Shema Yisrael.*

In one room, we saw hundreds of barrels filled with fat and bars of soap stamped with the letters "RJF," neatly stacked on long shelves. None of us understood these findings; we didn't see the need for soap in a death camp.

I left through the huge steel gate, a changed person. It would be a long time before I was able to laugh or smile, enjoy the sunshine or delight in the glee of a carefree child.

We marched into Lublin. Thousands of Poles flocked to see us, welcoming us with applause and flowers.

"Hurrah for the liberators!" they shouted with enthusiasm. "Cheers for the freedom fighters! Long live our valiant heroes!"

"Excuse me," I said, turning to one of the smiling Lubliners. "Where could I find Jews in this city?"

"Jews?" he shot back, laughing uproariously. "There are no Jews in this city. That's the only good thing the Nazis did. They finished them off. The whole lot!"

"They must be lying, those *goyim*," I muttered to myself. "It just cannot be true. There were hundreds of thousands of Jews living here in Lublin. How could it be that there is not one left?"

Obsessed, I felt driven into the streets of Lublin. Like an alcoholic looking for a drink, I walked around the beautiful city, peering into the faces of the passersby in a desperate search for a Jewish countenance. All my efforts were in vain. Smug, unfeeling Polish faces gaped at me. Where were all the Jews of Lublin?

After wandering through the streets for hours, I suddenly detected a pair of Jewish eyes.

"*Entshuldig, du bist a Yid?*" I asked the young man in Yiddish. "Excuse me, are you Jewish?"

"No," he replied in Polish. "I don't speak Yiddish. I am Polish."

"*Shema Yisrael,*" I continued in a Polish dialect of Yiddish. "*Ich bin oich a Yid.* I too am a Jew."

His face softened, and as he peered into my eyes, his fear subsided. It was obvious that he believed me.

"Yes, I am Jewish," he replied after a moment of silence.

"Are there more Jews here?"

"No. Since the war began, I have not met one Jew. When the war broke out, I went into hiding with a kindhearted gentile neighbor, under the guise of being his non-Jewish servant. Of course, I had to turn all my possessions over to him."

"But where are all the Jews of Lublin?" I persisted. "What happened to them?"

Tears filled his eyes. "Don't ask . . . First, the Jews were forced into overcrowded, walled-in ghettos where excruciating hunger, deprivation and disease took their toll. In the ghetto, the Jews were turned into slave laborers, and when they had been reduced to skeletons, broken in body and spirit, they were sent to the extermination camps to be gassed, starved, hanged or machine-gunned to death."

The man cried uncontrollably, and I sobbed along with him. Could it be true? Could it be that of the millions of Polish Jews, only the two of us were left?

After a long pause, I was able to speak again.

"Tell me," I pleaded. "What are those bars of soap I saw in Majdanek? What is the significance of the letters 'RJF' that are stamped on them?"

"*Reines Juedisches Fett,*" he whispered. "Pure Jewish fat."

Soon afterwards, our troops crossed the Bug River. Artillery thundered continuously, and volleys of Katyusha rockets streaked across the sky as we pushed the enemy westward toward Warsaw. At one point, as we were chasing the Germans, I spotted a sign at a local railroad station we were passing through. "Dlugoszodle."

"That's my home town," I whispered excitedly to no one in particular.

In my mind's eye, I saw our small house with the thatched roof. I envisioned the chickens pecking noisily in the backyard and Chayale scattering the seeds for the little chicks. I could even hear my father's clear voice as he prepared the *Gemara* lecture he was going to deliver in the *yeshivah*.

Various scenes from the past flitted through my mind: My mother wearing her kerchief, sitting on the porch on *Shabbos* afternoon reading in the *Tzenah Urenah*. My father sitting in the living room, receiving people from town who came to him with their *sheilos* and personal problems.

I had an urge to run home, straight into the arms of my father and mother.

Tears ran down my face as I struggled to face reality. Deep down, I knew that I had no hope of finding any living relatives. I had to stop weeping for a vanished world and try to look toward the future.

"All right, men," an officer called out, interrupting my thoughts. "We have to dig in and wait for instructions."

With the Dlugoszodle station far behind us, I turned my concentration to the matters at hand. Working together, we prepared the foxholes and bunkers. I brought in my communications equipment, binoculars, field glasses and maps and got ready for action. We were encamped on the east bank of the Vistula River, and all was quiet. Except for an occasional

exchange of artillery fire, several days went by without any change. German fighter planes randomly strafed our positions, but without much success.

Each night, Russian scouts were sent on reconnaissance missions to capture German soldiers. These prisoners were interrogated regarding the position, strength and movement of their forces. We learned that a major offensive was not in the offing, and the ensuing lull in the fighting gave us plenty of time to think about our situation. The tension mounted.

One moonlit night, a friend of mine by the name of Avremele Friedman sneaked into my bunker with a nervous expression on his face.

"I'm slated to go on a scouting mission tonight to bring in some Germans for questioning. I wanted to say good-bye."

"*Es zoll sein mit mazel,*" I wished him. "Come back safely."

I felt a tinge of anxiety as I wished him farewell, knowing that this operation of penetrating behind the German lines to bring back prisoners was fraught with danger. Many scouts on similar missions had not returned. In my opinion, the officers were playing with the lives of the men. The information they squeezed out of the captured Germans was not very helpful, and many of our soldiers paid with their lives for obeying their officers' orders.

Unfortunately, my friend Avraham Friedman was one of those who did not survive the mission. He drowned in the waves of the Vistula River while carrying a captured German on his shoulders.

Several nights later, as I lay sleeping in my tent, I was suddenly jostled awake by a powerful poke between the shoulders.

"Itzik, get up! Incoming shells! Come quickly into the dugout!" It was my aide, Bolak, prodding me into action.

The screeching sound of an incoming shell pierced the quiet night, and it exploded a hundred feet away from our tent. Bolak dashed into the bunker, but I remained dozing in my tent, too lazy to run.

The next morning, Bolak returned to the tent. The shell that exploded during the night was just an isolated shot and not part of an all-out barrage. I sat down to prepare breakfast, cooking cabbage and potatoes, and soon the appetizing aroma filled the tent. Suddenly, another shell came streaking across from the German positions. This time, I sprang into action.

"Bolak, come quickly into the bunker!" I yelled in alarm, as I maneuvered around the cluttered tent, heading for shelter.

"No, this time I'm staying," Bolak said ruefully. "It would be a shame for all this good food to go to waste. I'm famished."

"What? Come quickly! There's no time to lose!" I grabbed him by his arms and dragged him into the bunker.

As we jumped into the foxhole, a deafening explosion shook the earth around us, stunning us momentarily. A shell had landed on our tent, and the duffel bags, field telephone and everything else went up in flames.

For the next forty-five minutes, we remained in the foxhole, crouched under a layer of straw to protect us from shrapnel and debris. It was a heavy shelling attack, and all around us the grounds were pock-marked, full of sieve-like holes.

Then, all of a sudden, absolute silence descended upon the camp, like the quiet after a storm.

Bolak, my aide, turned to me, sobbing like a child.

"Now I believe in G-d, Itzik," he said. "I've seen with my

own eyes that G-d protects those who fear Him."

I was surprised to see Bolak so affected by the blast. The son of a non-Jewish mother and an apostate father, Bolak had always been adamantly atheistic in his views, blatantly denying all that was sacred to religious Jews.

Time passed, and we grew accustomed to the intermittent shelling that bombarded us when we least expected it.

Erev Rosh Hashanah, 1944, arrived. The Day of Judgment was only hours away. Would we, the survivors of the conflagration and the sword, be inscribed in the *Sefer Hachayim*, the Book of Life? Would the *tzaros* that our people had endured tip the scales to the side of merit?

I peered through my binoculars. The view was enchanting, the scenery breathtaking. The Vistula River continued to flow gently, unaware of the chaos that surrounded it. Pastures extended endlessly in a plethora of color, and forests of trees silently swayed in the breeze, their foliage beginning to turn a golden yellow. The sun descended slowly in the ruby-red evening sky, caressing a land whose wounds were still bleeding.

My heart was bursting with turbulent emotions. Would the upcoming year finally bring peace to this magnificent world?

"Company five, company five, over!" I called impulsively into my microphone.

"Company five receiving, over!" came the reply.

"All Jewish personnel in your unit, come to the field telephone," I broadcast excitedly.

"Company seven, company seven!" I called to another unit. "All Jewish personnel come to the field telephone."

Using my radio-telephone equipment, I rounded up all the Jewish soldiers in the units within my range. When they

were gathered at their respective receivers, I began to speak to them.

"*Rosh Hashanah,* 5705, will soon be here. It is a day when Hashem is close to all who call upon Him. It is the day on which He judges each and every one of us, when we pass before Him like sheep before their shepherd. *Yehi ratzon,* may it be Hashem's will that we should all have a *kesivah vechasimah tovah,* a *shenas geulah viyeshuah* for us and for all of *Klal Yisrael.*

"*Karov Hashem lenishberei leiv,*" I continued. "Hashem is close to the brokenhearted. Let each of us *daven* for the *geulah* of *Klal Yisrael.* And it is written, 'He who *davens* for someone else will be answered first.'"

One day, as I was transmitting messages on my mobile unit, my radio receiver picked up a great deal of noise interference. I turned buttons and flipped switches on the control panel, but the static kept getting worse.

"We have a serious problem on our hands," I grumbled. "The batteries are almost drained, and power is fading. Within two or three days, we'll be completely cut off."

"So what are we going to do?" Ivanietz, a Ukrainian, asked dryly.

"I've got to go to Praga right away to recharge the batteries," I shot back.

"Isaac, have you lost your mind?" Pavel, the ammunition man, exclaimed with a startled expression. "Do you know what's happening in Praga? At this very moment, there is fierce fighting in progress."

"Well, what do you want us to do?" I asked calmly. "Can we survive without communications equipment?"

"Maybe we can send a common soldier. Why do you have to risk your life?"

"Isn't a lower ranking soldier as much a human being as

I am? Is my blood a different color than his?"

The commanding officer duly assigned a jeep for me, and with Ivanietz the Ukrainian at the wheel, we set off.

"Near the bank of the Vistula, there is a shop that repairs electronic equipment," I said, consulting my map.

The car raced along at a dizzying speed, the wheels skipping over many pits and potholes, jerking violently. Occasionally, we would be forced to come to a screeching halt as shells came crashing into the ground just a few feet away from us.

"Isaac," the Ukrainian moaned, "let's go and hide somewhere. I can't go on any more . . . I'm going to die!"

"Come, let's go faster!" I hissed. "We can't leave our company without radio equipment. We've got to get back right away."

Ivanietz pressed the accelerator to the floor, and the jeep sped ahead. After a few moments, he was forced to slow down, and he grumbled impatiently.

In front of us, a horse hitched to a large artillery gun was moving ahead at a leisurely pace and blocking both lanes. At the intersection with the main highway, the horse came to a stop, and we were forced to do the same.

Suddenly, with an earsplitting blast, a shell landed directly on the horse and the big gun, blowing apart everything in sight.

"*Ribono Shel Olam!*" I exclaimed. "That would have been us! This was a *ness*, a miracle that is plain for all to see!"

The Ukrainian turned the car around and raced away at top speed. I did not consult the map; I did not even know in what direction we were going. The main thing was to get far away from there.

Ivanietz stopped the jeep in front of a dark tunnel.

"That's it," he sighed, wiping his sweaty brow. We can't go any further."

"We have no choice but to abandon the car," I cried, poring over the map in front of me. "The main thing is to get away!" Ivanietz strapped the short-wave radio equipment to his back, and I held on to the map as we passed through the dark tunnel. We advanced in a crouched position, sometimes sliding on our bellies, until we reached the other end. When we emerged, bullets were coming at us from all sides.

"If this is Liberators Street," I said, studying the map, "then we have to make a left turn over there. Then a right turn."

"Hey, young fellow!" a Russian soldier yelled at me. "Do you want to get killed? Get away from there! Run as fast as you can!"

"But you see, I'm in a hurry," I replied. "I've got to get this equipment fixed and take it back to my unit."

"Don't be crazy!" the soldier shouted. "Go and hide in a cellar, and stay there until dark. Tonight, during the cease-fire, you can go anywhere you want."

"I have no alternative, he's right," I mumbled, pulling Ivanietz behind me into the cellar of the adjacent house.

"Company six, company six, over!" I turned the buttons on the control panel in an attempt to establish contact with my own unit.

"Itzik, Itzik, is that you? Where are you?" It was Stephan, the other radio operator in my unit.

"I got stuck in Praga, in the middle of a shelling," I said. "I expect to be back tomorrow morning with the equipment in working condition again."

"Fine, lots of luck. Over!"

With Hashem's help we made it back to our camp with no

further incident, and with our radio equipment in full working order.

Shortly after our adventurous trip into Praga, several officers from Headquarters came to inspect the front-line troops. The high-ranking officers came in the morning and observed the roll call to see what forces we had at our disposal. In the middle of roll call, the officer in charge called out my name. I stepped forward, saluted the visitors and waited for them to address me. One of the colonels asked me the name of my home town and said that after roll call he would come over to talk to me. I stepped back into line, impatient to hear what the colonel had on his mind.

When roll call was over, the colonel came to my communications tent, and after chatting for a while, he suggested that we go for a walk in the nearby forest.

"I was told," the officer began in a serious tone, "that you are a very capable fellow. You have the potential to rise to high rank in the army. I would like to give you an officer's commission, but I cannot do that unless you go to officer training school. You can come up through the ranks and become a non-commissioned officer, but unless you have academic training, you'll never be able to become a commissioned officer. By the way, if you go to officers' school, you'll be away from the fighting front and will not be exposed to any danger."

