Tell Your Son

והגדת לבנך



By Zvi Shmuel Rosenberg

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Translated by
Avraham Yaakov Finkel

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4205 Nautlis Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11224

Cover Design by C.S. Friedman

ISBN 0-9632171-3-5

Printed in the U. S. A. By:
Moriah Offset Corp.
115 Empire Blvd. Brooklyn, N.Y. 11225, Tel: (718) 693-3800

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgment V

Introduction VII

1. Reb Eliezer Lipman Rosenberg 1
2. Reb Shmuel Rosenberg 5
3. World War I 13
4. Years of Separation 17
5. Reb Shmuel's Homecoming 21
6. The Post World War I Years 25
7. Darkness Descends 31
8. Coping With Adversity 37
9. Drafted Into the Army 41
10. The Petirah of Reb Eliezer Lipman 47
11. Marriage and Birth of a Son 53
12. Hitler Comes to Power 57
13. World War II Erupts 63
14. The War Intensifies 67
15. In the Hungarian Army 71
16. The Long March 77
17. Kamishenko 83
18. Death Came on Sunday 89

19. The Russian Offensive 93
20. On the Road Again 97
21. Suspected of Espionage 103
22. A Breathing Spell 109
23. Saved in the Nick of Time 113
24. Rescued From a Blazing Inferno 121
25. Hunger, Pain, and Disappointment 129
26. The Final Solution 135
27. Auschwitz 141
28. The Germans March Into Hungary 145
29. Horidi Kanachal Dim'ah 149
30. Wanderings 153
31. Disquieting Reports 159
32. The Russians Are Coming! 165
33. The Agonizing Search 173
34. Return to Bistritz 181
35. Appalling News 185
36. Building a New Life 191
37. On the Move Again 197
38. At Home in Eretz Yisrael 205
Epilogue 210
Photographs 212

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

It is with great happiness that I wish to express my deep gratitude to Hashem for enabling me to publish this book. My joy is all the greater since the book appears at the celebration of the bar mitzvah of our dear son Dovid, *neiro ya'ir*.

My main purpose in writing this book was to acquaint our children with the history of our family and to let them know who were their distinguished ancestors. It is my fervent hope that *im yirtzeh Hashem* they will follow in their forebears' footsteps and build Jewish homes on the hallowed foundations of Torah and *yiras Shamayim*, in the *derech Yisrael saba*.

Dear children, let me speak to you directly. This book is dedicated to you, Ruchie, Duddy, Adina, Ari and Avigail. Please read it carefully, for then you will realize that you are the descendants of a long line of outstanding *tzaddikim* and *talmidei chachamim*, something you should be very proud of.

A long time has passed since I started writing this book and completed the manuscript, but various problems arose that prevented me from having it published. For years the pages were gathering dust in a drawer. Then, one day, my dear wife Mireleh

took action, overcame all obstacles, and turned the manuscript into a finished product. Dear Mireleh, I would like to apply to you the *pasuk*, *Rabbos banos asu chayil ve'at alis al kulanah*, "Many women have done well, but you surpass them all" (Mishlei 31:29). This is not the only project in which you helped me; you have been my faithful *eishes chayil* in all our undertakings, every step of our joint path through life. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

My heartfelt mazal tov wishes to my parents-in-law, Reb Yissachar Dov and Chayah Sarah Friedman. May they have good health and live to see much *nachas* from the bar mitzvah *bachur* Dovid and all their grandchildren.

Many thanks to my very dear friend Chaim Shmiel Friedman for creating the distinctive cover design, and for being a true friend who is always willing and ready to help when needed.

My sincere thanks to Reb Avraham Yaakov Finkel for his superb English translation of my Hebrew manuscript and for the gracious and cordial way he worked with me.

To you, my dear and cherished parents, *avi mori* Reb Moshe and *imi morasi* Moras Chayah Reizeh, *sheyichyu leorech yamim tovim*, I owe the greatest debt of gratitude for the sacrifices you made for me and the love and affection you lavished on me. Your life has been my inspiration. May Hashem *bentch* you with good health, happiness and *arichas yamim veshanim*. May He grant you to see a *dor yesharim yevorach*, "a blessed generation of upright men," of children and grandchildren engaging in Torah and mitzvos, *ad bias go'eil tzedek, amein*.

INTRODUCTION

The book you are about to read is a true story. It is a factual account of my father's experiences during the terrifying years of the holocaust, written without embellishments or literary flourishes. For as long as I can remember, whenever my father had a free moment, he used to tell me stories about the pain and hardships he endured during World War II. He wanted to instill in us children a clear understanding of what happened to the Jewish people in *galus*, and etch in our memories the atrocities our enemies perpetrated on us. As I grew up listening to these stories, I began to grasp the enormity of the crimes and realized that the *churban Europe* was perhaps the greatest disaster that has befallen the Jewish people in its entire anguished history.

Every Jewish generation has suffered from a variety of tyrants and oppressors. Invariably, their hatred of the Jews was inspired by political and military considerations. Pharaoh enslaved *benei Yisrael* for fear "that they may increase so much, that if there is a war, they will join our enemies and fight against us, driving [us] from the land" (*Shemos* 1:10). And when he decreed that every boy that was born must be cast into the Nile, he did so to prevent the rise of the Jewish leader who was going to redeem *klal Yisrael*, as his stargazers had foretold (Rashi). Nebuchadnezzar and his general

Nevuzaradan destroyed the first *Beis Hamikdash* and led the Jewish people into exile to Babylon because King Tzidkiyahu rebelled against him, clearly a political and military factor. Even Haman, the proverbial *rasha*, was motivated by personal animosity toward Mordechai for his refusal to bow down to him. Later, during the era of the second Beis Hamikdash, the Greeks and the Romans persecuted the Jews forbidding Torah study and the keeping of the mitzvos. Their aim was to weaken Jewish nationalism by undermining the foundations of Torah, hoping to make the Jews accept them as rulers and adopt their Hellenist religion. The common thread that runs through all these and later persecutions and expulsions, whether at the hands of the Spanish Inquisition, the Crusaders or the Chmielnicki pogroms, was envy, greed, and religious hatred. By contrast, the hatred the Germans harbored against the Jewish people was an altogether different phenomenon. Hitler and his henchmen were not driven by greed, for if that were the case they would have been content to confiscate all Jewish properties and resources. Neither were the Germans influenced by hatred of the Jewish religion for they killed non-observant and intermarried Jews, as well as Jews who had converted to Christianity. Hitler's stated goal was to wipe out the Jewish people all over the world; his reason was based on his insane theory of racism. He believed that the Germans were the *Herrenvolk*, the master race, and that the Jewish people represented the lowest and vilest form of humanity. By annihilating the Jewish people he wanted to make the world *Judenrein*, to rid it of the Jewish bacillus and prevent it from being infected with it. Extermination was his answer to the *Judenfrage*, the Jewish problem.

The fact that one third of the Jewish people were brutally

murdered proves how successful Hitler was in carrying out his program of destruction, and let's not forget, he had the enthusiastic support of the German people.

Having heard the story of the holocaust from my father, a surviving eyewitness, I consider it my duty to put it in writing for the benefit of the coming generations, to let them know about these events as best I can. I am well aware that an abundance of holocaust memoirs have been written and published. But every survivor has a story to tell of the miracles he experienced, for without Hashem's miracles he would not have made it. Such stories must be told and recorded for posterity. And we should remember that, no matter how many holocaust accounts have been told, there are six million stories that have not been told, the stories of the pathetic victims whose lives were snuffed out by the sons of Amalek.

The cornerstone of our *emunah* is *masorah*, our acceptance of the teachings we learned from our fathers, and they, in turn, from their fathers. The Torah expresses this idea in the *pasuk*, *She'al avicha veyageidecha zekeinecha veyomeru lach*, "Ask your father and let him tell you, and your grandfather, who will explain it" (Devarim 32:7). The *pasuk* tells us that the foundation of *Yiddishkeit* is the faith a son places in his father, in his *rebbe'im*, in the *gedolim* and *tzaddikim* of his time. They are the links that connect us with Moshe Rabbeinu who received the Torah from Hashem on Har Sinai. We in turn, must transmit this *mesorah* to our children and grandchildren in an unbroken and everlasting chain, as if we ourselves had stood at Har Sinai. Indeed, Chazal tell us that every Jewish *neshamah* was present at *Kabbalas Hatorah*.

Now, just as we are duty-bound to convey to our children our belief in Hashem, in *Yetzias Mitzrayim*, and in *Maamad Har Sinai*, so should every Jew relate to his children the story of his own miraculous escape from mortal danger, and point out to them how eternally grateful he is to Hashem for sparing his life. The Torah commands us, *Vehigadeta levincha*, "You must tell your son" (Shemos 13:8), and so we must relate to our children the miraculous survival of *klal Yisrael* as a whole, since its emergence until the present time. We should explain to them that our mortal enemy is Amalek, the personification of evil, and that it is a mitzvah "to obliterate the memory of Amalek from under the heavens" (Devarim 25:19). We should impart to them that we are looking forward to the day when this *nevuah* will come true.

It is with this in mind that I chose "*Vehigadeta Levincha*" as the Hebrew title for this book.

It is my fervent hope that *be'ezras Hashem*, the coming generations will continue to follow in the path of our forefathers and adhere to Torah and *kiyum hamitzvos*, until the coming of the *Goeil Tzedek*, amein.

Zvi Shmuel Rosenberg

Chapter One

RABBI ELIEZER LIPMAN ROSENBERG

As you travel through countryside of central Romania you will come upon a peaceful valley called Transylvania, situated in the shadow of the majestic peaks of the Carpathian Mountains. Nestled at the foot of the lofty peaks you will find a scattering of small picturesque hamlets and villages. Leisurely the road winds through lush golden wheat fields and orchards heavy with luscious fruit that blanket the region. The invigorating air wafting over emerald meadows and thick pine forests refreshes you as you admire the breathtaking scenery. It should come as no surprise that Transylvania [formerly called Siebenburgen] was coveted by its neighbors and throughout history has been invaded and fought over numerous times. Today, the region, bounded by the Carpathian Mountains and the Transylvanian Alps, is part of central Romania, but before World War I it was under Austro-Hungarian domination, and before that, occupied by Turkey. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, decades before the outbreak of World War I, the villages of Transylvania were home to a large Jewish population, who lived there in tranquility, enjoying friendly relations with their gentile neighbors, in an

atmosphere of harmony and mutual respect.

One of the villages in this area was Krasne, a settlement of about two thousand families, including about one hundred Jewish families. To a casual observer, Krasne looked just like any other hamlet in the valley, but the Jewish community of Krasne was no ordinary *kehillah* by any means. Brimming with vitality, *frumkeit* and enthusiasm for Torah and mitzvos, the small *kehillah* was a model of dedication to *Yiddishkeit*. In the center of the village stood the *shul*, a magnificent, large structure, with a *mikveh* close by. At that time, the Rav of Krasne was Rabbi Baruch Bendet Lichtenstein, an outstanding *talmid chacham* who led the community with a firm hand. The Krasne Jewish community maintained and supported a yeshivah of thirty to forty students, as well as an elementary Torah school with about one hundred students. These institutions were the pride and joy of the entire *kehillah*.

The most distinguished member of the Krasne community was Rabbi Eliezer Lipman Rosenberg, one of the *rebbe'im* of the yeshivah. A humble man, a *yerei Shamayim* and an outstanding *talmid chacham*, he had studied under the famous Maharam Schick in Chust. At the tender age of eighteeen he received *semichah* from the Maharam Schick who attested that he was well-versed in *Shas* and *poskim* [reponsa literature]. The Maharam Schick lovingly used to praise him as his top student. By the same token, Rabbi Eliezer Lipman's students used to quip, "No wonder our Rebbi's loves of Torah and mitzvos so much. After all, he was born in the year *Taryag* [*tav, reish, yud, gimel*-5613/1853], and 613 is the number of mitzvos in the Torah!"

Rabbi Eliezer Lipman was the son of Reb Levi Yehudah of Volka. Shortly after his wedding, Reb Eliezer Lipman and his wife Feige settled in Krasne. Their marriage was blessed with twelve children - six boys and six girls. Proudly boasting of his beautiful family, he used to say, "They are my twelve *shevatim* [tribes]."

Being a rebbi in a yeshivah, Rabbi Eliezer Lipman eked out a meager living. In fact, he lived from hand to mouth, as Chazal put it, "Eat bread with salt, drink water in small measure - but toil in Torah!" (Avos 6:4). That was his guiding principle. As a result, he was always calm and contented, filled with inner strength and abundant *bitachon*. His first priority was the education of his children, instilling in them a love of Torah learning, and encouraging them to study with diligence and eagerness.