I pondered the suggestion and tried to stall for time by talking about other topics relating to the war.

"I can see that my proposal does not interest you," said the colonel, sensing that I was evading the issue.

"Let me try to explain my attitude on the matter," I explained. "You see, I am an observant Jew, trying to keep the Sabbath and the dietary laws. This is what prevents me from

accepting your generous offer."

"How so?"

"The Talmud says that the Jewish people were redeemed from Egypt because they did not change their names, their language or their style of dress. If I would become an officer, it is very likely that I would have to change my name, and I don't want to be tempted in that direction. Furthermore, if I were an officer, the men under my command would be subservient to me. In their hearts, they would resent taking orders from a Jew, and they might vent their rancor on another Jew. Certainly, they would flatter me and obey my orders, but my fellow Jews would suffer for it."

The officer reflected a while, then turned to me, smiling. "You are right," he said.

I went back to my tent, deeply grateful to Hashem for saving me from new trials and temptations.

CHAPTER 40

An Officer of Men

FOR A FULL FIVE MONTHS, WE REMAINED ENCAMPED near Warsaw, waiting for marching orders. There was not much to do, and we spent our time searching the countryside through binoculars, trying to detect any enemy movement. We chatted aimlessly, all the while listening to the echoes of explosions emanating from the city, not knowing who was fighting whom. We could not be sure if we were hearing Poles fighting Germans, Russians fighting Germans, or even partisans fighting Jews.

One evening, when the men were all sitting around with nothing to do, a first sergeant told a joke that centered around the alleged Jewish ritual of using the blood of Christians to bake *matzos*.

Indignant, I jumped up and slapped him in the face.

"I am risking my life for this nation; how dare you malign my people!"

The soldiers who had witnessed the incident agreed with my reaction, and none came to the defense of the sergeant. Later that night, the fellow came over to me and apologized, begging me not to lodge a complaint against him.

"I made a mistake," he admitted. "I'll never speak again without thinking first."

As the days wore on, the soldiers grew impatient. The officers were eager to push ahead, but without orders from our superiors, they were powerless.

It was *Kislev*, 1944, on the eve of the Yuletide, and I was the officer on duty for my company.

"Listen closely, men," I ordered. "Tonight we have to be especially careful. The enemy is liable to mount a serious attack on the assumption that we've abandoned our forward positions because of the holiday."

From time to time, I went out to check the sentry posts, making sure that the sentries had not become drunk. I knew how important it was for them to remain alert, and the consequences if they were to ignore their duties.

"Isaac, aren't you coming to the party?" Ivanovitch asked.

"I wish I could," I replied, trying to appear regretful. "You know I'm on duty tonight, and I have to make the rounds." I was happy to have an excuse to absent myself from their celebration.

"But can't you come in for just a moment to wish us a happy New Year?" Grishka, the quartermaster, called out. "You remember we wished you a happy New Year on your holiday."

True, I thought. They did come in during our *Yom Tov* meal to wish us a happy New Year on *Rosh Hashanah*. And if

I go to the party, they surely won't try to convert me. All they expect from me is to show some respect for their way of life, just as they respected my ways and my religion. I decided that it would only be right to make an appearance.

From a distance, I could hear singing, enthusiastic cheering and loud clapping. They were distributing gift packages that had been mailed to the front by Russian and Polish citizens. Each soldier, after receiving his gift, had to make a little speech expressing his thanks.

"Now it is Isaac's turn!" the men shouted.

"Okay," said the officer. "This package is for the brave soldier, Isaac Pomerantz!"

What was I going to say? From me, a religious Jew and a learned man, they surely expected to hear words of encouragement and hope.

There was absolute silence in the big warehouse. One thousand warriors focused their eyes on me, waiting to hear what I was going to say.

"Ahem." I cleared my throat while sorting out my thoughts. "It is written in the Bible that a sinner must bring an offering to G-d. Maimonides, the great Jewish sage, writes that the sinner should be aware that it is he who really should die, but that G-d, in His great mercy, allowed him to sacrifice an animal in his place. Therefore, the Bible ordained that the sinner must lay his hands on the sacrifice and declare that the animal that he is offering is a substitute for him. It rises to Heaven in his stead.

"Through the gift packages they have sent us, the good people of Poland and Russia are placing their hands on us, the best sons of the nation, entrusting us with the sacred task of freeing the fatherland from the hands of the Nazi oppressors.

"Let us rise to the challenge, and may G-d grant us victory!"

A thunderous round of applause rose from the audience.

"Hurrah, long live Isaac!" the company shouted ecstatically.

I felt my legs being lifted from the floor, and my head almost bumped into the ceiling. The soldiers picked me up and carried me around on their shoulders.

Seeing their enthusiastic reactions, I just hoped that I had made a *kiddush Hashem* and brought honor to the Jewish people.

The party came to an end, and I returned to the communications center to find the teleprinters clicking at high speed. I heard footsteps in the hallway.

"Itzik, could we listen to the radio?" several officers of our company requested. "We want to tune in to London on the short-wave radio so we can hear the latest from the front."

The officers were all quite intoxicated, and before long, the strong odor of alcohol permeated the room. On the radio, the Polish-speaking announcer was describing Allied victories in Italy and France.

"Well, that calls for another drink, fellows," I said, grinning.

From outside, we heard the sound of loud belching.

"That must be Gustav," they said, roaring with laughter. "He is dead drunk."

"Where's my medal? Someone stole my medal!" Gustav shouted, staggering into the room. "Give me back my medal!"

"Go away, you fool. No one took anything from you!" Pavel laughed, mocking the other man openly. "Anyway, cowards don't get medals."

That did it. Angrily, Gustav pulled his gun out of the

holster and pointed it at the officers.

"Give me back my medal, you dirty thieves," he roared. "If you don't, I'll shoot you right here and now!"

The drunken officers stopped laughing and trembled with fear. Suddenly, I felt a powerful surge of energy flow through me. I bolted toward the drunkard, and before he knew what was happening, I knocked his gun to the floor. I quickly picked up the gun and ordered the drunken soldier to leave.

The next morning, a sober Gustav thanked me from the bottom of his heart for what I had done.

CHAPTER 41

Close Combat

IT WAS FEBRUARY, 1945, WHEN THE ORDER TO MOVE SOUTH was finally issued. We loaded our weapons, ammunition and supplies, climbed aboard the army trucks and moved out. After travelling for two days on dirt roads along the Vistula River, trying to avoid the German bombers, we stopped in Poltava, in a forest full of trenches and bunkers.

I was totally exhausted from the journey and felt too weak to take another step. According to *Chazal*, if a person makes a vow not to sleep for three days, he should be flogged for taking a vow in vain, because it is impossible to keep such a vow. It is a fact of nature that man cannot go for three full days without sleep. I had been travelling for two and three quarter days without a moment's sleep, and I understood the saying of *Chazal* perfectly.

I spread a blanket on a snow-covered hill and fell into a deep sleep. I was in a stupor, oblivious to all the turmoil taking place around me. I did not hear the German planes flying overhead, nor did I feel the impact of the tons of explosives falling on our camp. Even the rocket fire that illuminated the night had no effect on my deep slumber. Through it all, I slept like a child, an easy target for the enemy fire.

The next morning I awoke, feeling like a new man. In truth, I was as good as a newborn, for only through a miracle was I saved from the devastating air raid that had occurred during the night. The forest around me was completely destroyed.

The men were still taking shelter in the bunker, and when I entered, they greeted me in amazement.

"Itzik, are you still alive? We were sure you'd been killed on that hill. We tried to wake you up, but it was impossible. There was no way for us to carry you to the bunker with shells raining down all around us."

"*Baruch mechayeh hameisim,*" my Jewish friend cried fervently. "Blessed is He Who revives the dead."

"*Baruch she'asah li ness bamakom hazeh,*" I whispered. "Blessed is He Who performed a miracle for me in this place."

The following night, the German bombers once again strafed the forest. We sat in our bunkers shivering with fear, feeling as if the night would never end. At dawn, we peered out of our bunkers and witnessed an appalling sight. The entire area was littered with corpses and wounded soldiers screaming in agony.

As soon as we emerged from our shelters, we were given the order to march. It was eight o'clock in the morning, and

the sun was just rising. We were all relieved to leave the "forest of death," sure that wherever we were heading would be an improvement over the fateful site we had just occupied.

We had to load all the trucks and artillery guns onto wooden rafts that would be pulled by small tugboats across the Vistula River. The work was backbreaking, but finally the guns were in place, their turrets directed upward. Slowly and laboriously, the rafts began to make their way to the western bank of the river.

"German bombers, due northwest!" Sergei called from his sentry post.

The gunners jumped on the anti-aircraft gun trucks, the ammunition men took up positions near the artillery cases, and I established radio contact with the nearby rafts. Overhead, about eighty German bombers took aim and dropped a hail of bombs directly towards us. Meanwhile, our anti-aircraft guns opened fire on them with a steady barrage that became an impenetrable curtain of death.

The waters of the Vistula churned wildly, threatening to overturn the rafts that were reeling precariously on the waves. Even if the rafts managed to stay upright, a stray spark could have ignited our ammunition at any moment.

"Help! The raft is breaking up!" cried Ivanietz the Ukrainian. "We're all going to drown!"

I uttered a silent *tefillah* to the *Ribono Shel Olam*, praying that He would save us from this inferno.

"They're turning back," Sergei suddenly exclaimed joyfully. "They're turning back!"

We could not believe that we had survived this deluge of fire. Hashem, Who sends each bullet to its intended address, had taken pity on us.

"*Hodu Lashem ki tov*," I whispered quietly. "Give thanks to

Hashem for He is good, for His kindness endures forever."*

We finally made it to the western bank of the Vistula River, thankful to set our feet on dry land.

"Come on, men, let's not waste time," our officer shouted. "Everybody on their trucks! Forward, on to Warsaw!"

* *Tehillim 136:1*

CHAPTER 42

Weep, O Yisrael

WE WERE SLOWLY MOVING NORTH, TOWARD WARSAW. The convoy rolled on monotonously, hour after hour, with no end in sight, merely one cog in the strategic master plan to assault the city from the southwest. At last, we paused to take a short break, and I got off the truck to stretch my legs, stiff from sitting on a wooden bench for hours on end. Looking around, I spotted a sign that made my heart stop for a moment. "Gora Kalwaria" were the words etched on the sign directly across the highway.

Ger! This was Ger. A torrent of memories swept over me, moving me to tears. I recalled travelling to the Rebbe with Avremel on a horse-drawn wagon loaded with a group of *bachurim*. The *tisch*, the throng of *chassidim* crowding around the long table, the young boys holding on precariously to the

windows to catch a glimpse of the proceedings. Everyone crammed tightly together in one hall, observing the Rebbe's every move. And then, I could remember how the Rebbe had lifted his hands and begun to speak *divrei Torah*. How a hush had instantly fallen over the vast *beis midrash* as we all thirstily drank in his words.

Could there be a more fitting place for me to pour out my distress? This was a place where every corner was suffused with the sparkling light of *kedushah* and *yiras shamayim*. Surely, a place like this had not been completely destroyed. There must still be a remnant of all this glory, I thought excitedly. In Ger, I surely would find *chassidim*.

Without waiting another moment, I turned to my commanding officer, Captain Klita.

"How long are we going to stay here?" I asked.

"I don't know, Itzik."

"I request permission to leave my unit for half an hour, sir."

"For what purpose?"

"I'd like to go to the town of Gora Kalwaria. To visit the synagogue of my rabbi."

Captain Klita looked at me in utter astonishment. "Are you a *chassid* of the Gerrer Rebbe? One of those with the long *peyos* and the round black hats?"

"I certainly am. Before the war, I also dressed that way."

"It seems to me, Itzik," the captain said jokingly, "that that kind of uniform does not suit you very well."

"You are making a mistake, sir," I shot back. "I cannot wait to get back into the *chassidic* garb that befits my upbringing and outlook on life."

I had a feeling that Captain Klita did not quite comprehend what I was saying, but that was not surprising. There was

no way a gentile could understand something like this.

"All right, permission granted," he said. "You may go for half an hour, but no more."

My feet carried me in the direction of the Gerrer Rebbe's court, the world center of Gerrer *chassidus*, the place from which the light of Torah radiated all across Poland.

I came to a sudden halt.

"Where is the Rebbe's court?" I cried. "Where is the *beis midrash*, the Rebbe's house, the *chassidim*? Where are they?" I wept aloud.

Everything was in ruins. All that remained were demolished buildings without any signs of life.

"*Ribono Shel Olam*, what has happened?" I sobbed. "Is it really true? Is no one left at all?"

I fell to my knees, and caressing a ravaged wall of the ruined *beis midrash*, I cried bitterly.

"Where are Your *chassidim*? Where is the *davening* that rose from here straight to the heavens? Where is the *kol Torah* that resounded here day and night?"

Until now, I had still hoped to return home after my years of wandering and distress. I believed that the nightmare of Majdanek was only a mirage, that the story of the holocaust was a monstrous lie. Now, I palpably felt the ugly truth staring me in the eye.

"*Ribono Shel Olam*," I murmured. "Why? What happened here? How could Hitler have succeeded in killing all the Jews? Were there not fifty *tzaddikim* in all of Poland who could have protected Your people of Yisrael? What about all those wonderful *yeshivah bachurim* who learned Torah day and night in *kedushah* and *taharah*, who denied themselves every pleasure and enjoyment of this world? Was their *zchus* not great enough to save the people from annihilation? Can it be

that all these were found guilty, and I had the *zchus* to remain alive? No, they did not die because of their sins, nor did I survive because of my good deeds. I know their hearts and thoughts were pure, and that they did everything *leshem Shamayim*, for the sake of Heaven . . . No, I cannot go on any more . . ."

I threw myself on the scorched ground and cried uncontrollably.

"*Avinu Shebashamayim*, our Father in Heaven, where shall I go now? If the Russians and Poles come out of the war alive, they have homes and families to return to. But I, where can I go? Where are my parents, my brothers, my sister? Where are my friends and *rebbeim*? Why should I go on living? Why, Hashem, did I not deserve to sacrifice my life *al kiddush Hashem* together with all the *kedoshim*, the pure souls who went to heaven in this storm?"

Emotionally drained, I returned to my troop a broken man.

"Itzik," the soldiers said anxiously, "what happened to you? Why are you so unhappy?"

I kept quiet. They would never understand the ruin of my poor people.

CHAPTER 43

Warsaw Is Liberated

WE BROKE THROUGH TO THE SUBURBS OF WARSAW and entered the neighborhood of Minktov. The Polish multitudes greeted us with joy, cheers and song.

"Hurrah for our Polish heroes! Long live the liberators of Poland!"

Bouquets of flowers descended upon us. Cigarettes and chocolate bars were pressed into our hands. Deeply moved, thousands of joyous Poles intoned the Polish national anthem, while others danced and rejoiced.

I could not bring myself to participate in the festivities, feeling like a mourner at a wedding celebration. Just a few years ago, through these very same streets, thousands had flocked to the courts of *rabbanim* and *chassidic rebbes*. How

could I now rejoice? Where were my brothers and sisters, my fellow Jews? As the ecstasy and jubilation increased in the streets, I grew more and more distraught. While they laughed, I cried and cried.

"Hey, soldier, why are you crying?" several Poles asked me.

"I am a Jew," was my only reply. My tears needed no further explanation.

Upon hearing these words, the Poles showed no compassion for me. They were merely astonished that in this world there still existed a creature called a Jew.

At midnight, I patrolled the Warsaw streets in an armored vehicle and conducted a security check. The streets were still full of joyous revelers. The first night of freedom from the German yoke was truly a night to be remembered. Crowds of deliriously happy Poles were carousing through the streets, cheering me and throwing candy in my direction. Through the tears that filled my eyes, I scrutinized their facial features, hoping to detect a Jewish face.

"Do you know of any Jews around here?" I asked hesitatingly.

The Poles just laughed in my face. "You're wasting your time looking for Jews. Poland is *Judenrein*, clean of Jews!"

"No, it cannot be true," I cried softly, unable to make peace with this awful fact. "Is everything *hefker*? Has anarchy truly taken over? Have You, Hashem, fulfilled the prophecy of '*Ve'anochi hasteir astir*,'* and hidden Your Face from the children of Yisrael?"

As time went on I grew increasingly depressed, unable to stop brooding over the destruction that had ravaged my

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* *Devarim 31:18*

people. I wept constantly, but the tears did nothing to relieve my dreadful burden.

The war continued to rage, taking its toll of dead and wounded. Good friends fell in battle, but I continued to push forward. I watched the horrors taking place around me, knowing in my heart that I was no more deserving of life than those who were killed *al kiddush Hashem*. I had just one request of the *Ribono Shel Olam*: If it was His will that I stay alive, He should let me remain sound and uninjured. After all, I was alone in the world; who would take care of me in my time of need?

We continued to push forward, heading north. Eventually, my frame of mind underwent a complete transformation, and I became indifferent to my surroundings, almost apathetic. I stopped asking questions of Hashem, and my tears dried up. Whatever Hashem did was right, and my understanding was too limited to fathom His thoughts. Who was I to question His judgment? It was true that I could not come to terms with the catastrophic circumstances, but I was too small to comprehend the depth of Hashem's designs. I had to accept as an article of faith that whatever *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* did was for the best.

CHAPTER 44

Battle of Desperation

WE WERE MARCHING ON DANZIG, THE GREAT GERMAN port on the Baltic Sea, center of international trade. A fierce battle seethed all around us, and we had to concentrate all our energies on staving off the German forces. Once again, I was kept busy drawing up topographical maps of the terrain. The field telephone rang incessantly amidst the rat-tat-tat of small arms fire and the thundering din of the artillery. Shells were coming at us from every direction.

We tried to locate the enemy positions, but it was difficult to establish where the front lines were amidst the turmoil of the fighting. Our superiors were beginning to panic, not knowing what was happening.

"Sergei, you look north! Itzik, you look south!" the

captain shouted. "Tell me what you see. What's going on out there?"

As we surveyed the scene around us, the bitter truth began to sink in. We were caught in a pincers movement; the Germans had us completely encircled.

"We're surrounded," I said matter-of-factly, with the cold impassivity that dominated my thinking at that time.

"What are you saying?" the captain yelled hysterically.

"The accursed Germans have managed to spread out and surround us from all sides. Just look, over on this side their infantry is advancing, over there they are moving up the artillery, and from the other two sides they are coming at us with tanks."

"Can you see any way out?" the panic-stricken captain asked.

"There's no way out of it," I countered calmly. "All we can do is wait for relief from outside."

"So, what are you waiting for?" he said, impatiently pushing my shoulder.

"I already called for help, Captain. Can I get you something to drink?"

A meeting was called, and all the top officers assembled for an emergency session. Images of the concentration camps and gas chambers were on everyone's mind. Among the prisoners in these camps were thousands of war prisoners, and although they were not treated as badly as the Jews, they certainly suffered a great deal of deprivation.

"We will not surrender to these savages," the captain said firmly. "We have plenty of weapons and equipment, and our food and water supply will last us for at least a week. We will fight to the last bullet!"

We all nodded our heads in agreement. "Every bullet is

worth its weight in gold!" was our motto. We did not go on the attack any more, and our strategy became strictly defensive. We did not aim for victory, but we would not consider defeat.

The days went by in slow motion. The tension was nerve-racking, and everyone was edgy and apprehensive. Four days had passed without any change, and as usual, I was sitting in the observation post, studying the topographical map.

Suddenly, the earth beneath me began to shake from the impact of exploding gun shells. The horizon was lit up in bloody red hues.

"Reinforcements are coming! Relief is on the way!" I cried out to the captain. "Load the guns, aim toward the south. Fire!"

In less than two hours, we had the Germans on the run, leaving behind a battlefield strewn with corpses.

Once again we went on the offensive, pushing into the heart of Germany, advancing toward Kolberg, a town on the Baltic coast, one hundred and fifty miles west of Danzig.

"Forward! We are taking this town!" the captain commanded. We all plodded along behind him. A deathly stillness pervaded the area, and the town seemed deserted.

All of a sudden, we were caught in a rain of machine-gun fire. Our troops were unprepared for the sudden onslaught and taken totally by surprise. Hiding behind the curtains in the seemingly deserted homes, were guerrillas manning machine-guns. Deadly barrages of fire were directed at us from all sides, and we were forced to withdraw.

"We will have to make an attack with precision shelling," the captain announced.

The Germans were well dug in, their heavy guns positioned all over the town.

"Evidently, they also swore to fight until their last bullet," we commented cynically.

We began to prepare frantically for the decisive battle that lay ahead. We dug fortifications, and new arsenals of weapons arrived daily. Different units advanced from the north and the south, a plan of attack was prepared, and reconnaissance units were sent into town.

Meanwhile, it was almost *Nissan*. While everyone else worried about the impending battle, my main concern was how I was going to celebrate the upcoming *Pesach*.

CHAPTER 45

Pesach on the Battlefield

"MR. SPIEGEL," I SAID TO THE JEWISH QUARTERMASTER of our company, hoping to start my *Pesach* preparations. "I need a sack of flour to bake *matzos*."

"Ha, ha, ha," he burst out, laughing hilariously. "Did you hear this?" he called to the other men standing nearby. "This crazy man wants to bake *matzos*! Death is lurking all around us, we are preparing for a crucial battle, and he thinks of *matzos*! The poor guy has lost his mind."

"When you go home after the war," added Stefansky, who overheard our exchange, "then you can fulfill your *mitzvos* as much as you like. But not here!"

I felt as though a dagger had just been thrust into my heart. Then I recalled the first paragraph of the *Shulchan Aruch* where it says, "Don't be shamefaced when confronted

by people who ridicule you."

"You'll see, Mr. Spiegel," I said defiantly. "You'll see that right here on the front we are going to bake *matzos*. We'll see who has the last laugh!"

As I left, I could feel the glances of the men mocking me. I went straight to the bunker of my friend Captain Klita. Although he was a Pole and a sworn Communist, he would show more understanding for my request than had the assimilated Polish Jews.

After making some small talk, the captain asked what was on my mind. When he heard my request, he answered without thinking twice.

"Well, what's the problem? Just go to Spiegel and tell him in my name that he should give you the flour you want. I even give you permission to requisition a few men from our company to work for you, and you may also pick some local Germans to help you with the baking . . . Don't worry, I'll personally see to it that you'll have enough to eat on Passover."

When I returned to the warehouse with official permission from the captain, Mr. Spiegel did not repeat his taunts and silently gave me whatever I requested.

In one of the abandoned houses in the area we discovered a bakery oven. With the help of a group of Jewish soldiers, a few Poles and several German women, we turned the house into a strictly kosher *matzah* bakery that could pass the most rigorous standards of *kashrus*. Our *matzah* bakery soon became the talk of the entire army base.

Each morning, all the *matzah* workers underwent a thorough examination for absolute cleanliness. Their pockets and hands had to be free of *chametz*, and while they were working they did not touch bread. Before we began the

baking, I burned out the oven the way I had seen my father do it. We then proceeded to knead the first dough. As the finished *matzos* emerged from the oven, we were moved to tears.

"Just like back home," the Jewish soldiers murmured emotionally.

"True, exactly like in my father's house," I sighed. "Oh, Father and Mother, where are you?"

Operation Matzos came to a close. The gentile soldiers who had helped with the baking were happy to receive a *matzah* as a gift, and even Captain Klita held his *matzah* with pride, inhaling the fresh-baked aroma with obvious delight. The other *matzos* were placed into a large clean box which we stored in the tailoring shop, since most of the tailors were Jewish. We locked the box in a special room, and I was entrusted with the key.

"Itzik," the tailors pleaded when they saw the *matzos*. "We also would like to eat *matzos* on *Pesach*."

"Maybe you could organize a communal *seder* for all the soldiers on the base," another tailor suggested. "The *goyim* celebrate their holiday with a big party. Why can't we all gather together to observe *Pesach*?"

The idea was a good one, and everyone excitedly participated in the preparations. Several days later, we received a large delivery to complete our *Pesach* menus.

"Itzik, the food for *Pesach* has arrived!" the chief of the tailoring department exclaimed joyously.

The van was parked in the base parking lot, and Shlomo Bosol, a *frum* soldier, was sitting in the seat next to the driver, flashing a triumphant smile.

"Look what we have here!" he crowed jubilantly, jumping into the back seat. "We'll have plenty of food for *Yom Tov*!"

Boxes filled with vegetables were smiling at me, and next to them were layers upon layers of eggs. We did not have chickens, of course, because there was no kosher *shechitah*, but one thing was certain: we would not go hungry this *Pesach*.

Erev Pesach, as the sun began to set, the fragrance of cooked food rose from the tailoring shop. The tables were set.

"Itzik," the foreman of the shop called with a secretive smile. "We have a new outfit for you for *Pesach*, compliments of Captain Klita."

He took me into the adjacent room and showed me an elegant uniform with lines of decorations arrayed across the chest. Although it seemed slightly pompous and overdone, I had to admit that Captain Klita was a truly nice person.

Over one hundred Jews assembled at the tailoring shop. Among the group were privates and officers, tailors and combat soldiers, *talmidei chachamim* and ignorant Jews, many of whom had never witnessed a traditional *seder*. And no one had a *Haggadah* or a *Siddur*.

After leading the *Maariv davening*, I sat down to conduct the *seder*. With our combined efforts we recited the paragraphs of the *Haggadah* by heart. I explained in Polish what happened long ago on this night, and the important ramifications that *Pesach* held for all Jews.

In the middle of my explanation, I was interrupted by a delegation of Polish officers from headquarters who had come to greet us on our *Yom Tov*.

"A happy holiday to you!" they exclaimed. "In honor of this occasion let us propose a toast of vodka to the life of our division, to the life of our army and to the life of our fatherland!"

Then one of the Jewish officers got up and took the floor.

"Men, we are assembled here to celebrate the festival of freedom. We, too, are fighting for freedom and deliverance, from the chains of the ghetto and from the fetters of nationalism. We are struggling for freedom for mankind and the workers' class. No longer will we endure the yoke of antiquated and outdated laws. Yes, *Pesach* will forever be remembered as the festival of freedom and redemption."

His blatant *apikorsus* and blasphemous communist drivel made my blood boil. I poured myself a glass of water, and sipping very slowly, I crystallized in my mind the things I would say to counteract his words.

"Friends and brothers," I began, "tonight is *Pesach*. On this night, three thousand, two hundred and fifty years ago, we went out from slavery to freedom and from darkness to great light. Our Sages tell us that no slave had previously tried to escape from Egypt. It was the most advanced civilization and the most prosperous society of that time, and materially, the slaves were well provided for. The Jews who fought for spiritual freedom suffered from spiritual, not physical, oppression. But the 'enlightened ones,' the 'free-thinking,' emancipated Jews did not want to leave Egypt. Even in the Sinai Desert they agitated against Moshe, complaining, 'Why have you taken us away from the fleshpots of Egypt, the land of free fish, cucumbers and melons?'