Chapter Two

RABBI SHMUEL ROSENBERG

On the 16th of Elul, 1877, Rabbi Eliezer Lipman's son, named Shmuel, was born. Even at an early age, Shmuel displayed signs of unusual intelligence. A bright and studious boy, he applied himself to his studies without letup, and was a source of great nachas to his parents and the entire family. Until his bar mitzvah he learned in Krasna under his father's guidance. However, immediately after his bar mitzvah, his father decided that Shmuel had reached a level where he should leave home and enter one of the great yeshivahs. And so he went to learn in the famous Neitra Yeshivah where he advanced in his studies. After 2 1/2 years, on his father's instructions, he transferred to the great yeahivah in Paksh. There he made remarkable progress, learning until late into the night, visiting his family only on rare occasions. By the time he reached the age of twenty, he was known as one of the outstanding talmidim of the Paksh yeshivah. His reputation spread rapidly, and before long the shadchanim were knocking on his parents' door, suggesting a variety of suitable matches.

In the town of Butshum there lived at that time Reb Yosef Zev

Gutman and his wife Mindel, nee Stern. A prominent member of the community, he ran the local grocery store and leased tracts of farmland he owned to the farmers of the surrounding area. The couple had four daughters and one son. Their oldest child was Eidel, an attractive and diligent girl. She was her parents' right hand, and was wholeheartedly devoted to them. One day - she had reached the marriageable age of eighteen, - her father found her sitting in the backyard, crying bitterly.

"What seems to be the trouble, Eidel dear?" her father asked, with concern.

"I am davening to Hashem," she replied, "imploring Him that I should find a husband who is a talmid chacham. It is my fervent wish to marry a tamid chacham."

Recognizing Eidel's noble qualities, her father made up his mind to do all in his power to make her wish should come true. When shortly thereafter Shmuel Rosenberg was suggested as a prospective match for Eidel, it did not take long for the shidduch to be sealed. Everyone was elated, most of all Eidel who realized that her tefillos had been answered in full measure. The chasunah took place in Butshum, and, as befits a respected baal habayis like Reb Yosef Zev, it was a magnificent affair. Being a well-to-do merchant, he promised to support his son-in-law for several years, enabling him to pursue his Torah studies without having to worry about parnassah.

A year after the wedding, their first child was born. They named her Leah. But their joy was shortlived, for tragically, when she was

nine months old, she suddenly passed away. It was a severe blow, which was softened somewhat by the fact that Eidel was expecting another child. They took comfort in the thought that Hashem was giving them another child, and a few month later their son Feivel Hirsch was born.

While learning in Paksh, Shmuel had studied shechitah and received a k'sav kabbalah [certificate] from the yeshivah authorizing him to be a shochet. He felt that now the time had come for him to earn a livelihood and support his family. It so happened that just then the kehillah of Seyfalk was looking for a shochet. Having heard of Shmuel's piety, his noble character and his qualifications as a shochet, they offered him the position, which he readily accepted. He left his father-in-law's house, and together with his wife and new-born son moved to Seyfalk to become the shochet of the kehillah.

In the years that followed, the family increased with the birth of two daughters, Zissel and Devorah. Reb Shmuel was well-liked by the kehillah, all the more so since, besides being a good shochet, he was an excellent baal tefillah with a sweet, melodious voice. But as much as they liked him, the Jews of Seyfalk who were struggling to make a living, were unable to pay him an adequate salary. And so the family made do with very little, just as he had been accustomed to in his father's house. Yet in spite of that, he was always happy and cheerful.

An opportunity arose when the Krasne kehillah made it known that they were looking for a temporary replacement for their shochet. Reb Shmuel took the position and moved back to his

hometown where he rented a house close to his parents. In order not to leave the Seyfalk Jews flat without a shochet, he traveled once a week to Seyfalk to take care of their needs. In Krasne his son Berel was born; later on, his name was changed to Chaim Ber. This came about when suddenly one day the child became gravely ill, burning up with a high fever, hovering on the brink of death. Shmuel and Eidel, still smarting from the death of their first child Leah, decided to add the name Chaim, as a segulah [a remedy and good omen] for long life. To everyone's relief and joy, Chaim Ber's condition took a turn for the better, and before long, he made a complete recovery. A while later, the permanent shochet of Krasne resumed his duties, and Reb Shmuel moved back to Seyfalk.

But fortune did not smile on Reb Shmuel; on his meager income he was unable to make ends meet, and putting food on the table presented a real problem. The family grew as two more daughters were born, Sarah and Chanah. Then misfortune struck when one day Sarah became seriously ill. Children's diseases were rampant in those days, and many children died from various epidemics. All attempts to save little Sarah's life failed, and the child died at three years of age. Her passing came as a staggering blow to the parents who were despondent by their dismal living conditions as it was. Reb Shmuel who had always been happy with his lot became depressed over the fact that he was unable to support his family. But with bitachon in Hashem he pulled himself together, hired a horse-drawn carriage and a driver, packed his belongings, and moved his family to Strytzu.

In those days, the Transylvania roads were unpaved and

difficult to travel over, especially during the winter when they were virtually impassable. Often the carriages had to move off the road to avoid getting stuck in the mud. A joke making the rounds had it, that when riding uphill the coachman told you to get off to make it easier on the horses, on a downhill slope he made you get off because he was afraid his horses might get crushed by the overloaded carriage hurtling down behind them. And on a level road the coachman would tell his passengers, "Enjoy the walk outside. It's good for you!" With a coachman you just couldn't win!

Strytzu was a small village, midway between Krasne and Butshum, with no more than three hundred inhabitants, including six or seven Jewish households who were involved in business. Reb Shmuel tried to establish connections with them in the hope of improving his financial situation.

It was in Strytzu that their son Moshe was born, on the 26th of Tammuz, 1913, and it seemed as though the birth of this child meant the beginning of a new and bright chapter in Reb Shmuel's life. Happily he made the arrangements for the bris in Stritzu which was attended by relatives and friends who came from Krasne, Butshum and other nearby villages to share in the simchah. The mohel was the old shochet of Butshum, Reb Yisrael Meir Waldman. Since at the bris of his sons Feivel Hirsch and Chaim Ber he had given the honor of sandek to his father-in-law and his father, he took the mitzvah for himself this time hoping that the zechus of the mitzvah may bring him hatzlachah. The baby was given the name Moshe after the Maharam Schick [Rabbi Moshe Schick], the revered rebbi of his father, Rabbi Eliezer Lipman.

It did not take long for Reb Shmuel to realize that he was not cut out for business. He was an honest and straight person, but lacked experience in business dealings. "I tried, and I did not succeed," he said calmly, "it just was not bashert," and was not heartbroken about his unsuccessful venture into the world of business and finance.

Without brooding about the past he decided to move to Horvat where he resumed his career as a shochet, realizing that this was the profession that best suited him. Since Horvat was too small a village to support a full-time shochet, he was forced to travel around to the neighboring hamlets to do shechitah for them. He further supplemented his income by being the melamed of young boys in Horvat. Since Horvat is only a short distance away from Krasne, he now had a chance to visit his parents there on a regular basis, and fulfill the mitzvah of kibud av va'eim. In Horvat his wife gave birth to their daughter Rachel. Over the years, the family had grown into a large mishpachah, and along with it, Reb Shmuel's concerns of providing for them increased. In spite of this heavy burden, Reb Shmuel was never downcast. He placed his trust in Hashem and dedicated all his energy to instilling in his growing children the love of Torah and yiras Shamayim. Every spare moment he devoted to learning Torah. On Thursday night he used to stay up all night studying without a break. Despite his straitened circumstances his door was open to passing wayfarers, who were treated to meals and lodging.

His self-effacing humility was extraordinary. Once on a Thursday night a guest noticed Reb Shmuel sitting bent over a sefer by the light of a candle in the wee hours of the morning.

"Why don't you go to sleep?" the guest asked, surprised.

"O, I have trouble falling asleep," Reb Shmuel replied, smiling softly.

Humility, simplicity, and a consuming love of Hashem coupled with a deep yiras Shamayim - those were the outstanding characteristics of Reb Shmuel.

Chapter Three

WORLD WAR I

It was the spring of 1914, shortly after Reb Shmuel had moved to Horvat. It was a turbulent time in Europe, as the great powers armed themselves for the coming struggle. The Austro-Hungarian empire which ruled Transylvania was seething with turmoil, and dark clouds of war were gathering on the horizon. On Tisha Be'Av 1914, World War I broke out in all its fury, engulfing all of Europe.

The Hungarian military command immediately ordered a general mobilization, whereby even middle-aged men were subject to the draft. Those unqualified to serve on the frontlines were inducted to do productive work for the war effort. Evading the draft was out of the question, since draft dodgers could be executed on the spot without a trial. There were a few exceptions however. People whose occupation made them indispensible for the day-to-day functioning of the community were exempt from the draft.

Being a good citizen, Reb Shmuel dutifully registered at the local draft board.

"What is your occupation?" the examiner asked.

"I am the ritual slaughterer for the all the villages of this county, Sir," Reb Shmuel replied straightforwardly. With that he handed the examiner a petition stating that his services were needed by the Jewish communities, requesting that he be exempted from military service.

After a brief discussion, the members of the draft board granted the request and released him from the draft. His heart brimming with joy and gratitude to Hashem, Reb Shmuel returned home.

In the petition for his release from the army it said that he served as the shochet of Krasne and all the other towns in the county. To comply with this, he moved back to Krasne, and from there he fanned out to all the villages of the region to do their shechitah. Serving the needs of all those villages proved to be more than he could handle by himself. The rigors of traveling and the shechitah simply overwhelmed him. So Reb Shmuel went back to the draft board and asked that he be assigned an assistant. He suggested for the job his brother-in-law Reb Avraham Elchanan Halperin who was a certified shochet. Much to his delight, the board approved his request, and now he and his brother-in-law split the work between them. He certainly was happy about the reduction of his work load, but his greatest joy was the fact that he was instrumental in freeing from the draft Reb Avraham Elchanan Halperin, his sister Miriam's husband.

A year went by, Krasne and the surrounding area were not touched by the conflict. But in 1915 the fighting on the battlefront

escalated sharply. Hungarian casualties mounted, exceeding all expectations. As a result, an additional draft call was issued, and this time the examiners were much more strict about granting exemptions than they were the first time. Reb Shmuel was not as fortunate as he had been the first time around - his appeal was denied. He was recruited for military service in the Hungarian army. But his brother-in-law, Reb Avraham Elchanan received an exemption and remained as the only shochet for the county, and the territory he had to serve was widened.

Since Reb Shmuel had no choice, he prepared to leave. Before his departure he wrote a tzava'ah [ethical will] and asked that it only should be opened in case chas veshalom they were informed that he would not return from battle. In his tzavaah he urged his children to remain faithful to Hashem and the Torah, and exhorted them to live righteously and help and support their mother.

Parting with his family was very difficult for Reb Shmuel and even more so for his wife Eidel who now had to fend for herself taking care of her seven children, but there was no alternative. And so, with his knapsack strapped to his back Reb Shmuel headed for the induction center where he joined the other recruits on their way to the front.

During his entire three-year stint in the army, he was granted only two very brief furloughs to visit his family.

Chapter Four

YEARS OF SEPARATION

Throughout their married life, Reb Shmuel and his wife Eidel had seen a great deal of hardship, but the years of wartime separation were far worse than anything they had experienced before. The only bright spot in the dismal situation was the fact that the family lived in Krasne, close to Reb Shmuel's parents. This made it possible for the grandfather, Reb Eliezer Lipman, to keep an eye on the children's education, to teach them Torah and test them on their studies in the *cheder*. On Shabbos the family had their meals at Grandfather's house, and the *seder* nights and Yamim Tovim were spent together with the grandparents. Of course, the festive mood at those meals was dampened by the absence of Reb Shmuel, but Grandfather raised everyone's spirits when he said, "*Im yirtzeh Hashem*, he will come back soon in good health, and next year we'll celebrate the Yom Tov together with the coming of Moshiach."

Although Reb Eliezer Lipman and his wife Feiga were elderly people of very limited means, they did their utmost to help Reb Shmuel's family financially. Still, Eidel found it very difficult to

make ends meet. Under the circumstances, the children had to pitch in and do their share to help with the upkeep. Eidel would buy wool and cotton material and manufacture bed sheets and towels which she would sell at a small profit. The older children had the job of watching and taking care of the little ones, and, aware of the difficult situation, they willingly did their assignments.

One wintry day, Moshe who was only five years old at the time, was sent on an errand to pick up some milk from one of the neighbors. It was frosty outside, and the muddy road was pockmarked with big puddles. Carrying his container of milk, Moshe tried to navigate his way through the puddles. Suddenly he slipped on a slimy rock, lost his balance, rolled off the road, and fell into the swift-flowing creek cascading alongside the road. Within seconds the child was being swept along by the powerful current as he tried to struggle with all his might to keep his head above water. Miraculously, just at that moment, a neighbor, a non-Jewish old lady, passed by and saw the little boy careening in the rampaging stream. Without a moment's hesitation the brave woman jumped into the roaring water, and with superhuman strength she managed to pull the child out. Dripping wet, covered with mud and chilled to the bone she brought him home. Words could not express the gratitude Eidel felt toward the valiant woman who had saved young Moshe's life. People who heard what happened remarked that the name "Moshe" had taken on its original meaning when it was given to Moshe Rabbeinu by Pharaoh's daughter, *ki min hamayim meshisihu*, "for I drew him out of the water" (Shemos 2:10).

On August 27, 1916, Romania declared war against Austria-Hungary. One month later, the Romanian forces were routed by the Central Powers, and on December 6, Bucharest, the Romanian capital fell. The Romanian army, a crippled force, was forced to withdraw into Moldavia, surrendering vast territories to the Central Powers. Since much of the fighting took place in Transylvania - the border region between Romania and Hungary - the people of that sector suffered a great deal as many villages were destroyed, crops were ruined, and the once flourishing countryside was turned into utter desolation.

Chapter Five

REB SHMUEL'S HOMECOMING

It was this devastation and misery that led Eidel and her in-laws to leave war-ravaged Krasne and move with their families to Husasu where Reb Eliezer Lipman's brother lived. Husasu was a quiet, tiny, out-of-the-way hamlet, where they stayed until the end of the war. It was a wise decision. For when World War I ended with the defeat of the Central Powers [Germany, Austria-Hungary and Turkey], the Romanian army took back Transylvania. The victorious Romanian troops swarmed across the larger towns and villages, looting and pillaging and abusing the local population.

At that time, one single Romanian company commander on horseback appeared in Husasu. As he was trotting across the village square, he came upon fifteen year-old Feivel Hirsch who innocently happened to be walking by. The commander who was drunk, decided to have some fun with a Hungarian boy.

"Hey, you! Come over here!" the Romanian shouted.

Scared to death, Feivel Hirsch turned around and ran as fast as his feet would carry him. He disappered among the hedges in the

courtyards, and slipped into an attic of one of the farm houses.

Soon after that, the Romanian commander picked on a Hungarian boy who obeyed his order and stepped forward. Terrified, the boy bowed and respectfully saluted the officer.

"Now you're saluting me," the Romanian sneered, his eyes rolling madly, "but I'll bet that yesterday you cursed me!"

He then grabbed the boy, tied his hand and feet to the horse's tail, goaded his horse, dragging the boy behind until he lost his life. This incident gives us an inkling of the bitter hatred that raged in the hearts of the warring nations even after the war ended.

Soon after the end of World War I on November 11, 1918, Reb Shmuel happily was demobilized and sent home. Although exhausted, haggard and worn out, he was full of hope and *bitachon*. The joy of the reunion with his family after an absence of three interminable years was indiscribable. At long last he had a chance to tell in detail everything that happened to him in the war, and the many times that Hashem miraculously had spared his life.

"Take a look at this," he said mysteriously, as he pulled his helmet out of his knapsack. "See this hole? This is where a bullet hit me and passed right through without touching a hair on my head.

The *Ribbono shel Olam* protected me and performed this *nes* and many other *nissim* for me. My heart is full of thanks to Hashem Yisbarach for bringing me home safely. This helmet I am keeping as an everlasting reminder of *chasdei Hashem*."

He then opened the *tzava'ah* he had written before he left for the war and read it to the family. "I hope," he said, his eyes brimming with tears, "that you will follow these guidelines even now that I am with you, *baruch Hashem*."

The next several years the family lived again in Krasne, where three more children were born: Shimon, Levi Yehudah and little Rivkah, "the daughter of his old age." Then one day, there was an opening for the position of *shochet* in Butshum, his father-in-law's residence. Upon his father-in-law's and Eidel's urging, Reb Shmuel accepted the post, and so the family once again moved, this time to Butshum. He augmented his income by being a *melamed* and received some support from his elderly father-in-law who was delighted to have his children live close by.

Chapter Six

THE POST-WORLD WAR I YEARS

At the end of World War I, Siebenburgen was restored to Romania and renamed Transylvania, but the villagers in the district were not affected in the least by the change of government. Many of the returning veterans had difficulty adjusting to civilian life: employment was hard to come by, and the psychological and emotional scars of their wartime experiences prevented a great number of them to make the transition to normal family life.

The Jews of Transylvania were very supportive of one another, and as time went by, life began to take on a semblance of normalcy.

The various *kehillos* did not confine their help to the material needs of their members but devoted a great deal of energy to establishing *chadarim* and yeshivahs. These *chinuch* institutions had suffered badly during the war due to the fact that many of the *melamedim* and older *bachurim* had been drafted. It was next to impossible to keep these institution open with the few remaining *melamedim* since they could not be paid because of the critical shortage of funds. Now the yeshivahs and *chadarim* had to be

reorganized from scratch. It is worth noting that the *shul* was always the pride of every *kehillah* in Europe, and even the most destitute communities somehow found the means to maintain a rabbi, a *mikveh*, a *shochet* and *melamedim* for the cheder. If a *kehillah* was unable to support these functionaries out of its own resources, it raised the needed funds by appealing to other *kehillos* for help. But they would not dream of doing without these essential institutions. The *shul* was always an exceptionally beautiful structure, taller than any of the houses in the village, to symbolize its importance. In many localities the *shul* served as *beis midrash*, where the men assembled after *Maariv* to learn by candle light, and until late at night the sweet sounds of *kol Torah* echoed through the deserted village streets.

The children went to Public School for half a day, and in the afternoon they learned Torah by the *melamed.*

By the time Reb Shmuel moved to Butshum, Moshe was already eleven years old, and learned *limudei kodesh* all day in the local *cheder* where he was taught by his father who also served as a *melamed* in Butshum. Although Butshum was a relatively small village comprising no more than thirty Jewish families, the community maintained a rabbi and a *shochet*, but both the rabbi and the *shochet* doubled as *melamedim* in order not to overburden the budget of the small *kehillah.*

With the passing years the children grew up, and when Feivel Hirsch, the oldest son, reached the age of twenty his father sent him to learn in a yeshivah in Austria. He stayed there for a short time, after which he moved to Antwerp, Belgium. The Jews of the

Antwerp community, most of whom came from eastern Europe, were very helpful to the bright but penniless new arrival. Remembering how they felt as immigrants, they invited him for meals and made him feel at home.

"Feivel Hirsch," a kind host said to him after breakfast one morning, "I can introduce you to a friend of mine, who would be willing to teach you the diamond business," he continued, smiling encouragingly. "If you're ambitious, you'll be successful, *im yirtzeh Hashem*."

"You know, the diamond business is booming," he said with a meaningful wink.

Feivel Hirsch seized the opportunity, and being a hard-working young man, he established himself, and before long was able to earn and save a substantial amount of money. He regularly wrote to his parents and always enclosed some money to help support the family. Before long, he was introduced to a lovely *frum* girl of a distinguished family, and soon thereafter they got married and settled in Antwerp.

In spite of his idyllic surroundings, Feivel Hirsch felt lonesome and missed his parents and the family. The letters he received from home only heightened his yearning. Although he could easily afford the trip, he was unable to travel to Butshum, because he had left Romania in order to avoid military service. Having left Romania illegally, he was unable to return, since he would be arrested upon entering the country. It was the one thing that weighed most heavily on his mind.

It was around that time that Feivel Hirsch's brother Chaim Ber received his draft notice. He decided to follow his brother's example and go to Belgium.

"*Im yirtzeh Hashem* I'll be successful, establish a home and build a future there," he said confidentlyFeivel Hirsch was overjoyed to have his brother close to him. He set him up in the diamond business, and within a short time he became engaged, got married and set up housekeeping in Antwerp.

With the departure of his brothers, Moshe became the oldest son in the family, and when he reached the age of fifteen his father decided to send him to an out-of-town yeshivah. And so, one day, Moshe left Butshum to go to learn in the Krasne yeshivah which had a higher standard of learning than that of the Butshum yeshivah. Since the yeshivah had no dormitory, Moshe, together with a few other *bachurim*, rented a house for their sleeping quarters. For their meals the *bachurim* were the guests of various local families on a rotating basis, as was customary in those days. Often Moshe would be invited to share a meal with the families of uncles and aunts who lived in Krasne. Since his father was unable to send him any spending money he tried to earn a little cash after the yeshivah sessions. He found a local blacksmith who was willing to take him as an apprentice for a few hours per week, and so he got by without having to approach his father who was strapped financially. Besides learning in the yeshivah, Moshe also had *shiurim* with his zeide Reb Eliezer Lipman. These *shiurim* made a lasting impression on him; later in life he often would say, "The Gemara I learned with my Zeide Reb Eliezer Lipman is etched in my memory. To this day, I remember clearly the complex *sugya* of

Rabbi Chanina Segan haKohanim, in *Pesachim* 14a as if I had learned it yesterday."

It was around that time that Moshe's other zeide, Reb Yosef Zev Gutman passed away and was laid to rest in Butshum where he had lived all his life. Shortly thereafter, Babbe Feiga, the wife of Reb Eliezer Lipman passed away in Krasne. At the end of the year of *aveilus*, life had become very bleak and lonesome for Babbe Mindel who had lost her husband, and even more so for Zeide Reb Eliezer Lipman who had become a widower in his seventies. It did not take long for the two lonely souls to find each other, and a short time later they got married.

Speaking of her new husband, Babbe Mindel said, with a twinkle in her eye, "He thinks that I'm still as pretty as I was when my Eidel married his son Shmuel!"

Seriously though, Babbe Mindel recognized and fully appreciated the *tzidkus* and greatness in learning of Reb Eliezer Lipman. She considered herself fortunate to have the *zechus* to be the wife of such an outstanding *talmid chacham*, to be his *ezer kenegdo*, his helpmate, enabling him to pursue his Torah studies. After the wedding, Reb Eliezer Lipman left Krasne and moved to Butshum.

Chapter Seven

DARKNESS DESCENDS

At the age of seventeen Moshe transferred to the yeshivah of Simlau, a larger yeshivah with a more advanced program of learning. Unlike the village of Krasna, Simlau was a small town with a *kehillah* numbering around three hundred families. The yeshivah had over seventy *talmidim*, a considerable enrollment in those days. Moshe's thirst for learning seemed insatiable. Filled with an ardent love of Torah, he studied with *bren* and persistence. In Simlau, like before in Krasne, after a full day of intensive learning, Moshe tried to earn some money for expenses, not wanting to rely on his father's support. Since Torah study ranked highest on the list of his priorities, he found it very gratifying to tutor younger yeshivah students. With the small amount he earned this way he was able to buy clothes and other necessities. During the *bein hazemanim* [intersession] period, he worked in a local Jewish winery, and when he went home for the Yamim Tovim, he brought with him a modest sum of money which he happily contributed toward his parents' household expenses. This was gratefully accepted, what with the heavy cost of preparing for the Yamim Tovim.

The Yamim Tovim in Butshum in the company of parents, grandparents and family were high points in Moshe's life. But as soon as the Yom Tov was over he went back to the yeshivah, to start the new *zeman* with renewed strength and added zest. In Simlau, like in Krasne, he had his meals with various families on rotation. One of his uncles, a brother of his father, also called Moshe, lived in Simlau where he ran a grocery. Of course, Moshe was regularly invited for meals at this uncle's house.

One morning, a few weeks into the new *zeman*, as Moshe was sitting stooped over his Gemara, his uncle Moshe came into the *beis midrash* with an expression on his face that spelled bad news.

"I had an urgent telephone call from Butshum," he said gravely. "Your father is not feeling well. He has been admitted to the hospital in Zilau."

In those days the only telephone in town was situated in the Village Hall, and to receive or make a call was a major event. Without losing a minute, Moshe took his tefillin, packed his bag and boarded the first bus heading for Zilau. The two-hour trip seemed to last an eternity. Arriving in Zilau, he jumped off the bus, ran to hospital as fast as his legs would carry him and went straight to his father's room. Reb Shmuel lay there burning with a high fever. Sitting by the bedside was the Jew who had brought him to the hospital from Butshum.

"Your father has been sick for more than two weeks," the man explained, speaking in whisper. "When he suddenly took a turn for the worse he had to be rushed to the hospital in critical condition.

The doctors don't know exactly what caused the fever, but they suspect that he has an abdominal infection."

Moshe tried to speak to his father, but it was to no avail. Reb Shmuel did not react. He lay there motionless, breathing heavily, his blue eyes wide open, staring into nothingness. His *tallis katan* spread on his hospital gown moved up and down with every labored breath he was taking. Realizing that his father lay in a coma, Moshe broke into tears. Sobbing bitterly he tried to talk again and again to his father, hoping against hope that he would wake up, but there was no response, no sign of recognition.