"So you see, Egypt was not a country of physical enslavement. It was a regime that held the mind in bondage, where the people were slaves to their lusts and to their unbridled passion for material pleasure and enjoyment. Rabbi Yehudah Halevi said: 'He who is a slave to mundane values is forever in bondage. Only a servant of Hashem is truly a free man.'

"A person can be a slave to his own body, a slave to his addictions. We have seen many soldiers from affluent homes

who were pampered and accustomed to a life of luxury. When they were forced to do without the comforts of home, they suffered greatly.

"Only a servant of Hashem who, with the *mitzvos* of the Torah, has been trained to be the master of his body rather than its slave—only he is a free man. This is the true meaning of *Pesach*, the Festival of Freedom!"

Thunderous applause accompanied my final words. With a sigh of relief I sat down, wiping drops of perspiration from my brow.

At two o'clock in the morning, the last of the Jewish guests left the tailoring shop, their faces glowing with blissful smiles. It had been a celebration of true liberty. For a brief moment, they had been freed from their drab surroundings and the battlefield environment to be elevated to a higher world.

Immediately after *Pesach*, the battle for Kolberg began in earnest. The Germans fought in suicidal combat, advancing into a curtain of gunfire, running unprotected into open terrain and firing their machine guns blindly in all directions.

"All right, men!" Captain Bigolzimsky ordered us. "On the attack! Forward at any cost!"

The smell of death hung in the air, and soldiers were falling like flies in all directions. With no time to retrieve the bodies, we just concentrated on pushing ahead toward Kolberg. In the vanguard marched the infantry, followed in the rear by the big artillery guns.

My assignment was to point out to the gunners the targets that were to be destroyed. There were four of us working together as a team. Two men went along with the infantry to the forward front line, to within a few hundred yards of the German lines. With binoculars, they would pinpoint the position of enemy concentration and gun emplacements,

radioing the information to the two teammates who stayed in the back with the Russian artillery. Those two would indicate the targets on the topographical map and give the coordinates to the gunners, who would then launch their shells accordingly. Understandably, the task of the scouts at the front was the far more hazardous one. Therefore, we rotated; every week a different twosome accompanied the infantry.

When it was my turn to go scout the firing line, I radioed my Polish friend Tatranovitz who was manning the forward position.

"Connection one, connection one! Over!"

"Connection one, come in," the radio-telephone screeched.

"Come back to base. I'm coming to the front, over!"

"Stay where you are," came the answer over the radio. "The situation here is critical, and we can't make any changes now!"

"I'm coming right now!" I called resolutely.

"Absolutely not!" he said with finality. "You stay back there, do you hear? You don't realize what's going on over here. The Germans are advancing, and I can't move an inch."

I went to the captain.

"It's just not right!" I said. "No one is allowed to risk his life to such an extent. This is the second week that Tatranovitz is staying on the firing line. Now it's my turn to fill in for him, and he refuses to budge."

The captain immediately got Tatranovitz on the phone, but he was unable to convince him. Tatranovitz insisted on staying at the front, stating that the situation was critical and that he simply could not move.

"*Itzik, sei nit kein akshen,*" Lieutenant Rosenstrauch, the Jewish officer who overheard the discussion, said to me in

Yiddish. "Don't be stubborn. Stay at your post. Tatranovitz is absolutely right."

There was nothing I could do, so I returned to my job at the rear.

Finally, Kolberg was taken. Tens of thousands of bodies lay scattered in the streets and under the ruins of devastated buildings. In the distance, two ships sailed away on the Baltic Sea, crammed with German refugees fleeing from their ravaged town. Not one building in the entire town was left standing. Kolberg was one big heap of rubble.

The Russian Army also suffered many casualties. Although we had won the battle, morale ran very low. The frightful scenes at the front were more than the men could absorb. Those who came out unharmed could only think of drowning their harrowing memories in vodka.

"Itzik!"

It was Tatranovitz running toward me with outstretched arms. I embraced him warmly.

"I want you to come with me," he said, flushed with excitement. "In one of the broken-down houses, I prepared some eggs and vegetables and a bottle of vodka. We'll have a real victory celebration!"

"Please leave me alone, Tatranovitz," I pleaded with him. "You know that I don't drink with the men."

"You must come," he persisted. "Don't drink. Just have something to eat. You also have a share in the victory. Come on now, please!"

Inside the ruin, several soldiers had gathered already, and the vodka was flowing freely.

"Let's drink to the unknown soldier!"

"*Na zdarovie!*" was the cry in Russian.

"*Nazdrowie!*" in Polish.

"Cheers! *Lechaim*!"

The cups were emptied and filled again for the second round.

"To the health of the captain!"

The third round hailed "the health of the company," and by the sixth and the seventh round, there was no more need for any designation.

After a few hours, the whole group was dead drunk. In one corner, I heard weeping. Tatranovitz, who was completely intoxicated, came staggering across the room.

"Itzik," he said thickly. "I swear, the reason I didn't want to switch places with you was because you are the only one left in your whole family. So, if you were destined to die in battle, I wanted to die instead of you."

I gazed at the drunken man standing in front of me. His words had the ring of truth, even if they were uttered under the influence of alcohol.

"You know, Tatranovitz," I said, hugging him passionately. "There is a special place reserved in Heaven for *chassidei umos haolam*, the righteous people of all nations. And you, dear fellow, are surely one of them."

CHAPTER 46

The Final Battle

"ITZIK!" LIEUTENANT ROSENSTRAUCH CRIED, BURSTING suddenly into my tent. "How come you're sitting here so calmly? Haven't you heard that we're about to advance on Berlin?"

I looked at him incredulously, not believing his shocking revelation. But before the hour was over, we received orders to pack up our belongings and move on to an unknown destination.

The convoy moved in a southwesterly direction. During the night, we moved forward, and in the daytime, we dug in. The roads were covered with German corpses, but fortunately, in the darkness, much of the gruesome sight was concealed. Along the highway we spotted thousands of burned out German tanks and other broken-down army

vehicles. Occasionally, we heard the shrieking sound of German fighters zooming by overhead.

"Do they really believe they can still be victorious?" Rosenstrauch asked in wonder. "Their planes have as much effect as mosquito bites in the ear of a lion!"

We were not the only ones marching towards Berlin. From all directions, the Allied armies were converging on one of the last German strongholds.

As we made our way towards Berlin, the roads became increasingly congested, and traffic slowed to a crawl.

"We'll never get out of here," my Ukrainian driver mumbled. "Just look at that traffic up ahead. There are cars and trucks backed up for miles!"

"Take a look at that sight!" a soldier called out from his comfortable perch atop a truck. "Over there, the Russian commander-in-chief, Field Marshal Rokossovsky, is standing on a barrel, directing traffic!"

It was a funny sight indeed, and it provided some sorely-needed lightheartedness to our grim situation.

For two full days, we barely moved through the congestion that had developed at the gates of Berlin. Finally, we were ordered to bypass Berlin and cross the Elbe River at a point fifty-five miles west of Berlin.

The Germans continued to fight relentlessly, although by that time, the entire Nazi empire had crumbled. The Allies occupied most of Germany, and only a small area still remained under Nazi control. Still, the Germans would not give up.

On May 1, 1945, our unit was driving through the narrow streets of a small, peaceful village near the Elbe River. The road was lined with orchards in full bloom, and only the trenches that were scattered about reminded us that there

was a war going on. I sat in the truck directly behind our Ukrainian driver, with my two-way radio equipment on the seat beside me.

We were headed towards a rocky mountain that was preceded by an open, treeless area. Our objective was to capture the mountain and clean out all the pockets of resistance. The infantry rode in the vanguard position, and our company, which included the artillery, followed on their heels.

As the communications man and topographer, I was responsible for devising a strategy to accomplish this mission. Trying to overcome my fatigue, I reached for a drink of vodka and began to develop the initial plan. Suddenly, our convoy was bombarded by a hail of incoming shells.

"Attack! Incoming shells! Take cover!"

The infantry troops were sprayed with a hail of machine gun fire and instantly suffered many casualties. Dozens of shells rained down on our convoy, and I witnessed several of my friends killed before my eyes. Hunched over, I ran to the command post where a heated argument was in progress.

"We've got to move out of here!" the commander of the Russian infantry shouted. "The area is completely exposed, and the Germans on the mountain can see every move we make!"

"How are we going to take the mountain if we retreat?" shot back the Jewish lieutenant, who was a friend of mine. "If we don't hold our ground, we'll never be able to capture the mountain. And as long as the Germans control the high ground, they have the power to wipe us out!"

"We can't waste the lives of our soldiers!" the Russian retorted angrily, pounding the table.

Suddenly, the Jewish infantry commander pulled his gun

and turned to face his men. We watched him, flabbergasted.

"Anyone trying to run will be shot!" he called out. "Is that clear?" He turned to me. "Itzik, how about the big guns? Do you have any targets we can shoot at?"

"Not yet. Just give me ten minutes, and I'll have a map ready for you."

I instantly surveyed the mountain through the telescope and drew a map pinpointing the targets that were to be destroyed. As I scrutinized the mountainside, I discovered German tanks racing down the mountain straight towards us. Immediately I radioed Tatranovitz, who was in charge of the artillery guns.

"The enemy is advancing in our direction! Fire one tracer shot, and then I'll be able to give directions to all the guns."

One Russian tracer shell went up, and I tracked it with my telescope.

"Direct hit! Right on target!" I shouted excitedly. "Fire! Fire! Fire!"

The scene unfolding in front of my telescope was simply unbelievable. One after another, dozens of German tanks went up in flames, while others turned around, fleeing in wild panic. Our infantry men steadfastly pushed on toward the mountain and swiftly climbed the slopes, claiming a quick and decisive victory.

As night fell, a group of high-ranking officers paid us a visit.

"Congratulations, men. That was a magnificent attack!" they commended us, warmly shaking our hands. "For a fight like that you deserve medals, so as a special reward, you have the night off to enjoy yourselves!"

The war raged on. We continued to advance to new positions, and I was kept busy at every new encampment,

searching through my binoculars for enemy strongholds to be blown up. Our communications tent was located right near the cellar that housed the company headquarters. This put us in the center of the battlefield, and German cannon fire exploded all around us.

Gradually, our senses became dulled, and our innate fear of death slowly melted away. Laughter inexplicably replaced tears as our soldiers witnessed dozens of comrades killed by enemy fire. I, too, fell victim to a certain degree of callousness and indifference. No longer feeling fear when we came under German attack, I would take cover only because it had become an instinctive habit.

One battle led to another, and we were constantly on the move. One evening, as we awaited our new orders, I was approached by the officer on duty.

"Isaac," he asked, "is your communications gear in working condition?"

"Yes, sir. It is."

"Check again to make sure it's working perfectly, and let me know right away. We're going on a front line scouting mission."

"*Re'eih na veanyeinu veriva riveinu*," I whispered. "Behold our affliction and fight our battles, and redeem us speedily for Your Name's sake, for You are a powerful Redeemer. Blessed are You Hashem, Redeemer of Yisrael. *Ribono Shel Olam*, I can truly say that I have no other Redeemer but You. Fight our battles, help us to subdue this Satan and put an end to his plans, for we have no Redeemer but You."

Shortly afterwards, we set out on our mission, with our destination marked on the map I carried in my pouch. My assistant loaded the two-way radio equipment on his shoulders, and we scrambled ahead to get there as fast as possible.

We found ourselves in the midst of a host of Russian front line troops, all of them rough-looking characters who had just been released from Siberia. They were all condemned criminals who were sent to the front to atone for their misdeeds, and they had been promised amnesty if they would survive the war.

Observing the savage group we had joined, I wondered what the streets of Russia were going to look like after the war, with these types of condemned criminals running loose.

I went on a short reconnaissance expedition around the area where we were encamped, and I noted that the valley that was indicated on the map was completely flooded from the spring rains. Not far from there, I came upon an abandoned warehouse full of bales of cloth.

"Krupietz," I called to my aide. "We'll be able to retire very comfortably tonight on this material."

We spread out some rolls of silk, prepared our bedding and slept "the sleep of the just." Since the day we entered the army we had not slept in such luxurious beds.

The next morning, we went on our way, moving toward the front line. Our objective was to capture the village that lay ahead. Since the crack of dawn, we were under intense fire from the Germans with no respite. They barraged us with cannons, mortar shells and small arms, and we couldn't let down our guard for a moment. I crawled forward warily, followed by my aide, who carried the two-way radio strapped to his back.

"Look, a Jew," someone called out in Yiddish. "Quick, jump into my bunker. It'll cost you your life if you don't." It was a Jewish officer in the Russian infantry. "I'll be needing your two-way radio in about two hours, so stay right here!" he added.

I was quickly convinced and ducked into the bunker with relief. Before the hour was over, we learned that the village had been taken by our forces.

"Attention all listeners!" an excited voice announced over the radio. "The war is over! We have been victorious! The Germans surrendered!"

At first, we could not believe our ears. Could it be true—was the nightmare really over? Could we emerge from our bunker and actually walk around without fear? No more peril? No more fighting? Had it all really ended?

Moments later, vodka bottles were brought out, and everyone jubilantly embraced each other. The officers relayed to us the earth-shattering facts of the unconditional surrender by the German generals, and we received newspapers with pictures of the capitulation.

I took part in the victory parade through Berlin, and then we returned to Lublin.

BOOK FIVE

New Beginnings

CHAPTER 47

After the War

AS A DECORATED SOLDIER AND A VETERAN OF THE MOST ferocious battles of the war, my situation after the war could not have been better. I was on good terms with many high-ranking officials, and I was given an office job with regular hours. I was teaching raw recruits how to use topographical maps and how to determine position in unfamiliar territory. Occasionally, I would take the twenty or so recruits under my command on a hike into an open field where I taught them how to use a compass, how to get their bearings using the position of the sun and how to orient themselves by reading a map properly.