Sizing up the gravity of the situation, Moshe immediately got in touch with the uncles in Krasne and Simlau.

"You've got to come right away," he told them, his voice cracking. "Father is very very sick."

Meanwhile Moshe remained at his father's bedside, fervently saying *Tehillim* together with the Jew who had accompanied him from Butshum. The breathing became heavier and gradually deteriorated until it suddenly stopped altogether. Shuddering with cold shivers, tears flowing down his cheeks, Moshe recited at once, "*Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad.*" That is how Reb Shmuel returned his pure *neshamah* to the *Borei Olam* in *kedushah* and *taharah*. He was *niftar* on 2 Kislev, 5691/1931.

Darkness descended. It seemed as though gloom had settled on the world. By late afternoon the uncles arrived from Krasne and Simlau. All that was left for them to do was to make the arrangements for the *levayah* in Butshum. They rented a car to

carry the *aron*. In addition to the rental fee they had to spend a large amount to pay off the driver. The reason for the bribe was a bizarre superstition the local farmers had. They held the absurd belief that a corpse passing their fields on the way to the funeral would bring harm to their crops, and so they prohibited any deceased from being transported on a road that passed their fields. To avoid being stopped by the farmers the aron had to be driven to Butshum in the dark of night, in deepest secrecy.

In Butshum, the entire community stood with bowed heads as the *niftar* and the mourners arrived. They had heard the tragic news even before the *aron* had left Zilau. Now, in order to pay the *niftar* their last respects, they all escorted the *aron* to the cemetery on top of a hill overlooking the village.

Reb Shmuel was only fifty-three years old when he passed away after a life of much anguish and hardship. But what people remembered most of all was his kindheartedness and his easygoing, peaceloving character. The Jews of Butshum mourned Reb Shmuel's passing. Knowing his noble qualities, his love of Hashem and His Torah, they realized what a great loss they had suffered.

Reb Eliezer Lipman, Reb Shmuel's father, a venerable old man of close to eighty years of age, gave a *hesped*. Crying bitterly, he lamented,

"Twelve saplings I have planted, and the finest of them was snatched away in the prime of life!"

It was heartrending to hear the young orphans recite the *Kaddish* at the newly-dug *kever*. Moshe was seventeen-and-a-half

years old, and his brothers Shimon and Levi Yehudah were not even bar mitzvah. They sat *shivah* in Butshum, together with their grandfather, and the entire family grieved over the great loss.

The loss was felt most keenly by the young widow, Eidel. *Chazal* put it succinctly, *Ein ish meis ella le'ishto*, "The death of a man is felt by no one but his wife" (Sanhedrin 22b). Reb Shmuel had cherished, admired and encouraged her, inspired her with his *bitachon* in Hashem, cheered her when poverty and hardship seemed to overwhelm them. And now she felt lost without him . . . "Hashem, you are the *Dayan almanos*, ëthe Judge of widows,' she *davened* silently. "I know You will help me, and my children."

Chapter Eight

COPING WITH ADVERSITY

As soon as the days of *aveilus* were over, the uncles and aunts went back to their homes and families. All of a sudden Moshe found himself in the position of the man of the house, the person in charge of the affairs of the household. The older brothers, Feivel Hirsch and Chaim Ber were in Belgium throughout those difficult days where they had started to raise their own families. Missing their father's *levayah* and the *shivah* was very difficult for them to live down.

Mother Eidel understood, and never reproached them in any of her letters, although she was deeply despondent over the death of her husband and the absence of her two sons. O how she missed them. Her only source of comfort was hidden in a small box she had carefully stashed away. It was the box that contained the baby and childhood pictures of her two older sons, pictures of their weddings in Belgium she had not been able to attend, and baby pictures of her grandchildren, whom she had never seen. Whenever Mother Eidel felt downcast she pulled out that box and lovingly pored over those old photographs. Weeping softly she

would bemoan the fact that it was extremely doubtful that she would ever see her sons again or hug her sweet little grandchildren.

Zissel, the oldest daughter, also had left home after her marriage in Butshum to Chaim Shalom Kleinman. As a yeshivah bachur he learned *shechitah*, and had received *kabbalah* [certification] to be a *shochet* both for fowl and large cattle. Right after the *chasunah*, he was offered a position as *shochet* in Bucharest. He accepted the post, and the young couple moved to that city, the capital of Romania. In light of all the changes, Moshe became the only support of his grief-stricken mother. She knew she could rely on him. As anxious as he was to resume his learning at the yeshivah, he realized that helping his mother took precedence. And so he sacrificed his heart's desire and stayed at home, ready and willing to do his mother's bidding.

As a way of earning a living for her children, Mother Eidel launched a home bakery, and with the help of her daughter Devorah, the oldest girl in the family, she began to produce a line of bread, cake, beigels and assorted pastries. It was Moshe's job to go on the road with the bread baskets in the pre-dawn hours, so that he would arrive in the neighboring villages early in the morning, ready to sell the fresh baked goods. The times were peaceful and tranquil, still, walking along deserted country roads alone at night was no fun. On the other hand, it was not really dangerous. Incidents of murder, assault and robbery were almost unheard of in those days. And so, day after day, Moshe marched from village to village, making his rounds until he was sold out. With the day's collections tucked away in his pocket, he made his way home, only to start out again before dawn the next morning.

All week long Moshe worked tirelessly and with single-minded determination, keeping in his mind's eye the image of his mother and his family. It was for their sake that he labored, and this thought was the fuel that propelled his relentless drive and energy.

But just when things seemed to improve and life seemed to return to normalcy, tragedy struck again. Little Rivkeleh, the youngest daughter, became seriously ill. For several weeks she was in critical condition, hovering on the brink of death. Sadly, all attempts to save her life failed, and she passed away when she was only eleven years old. It was a devastating blow to Mother Eidel and the children. The wounds of the *petirah* of Reb Shmuel were still fresh, and now this . . . With a bleeding heart they laid the child to rest in the Butshum *beis olam*, close to her father's *kever*. There was not a dry eye among the large crowd that attended the *levayah*. Heartbroken, everyone tried to find words of consolation to comfort the grieving mother and the children.

This happened only one year after the *petirah* of Reb Shmuel. Mother Eidel was inconsolable, brooding about her misfortune, but never complaining. With *emunah peshutah* she accepted her sad lot, bowing to Hashem's superior Will and Wisdom. The realization that she had a large family to take care of gave the crushed woman the inner strength and fortitude to carry on and the energy to resume working in her bakery bsiness. Moshe did his utmost to help his mother, and besides selling his mother's baked goods he grabbed every odd job that came his way, just so he could relieve his mother's burden. But whenever he found a spare moment, he slipped into the beis midrash to immerse himself in the Gemara.

Meanwhile, Devorah became of marriagable age which meant thinking about raising funds for a dowry and a wedding, a terrifying prospect for the destitute family. But Grandfather Reb Eliezer Lipman came to the rescue, taking upon himself the task to raise the money for the wedding expenses. This paved the way for Devorah to get married to Zev Fischman, an accomplished young man and a *talmid chacham*. Besides learning Gemara, he studied *hilchos shechitah*, and trained to be a *shochet*. After passing a rigorous test he received his certification to be a *shochet*. Now he was ready to take over the *shochet* position of his late father-in-law, Reb Shmuel z'tzl and was appointed as *shochet* of Butshum.

Chapter Nine

DRAFTED INTO THE ARMY

After Devorah's *chasunah*, things began to settle down, and since the young couple lived close by and could be of help if the need arose, Moshe decided that the time was ripe for him to return to the yeshivah. He took his two young brothers, Shimon and Levi Yehudah along with him. They were learning in Butshum at that time, but now he enrolled them in the Simlau yeshivah where earlier he himself had been learning for a short while. After making sure that the boys were securely settled in their new environment, he continued on to Satmar. Satmar, a major city situated in north-east Romania near the Hungarian border, had a large Jewish population numbering more than ten thousand *frum* Jews. The Satmar yeshivah had a student body of hundreds of *bachurim* composed of local residents as well as many out-of-town *talmidim* from Romania, Hungary, and some from as far away as Germany and Switzerland. This was the yeshivah where Moshe hoped to delve into depths of Torah and gain a clear understanding of the intricacies of the Gemara and Halachah. It was there that he had the *zechus* to attend *shiurim* by the saintly Satmarer Rebbe, Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum z'tzl, and to be tested by him.

Regrettably, his stay in Satmar was of short duration - no more than a few months. It seemed as if the Satan was doing his best to interfere with Moshe's advance in learning. One day, out of the blue, Moshe caught a serious throat infection, and the doctor ordered several weeks of bedrest, [this was before the discovery of antibiotics]. Having no choice but to obey, he choose to return home and stay in bed there rather than to be sick in a strange place with no one to look after him. And so he stayed home for about two months, bedridden for most of the *zeman*, under the watchful eye and constant care of his mother. After his recovery he stayed at home, and since he felt a deep attachment to Torah learning he decided to become a rebbi of young boys. He started out as rebbi in Angursh, a hamlet near Butshum. Next he was offered a well-paying position as rebbi in Ardyad. While teaching there, he kept tabs on the progress his brothers were making in the Simlau yeshivah. Based on the reports he received, he decided to leave Shimon in Simlau, and to take his younger brother with him to Ardyad to learn under his guidance and supervision. Moshe felt deeply responsible to carry on his father's legacy, and the spiritual and material welfare of the family was uppermost in his mind all the time.

Meanwhile, Moshe's sister Chanah grew up to be a big help to her mother. A clever and adroit girl, she was an expert seamstress, and by taking in sewing and mending jobs she was able to help defray the household expenses. But as hard as she worked, she would never accumulate enough money for a dowry, and without that, her prospects for marriage were very slim. Her married sister Zissel who lived in Bucharest, realizing the predicament, invited Chanah to come to Bucharest.

"A crackerjack seamstress like you can make a lot of money in this city," she assured her. "Come here and stay with us, I'd love to have you join our family," she said warmly.

With her mother's approval, Chanah followed suit, packed her bags and set out for Bucharest. Soon after her arrival, she got a decent job in a shop in the local garment industry. The boss praised her for her diligence and her meticulous work, but when she wanted to leave early on Friday afternoon, he came over to her, looking grim.

"If you don't come in on Shabbos," he growled, "don't bother to come back on to work on Monday. Remember, if you don't show up tomorrow, you're fired."

"You can't fire me, sir," she answered defiantly. "I quit!"

Deeply disappointed, Chanah said goodbye to her sister Zissel and returned to Butshum. Determined to leave home, she applied for a passport and visas, preparing to join her brothers in Antwerp. Aware of the difficulties her brothers had encountered crossing the border illegally, she wanted to leave the country with valid documents. By paying off one of the officers in the Passport Office she received her papers on short order, and after a tearful farewell she headed for Belgium. Overjoyed to be reunited with their sister, Feivel Hirsch and Chaim Ber did their utmost to make her feel comfortable and to make her adjustment as smooth as possible. It did not take long before Chanah became engaged to a suitable bachur from a respected family. Her brothers, who made all the arrangements for her *chasunah*, were happy to see Chanah and her

young husband establish a *bayis ne'eman* in Antwerp.

To Mother Eidel, Moshe was the pillar of strength she leaned on, and although Ardyad was not exactly close by, he came to visit her regularly. When he was twenty-one years old, Moshe received a draft notice to register for induction into the Romanian army. He returned home, because the induction center where he had to register was close to Butshum, but he received a deferment for an indefinite later date. He was ordered to be ready to be mustered at a moments notice, so that he had to stay in Butshum, as the call-up might come any day.

As he had done on previous occasions, he used the time he spent at home to help his mother in every way possible, taking on a variety of odd jobs, tutoring boys, bookbinding, selling fruit, and similar chores. A few weeks later, he received the second draft notice. This time he received his marching orders. It should be noted that in the Romanian army, after the First World War, Hungarians and Jews were treated as second-class soldiers. Thus, for example, they were not issued the full array of standard arms and ammunition, and they were put to work doing menial labor, such as laying railroad tracks.

Moshe's stint in the army progressed quite smoothly, although once in a while he ran into anti-Semitic incidents. Once a Romanian officer tried to force him to make the sign of the cross. Of course, Moshe refused. To get even with him, the officer harassed him, making him do all kinds of strenuous tasks. However, at the first opportunity, when a higher officer came to inspect the troops, Moshe lodged a complaint stating that his

superior was guilty of discrimination and making him a laughing stock. It helped, for a while at least. But being among gentiles, he constantly met with insults and assorted anti-Jewish slurs. These taunts only helped to make him more proud to be a Jew.

Midway through his tour of duty, Moshe met two *bachurim* from Satmar he knew from the time he studied there. Now, among strangers, far away from home, their friendship grew even closer. Both *bachurim* came from well-to-do families, and so it happened that well before the end of their hitch - which had another two years to go - they managed to pay off their army doctor to write certificates for them and for Moshe declaring the three of them medically unfit for military service. They then took care of the commanding officer to accept these certificates and to issue a medical discharge for themselves and for Moshe.

On his release from the army, Moshe returned home to Butshum where his mother now remained with only her daughter Rachel. The young boys, Shimon and Levi Yehudah were away learning in yeshivah. The peace and tranquility were a soothing balm for Mother Eidel after all the pain and suffering she had endured during most of her life. Daughter Devorah and her husband Zev Fischman, the shochet, who lived close by looked after her with love and devotion and took care of every need that arose.

Grandfather Reb Eliezer Lipman was not in Butshum any longer. He moved back to Krasne after the passing of Grandmother Mindel.

Chapter Ten

THE *PETIRAH* OF REB ELIEZER LIPMAN

In in winter of 1936 Reb Eliezer Lipman's health began to decline. Feeling that his strength was waning, he asked that a rav be called. The *rav* he asked for was the young Rabbi Hillel Lichtenstein, the son of Rabbi Baruch Bendet Lichtenstein who succeeded his late father as Rabbi of Krasne.

"I want to leave a *tzava'ah* for my family," the venerable sage said in a barely audible voice, "that they should continue in the path of the Torah after I am gone to my reward."

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The following is a segment of the text of Reb Eliezer Lipman's *tzava'ah*:

> It says in our holy Torah, "For I have loved him [Avraham] because he commands his children and his household after him that they keep the way of Hashem, doing charity and justice" (Bereishis 18:19). It is our duty to follow in the footsteps of our holy forefathers, in whose

zechus we live and are sustained, by *chasdei Hashem Yisbarach*. It says in Sefer Chasidim, "A person is required to train his children and his family to respect our King and our Creator. The merit of the community depends on him, and his reward is infinite. A son can gain merit for his departed father. For if a son performs good deeds, he gains merit for his father.

If parents instructed their children to do good deeds after their passing, and the children carry out their parents' will, it is considered as though the parents themselves had performed the good deeds" (Sefer Chasidim par. 1171).

See now, I have aged; I know not the day of my death. I feel how my strength is ebbing. Therefore I address all my sons and daughters, my sons-in-law and my daughters-in-law, may they live in happiness. I want to exhort you and instruct you to be extremely careful in your observance of *Shabbos kodesh* in all its minute details, for Shabbos is equivalent to all the mitzvos. For whoever observes Shabbos according to Halachah, even if he worships idols as they did in the generation of Enosh, he is forgiven, and he is rewarded with an unbounded heritage, as *Chazal* state.

Furthermore I want to urge you to set aside set daily periods for Torah study, each according to his ability and comprehension. Especially on *Shabbos kodesh* and on Yamim Tovim, for the reason that Shabbos and Yom Tov were given to *klal Yisrael* is in order that they should

occupy themselves with Torah learning.

Moreover, I emphatically implore you, urge you and instruct you to raise your children to learn Torah, for Torah is our life and the length of our days. Guide them and lead them along the ways of Torah and *Yiddishkeit* that have been handed down to us from our parents and *rebbe'im*, without deviating either to the right or the left from the guidelines we were given by our *chachamim z'l* concerning children's education.

The primary purpose of man in this world is to raise his children and grandchildren to be *yir'ei Hashem Yisbarach*, who conduct themselves properly and possess a good and uprightcharacter.

You, my dear children and children-in-law, you know full well how much hardship I have endured, and the distress I have suffered until Hashem granted me the *zechus* to raise you in the way of Torah, and to marry off my daughters *baruch Hashem* to husbands who are *yir'ei Hashem*. I *daven* to Hashem that my struggle was not in vain *chas veshalom*, that the wellspring may never run dry, and the tree may never be cut down. Remain upright for generations to come, be strong and stalwart in your *emunah* and *yiras Hashem* all your life, then all will be well with you in this world and the world to come.

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A few days later his health failed, and Reb Eliezer Lipman

returned his pure *neshamah* to his Maker. He reached the age of eighty-three. The year was 1936; the German dictator had already come to power, but Reb Eliezer Lipman had the *zechus* to be spared to witness the unspeakable calamity that was about to befall *klal Yisrael.* His death brings to mind the *nevuah* of Yeshayah *hanavi, Ki mipenei hara'ah ne'esaf hatzaddik,* "Because of the impending evil the *tzaddik* was gathered in," (Yeshayah 57:1). Hashem, in His great compassion spared Reb Eliezer Lipman the tragedy of seeing almost his entire family, including well over one hundred grandchildren and great-grandchildren, wiped out in the holocaust. *Hashem yinkom damam.*

A telephone call was placed to the Butshum Village Hall to inform the family of his passing. Moshe and his brother-in-law Zev Fischman, the *shochet,* right away hired a horse and buggy and headed for Krasne.

All of Krasne was steeped in mourning. The entire village came to pay their last respects Reb Eliezer Lipman, the patriarch of Krasne and one of the most prominent and revered members of the *kehillah.* The various storekeepers and craftsmen closed their stores and shops to attend the *levayah. Yeshivah bachurim* who had learned Torah from him as well as people from neighboring villages, all assembled to bid farewell to their beloved rebbi.

The *aron* was carried into the interior of the *shul* and placed in front of the *Aron Hakodesh.* Such honor was accorded only to *rabbanim, rashei yeshivah* and *rebbe'im* who sat in the shul and the *beis midrash* learning Torah day and night. The first *hesped* was given by the *rav* of Krasne, Rabbi Hillel Lichtenstein who

expressed the anguish of the kehillah over the loss of the great *marbitz Torah* whose *neshamah* had risen to Gan Eden. The next *maspid* was the *niftar's* grandson, Reb Zev Fischman. After the sons said *Kaddish*, the *levayah* proceeded to the *beis olam* at the outskirts of the village, as young and old escorted Reb Eliezer Lipman on his last journey. He was laid to rest next to his first wife Feiga.

Chapter Eleven

MARRIAGE AND THE BIRTH OF A SON

Ever since the death of his father, Moshe had been the mainstay of his mother and the family. Now that he had been discharged from the army and the upheavals in the family were a thing of the past, a sense of stability and calm pervaded the atmosphere.

One day, musing about the future, Mother Eidel said,

"My dear Moshe, I think the time has come for you to think about getting married."

Since Moshe did not demur she continued,

"Recently a *shadchan* suggested a very nice girl from a good family in Varmish. I think you should look into the matter."

Moshe listened intently, and did not say a word.

"Her name is Chanah Leah Ganz, the oldest daughter of Reb Elyah Ganz," she said, smiling encouragingly. "He is a prosperous merchant; the Ganz family is highly respected, and Chanah Leah

is a fine *frum* girl of outstanding qualities."

Moshe's ears perked up. It was obvious that he was interested. "Reb Elyah Ganz owns wheat fields and vineyards," Mother Eidel continued, her cheeks flushed with excitement. "He runs the local food market and a tavern where he sells wines and liquors produced in his vineyards."

Taking his mother's cue, Moshe traveled to Varmish, his heart beating faster with anticipation. The Ganz family, and Chanah Leah in particular, were impressed with Moshe's personality, his intelligence and sensitivity and above all, with the fact that he was an outstanding *lamdan*. To make a long story short, they happily shouted "*lechayim*," the *shidduch* was sealed, everyone jubilantly wished *mazal tov*. Reb Elyah Ganz set a respectable amount as a dowry, and in addition, he gave the *chasan* a considerable sum of money to buy new clothes and other necessities, and offered to pay for the wedding.

The *chasunah* which was held in Varmish was a splendid affair. The Jewish community of Varmish comprised just a handful of families, but they kept close ties with the fifty Jewish families of the neighboring *kehillah* of Lechnitz. Now the entire *kehillah* of Lechnitz came to take part in the wedding of the daughter of Reb Elyah Ganz, one of the most prestigious members of the community and its main supporter.

The family in Butshum rented a bus, and Mother Eidel taking the entire family in tow, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts and distant relatives - everyone came to join in the festivities.

As befitting a wealthy *mechutan*, the tables were laden with a profusion of sumptious food, luscious fruit and delectable tidbits, all elegantly arranged. The band played full blast, and the happy guests danced and rejoiced all night, until the wee hours of themorning. It was a *chasunah* they would never forget.

For the first three months after their wedding, Moshe and his young wife stayed at her parents' house. The couple then moved to Sasregen, and with the dowry money Moshe had received from his father-in-law they bought a house to live in and a grocery store as a source of income. Within a short time Moshe felt completely at home in the Sasregen *kehillah* and was accepted as a valuable addition to the community of three hundred Jewish families. On Shabbos he used to go to the *tisch* of the Sasregener Rebbe, Rabbi Yisrael Yaakov Vishurun Rubin. He became a devoted follower of the Rebbe and a member of the inner circle of the Rebbe's *chasidim*.

Chanah Leah became pregnant, and when she was due to give birth they traveled to Varmish to be with her parents, but sadly the baby was stillborn. After a short period of recuperation they resumed their life in Sasregen, and soon Chanah Leah was expecting once more. This time they stayed in Sasregen where she gave birth to a healthy boy, precisely on the *yahrzeit* day of Moshe's father, the 2nd of Kislev. With *simchah* and elation the *bris* took place in Sasregen. His father-in-law Reb Elyah Ganz had the honor to be the *sandek*, and the baby was given the name Shmuel, after Moshe's late father. Mother Eidel had the thrill of her life cradling little Shmuel in her arms. Over and over she repeated his name, as she tenderly kissed the baby's forehead.

The birth of little Shmuel was a source of solace for the pain and anguish of the past. It seemed as if his arrival was a harbinger of a bright prospects for growth in both a spiritual and material sense. Moshe and his wife Chanah Leah looked ahead toward the future with *bitachon* and confidence in Hashem.

Chapter Twelve

HITLER COMES TO POWER

In contrast to the life of calm and serenity in Transylvania, the new reports arriving from Germany were frightful and ominous. In 1933, Hitler, the German tyrant, rose to power, and a year later the overwhelming majority of the German people elected him as *Reichskanzler*, Chancellor of Germany, the highest office in the land. With spellbinding oratory and leadership, and by appealing to the basest instincts of the German population, Hitler rapidly consolidated his power. His use of propaganda and his terror machine allowed him by the end of 1934 to place Germany completely in the grip of his dictatorial rule.

Within a very short time the Gestapo, his secret police, held sway over Germany, in control of the judiciary and the court system. The German army and security forces pledged their allegiance to the *Fuehrer*, as he called himself, and accepted this former sergeant as their supreme commander. Yet not one German raised his voice in protest! All forces in German life - the economy, the press, communications, and the churches - bowed to his directives. Any challenger was brutally silenced. School

children were encouraged by their teachers to report any subversive activities or utterances by their parents or neighbors.

The Fuehrer promised to provide Germany with *Lebensraum*, or "living space" by expanding the borders of Germany, and to restore German honor which it lost with the abject defeat at the end of the First World War. This pledge appealed to the Germans who were still grumbling over the humiliation that was dealt them by the Allied powers when they were made to agree to the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. He called the German nation the *Herrenvolk*, the master race; and the people - rich and poor, both the educated elite and the riffraff - cheered him. He savored the adulation. Riding in an open limousine, he smiled at the frenzied crowds lining the streets, waving the swastika flags, passionately shouting "Heil Hitler!" "Heil Hitler!" By the hundreds of thousands Germans came to mass rallies to listen to his tirades in mesmerized silence, rooting for him with savage frenzy.

Ever since losing World War I, the German people lived in a depression. The Treaty of Versailles required Germany to pay heavy reparations to the victors, and the German economy was in shambles. Inflation was out of control, and unemployment was widespread. Hitler found an easy scapegoat. He blamed the treaty - and the Jews - for all of Germany's miseries. Pointing his finger at the Jews, he characterized them as "the dregs of society, parasites, and a cancer on the body of the German people."

"Let's get rid of them!" he shouted insanely. And the Germans cheered. "*Die Juden sind unser Unglueck*! The Jews are the cause of our misfortune! They are in league with the devil and the forces of

darkness! The Jews defile our soil, they poison our rivers and lakes!" And the Germans cheered until they were hoarse. "We must cleanse Germany of the Jews! We will make Germany *Judenrein*!" And the German people ate it up.

Hitler shrewdly aroused the hatred of the Jews that was dormant in the soul of the German people. It is an inborn hatred that is in their blood and their genes.