Each class lasted only one hour, and I was free for the rest of the day. During my spare time, I read various books that I had picked up during the war. My primary concern was to

avoid falling into a state of depression. I did all I could to forget the painful memories that plagued me and tried not to worry about my uncertain future.

When the training exercises fell out on *Shabbos*, I led my bewildered recruits into town instead of going to the field. Then I would make my way to the *shul* and give the group some time to do as they pleased.

"All right, men, you're on your own," I would tell them when we arrived in front of the *shul*. "At twelve o'clock sharp, we meet here again. Make sure you are back! If you behave yourselves we'll have more of such outings from time to time. Right now, you are free to go."

Then I would take leave of the cheerful students and go into the *shul* to *daven*. The *shul* was attended by many different types of people, all of whom had now come together as survivors of a brutal war. There were those who had fought with the partisans in the forests, others who had survived the ghettos and the concentration camps and some who had returned from Siberia.

One *Shabbos*, as I was standing in front of the *shul*, I heard a surprised voice call my name.

"Itzik, is that you?"

Greeting me with outstretched arms was Mr. Goldreich, my friend from the days in Osh in Kazakhstan, and his son Shimon. Excitedly, we began to exchange experiences. There was so much to tell.

"Won't you come home with us for *cholent* after *davening*?" Mr. Goldreich interrupted me. "Then we can continue talking."

"Eh . . . eh . . ." I stammered.

"Don't worry. Everything is *glatt kosher* in our house. We have a *shochet* here in Chelm, and our bread, too, is kosher.

There are no problems with *kashrus* in this town."

How I yearned for a *heimishe* home, a *Shabbos* table, homemade food. The invitation was certainly a tempting one, and I promised to accept it as soon as circumstances would permit me the free time.

A few days later, I received an odd message from the Office of the Military High Command asking me to come in for an interview. I felt very uneasy. What could they want from me? My students scored excellent marks on their test in topography, so that couldn't be a subject of grievance.

I arrived punctually for the meeting, and nervously entered the office.

"Sergeant-Major Isaac Pomerantz," the general read from a note in front of him.

"Yes, sir!" I saluted.

"We have heard many commendable things about you. You have an outstanding record as a combat soldier on the front, and you are also an excellent instructor."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, what are your plans for the future?" the commander asked, scrutinizing me from head to toe.

"Well, eh . . . I haven't really thought about it yet," I replied.

"Well, we've done the thinking for you," he said solemnly. "We care very much about the future of our sons who sacrificed their young years for the fatherland, and we have two suggestions. One idea would be to sign up as a career soldier in the Polish communist army where you will serve as an instructor of topography. The pay is excellent, and the army provides you with clothing and a fully furnished and equipped apartment. Your second option is to become a farmer. The government will give you ten acres of land, a

house and some agricultural equipment to help you get started. Well, what do you say?"

I reflected about his offer. Poland was the country where I was born, where I had grown up and where I had lost my entire family. I had certainly tasted the sting of Poland, and now I had no desire to savor her honey.

"Sir," I said after a long pause. "I am a Jew. My entire family perished in the holocaust. I am very grateful to you, but I must decline your generous offer. I don't want to remain in the land whose earth is saturated with the blood of my people."

The commandant looked at me silently. He understood. Then he cordially shook hands with me.

"I wish you the best of everything, Isaac. Good luck to you, whatever you decide to do."

I saluted and left the office. Once outside, I paused for a moment to think things over.

I recalled the year and a half I had spent at the front under a constant hail of bombs and fire. During that time, my life had been in danger every minute of the day. I fought like a lion though, and earned several service medals for bravery above and beyond the call of duty. My gentile friends would now enjoy many benefits as a result of their service in the army; they would be appointed to important posts, and their distinguished war records would open all doors before them. But I was a Jew, and the soil beneath my feet was accursed. I knew that once more, I would have to become a wanderer and travel far, far away. . . But for the time being, I was tied to this place. As long as I had not been discharged from the army I was forbidden to leave the country.

I went back to teaching new recruits, and in my spare time I read books. What would I gain by dreaming and making

plans for the future as long as I was still chained to my army uniform?

"Itzik, did you apply for a furlough?" my friend Kaminsky asked.

"What furlough?" I asked with mounting interest. "What are you talking about?"

"I've heard that the army is granting ten-day furloughs," he said. "Since the end of the war you haven't had a minute's rest. You definitely have earned a short furlough."

"You are so right," I replied, smiling. "I'm going to submit an application right away. I'll talk to the commander. You know, I haven't even visited my home town yet."

My furlough was approved with little difficulty.

"Just make sure, Isaac, that you don't desert the army," the commander warned, winking at me.

CHAPTER 48

Looking Ahead

DRESSED IN A SHINY NEW UNIFORM ADORNED WITH rows of medals, I hitched a ride to Lublin, where I headed straight for the market square. Along the way, I encountered several Jews wearing traditional garb.

"Could you direct me to a *rav* here in town?" I asked a *frum*-looking person.

The man looked at me in utter amazement, scrutinizing my uniform curiously before giving me the rabbi's address. When I got to the house, a young man opened the door.

"*Ken ich red'n tzim rav*?" I asked in Yiddish. "Could I speak to the *rav*?"

"*Yo, ich bin der rav*," was the surprising answer. "I am the *rav*."

"Please, don't mind my uniform or the medals on my

chest," I said with pleading eyes. "In my heart, I am not a Russian soldier. I am a *yeshivah bachur*, a *ben Torah* who has been drafted into the Russian army, and I am anxiously waiting for my discharge."

We had a lengthy conversation, and I related to him the story of my wanderings during the war years.

"Listen to me, Itzik," the rabbi said after hearing my narrative. "Go to the market square and ask for a man by the name of Shloime Appelbaum. I think he can help you. Just tell him that I sent you."

I had no trouble locating the man in the square, and I wasted little time describing my problem to him.

"Don't worry, Itzik," Shloime reassured me. "Just leave it to me. I'll see to it that you get safely across the border into Austria. Come and see me tomorrow, and we'll discuss the details."

The next day, at the appointed time, I went back to Shloime, but this time he did not appear so confident.

"Itzik," he explained, "with army personnel, things are not that simple. The smugglers are afraid of the long arm of the Polish and Russian armies. The generals are interested in holding on to their servicemen, especially those with extensive combat experience. They don't give up their best fighters so easily. Do you understand?"

I was dismayed. Eretz Yisrael had seemed so close, and now . . .

"Don't feel bad, Itzik," he comforted me, putting his hand on my shoulder. "Go to this address and talk to the lady there. Her name is Dinah. Maybe she can help you."

An elderly lady answered the door, and I could see an aged man, probably her husband, dozing in an armchair in the living room.

"Is Dinah in?" I asked hesitantly.

"Yes," the old lady replied in a quivering voice as she dragged herself into the kitchenette.

A young woman came to the door.

"Shloime Appelbaum sent me here," I said.

"Shloime?" she countered, casting a suspicious glance at my army uniform. "Who's that?"

"Shloime Appelbaum from Lublin, Kamintzka Street."

"Look here," she said nervously. "I am not in charge. I have supervisors to whom I answer. Go to Shimshon or Shmerel from the industrial zone. If they approve, I'm willing to help."

"Listen to me," I pleaded, trying to reason with her. "I am a *yeshivah bachur* from Dlugoszodle who was imprisoned in Siberia and then transferred to a *kolkhoz*. From there I was transferred to Moscow, and that's where I got drafted into the army." In a few words, I briefly related my whole story to her.

She sighed deeply, finally convinced that I was not an undercover government agent.

"All right," she conceded. "Come in, and let me see what I can do."

After carefully weighing all the aspects of the complicated case I presented, she reached a decision.

"Listen," she said, looking at me with compassion. "Go to Dubinsky Street in Cracow, near the main square downtown. There you will hand this note to the man in charge."

With that, she pulled a note out of a drawer, scribbled something on it and handed it to me.

"One more thing," she added, as her eyes filled with tears. "When you get to Eretz Yisrael, please give regards to my relatives in Bat Yam."

I made my way to the Warsaw railroad station, a place that

was always buzzing with frenzied activity. During the weeks right after the war, the usual commotion was augmented by the presence of thousands of refugees, soldiers on leave and Poles who had fled to Russia and were now returning to their homes. I stood on the crowded platform, with barely enough space to stand. A sign indicating Dlugoszodle smiled at me from the wall of the station.

It wouldn't be long before I would see my home again, the yard where I loved to play and the pear tree near which we had buried the *sefarim* and the *chiddushei Torah*. Whom would I find in my home town? Maybe Aunt Nechamah, or my *rebbi*, Rabbi Gershon, the *rosh yeshivah*. I thought of Reb Moshe Hirsch, the bath attendant, a real *tzaddik* and the *gabbai* of the *shul*. Maybe, just maybe, the door of my house would open and I would see my dear mother. *Mamaleh* . . .

The tumultuous scene on the platform became blurred as a curtain of tears covered my eyes.

"Reb Yid, how long have you been standing here, waiting for a train?" a voice speaking in Yiddish aroused me from my thoughts.

"Eh . . . eh . . . maybe half an hour," I replied.

"What time is your train scheduled to arrive?" he asked.

"Good question." I grinned.

In times of distress, one could clearly tell that "all Yisrael are friends." Before we knew it, the Jew, who moments ago was a total stranger to me, had struck up a friendly discussion with me about the war, politics and the Jewish community, which was beginning to rebuild itself amidst the ruins. He told me that he was heading for Bialystok where his son, who had just been released from Siberia, was waiting for him.

"So tell me, where are you travelling to?"

"To Dlugoszodle," I answered, "my home town."

"Have you lost your mind?" he exclaimed in shock.

"Wh . . . wh . . . what do you mean?" I was perplexed.

"These *reshaim* won't give up any part of the things they stole from you," he said, enraged. "They are not impressed by your medals or your military rank. If they so much as recognize you and have an idea that you want to take something out of your house, they'll kill you in cold blood."

I looked at him incredulously.

"But our neighbor was a good man," I protested.

"Please," he begged me, "forget Dlugoszodle for your own good. My best friend returned to his home town from Auschwitz. The moment he knocked on his door and gave his name, he received a bullet through his head. Run away from here. The earth of Europe is not fit for a Jew to walk on! Forget about your father's and grandfather's manuscripts. Save your life, and raise a family so that your lineage will continue."

Tears welled up in my eyes. I had passed through Majdanek, and I had seen the destruction of Europe, but only now did I begin to get an inkling of the enormous and appalling *churban* that had befallen our people.

CHAPTER 49

Back to my Roots

I NEVER SAW DLUGOSZODLE AGAIN. INSTEAD OF GOING there, I caught the train directly to Cracow. The Jewish lodging house there was bustling with activity. A blend of different languages mingled with a spirited Yiddish resounded from all corners. This was the place where old acquaintances from a now devastated world met to tell one another about personal war experiences, each recounting the names of friends and relatives who survived or, unfortunately, did not make it. Here people concluded business deals, discussed the affairs of the world, reminisced about a world that was gone forever and charted a future that was shrouded in a haze of uncertainty.

"Itzik." I heard a friendly voice and felt a soft hand touching my shoulder. "Come here, I want to talk to you.

"First of all," the stranger said to me, "get rid of your uniform. It is very suspicious to walk in these surroundings wearing a uniform."

The man introduced himself as Shimon and persuaded me to go out and buy used clothes. I picked up a second-hand suit that was stained and a little threadbare. I stepped into a public bathroom, changed my clothes and came out a different person, looking much like the Jews all around me. I was now untidy and disheveled, a typical refugee. My pants hung on me like on a scarecrow; my jacket was tight, and my shirt was missing three buttons. To make things worse, there was no hat to be found in all of Cracow.

Deeply ashamed to be walking around bareheaded, I went with Shimon to the center for Russian refugees. I left my uniform in the public bathroom, and Shimon held on to my medals.

In the refugee center, I bumped into a young man who struck me as being a *heimishe Yid.* I introduced myself and found out that his name was Yitzchak Weingruber.

"I don't know what to do, I am so embarrassed," I whispered, red-faced with shame. "Please don't judge me by my looks. I really am a *yeshivah bachur.* I wound up in Siberia, and from there, after wandering around a great deal, I was drafted into the Polish-Russian army. I have not been demobilized yet, but I am anxious to get out of Poland and go to Eretz Yisrael in spite of the danger that this entails. A little while ago, I bought these civilian clothes, but I was unable to find a hat."

"Don't worry," he said with a friendly smile. "Just wait here. *B'ezras Hashem,* I'll come up with something."

Within an hour, Yitzchak came back to the center triumphantly waving a pathetic-looking hat.

"It was pretty expensive, but without a doubt, it was worth every penny."

The Berichah, the organization for illegal immigration to Eretz Yisrael, placed Shimon in charge of our transport. Before we left, he approached me and addressed me solemnly.

"You are no doubt aware that desertion from the army is punishable by death. Therefore, look carefully through all your things, and check all documents in your possession. Anything, any paper, any letter, any photograph that might connect you with your past in the military must be destroyed."

"And what about my medals?" I asked.

"Give them to me. When we are in Eretz Yisrael, I'll return them to you."

I had no choice. The man was right. I was carrying a diary from the front, diplomas, letters and papers from the Russian and Polish armies. A few friends of mine gathered around to read excerpts from the diary, and they browsed through my honor certificates and tests from my training days. Then we built a small fire and watched it all go up in smoke.