Hitler's war against the Jews began on the day he assumed power. Jews were forbidden to enter German stores by signs stating, "Dogs and Jews not allowed." Jewish children were banned from public schools. In his infamous book, "Mein Kampf" Hitler drew the blueprint for the new Germany and described the Jews as a racial pollutant that degraded and polluted the purity of all with whom they came in contact. He prohibited Germans to buy in Jewish stores; anyone disobeying his orders was severely punished.

German Jewry reacted to this horror with anxiety and consternation. Their ancestors had been living in Germany for over one thousand years, and they had always thought of themselves as patriotic Germans. Now they suddenly found themselves outcasts, stripped of their citizenship, their businesses ruined, and their lives threatened. Many abandoned their homes and left Germany as long as there still was a chance to escape. Jews who had immigrated from Poland were expelled and shipped back to Poland with only the shirts on their backs.

But not all were able to flee. Some did not have the required documents and visas, others could not find a country that was

willing to accept them. Then there were those that thought that this was merely a passing episode of European anti-Semitism, and that Hitler would soon pass from the scene. Until 1940, Jews could still leave Germany, after that all the world was closed to the Jews. Their fate now was in the hands of the Germans.

On September 15, 1935, the "Nuremberg Laws" were enacted that denied German Jews their civil rights, and forbade marriages between Jews and non-Jews. As a result, even intermarried and baptized Jews were forced to return to Judaism. Jewish doctors, lawyers and scientists were dismissed, Jewish actors, singers, artists and musicians were not allowed to perform. Passports belonging to German Jews were marked with the letter "J", and to their first names, the obligatory names "Israel" or "Sarah" were to be added. Jewish bank accounts and properties were confiscated. If anyone resisted, he was beaten and mocked in front of jeering crowds of Germans.

The German people enjoyed the "new order." The unemployed were given excellent jobs vacated by Jews who had been fired. The money in Jewish bank accounts was transferred to German accounts. Looting Jewish stores and businesses proved to be a profitable enterprise for many Germans. It seemed as though the economy was improving, and the Germans attributed it to the wise leadership of the Fuehrer. Hitler's prestige and approval rating soared to astronomical heights. In schools and universities the students began their day with a hymn in his honor.

Drunk with power, Hitler thought the moment had come to expand the borders of Germany and so, on the 12th of March

1938, the German army marched across the border into Austria where they were received with open arms by the Austrian population. Under the direction of Adolf Eichmann of the S.S. the Germans immediately began to intimidate the Austrian Jews. Jews were terrorized, beaten on the streets, forced to clean public latrines, and driven into economic destitution.

In November of 1938, Germany was convulsed by an appalling event that displayed the true character of the German people for all the world to see. This is what happened.

In Paris, Herschel Grynszpan, a young Polish Jew, who had been living in Germany, in an attempt to avenge the Germans' brutal deportation of his family, shot Ernst von Rath, a junior German diplomat. Two days later, the German died. On the night of November 9, riots broke out throughout Germany. The Germans called it, "a spontaneous demonstration of righteous indignation." It was neither spontaneous, nor righteous, nor indignant; it had been carefully orchestrated at the very highest level of the German hierarchy and was executed through marauding mobs acting under the choreographed direction of the S.S. In a wild orgy of destruction, 76 synagogues were demolished and 191 others set on fire; 815 shops and 171 homes were destroyed. *Sifrei Ṭorah* were set on fire, *sefarim* went up in flames, and any Jew found walking in the street was savagely beaten to death. Defenseless Jewish men, women and children went into hiding in basements and attics to stay out of the path of the marauding hordes. The bloodthirsty rabble was on the loose, looting and pillaging Jewish homes and stores, smashing windows and furnishings with unrestrained frenzy. Between 20,000-30,000 Jews were arrested and sent to

concentration camps. The night came to be known as "Kristallnacht" - the "Night of the Shattered Glass." That infamous night marked "the beginning of the end." The pogrom lasted for two days, and in its aftermath the streets were strewn with glass and charred furniture. The smashed and splintered glass came to symbolize the shattered illusions of German Jews who were raised to believe in German *Kultur*. It brought home to them that they were at the mercy of their German neighbors and that their lives were in mortal danger, that their situation was desperate.

His appetite whetted by the annexation of Austria, Hitler set his sights on Czechoslovakia. In the fall of 1938, Germany seized Czechoslovakia unopposed and proclaimed that country a protectorate of the Third Reich.

Chapter Thirteen

WORLD WAR II ERUPTS

Intoxicated with success, Hitler launched his infamous blitzkrieg against Poland on Friday, September 1, 1939, marking the beginning of World War II. France and England, coming to Poland's aid, declared war against Germany, hoping to slow down the German offensive. Yet within six weeks the German Wehrmacht crushed the Polish army, and thereby more than three million Jews fell under German domination. The Germans now were faced with the problem of how to deal with this huge Jewish population. And so the plan for the "final solution" slowly began to take shape. The official German policy was to expel all Jews from their homes and drive them into newly established ghettos in Warsaw, Lodz, and Lublin. But their true aim was, "to destroy, to slay and to exterminate all the Jews, from young to old, children and women" (Esther 3:13). In deepest secrecy careful plans were laid to implement the total annihilation of European Jewry through disease, starvation, slave labor and wholesale murder. The Germans found willing accomplices in the Poles, many of whom bore an age-old hatred against the Jews. They reveled in humiliating Jews and eagerly betrayed to the Germans Jews who

had gone into hiding.

Believing that Germany would win the war, the Hungarian leaders signed a pact with Germany making them the allies of the Axis powers. In return they were allowed to recover a large section of Transylvania they had been forced to relinquish to Romania at the end of World War I. Upon taking control of the Transylvania region, the Hungarian authorities enacted anti-Jewish laws which placed severe restrictions on the Jewish population and made life very troublesome for them. Moshe who until that time had earned a decent livelihood from his grocery in Sasregen, saw business dwindle to the point that it did not pay to keep the store open. He had seen troubled times before in his life, and recognized that he had to take action.

"Look, Chanah Leah," he said to his wife, "it says, *uveirachticha bechol asher ta'aseh*, 'Hashem will will bless you in all that you do' (Devarim 15:18). A Yid has to do something, and then Hashem will send His berachah. We can't just sit here, fold our arms and wait."

"Well, what do you have in mind?" Chanah Leah replied, looking puzzled.

"Let's sell the house and the store, and move to Bistritz," he said resolutely. "Bistritz is a big city with a kehillah of about five hundred Jewish families. With Hashem's help I'll be able to earn a living there. Well, what do you say?"

"Wherever you go, I go," Chanah Leah replied, sighing deeply. "But I'll surely miss our beautiful home here."

And so Moshe sold his house and the store and moved to Bistritz where he opened a small broom factory.

Reb Elyah Ganz, Moshe's father-in-law, came to his children's aid by buying a house for them in Bistritz. The special straw needed for manufacturing brooms Moshe bought in outlying provinces of Hungary, so that he often had to go on extended buying trips. However, new regulations were introduced requiring Jews to obtain travel permits, and those were hard to come by. In light of these staggering difficulties Moshe gave up the broom business and opened a store in the city market where he sold meat and wine. This too came to nothing. One clear day, the police raided the market, arrested all Jewish vendors, taking them to the police station.

"As of today, Jews are forbidden to conduct business in the city market," the fat commissioner barked with self-important pompousness. "Anyone violating the law will be dealt with severely!"

Businesses that had special permits were still allowed to operate, but they were required to stay open on Shabbos and Yom Tov. Some frum Jewish storekeepers somehow managed to circumvent the regulations, but many chose to go out of business altogether, hoping for better times.

The result of all this harassment was that many Jews lost their sources of income and could no longer make ends meet. Admirably, many wealthy Jews supported the poverty-stricken in the community. They tried to persuade the municipal and police

authorities to be lenient, offering them bribes to look the other way. But all the cajoling fell on deaf ears.

"There's nothing we can do," was the standard answer. "Those are direct orders from our superiors in Budapest. If we get caught violating them, we'll be in big trouble."

It was obvious that the Germans were pulling the strings, and the Hungarians puppets were doing Hitler's bidding. Hungarian Jews thought that their lot was the worst that could happen to them.

They were completely in the dark about the program of total extermination that was under way in Poland and Russia. Reports about mass killings by *Eisatzgruppen* [mobile killing units], ghettos and concentration camps did not reach them, and the horror stories told by the handful of escapees about German atrocities were dismissed as lunatic ravings. And so, blissfully oblivious of the inferno that was blazing in Poland, Hungarian Jews tried to cope with their troubles as best they could.

It was around that time that Moshe's wife gave birth to a daughter. They named her Zelda. Moshe was now a father of two small children, without an income and very meager reserves; his prospects for the future looked very bleak

Chapter Fourteen

THE WAR INTENSIFIES

The German offensive gained momentum. In the spring of 1940, the German panzers smashed into Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium and France. Within six weeks, the German armies were in full control of all these countries. Caught in the trap, the Jews of Europe listened with trepidation to Hitler's harangues as he screamed, insanely waving his hands, "We will wipe the Jews off the map of Europe! We will make Eurpe *Judenrein*!"

Jews went into hiding with non-Jewish friends. When caught, they and their gentile protectors were sent to a certain death. The Germans operated with fiendish efficiency, and wherever they went they found collaborators, willing to do their bidding. Especially the Poles, Ukranians and Lithuanians were enthusiastic henchmen of the Germans, and, when it came to killing Jews, they often equalled or outdid their masters in ruthlessness and bestiality.

On October 2, 1940, one year after the conquest of Poland, the Warsaw ghetto was established, and the Jews of the city and

surrounding area, numbering some 400,000 were sqeezed into the ghetto area, enclosed by a high wall with barbed wire. The ghetto was overcrowded, dirty, disease ridden, and terror filled. Hunger, sickness, and depression made life unbearable. The old, the weak, the young and the delicate did not survive for very long, and during 1942 alone, some 312,000 were sent to their deaths in the gas chambers of Treblinka.

In the ghetto starvation was rampant. Corpses were lying scattered throughout the ghetto streets. Wornout clothes and shoes could not be replaced, and everybody walked around in rags, often going barefoot. Young boys sometimes managed to sneak out of the ghetto by way of the sewers, bringing back a few potatoes. When they got caught they were shot on the spot. The Germans took pleasure in randomly beating up Jews, men, women and children alike. Yet in spite of the abominable living conditions, the spirit of Torah and *chesed* thrived in the ghetto. People living on the brink of starvation organized *shiurim*, held daily *minyanim*, and meticulously observed the mitzvos. They maintained underground classes and seminaries for students, wrote books, and collected *sifrei kodesh* for safekeeping. But conditions deteriorated from day to day.

On the eastern front the German offensive seemed unstoppable. The German forces rapidly advanced, and by June of 1941, occupied the vast reaches of Lithuania and the Ukraine, and penetrated the heartland of Russia. In town after town, German *Einsatzgruppen*, [mobile killing units] rounded up the Jewish population, young and old, men women and children, made them dig their own mass grave and mowed them down with machine gun

fire. Those who fell into the mass grave while still alive where buried alive together with the dead. They did this in Kiev, Riga, Vilna, Kovno, Dvinsk, Lvov, Kishinev and hundreds of smaller towns and villages. In many towns they herded the Jews into the local synagogue and burned them alive. Anyone trying to climb out of a window was shot instantly. The methods of the atrocities varied from place to place, but their objective was the same: to annihilate the Jewish people.

Toward the end of December, 1941, the first gassing took place in Chelmno, near Lodz, using carbon monoxide gas from truck engines. Chelmno was the extermination camp for the Jews in the ghetto of Lodz. In the spring of 1942, extermination by gassing began in Sobibor, followed by Belzec, Treblinka and Majdanek, and Auschwitz. Trains from all over Poland and the far reaches of Europe began to funnel Jews to their final destination.

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought the United States into World War II. The oppressed Jews of Europe breathed a sigh of relief, hoping that America's entry into the war would put a stop to the German atrocities. But their hopes were dashed, as the German accelerated their program of extermination of the Jews to a feverish pitch.

While fires were raging all around them, Hungarian Jewry still lived in relative tranquility, although they could see dark clouds gathering on the horizon. In these troubled times, Moshe cared for his mother, his brothers and sisters, just as he had done ever since the passing of his father. And so he was very helpful and took care of all the details when his brother Shimon became engaged in

Bistritz, to the sister of his brother-in-law Zev Fischman, the shochet of Butshum. His brother Levi Yehudah who was serving in the army was away on training exercises, being moved around all over Hungary. One day, Moshe found out that his brother's unit was scheduled to pass close to Bistritz. He quickly prepared a package for him with some underwear, socks, some cake and fruit and some money. Smiling broadly he approached the company commander.

"I request permission to deliver this package to my brother. It's been a long time since I last saw him, sir," he asked, standing sharply at attention.