"Let's go, group!" sounded the command from outside. "The trucks are here. We're ready to take you to the railroad station!"

We were thrilled. Once again we were back at the station, only this time it would be farewell forever. We were leaving Poland! This would be the train that would take us toward our destination: Eretz Yisrael!

My heart pounded furiously with fear, fully realizing the risk I was taking. It was now either freedom or the firing squad. As I was standing on the platform, I noticed a

decorated Polish soldier walking straight in my direction. I recognized him, and my heart skipped a beat. It was my friend Roznovsky, a comrade from my unit who, like myself, was also on a ten-day furlough. I quivered with fright.

"*Ribono Shel Olam*," I whispered. "Through obvious miracles You have saved me, Yitzchak ben Yocheved, the sole survivor of my entire family. Do it for the sake of Your Name. Make me invisible to him, so that he does not recognize me and will not turn me over to my superiors."

Roznovsky continued walking toward me, coming closer and closer. His eyes skimmed across my face, and absent-mindedly, he continued pacing across the platform. It was a *ness* that he did not hear the sigh of relief I emitted. *Baruch Hashem*, Roznovsky, my companion for almost two years who ate, drank, slept and fought the Germans alongside of me, did not recognize me!

The train's whistle blew its earsplitting signal, and slowly, the train moved out of the station. The Berichah people came around, handing each of us a forged passport.

"Allow me to introduce myself," I said to my friend Yitzchak Weingruber, my travelling companion, as I bowed with mock deference. "My name is Abraham Sabalnas, born in Salonica, Greece. During the war I was in Auschwitz, and now I am travelling home, back to Greece."

"And I," a tall fellow sitting across the aisle chimed in, "my name is Albert Cohen, born in Milan, Italy. During the war I was in Auschwitz together with you, Sabalnas, and now I'm returning to Italy."

"Getzel, you are Albert? That name suits you very nicely. Especially with the Galitzianer Yiddish that you speak."

"Men, please be a little more serious!" the group leader scolded us. "We are coming close to the border. No more

Yiddish or Polish. Be careful. Everyone stay quiet!"

The line at the border-crossing station seemed endless, and it grew longer by the minute. The passport inspection proceeded at a snail's pace, and we kept quiet while we waited. Our passports stated that we were Jews from Greece, Italy, France and the Isle of Crete. If we would speak Yiddish or Polish, we would expose the scheme, and our journey would end catastrophically. Therefore, we had no choice but to listen to the inanities of the Polish passengers and contain our anger.

"Having to work with those dirty Jews makes me sick," one Polish serviceman complained.

"I just hope we don't catch a disease from them!" said another. "Such dirt, such filth, just looking at them disgusts me."

"Too bad Hitler didn't finish the job. Look, now they're all going back to their homes to take away all the things we got during the war."

These Polish soldiers are lucky, I thought to myself. If I had heard them talk like this two days ago, when I was still wearing my uniform and medals, I would have taught them a lesson for the rude way they are sneering at the Jews.

At last, early in the morning, it was our turn to have our papers inspected. All the cash we had on us automatically went to the border patrol who checked our passports.

"Good-bye, Poland," we said softly. "Good-bye for good. Take our money as a farewell gift." We knew that there still could be trouble ahead, but the worst part was behind us.

At eleven in the morning, we arrived in Pressburg, and by nightfall we were in Austria. The next phase of our trip was an arduous march across a lofty mountain range, which lasted all night. In the morning, we found ourselves at a

railroad station, where we caught a train to Leibnitz, an abandoned army camp.

Completely exhausted, we collapsed onto the mattresses and enjoyed a good night's sleep. The next morning, I walked around the camp, examining our new surroundings. I found out that it housed seven hundred Jews, all waiting to go to Eretz Yisrael.

It was *Elul*, 5705/1945. My heart was yearning for a little inspiration, a drop of *ruchnius*, a little *Yiddishkeit*. I went from barrack to barrack looking for *frum* Jews, and I assembled a small group who were all interested in preserving the *Yiddishkeit* in the camp.

Together with Moshe Davidovitz, a *ben Torah* from Radun, I designated one barrack as a *shul*. Mrs. Liba Schlossberg took on the task of preparing kosher cooked food, and Yaakov Pels and Zisha Wimbovsky organized daily *shiurim*. All those who were thirsty for a life of Torah and *mitzvos* joined us to form a league of *frum* Jews.

The first *Shabbos* in the camp was approaching.

"Let's all have our *Shabbos* meals together, like one big family," Menashe Koenig exclaimed enthusiastically.

After the Friday night *davening* I walked over to the communal dining room. When I saw the *Shabbos* candles illuminating the room, my eyes filled with tears.

"Shabbos lecht," I whispered. "Real white *Shabbos* candles . . . After so many years of longing for a Jewish home, I finally have *Shabbos lecht* again. Just like my mother's."

The tiny flames were flickering, radiating a glow of *kedushah*. These were the same lights my mother lit, after which she would *daven* that her children would follow in the path of the Torah. Yes, Mother, look down from Heaven and see. In spite of all the oppression, the suffering and the trials,

your *tefillos* were fulfilled. Your son is walking in the *derech* of Torah and *mitzvos*.

During the meal we were all exhilarated. For five atrocious war years, we rarely had an opportunity to look at a *sefer* or partake of a *Shabbos* or *Yom Tov* meal. Now, for the first time, we were sitting around a *Shabbos* table like we had at home, with hot, tasty food, accompanied by Torah thoughts on the *parshah*, *mussar* and *chassidus*.

The days in the camp passed pleasantly enough, but we were all anxious to reach our final destination, Eretz Yisrael. Although the war had ended, the atmosphere in Europe was still openly anti-semitic, and the native Austrians resented the Jewish presence in their homeland.

One day, Menashe Koenig burst into the barracks, shouting furiously.

"Those beasts still haven't learned their lesson!"

"What happened?" I asked, astonished at my friend's angry outburst.

"A miserable *goy* insulted a Jew, hurling Nazi slogans and obscenities at him. The Jew, of course, became enraged and slapped the *goy's* face. The *goy's* friends called the police, and he was locked up immediately."

"Who, the *goy*?" asked Zisha.

"The *goy*? I wish that were true," Menashe fumed. "It is the Jew who is behind bars!"

"Itzik, this is terrible," Menashe continued. "I can see history repeating itself. The war is over, but the Nazi attitude is still very alive here in Austria. We've got to do something!"

"What can we, a handful of refugees, do?" Yaakov wondered.

"We can stage a demonstration!" said Menashe, pounding his fist on the table.

The others all agreed with the idea, and the march was soon organized. I could not participate in the demonstration since I was called to an urgent meeting that day at the office of the Council for Aliyah.

When I returned to the camp after the meeting, I heard the calamitous results of the march. Not only were the cries for justice ignored, but Menashe was arrested for organizing an unauthorized demonstration. I quickly prepared a bag of kosher food and rushed to the jail.

The next day, a representative of the Agudas Yisrael of Austria arrived, smiling broadly.

"Itzik, get the people ready," he said. "The first transport, which will include one hundred and fifty people from Leibnitz, is leaving the day after tomorrow. Here is the roster. Of course, you are also on the list."

"No, Yosef," I replied firmly. "Choose someone else to go instead of me. I must stay here."

"Why?" he asked, astonished.

"First of all, as long as there are Jews here who demand a Torah environment, I must remain in the camp. Second, my good friend Menashe Koenig is in jail, and I visit him every day with kosher food. I simply cannot abandon him here."

A second transport left for Eretz Yisrael, then a third, but I still remained in Leibnitz.

The psychological pressure in the camp was enormous. Every so often, I would escape the tense atmosphere and tour the nearby Austrian towns, hoping to find a trace of Jewish life.

On one occasion, I visited Klagenfurt, a small, picturesque Alpine resort. White houses covered with red roofs dotted the town, and there was an abundance of parks, trees and flower gardens wherever one turned.

"Where was the Jewish neighborhood?" I asked a little boy riding a bicycle.

He gave me directions.

The Jewish homes were occupied by local townspeople, and in the courtyards, chickens were pecking at the feed. The *shul*, of course, was abandoned. The door and windows were shattered, the *aron hakodesh* was empty, and the beautiful *menorah* was crudely smashed.

Behind the *shul*, I came upon a dilapidated house that looked completely abandoned. Inexplicably, I felt drawn to the seemingly empty house and came closer.

I turned the rusty doorknob and opened the door, appalled at the sight that met my eyes. The house was completely bare of any furniture. Instead, it was filled from the floor to the ceiling with holy *sefarim*. These must have been the *sefarim* that the Germans had gathered up in the towns of Poland and Austria.

I remained in this warehouse of *sefarim* the entire day, eagerly studying them. I turned the yellowed pages with deep veneration, savoring the smell of the antique, leather-bound books. When the sun began to set, I prepared to leave.

At the door, I turned back as a thought struck me. Why shouldn't I help myself to some *sefarim*? They certainly didn't belong to anyone. But which should I select? There were *Gemaras*, *teshuvos*, *chiddushei Torah* and countless works on *mussar*, *chassidus*, *halachah* and *hashkafah*. There were also *Chumashim*, *Tanach* with commentaries and Kabbalistic writings.

I wanted to take them all, but I could not imagine that there would be a way of transporting all these *sefarim* to Eretz Yisrael. In the end, I selected nine *sefarim* and returned to the camp in Leibnitz.

At noon on the following day, I paid my usual visit to the jail.

"What's the matter, Itzik?" asked Menashe. "Has everyone decided to settle here in Leibnitz?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, surprised.

"Why are you still here? Why didn't the transports leave yet?"

"About five hundred people from the camp are en route to Eretz Yisrael," I replied. "Half of them probably arrived there already."

"I guess you decided to go with the last transport, because you don't want to leave me here all alone," he said with an appreciative smile. "So when is the last transport leaving?"

I kept quiet. I had indeed made up my mind that as long as Menashe was in prison I would remain in Austria.

"Tell me, when is the last transport going to leave?" Menashe insisted. "I simply won't allow you to miss your last chance to go to Eretz Yisrael. You know very well that the British are in control of Eretz Yisrael, and they are restricting immigration severely. If you don't go with our friends, who knows if you'll ever make it to Eretz Yisrael? I insist that you leave with them."

"The transport is leaving five days from now," I muttered.

"Then that is when you will be leaving to Eretz Yisrael," Menashe said with finality. "Please give me your word that you will sign up for that transport."

Seeing that I had no alternative, I duly registered for departure. Those of us who were headed for Eretz Yisrael were taken to Milan, Italy, which was just the next stop on the long journey that lay ahead of us. I was pleasantly surprised to find a good many *frum* Jews in the city.

"Let's form a group of *frum* Jews," I proposed.

"Like we did in Leibnitz?"

"No, a group with a wider range of activities and interests," I explained enthusiastically. "Just like Hashomer Hatzair, the anti-religious movement, has a *hachsharah*, a pioneer training institute, let us also establish a pioneer training school for *frum* Jews, a *hachsharah* of Agudas Yisrael."

My friends shared my excitement, and together we devised a plan of action. We moved to Caporso, a hamlet in southern Italy, where we founded a *hachsharah*. From the start, we set up a rigorous daily schedule that was packed with *shiurim*. Throughout the day, students had the opportunity to learn *Gemara* with a study partner and attend lectures in *halachah*, *mussar*, *daf yomi* and *chassidus*. In our *hachsharah*, the voice of Torah resounded from morning to night.

One day, as I was sitting in the dining room, the secretary of the settlement approached me, waving a sheet of paper in the air.

"Itzik, I received a telegram for you."

"A telegram?" I asked in wonderment. "From whom?"

"From Rome, from the main office of Agudas Yisrael of Italy."

I opened the telegram and scanned its contents.

> To Yitzchak Pomerantz. Request you come immediately to our office in Rome for important assignment in the interest of the *Klal*. Thanks. Greetings,"
>
> (signed) Yaakov Griffel, Secretary.

Just when I thought I would have a few days of intensive learning, Heaven was taking me away from my beloved Torah studies. I was not too interested in hearing about the project.

"Itzik, if Heaven sends you on a critical mission for the

sake of *Klal Yisrael*, you should be happy!" my friend Mordechai admonished me, seeing my disappointment. "If this is what *Hashem Yisbarach* wants you to do, you must obey His command."

Conscience-stricken, I remained silent. I knew that every new situation brought opportunity for spiritual growth and that I must accept the challenge with *simchah*. I began to wonder where the new assignment would lead me, and as I packed my bags, my curiosity mounted.

CHAPTER 50

Camp Salvina

THE RUSTLING STREAM SWIRLED PEACEFULLY THROUGH the valley at the foot of the mountain. Pausing for a moment to admire the breathtaking scenery, I recalled once more the meeting in Rome that had led me to this beautiful site in the countryside of Italy.

Nestled near the craggy summit of the mountain, an ancient castle rose up, its quaint towers reaching for the sky. The trails leading up the mountain slopes were bounded by blossoming gardens and orchards.

"Yes, that's it," I said to myself, studying the map in my hands. "This castle is Camp Salvina."

The location had been described to me in detail, and without further delay, I began the long climb up the mountain. A narrow, paved road wound its way through the

vineyards and orchards leading to the castle. Fragrant flower beds adorned with baroque-style marble fountains evoked a classic, old-world atmosphere.

As I neared the summit, the orders I had received in Rome echoed through my head. The castle I was approaching housed a children's camp that was run by the Jewish Agency. Here, anti-religious members of the agency had gathered many children who had survived the German death camps, under the pretense of giving them a healthy environment to live in until they would be able to travel to Eretz Yisrael. In actuality, the agency was trying to indoctrinate the children and uproot their faith in Torah and *mitzvos* before settling them on anti-religious *kibbutzim* in Eretz Yisrael.

I reminded myself to remove my *yarmulka* as I neared the castle, and I quickly stuffed it into the pockets of my khaki slacks. I looked down at my plaid shirt and smiled. I looked like a regular Palmachnik.

My mission was to infiltrate the children's camp and get a close look at what was going on there. Reb Yaakov Griffel, the secretary of Agudas Yisrael, had told me to collect the names of the children in the camp who came from *frum* parents and to bring him the list of names. The Agudah would then take care of having them transferred to a religious institution. But he warned me that if I was to wear my *yeshivah*-style clothes, I wouldn't be allowed to enter the camp. He assured me that all the *gedolim* permitted people on a holy mission such as this to walk around bareheaded if the situation required it. Grinning, he had told me to dress like a *chalutz*, and he fervently wished me luck.

I entered the camp and came upon a large playground where children were playing. Although they were laughing, their eyes reflected deep sorrow. These were children with

somber faces, whose laughter was always mixed with tears, children whose childhood had ended somewhere between the ghettos and the death camps.

"Come on, kids, let's have a soccer match!" several counselors called out. "Shimele, you'll be the goalie!"

The children formed two teams and started to play, listlessly kicking the ball back and forth. Moments later, half of them lost interest in the game and left the field, shaking their heads mournfully.

In another area, I saw a group of little girls playing with dolls. One girl pulled angrily at the doll's legs, while another stepped on her doll, clearly trying to deal with the pent-up emotions and frustrations she could not express.

"Hey, you, what are you looking for?" a counselor wearing short pants asked me.

"I am a refugee," I answered. "I was in Siberia and in the Russian Army. After the war I ran away from Russia to search for my relatives. I am the only one left of my family, and I want to go to Eretz Yisrael."

"You should go to Rome," he said bluntly.

"But I have no money; I can't even buy food." I said, looking at him dolefully. "I thought that perhaps I would find a relative among these children."

"All right," he consented. "You can stay here. One of the counselors went back to Eretz Yisrael two days ago. They promised us a replacement, but he has not arrived yet. In the meantime, you can sleep with the children. It's hard for them to sleep alone at night."

I entered the castle. The large halls were filled with toys and furnishings supplied by the Jewish Agency. I found out that the building housed one hundred and twenty children. One hundred and twenty anguished and tortured *Yiddishe*

neshamos. These included refugees from concentration camps, captives of the missionaries, survivors of the ghettos, escapees from Russia and children who were hidden with gentiles during the war. Each child with a past of his own, each with his own hair-raising tale to tell.

I entered the dining room, which was buzzing with the din of lively children. The tables were set with bread baskets, bottles of juice and plates of piping hot soup.

"Are you a counselor?" a fourteen-year-old boy asked me.

"Not exactly," I replied. "I came from Russia, and now I am homeless. In the meantime, they gave me permission to stay here until I can go to Eretz Yisrael."

"Oh, I see. That means that you are not one of the Jewish Agency people," he said, winking at me conspiratorially. "I'm telling you, don't touch any of the cooked food here. Everything is *treif*. They feed us pork here."

"And what are you doing?" I asked with interest.

"It's not only me. We are a large group—there may be as many as forty of us—who eat only fruits, vegetables, bread and dairy products, and if they are on the menu, we also eat hard or soft-boiled eggs."

"What about the counselors? Don't they scold you for doing that?"

"Look, if we were able to overcome the Nazis, Hashem will give us the strength to survive the Jewish counselors," he said, grinning.

The Jewish nation can be proud to have such children, I said to myself.

"Thank you very much for letting me know," I told the boy warmly. "I also observe *kashrus*, you know."

A haggard-looking boy standing nearby overheard our conversation.

"Do you have a pair of *tefillin*?" he asked with hopeful eyes.

"Why are you asking?"

"Because my counselor, the *rasha*, stole my *tefillin*!" he cried out angrily, clenching his fist. "They belonged to my father who was killed in the Warsaw ghetto. I carried these *tefillin* on me through all the forests. In the bunkers with the partisans, I put them on every day, and this mean counselor stole them from me!"

Tears welled up in my eyes. *Ribono Shel Olam*, I cried silently, how much more agony must these little heroes endure?

As the day wore on, I grew increasingly horror-stricken at the scenes I witnessed. Finally, darkness fell, and I entered the huge hall on the third floor of the castle, where bunk beds were arranged in long, straight rows. Silence reigned as the children slumbered. The little boys were sleeping peacefully, and here and there, bigger boys peered from beneath their prickly woolen blankets as they quietly recited the bedtime *Shema*.

It was midnight when the silence was suddenly broken by a pitiful cry.

"Tatty, he's hitting me! Tatty, don't let him burn my *tefillin*!"

I quickly ran toward the boy, who was crying hysterically. He was a small child, no more than eight years old, and he sat upright in bed, shivering all over. His pale face was illuminated by the light of the moon.

"Who hit you?" I asked, gently caressing the child's face.

"He did . . . he did," he sobbed convulsively.

"Shhh . . . shhh," I whispered soothingly. "You can relax. No one will ever hit you again."

"Oh no, that's not true!" he cried. "You're a bunch of liars, all of you. The Germans burned my father's *tefillin* and beat me and my mother, and here, the counselor burned Shloimele's *tefillin* and struck me for washing my hands and saying *Hamotzi*."

I wrapped my arms around his trembling body, and tears streamed from my eyes. Holding the little boy in a gentle embrace, I fell asleep beside him on his small bed.

The next morning, I pretended not to see the boys who got up and washed *negel vasser*, nor the boys who put on *tefillin* as they crouched beneath their beds. I called over one little boy, showed him my *siddur* and let him kiss my *tefillin*.

"What? Are you *frum* too?" he asked with gleaming eyes.

"Yes, I am."

"So what are you doing here?" he asked, astonished.

"I'm trying to help you."

"Please take me with you!" he pleaded, clinging to me.

"*B'ezras Hashem*, you and a lot of other children will be transferred to a different place, a *frum* camp," I whispered.

I stayed at the Salvina camp for ten days. They were ten horrendous days, worse than my stay in Siberia. During that time, I witnessed Jewish counselors who beat children in order to force them to desecrate the *Shabbos*, forcibly removed *yarmulkas* from the young boys' heads and ridiculed a girl who did not want to swim in a mixed swimming pool. The list of *frum* children grew longer by the day.

I knew that it was time for me to leave the camp, but before I left, I had to confront the people that were responsible for the anti-religious activities taking place in the camp.

I stormed into the camp office, livid with rage.

"How can Jews behave like this?" I roared, pounding on the table.

"What happened?" Yisrael, the head counselor of the camp asked, thunderstruck.

"Don't look at my bare head; look at my heart. I am a Jew, and therefore, I cannot tolerate the cruel treatment of these children. These are children from religious homes, devout children who, after surviving the worst horrors in the history of mankind, want to live according to the ways of their parents. Is your heart made of stone? How are you able to torture the souls of these tormented children? These are children who passed through the fires of the inferno, carefully guarding their *tefillin* and abstaining from eating non-kosher food. How does a Jew have the nerve to force pork down their throats and to steal a child's *tefillin* that he inherited from a father who was killed? Have you no shame? Have you lost all of your humanity? Have you no decency left?"

"Just a minute," he said calmly. "Aren't you the refugee who came here looking for a place to stay?"

"Yes, I am."

"You came here as an uninvited guest, and now all of a sudden you set yourself up as a judge?" he said tauntingly.

I stared back at him indignantly.

"Tell me the truth," I hissed. "If you had the power to wipe out the Jewish faith with its traditions and raise all Jewish children to be atheists, would you do it?"

The head counselor seemed confused, as though he were looking for protection from the blatant truth I had uttered. Evidently, my words had struck a sensitive nerve.

"Hm . . .eh . . ." he stuttered, clearing his throat. "I g-guess n-not."

"I'm glad you have the courage to admit the truth," I said, satisfied with his answer. "I can explain to you the real reason

you would not do a thing like that."

Tense and uneasy, the head counselor rose from his chair, looking at me curiously.

"Because you are not sure that what you are doing is right," I said softly. "I, on the other hand, am fully convinced that my way of life is correct and upright, and that's why I am willing to give my life for its continued existence."

I turned and left the office, slamming the door behind me. After packing up my few belongings, I made my way out of the camp, accompanied by Meir Horowitz, a young boy who refused to part with me. We headed in the direction of Rome, where I was to report back to the Agudah office.

When I arrived at the office, I met with Reb Yaakov Griffel, the secretary of Agudas Yisrael, and I handed him a list of thirty-two children who wanted to live a life of Torah and *mitzvos*.

Having accomplished my mission, I returned to our *hachsharah* and its environment of intensive Torah study.

Only later did I learn that a children's home of Agudas Yisrael was established in Italy, where "my children" found a safe haven.

CHAPTER 51

Eretz Yisrael

IT WAS *TAMMUZ* WHEN THE LONG-AWAITED DAY FINALLY arrived. Our meager possessions were loaded onto a truck, and the group of us that were bound for Eretz Yisrael travelled to Naples. On the night of *Tishah b'Av*, two hundred of us boarded an illegal ship and sailed into the open seas.

Our group, the members of Poalei Agudas Yisrael, made up one-third of the passengers, one third consisted of members of the general Zionist movement and one third were members of various other leftist Zionist groups.

The suffocating heat and the overcrowded conditions aboard the vessel were unbearable. The ship's hold was especially stifling, but of course there was no way for everyone to remain on the deck, where it was a little airier. The

Haganah officer in charge, a real leftist, divided the passengers according to party affiliation and allowed the groups to take turns staying on deck for a few hours at a time to stretch their legs and breathe some fresh air. It did not take long for us to notice that the officer was discriminating against our group, allocating a much shorter time on deck for us than for the others. As it became more and more obvious, three of us, Mordechai Palvinsky, Shimon Moskovitz and I, decided to put an end to the unfairness.

The next day it was unbearably hot, and as we sweltered below deck, we counted the minutes until it would be our turn to take our places on the deck.

Finally, it was our turn to go on deck. We filled our lungs with the pure fresh sea air, enjoying the sense of freedom evoked by the vast expanse of the azure sky and the cool breeze.

After only a few minutes, the voice of the officer in charge rang out.

"Itzik, start bringing your group back down."

I was outraged. Five minutes for us, and five hours for the others! Looking at the pained faces of the men in our group, I made my decision. We would not let this pass in silence! I had to speak out forcefully and meet him head-on.

I dashed over to the officer, grabbing him by the throat with all my might.

"Listen here," I thundered. "Do you think you're dealing with a bunch of *yeshivah bachurim* whom you can intimidate? I'm warning you, if you don't change your attitude, we'll do something about it. We won't let you walk all over us like this!"

My toughness took the officer by surprise, and I could tell he was afraid that I might carry out my threat. From that day

on, his attitude toward our group changed completely, and we suffered no more unfair treatment.

The harrowing voyage ended in the middle of the night as we secretly disembarked on a lonely beach near Chaderah, unnoticed by the British.

"*Hayinu kecholmim,*"* I whispered. "We were like dreamers."

"I just cannot believe it," added my friend. "Can this be real? We are actually standing on the soil of Eretz Yisrael, and we have the opportunity to kiss the earth of the land that the *tzaddikim* of all generations have yearned for."

"Yes, it is true," I murmured. "We really are standing on the land of our fathers. *Admas Eretz Yisrael*, the earth of Eretz Yisrael . . ."

I picked up a handful of sand and gazed at the grains running softly through my fingers. A steady stream of tears began to flow from my eyes, and I whispered over and over, "Eretz Yisrael . . . Eretz Yisrael . . ."

Feeling as if a dam had broken within me, I wept tears for all the anguish and suffering I had endured over the last five years.

"Move on, young man," a voice behind me urged.

I felt someone nudging me forward.

"Do you want us all to wind up in Cyprus because of you?"

The Palmachnik was right. I swallowed my tears and marched behind him with the others across the sand dunes. A camel caravan was resting on the narrow path at the foot of the dunes, as if patiently awaiting the new immigrants. We walked in the shadow of the camels, trying to remain hidden from the British. We continued to march as unobtrusively as

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* *Tehillim 126:1*

possible until we reached the city of Chaderah.

I spent only a short time in Chaderah, knowing that I would only be satisfied once I reached Yerushalayim.

Yerushalayim. The narrow alleys, stone houses and *frum* men with beards and *peyos* and traditional black coats all evoked memories of life back home in Europe.

I noticed my reflection in a store window. I saw a clean-shaven young man, dressed in gray slacks and a blue shirt. So different, so changed... Could this really be me, Itzik, the son of the Rabbi of Dlugoszodle?

I yearned to see myself looking different, but it was impossible to instantly cast off the shell that the last five years had formed.

I thought of Ger. The Rebbe's *tisch*, the *beis midrash*, my *chaveirim* who were now gone. These memories churned in my mind, blinding me. And in my mind's eye, I recalled the way the town had looked the last time I was there, after the Nazi savages had destroyed it. With tears in my eyes, I remembered the sight of the ruins of the large *beis midrash*.

I walked now to the large Gerrer *beis midrash* in Yerushalayim. The voices of the students sounded like a beautiful symphony to my ears. I stepped inside and took a seat on a bench near the door of the Rebbe's study. As I waited to speak to the Gerrer Rebbe, Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Alter, known as the Imrei Emes, my heart overflowed with emotion.

The door opened.

I felt my legs tremble as I entered the room. In my heart a tempest raged, but on the outside I projected stony toughness. My tears had dried up. The Rebbe gazed at me with burning eyes, scrutinizing me carefully.