"Permission denied!" the officer grumbled curtly.

Moshe begged and pleaded; it was useless. The vicious Jew-hater did not even allow him to talk to his brother. Standing at the outer edge of the army camp, Moshe spotted his brother. He waved at him, and over the distance the two brothers looked longingly at each other, their laughter mixed with tears. A wordless encounter, feelings of love expressed by waving arms, unaware that this was to be their final farewell.

Chapter Fifiteen

IN THE HUNGARIAN ARMY

With the passing months, the Hungarians showed their true colors. Gradually their latent hatred of the Jews came to the surface. The Hungarian army was placed under the supreme German command and fought alongside its German allies. However, not only Hungarians were drafted into military service. The district commander of the Bistritz region issued an order requiring all Jews to register at Army Headquarters. Moshe too, received a draft notice and reported for a physical checkup. Of course, the Hungarians did not have the slightest intention to make the Jews serve in the army. They were drafted to do slave labor wherever the army required it, paving roads, laying railroad tracks and the like. After passing his physical, Moshe was sent home, and a few days later, he was ordered to report early in the morning for extensive briefings on the duties he was expected to fulfill in the Hungarian military service. He was told to report for duty in June 1942, to be shipped to the battle front, destination unknown.

With Moshe's departure, his wife Chanah Leah was left alone at

home with her two small children, little Shmuel and baby Zelda. Seeing his daughter's plight, her kindhearted father, Reb Elyah Ganz held out a helping hand. He bought a house in Bistritz and moved there with his entire family to be close to his daughter. The knowledge that his wife and children were taken care of during his absence was a great relief to Moshe. Preparing for an uncertain future, he packed his belongings, warm clothes, a blanket, a canteen, sugar cubes, needle and thread and other incidentals. He stuffed everything into a lightweight traveling bag, placing his *tallis*, *tefillin* and *siddur* on top. He made sure to take along some cash for emergencies, sewing the bills into the lining of his coat and the folds of his pants.

With a heavy heart he said goodbye to his wife, kissed little Shmuel and Zelda, and, placing his hands tenderly on their heads he *bentched* them with the *birchas kohanim*: *Yevarechecha Hashem veyishmerecha. Ya'eir Hashem panav eilecha vichuneka. Yisa Hashem panav eilecha veyaseim lecha shalom;* "May Hashem bless you and safeguard you. May Hashem illuminate His countenance for you and be gracious to you. May Hashem lift His countenance to you and establish peace for you."

The families of the departing inductees were allowed to escort them all the way to the railroad station. The officers in charge behaved quite humanely, at least at this stage of the proceedings. Which was not surprising since the Bistritz Jewish community had paid them off liberally to be accommodating. The departing group was made up of about two hundred-and-ten recruits, including non-observant Jews, doctors, lawyers and other intellectuals, ranging in age from twenty to forty-five. From now on, they would

all be equals, and would share equally in whatever task they would be assigned. As the first order, everyone had to wear a yellow band on their left arm to let the whole world know that they were Jews.

In the afternoon, the shrill sound of the steam whistle pierced the air. "All aboard!" the command rang out. Amid tearful farewell wishes the recruits boarded the train and waved goodbye to the wives and children standing on the platform. Moshe's wife Chanah Leah and her children Shmuel and Zelda also waved vigorously at Moshe. Of course, the little ones had no idea what the excitement was all about. Slowly the train set into motion and, with billowing clouds of steam, the engine pulled out of the station. And as the train faded in the distance so did the bond between Moshe and his family pale irrevocably and turn into nothing but a dim memory.

At the Bistritz station, word was received that the train was held up for a while in the neighboring village to wait for another train to cross the tracks. Right away a small group of relatives got together to travel to that village, to say goodbye again to their loved ones and to see them once more before they left on their long journey. Chanah Leah went along too, to see Moshe off again. Meanwhile, as a result of a sudden short stop the train had made, Moshe bumped his head against a sharp edge and had a bandage on his forehead. Pleasantly surprised to see Chanah Leah, Moshe smiled, but Chanah seemed concerned about his injury.

"Don't worry about it," Moshe tried to soothe his wife. "It's just a scratch. I feel fine, *baruch Hashem*!" he said, fighting to hold back his tears.

The train stood there for two hours; then the inevitable moment of parting arrived. Chanah Leah wept profusely while Moshe restrained his tears with all his might. He wanted her to remember him as tough and robust, able to withstand the rigors that lay ahead. The whistle blew again, a last embrace, and Moshe climbed into the train, secure in the knowledge that his wife was well taken care of. The conductor shut the doors, the wheels began to roll as the train vanished from sight, making its way toward the eastern front.

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Sitting in the train, listening to the monotonous clatter of the train wheels Moshe's thoughts wandered to the past, to his childhood, the house where he grew up, his late father, his mother, brothers and sisters, the village, his friends. Memories of the long-gone past mingled with the images of the present. The scene of his wife and his children waving at him from the platform was alive in his mind's eye. Absorbed in gloomy thoughts, he was overcome by a feeling of despair and hopelessness. How was it all going to end? Would he see his family ever again?

"I've got to be strong," he said to himself, "I may not give in to depression. A Jew should never lose hope. A Jew believes that everything is truly meant for the good, *gam zu letovah*. The Baal Shem Tov says that sadness is worse than sin. *Ki vesimchah seitzei'u*, he translates, "With a spirit of *simchah* you will come out of all your misfortunes."

With that he whispered a silent *tefillah*, "Please, I beg You,

Ribbono shel Olam, bring me back in good health and spare my family from all *tzores* and misfortune."

The train ride seemed endless, the rhythmic shaking of the wagon was tiring, and Moshe dozed off. After several hours, soldiers came around handing out a simple cold meal consisting of stale old bread with some butter and jelly and a side dish of vegetables.

In spite of the skimpy meal, the company of inductees kept their spirits up. Suddenly, making a sharp turn, the train lurched sideways. Thrown off balance, one of the Jewish recruits reeled and fell off the train. Instantly the commanding officer pulled the emergency brake and brought the train to a halt. The recruit was brought back onto the train, where his wounds were professionally treated by a medic. This incident and the concern shown by the officers gave rise to the hope among the men that they were being sent to do a job in the national interest, and they felt that, as Hungarian Jews, it was their patriotic duty to put the shoulder to the wheel. From time to time the train stopped at various points to unload or take on cargo and military supplies, or for other reasons. At such stops, which sometimes lasted for hours, the men were allowed to get off the train to stretch their legs and enjoy the fresh air. Shabbos was like any other day on that interminable train ride, the only difference being that the men did not put on *tefillin*. In spite of their dismal surroundings they sang *zemiros* and made *Kiddush* over the bread ration they received, in an heroic attempt to introduce a little of the *kedushah* of Shabbos into the dreariness of their worldly existence. They *bentched* with *mezuman* to the incessant drumbeat sound of the wheels. After an exhausting

journey of more than two weeks they arrived in Gomel, a city deep inside Belorussia, near the Ukrainian border, about 100 miles north of Kiev. It was late at night, and the city under German occupation observed a total blackout. In pitch-darkness the men got off the train, carrying with them their baggage and food. After midnight they were allowed to go to sleep in a courtyard adjacent to the station, but the all-pervading darkness made it impossible to see anything. Fortunately it was summertime so that sleeping outdoors presented no problem. Moshe, like everyone else, grabbed a space near a wall in the courtyard, took off his shoes, covered himself with his blanket, and went to sleep on the ground.

Chapter Sixteen

THE LONG MARCH

Early in the morning, the men were awakened and ordered to line up in formation.

"Anyone wearing glasses must turn them in to the sergeant!" the commanding officer shouted. "Only educated eggheads wear glasses!" was the ridiculous reason he gave.

"Remember, you're in the army now!" he continued, his face flushed with self-importance. "Strict discipline is enforced! All orders are to be obeyed! Anyone stepping out of line will get clobbered!"

Their stay in Gomel lasted only a few days. Then an order was given for the group to start heading south on foot. The march took them into the Ukraine - two hundred-and-ten Jews guarded by fifteen armed guards and gun-toting Hungarian soldiers. On the first day they marched forty miles. It was a long and agonizing day. Many of the men almost dropped to the ground. But not every day was as bad as this, and everyone tried to take advantage of the occasional rest stops to preserve their strength to continue on the

march. Attached to the group there were several horse-drawn wagons, loaded with supplies, equipment and ammunition for the Hungarian soldiers and guards. The wagons were driven by Jews who were the envy of the fellows that were forced to walk. On the second day of the march, the column came under attack by semi-automatic rifle fire coming from the direction of the forest lining the road. Everyone fell to the ground trying to protect themselves from the bullets that were whizzing by. But the drivers were not allowed to get down from the wagons; they had to control the horses that would otherwise go into a stampede at the sound of the explosions. Now the roles were reversed; the exposed riders envied the the men marching on foot. The attackers were partisans hiding in the forests, shooting at passing troop columns and convoys. These partisan groups consisted of local Russians and Ukrainians as well as Jews who offered valiant resistance against the German occupiers.

Continuing on their march, the column reached Chernichov, a large city about sixty-five miles south of Gomel. In the wake of the German assault the city lay in ruins, totally devastated, a sea of rubble, wrecked buildings and structures. In their merciless fury the Germans had laid waste this and many other teeming cities.

After marching for two whole weeks, the men arrived in Starioskov, the main Headquarters of the Hungarian Military Police. All groups of Jewish inductees that were brought to this district had to undergo a series of test at this Hungarian Police Headquarters. The inductees had heard rumors about the brutality the officers and enlisted men at this Headquarters showed toward the Jews. A commander of a different Jewish unit told his colleague

in Bistritz that the personnel on the staff of Headquarters in Chernichov behaved with fiendish cruelty, and he graphically illustrated it with hair-raising stories of outrages inflicted on the Jews in his detail.

Having heard these terrifying reports, the Jews of the Bistritz unit entered the Headquarters building with trepidation.

With a fervent *tefillah* on his lips, Moshe implored Hashem that the examination should pass without trouble. The men were led into a large chamber.

"Everyone get undressed, and take off your shoes!" the Military Police sergeant barked. "We want to check and see what you are hiding!"

One by one the men were questioned. Each person had to give a detailed account of everything he carried on his person and in his baggage. Some of the men were made the butt of a joke, ordered to lie down, get up, do pushups, jump up, hunker down, all to the uproarious laughter of their tormentors who enjoyed the sadistic spectacle.

In the group there was a doctor, about thirty years of age. When they picked on him to do all kinds of calisthenic exercises, pushups and jumps, he quickly ran out of breath. He begged the guards to leave him alone, but that only whetted their appetite. Horrified, Moshe watched as they ordered him to do more pushups. "Faster, faster," they egged him on, clapping their hands with delight, until he collapsed, totally exhausted. The others picked up the hapless fellow, and helped him get back on his feet. The guards

apparently had enough. They told everyone to get dressed and to continue on their way. The men realized that, considering the gruesome stories they had heard, they had gotten off pretty lightly.

Continuing on their march, here and there they ran into explosions and small arms fire coming from the forests. In one of those incidents, as usual, they all quickly dropped to the ground. Jumping for cover into a hole, Moshe stumbled on a rock and fell. He got hurt pretty badly but, what was worse, as he fell, his canteen in his backpack hit a rock and broke. A canteen was of vital importance on the long march in the summer heat. Whenever the column passed a stream or a well, the men filled it with water which provided them with refreshing drinks and literally kept them alive. "What am I going to do without my canteen?" Moshe thought in desperation. Fortunately, marching in the same group was Moshe's friend and cousin Yechezkel Kraus. Seeing Moshe's predicament, he had the perfect solution.

"Don't worry, Moshe," he said, smiling warmly. "I have two canteens. Go ahead and take one of them."

"You're a lifesaver," Moshe replied. "You'll never know how grateful I am."

This episode illustrates the heartfelt friendship and mutual support the Jews showed to one another in those trying times. One day, as they were marching, a young man, twenty-six years of age, became sick, burning up with a high fever. With his last ounce of strength he dragged himself along with the company, not wanting to be left back. He knew that to be abandoned in the middle of

nowhere was a death sentence. The men tried to help him and asked the officer in charge to make a rest stop to give the sick man a chance to recuperate a little. The officer gave him permission to ride on one of the wagons, which put him on the road to recovery. A few days later, someone else fell ill, but his condition got worse by the hour. This time the officer ordered that he be taken to a doctor in one of the nearby villages. The company continued without him, and he has never been seen or heard from again.

The grueling long march left Moshe weary and footsore. At night the men slept in orchards, fields or pastures, and sometimes, if they were lucky, they found an old barn or an abandoned, broken down old house.