"*Yo, ich gedenk dich*," the Rebbe said. "Yes, I do remember

you. *A guten yishuv.* I wish you an easy adjustment to life in Eretz Yisrael."

After the short meeting, I was invited to see the Rebbe's son, who would eventually come to be known as the Beis Yisrael.

The Rebbe's son had piercing eyes that penetrated deep into a person's heart. He had the ability to see straight into the subconscious and discern all of a person's hidden weaknesses. He received me with extraordinary warmth and spoke to me like a father.

After the talk, I felt cleansed, purified. I sensed that part of the residue that had clung to me as a result of living among *goyim* had been washed off. I observed with awe that every motion the Rebbe made was *kodesh*, and every word he spoke was *kodesh kodashim*, holy of holies.

I did not stay in Yerushalayim, but I travelled there frequently. On each visit, I saw the elder Rebbe, the Imrei Emes for a few minutes, and spent many hours with the Beis Yisrael. I recounted to him all the things that happened to me, from the time I left my family until my arrival in Eretz Yisrael, without omitting any details. I told him everything and described to him the awesome trials and tribulations I had experienced during my years of wandering.

With the passage of time, my style of dress became more and more *chassidic*, and I began to feel that I had finally come home.

CHAPTER 52

A Berachah from the Rebbe

I ENROLLED IN THE YESHIVAH BEIS YOSEF IN TEL AVIV, AND I earned a livelihood working each evening as a bookbinder.

One *Shabbos*, when I was visiting the Yeshivah Sfas Emes with my cousin, the Beis Yisrael approached us. After conversing with him for a few minutes, he invited me to his house for the *Shabbos* meal.

Then, suddenly, he turned to my cousin.

"*Vos is mit a shidduch?*" he asked. "What about a match for Itzik?"

"I don't know what to answer," replied my cousin. "People keep suggesting suitable matches, but he does not want to hear any of them. I don't know why he is so adamantly opposed to getting married."

The Beis Yisrael looked deep into my eyes.

"*Ich vel shoin vissen. S'vet sein beseider.* I'll know. Everything will turn out all right." With these words, he left.

An hour later, I was summoned to the Beis Yisrael's room. I entered slowly, feeling uneasy and confused. To my surprise, the Beis Yisrael smiled benignly at me and placed his hand on my shoulder.

"Don't be bashful," he said. "Do you have anyone in mind? Tell me everything."

I explained to him that I had not brought up the subject because I had no reason to talk about it, and that I had learned from my father that certain matters should not be discussed.

"But now that you are asking me," I said, "I will tell you everything. And may Hashem guide me on my way."

I related the details of my relationship with the Sofer family, of Mrs. Sofer's proposition and my acceptance.

"But now that I think about the matter, I have many doubts," I added, trying to explain my hesitations. "Who knows where this family is now? They lived among *goyim*; perhaps they became assimilated. They may have completely abandoned the Torah way of life. Nevertheless," I felt compelled to add, "judging by the way they conducted themselves in Osh, I have reason to assume that they remained *frum*. If so, I do not want to break the agreement we concluded. That is the reason I did not show interest in any suggestions for prospective *shidduchim*."

"Do you have a picture of her?" the Beis Yisrael asked.

"No."

"What about letters she wrote you?"

"Yes, those I have."

"I would like to see them," he said.

I happened to be carrying several letters with me, and I showed them to him. He placed the letters in his drawer.

"*Bli neder*, within a few weeks I will have an answer for you."

Not knowing what to think, I went back to Tel Aviv. Five weeks later, I returned to Yerushalayim.

I paid my customary visit to the Beis Yisrael, and he greeted me warmly.

"I have researched the entire matter," he said. "Everything will be fine."

Gazing intently into my eyes, he blessed me, uttering each word slowly and meaningfully.

"*Zol zein mit mazel. Zolst nit heren fun kein shum andren shidduch. Vart biz sie vet kumen kein Eretz Yisrael.* It will be with *mazel*. Do not listen to any other proposed *shidduch*, and wait patiently until she comes to Eretz Yisrael."

I felt as if a tremendous weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

EPILOGUE

I AM FULL OF GRATITUDE TO *HASHEM YISBARACH* FOR bringing the Gerrer Rebbe's *berachah* to fruition and granting me the *zchus* to raise a family and watch my children and grandchildren grow up as faithful, Torah-observant Jews.

In 1948, while the fires of war were still raging in Eretz Yisrael, I was reunited with my *basherte* in Eretz Yisrael. What had begun as an openhearted talk in the district of Osh, in the faraway reaches of the Soviet Union, became a reality in the small town of Kfar Ata near Tel Aviv.

I praise the Almighty when I recall my erstwhile anguish and misery and the outright miracles that I experienced throughout the war. Just as Avraham Avinu was saved from the onslaught of the four mighty kings of the Orient and was

rescued from the fiery furnace of Nimrod, I, too, narrowly escaped death on numerous occasions. And just as Yaakov Avinu crossed the Jordan River with only his staff in hand, I arrived in Eretz Yisrael as the sole survivor of my family, with only pennies in my pocket.

From the start, life in Eretz Yisrael was not easy. I began to earn a livelihood as a delivery man, carrying cases of wine and whiskey to markets and restaurants. Only at four o'clock each day did I make my way to the Gerrer *shtiebl* where, immersing myself in the *Gemara*, I would try to forget my loneliness and painful memories.

During these first few months in Eretz Yisrael, the Beis Yisrael, who was soon to become the Gerrer Rebbe, was instrumental in lifting my spirits and helping me begin my life anew. I was only one of the many anguished survivors of the holocaust who turned to this exceptional *tzaddik* for guidance, and each time I spoke with him, I came away feeling as if the load I was carrying had somehow become a little lighter.

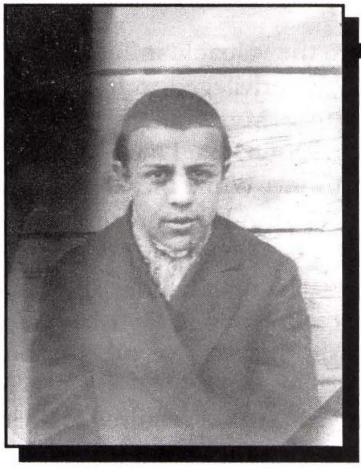
As time went by, I became more and more dependent on the discerning wisdom of the Rebbe, and even after I was married, I turned to him for advice before making any decisions. He was like a father to me, and I always felt that my welfare was of real concern to him. On *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov*, I would often be invited to eat at his table, and on these occasions, he would reveal many deep and meaningful concepts in *mussar* and *chassidus*.

Once, when several months had elapsed since my previous visit to the Rebbe, I met him and apologized profusely for my long absence.

"Don't worry," he replied lovingly. "I've been thinking of you constantly. Even when you do not come, I have you on my mind."

In retrospect, I treasure the valuable influence the Beis Yisrael had on me, and I feel privileged to have benefited personally from this saintly man. My only regret is that I have not made full use of his instruction, that I have not absorbed all that he tried to impart to me. While the Rebbe gave me numerous opportunities to penetrate to the innermost profundities of holy concepts, I remained on the outskirts of understanding, busying myself with trivialities and vanity all my life. Looking back, I realize how little I have accomplished, and I ask Hashem to help me repair the spiritual damage I have done.

Our Sages have taught, "You are not required to finish the task, yet you are not free to withdraw from it." (*Avos* 2:21) There is still a trace of resolve left in me. May *Hashem Yisbarach* accept this resolve as an accomplished deed. May He grant me the strength to continue to strive in learning His Torah and living according to it to the best of my ability. And may he grant that our own time, a time that has seen such suffering and sorrow, should also see the boundless joy of the coming of *Mashiach. Amein.*



Itzik at eleven



Itzik in the Red Army



Itzik's father



Itzik's mother and aunt, his sister Chayele in the forefront



Baking matzos on the front in Eastern Germany

Personal tefillah composed by the author before kaporos on Erev Yom Kippur, 1939.

While still waters flow,	שטילע וואסערען פליסען
Hashem, do not let us go	גאט, טי אינז נישט פערמיאוסען.
May all our sins be forgiven	די עוונות טי אינז פארגעבען
And let us go on living.	לאז אינז ווידער לעבען.
We tremble and we sigh,	עם כאפט אן א ציטער
Behold, a mother's cry.	אט, ווייגט א מיטער
O Lord, accept this plea,	וואס איז, מיין האר
And tear up the evil decree.	צירייסדעם שטר.
We cannot acknowledge or accept,	קיין חוב איז נישט צו אנערקענען
Responsibility for our past debt.	פאר צייטן שוין פארגאנגען
But if you seek sacrifice,	אויב קרבנות ווילסט
Take the *kaparos* fowl as full price.	נעם די עופות אלץ באצאלט
Take as atonements in our stead,	כפרות נעם
From the slaughterer's shed.	פון שוחט'ס הענט
Say that you forgive,	זאג סלחתי
Say that you forgive.	סלחתי זאג.
Why, Hashem, do you wait,	פארוואס זאלסטו ווארטען
While evil still does not abate?	ביז צום לעצטען
Rejoice, and Your anger contain,	זיי צו פרידען
At least Jews we have remained.	וואס מיר זיינען נאך יודען.
Inscribe us for a new year of joy,	א גמר חתימה טובה פארשרייב
And our enemies destroy.	אונזערע שונאים פארטרייב.

GLOSSARY

Amein: Amen
aron hakodesh: holy ark containing Torah scrolls
Aseres Yemei Teshuvah: the Ten Days of Repentance, *Rosh Hashanah* through *Yom Kippur*
aveirah (aveiros): sin(s)
Avinu Malkeinu: a supplicating prayer
bachur(im): youth(s)
baruch Hashem: Blessed is the Name; thank Heaven
basherte: predestined mate
becher: goblet
beis midrash: study hall
berachah (berachos): blessing(s)
Bereishis: Book of Genesis; *parshah* in the Book of Genesis
B'ezras Hashem: with the help of G-d
bimah: pulpit
bitachon: trust
challah (challos): *Shabbos* loaves
chametz: leaven; bread
Chanukah: Festival of Lights
chassid(im): adherent(s) to *chassidus*
chassidus: Jewish pietist movement
chavrusa: study partner
Chazal: the Sages, of blessed memory
chazan: cantor
chillul Shabbos: desecration of the Sabbath
Chol Hamoed: Intermediate Days of the Festivals
cholent: special *Shabbos* stew
Chumash(im): Book(s) of the Pentateuch
chupah: bridal canopy
churban: destruction
daven: pray
derashah: sermon
emunah: faith
frum: observant [Yiddish]

gabbai: synagogue vice president
galus: exile
Gemara: part of the Talmud
geulah: redemption
goy (goyim): gentile(s)
Haggadah: liturgy for *Pesach seder*
Hakadosh Baruch Hu: the Holy Blessed One
halacha (halachos): Jewish law(s)
Havdalah: concluding ritual of *Shabbos*
Hoshanna Rabbah: part of *Sukkos*
Kaddish: mourner's prayer
kallah: bride
kashrus: state of being kosher
kehillah (kehillos): community (communities)
Kiddush: sanctification of *Shabbos* or festivals
kittel: traditional white garment
kohein gadol: high priest
lashon hara: slander
Maariv: evening prayers
matza (matzos): unleavened bread
menorah: candelabra
mikveh: ritual bath
Minchah: afternoon service
minyan: quorum of ten
Mishnah (Mishnayos): part of the Talmud
mitzvah: Torah commandments
Mussaf: supplementary service
mussar: ethical instruction
Neelah: concluding prayers of *Yom Kippur*
ness: miracle
niggun(im): tune(s)
Olam Haba: the world to come
parshah: portion of the Torah
passuk (pesukim): verse(s)
Pesach: Passover, early spring festival
Ribono Shel Olam: Master of the Universe
Rosh Hashanah: New Year; tractate of the Talmud
rosh yeshivah: dean
sefer (sefarim): book(s)
seudah: feast
Shacharis: morning prayers
Shalom Aleichem: peace unto you; greeting
Shavuos: Pentecost, late spring festival
Shema Yisrael: Hear, O Yisrael
Shemoneh Esrei: the Eighteen Benedictions, fundamental part of daily prayers
shofar: ram's horn
shtetl: small village
shul: synagogue [Yiddish]
Shulchan Aruch: Code of Jewish Law

siddur: prayer book
Simchas Torah: Festival of the Torah
sukkah: *Sukkos* booth
talmid chacham: Torah scholar
techum Shabbos: the limit to which one may walk on *Shabbos* in a non-residential area
tefillah: prayer
Tefillin: phylacteries
Tehillim: Book of Psalms
teshuvah: repentance; responsum
Tishah b'Av: the Ninth of Av, a fast day
tzaddik: righteous person
tzeddakah: charity
Viduy: declaration of transgressions; confession
Yamim Noraim: Days of Awe
Yamim Tovim: festivals
yarmulka: skullcap
yeshivah (yeshivos): Torah school(s)
yetzer hara: evil inclination
yiras shamayim: fear of Heaven
Yom Kippur: Day of Atonement
Yom Tov: festival
zemiros: songs

The Holocaust Diaries Collection

Late Shadows
Moshe Holzcer

They Called Me Frau Anna
Chana Marcus Banet

Dare to Survive
Chaim Shlomo Friedman

Behind the Ice Curtain
Dina Gabel

Sisters in the Storm
Anna Eilenberg

Itzik, Be Strong
Yitzchak Pomerantz

In Preparation:

Songs of Hope
David Werdyger

Counterfeit Lives
Avrohom Krakowski