The entire march was made under the direction of the German army. They were in complete control of the Hungarians and regulated the distribution of grain and food in the area. The Germans supplied the provisions, such as flour, sugar, potatoes to the various armies, including the Jewish auxiliary work details.

Occasionally the Bistritz group ran into other Jewish work details on their way to Hungarian labor camps in different regions. Sometimes they were joined by another group and marched together for a good distance. On one such occasion they encountered a work detail from Krasne. Scanning the rows looking for a familiar face, Moshe met an old friend, Shimon Waldman from Krasne. The poor fellow looked hollow-eyed, drained and completely exhausted; he was ready to drop.

"Let me give you a hand," Moshe said, rushing to help him.

"Come on, let me take your backpack and put it on the wagon."

In Moshe's company they were allowed to put their backpacks on the wagons, but not all groups were offered this luxury. And so, for the duration of their joint march, Shimon Waldman's backpack stayed on that wagon. Moshe's kindness in relieving his friend of the heavy burden was a big help. It probably saved his life by giving him a chance to regain his strength.

At long last, the fatiguing, backbreaking march came to an end. They had reached their destination more than two months after they left Gomel. For all that time they had been on the road, walking a distance of close to 1,000 miles, which is the same as walking from New York City to central Florida. Their labor camp was in Kamishenko, a small, forsaken hamlet inside Russia, 450 miles east of Charkov. Finally they were able to put down their things and stretch their legs. They were housed in several abandoned cottages and houses where they settled down as best they could, resting up from the rigors of the journey, awaiting further instructions.

Chapter 17

KAMICHENKO

Having established a niche for himself, Moshe's life took on a semblance of normalcy. The strain of the endless march and the nightly search for a place to sleep were behind him, and a new phase of his life in exile began. Their work detail was put to work doing road work in the area, digging ditches and sewers, chopping down trees and similar chores. They erected a fence around the camp and built tables and benches to provide a minimum of comfort. One of the buildings served as communal kitchen and dining room. The men gradually got used to the daily schedule which became a predictable routine. The camp commander, a Hungarian by the name of Kovacs was quite friendly toward the Jews. No doubt, the sizable amount of money he had received from the Bistritz Jews before the group left had something to do with that. But whatever the reason, he behaved decently, and often showed kindness, compassion and an uncommon degree of humanity toward the Jews under him.

Summer went by, and the Russian winter was rapidly approaching. Cold waves announced its imminent arrival. The

cold weather made the outdoor work more difficult for Moshe who was not used to this climate. One frosty day, Moshe felt overcome by a sudden chill, and with chattering teeth, aching with frostbite, he stepped up to the camp commander.

"I request permission to go back to the house to warm up a little, Sir," he said, shivering all over his body.

"Permission granted," the commander replied. "But don't make a habit of it."

A little later, on another cold day while at work, Moshe found a big pumpkin in the fields. He cut it up, kept a slice for himself and shared the rest with his friends. They built a fire, roasted the pumpkin and relished the tasty hot morsel while warming themselves by the fire. The smell of the roasting pumpkin and the sound of the crackling fire brought back pleasant memories. For a brief moment they imagined themselves sitting around a campfire back home. Quietly watching the quaint scene, the sergeant kept quiet and did not interfere.

The *Yamim Nora'im* were coming closer. The men in the work detail, most of whom were *frum* Jews were faced with a difficult choice: To go to work on Rosh Hashanah, or to stay in the cottage. Sure, commander Kovacs was a nice fellow, but was it wise to provoke him and risk antagonizing him? Heated discussions were the order of the day. In the end, some of the men went to work on Rosh Hashanah, but the majority - about one hundred-and-eighty men, including Moshe - decided to stay in the cottage, come what may.

They *davened* the *tefilos* of Rosh Hashanah with deep *kavanah*, especially the words in the *tefillah* before *Maariv*, *Tichleh shanah vekileloseha; tacheil shanah uvirchoseha*, "May the year with its curses come to an end; may a new year filled with *berachos* begin," took on a deeper significance. And everyone was moved to tears by the touching phrase in the *Unesaneh tokef*, "On Rosh Hashanah will be inscribed. . . who will live and who will die; who by water and who by fire, who by the sword, who by beast, who by famine who by thirst. . .Who will rest and who will wander. . ." Never before did they experience the impact of this *tefillah* as they did this year in the loneliness of the exile in Russia. On the second day of Rosh Hashanah they did not go to work either, and on Yom Kippur, even those who had gone to work on Rosh Hashanah stayed in the cottage.

A mood of sadness and gloom gripped the group as they assembled to *daven*. Everyone sensed the heartache of being far away from home, isolated in goyish surroundings, with neither an *aron hakodesh*, a *sefer Torah* nor *tekias shofar*, in a miserable cottage, without the feeling of warmth and togetherness of *davening* in *shul* with family and friends. O, how Moshe missed his wife and children. Outside it was freezing cold, a howling wind was blowing the last leaves off the trees. Inside the chazzan intoned the *Kol Nidrei*, and everyone joined in singing the stirring ancient *niggun*. After *Ne'ilah* and fasting all day, everyone wished each other *Leshanah haba'ah biYerushalayim*.

No sooner was Yom Kippur over than commander Kovacs ordered everyone to line up outside. Looking indignant, he gave them a tongue-lashing for not coming to work.

"Don't let it ever happen again!" he yelled. "I won't stand for it! How dare you! Next time I catch anyone goofing off, he'll be thrown into the brig!"

On and on he went, repeating the same threats over and over. The men stood with bowed heads, timidly listening to his tirade, knowing full well that the whole thing was a charade, and that he did it only to impress his superiors. Proof of this was the fact that he could just as well have chased them off to work in the middle of the day, but he waited until after Yom Kippur was over to give his lecture.

In late September, commander Kovacs went home to Hungary on a furlough, and most people gave him along letters to deliver to their families. When word got around in Bistritz that Kovacs had arrived all relatives of the men in the labor camp got together and went to the Headquarters of the Military Police to pick up the letters from their loved ones. Kovacs, who was handsomely rewarded for his service, dutifully handed out all the messages, and on his return to Kamishenko he took back letters and packages for the men under his command.

Beaming with joy, the men greeted Kovacs who arrived carrying a large bag filled with gifts from home. Whatever they had asked for in their letters they received, and then some. Moshe eagerly opened his package where he found an encouraging letter from Chanah Leah. *Baruch Hashem*, the children were fine, and with the help of her parents she was able to manage very well. The delectable home-made cookies and kokosh cake were out of this world, and the sweater, thermal underwear and woolen socks he

found in the package would protect him during the upcoming harsh Russian winter.

While commander Kovacs was away in Hungary, his deputy filled in for him. A Romanian, he too, treated the Jews with kindness and consideration. These two men earned the everlasting gratitude of the Jews under their command for making life in exile bearable. Indeed more Jews survived the war in this work detail than in most other groups whose commanders were ruthless slave drivers who oppressed and tormented the Jews and in many cases were responsible for their deaths.

In mid-November it began to snow heavily, accumulations of up to a depth of several feet were not unusual. The harsh weather made working outdoors all the harder. Now their job was clearing the highways, piling the snow in huge mounds on the sides of the road to allow traffic to flow unhampered. Snow plows were unheard of; the only tools they had were ordinary shovels. Wearing worn-out gloves, wrapping heavy rags around their clothes, they tried to protect themselves from freezing to death in the sub-zero cold that often dipped to minus 40 degrees Fahrenheit. It was for their own benefit that the men kept moving vigorously so as to preserve their body heat.

Throughout his stretch in Kamishenko, Moshe was very careful to eat only kosher food. There were times when he was on the brink of starvation, and according to *Halachah* was permitted - and even required - to eat non-kosher food as a matter of *pikuach nefesh*. Still, his ingrained mental outlook and the education he received from his parents and *rebbe'im* prevented him from touching *treif*

food; the very thought of eating it filled him with loathing. One of the fellows in the work detail - a non-religious Jew - kept berating the *frum* men who did their utmost to eat only kosher things.

"If you eat *treif* food like I do, you'll stay strong and healthy," he used to say. "You'll be able to survive the rough time we're having. But if you are stubborn and keep on eating nothing but bread and jelly and drinking coffee, let me tell you, you're not going to last for very long."

Ironically, after a few months in Kamishenko, this fellow caught a bad case of typhus and was the first one of the group to die.

Chapter Eighteen

DEATH CAME ON SUNDAY

Sunday was the day off, time for laundering and repairing clothes and doing all the things for which there was no time during the rest of the week, since they worked for more than twelve hours each day. Usually they spent the day relaxing, especially during the cold of winter when it was nice and warm inside.

Occasionally, Moshe and several friends would go into the neighboring villages, taking along their manual hair clippers and sewing kits. Going from door to door they would offer their services.

"Anybody need a haircut? Patch up a garment? Any odd job around the house; we can do it!"

All Moshe asked for as payment was some bread and fruit, or occasionally some hot soup. In the evening he came back with a sack full of food which he shared with the kashrus-observing people, a welcome supplement to their meager diet.

One Sunday, as usual, Moshe and five of his friends got ready to venture into the surrounding villages to do some odd jobs in

exchange for food.

"Come on, Moshe," several of his friends urged, "please stay home today, and give all of us haircuts. We look like savages."

Looking at their unkempt, shaggy manes Moshe decided to say "yes" and to stay in the camp.

"You fellows, go ahead without me today," he told the others. "Lot's o'luck."

It was an uneventful day, a restful Sunday like any other. But when it got dark and the five men did not come back, people began to get worried. But since they were not supposed to be back in camp until morning to show up for work, their friends decided to wait before going out to look for them.

Early next morning an old peasant women from the neighboring village showed up in the camp, sobbing bitterly.

"Five Jewish workers of this camp were killed yesterday. . . A German officer murdered them. I saw it with my own eyes," she moaned, her voice trembling with terror. "First he asked them all kinds of questions. They answered him. Then he told them to lie face down on the bottom of the ditch by the side of the road."

Overcome with horror, the poor old woman staggered. They quickly offered her a chair and a glass of water.

"The men cried and begged for their lives," she continued, her voice barely audible. "They explained that they were members of a Hungarian labor detail working for the German war effort. It was no

use. The German drew his gun, shot them in cold blood and continued on his way as if nothing had happened," the old woman concluded, wiping a tear from her face.

Everyone sat in stunned silence; Moshe's heart was caught in his throat. He realized that Hashem had sent a malach to watch over him. It was truly a nes that his life was saved.

Commander Kovacs ordered one of his soldiers to take several Jewish workers along with him to bury the bodies who had been lying in the ditch for a full day, covered with blood. He told them to remove and bring back the victim's clothing since such garments were the property of the Hungarian authorities. The Jewish workers dug a common grave for the five martyrs, gave them a Jewish burial, recited *Keil malei rachamim* and said *Kaddish le'iluy nishmasam.* Having done this, they went back to the camp.

From that day on, no Jew left camp on his own any more. Although this made life more difficult, the fear of running into one of the Germans that patrolled the district outweighed all other cosiderations.

In December there was a change of camp commanders. Kovacs was assigned to a different post, and a new Hungarian commander named Szabo took his place. On the first day he ordered the men to line up in formation and gave a tough speech about order, obedience and discipline.

"Sloppy work and lying down on the job will not be tolerated!" he shouted. "If you guys follow orders, you'll be treated well," he continued. "But anyone shirking or causing trouble will get a

whipping he'll remember for the rest of his life!"

The men who had been used to the humane Kovacs were afraid of what was in store for them. By working diligently and without letup they hoped to gain his good graces. Basically Szabo was not a Jew-hater or a particularly ruthless sort; on the other hand, he was not nearly as kind a fellow as Kovacs, his predecessor was. Those days were gone.

One day, several men were not feeling well. They decided to stay in their cottage and not to go to work in the morning. Previously, when a person was sick Kovacs allowed him to take off from work. However, Szabo was not willing to make allowances. "Bring the goldbrickers outside," he thundered angrily. "I'm going to make an example of them. I'll show you what happens when you try to duck doing your duty."

With their hands tied behind their backs he hung them by their hands from a beam. Screaming in agony, the men pleaded for mercy. Moaning and groaning they begged forgiveness. Some of them fainted. Seeing their fellows writhe in pain, the others stepped over to Szabo and implored him to have compassion.

"Come on, have a heart," they pleaded. "You can be sure, they've learned their lesson."

After a few minutes, Szabo relented and gave orders to have the men released. This was the only time that he imposed such harsh punishment on the Jews. But the men learned to take his threats seriously; henceforth they would not dream of ignoring his instructions.

Chapter Nineteen

THE RUSSIANS OFFENSIVE

The bitter cold and heavy snow brought the German offensive on the eastern front to a grinding halt. The deeper they penetrated into Russia, the more fragile and exposed the German lines became. At the same time, the Russian army gained new strength and vitality from the mighty flow of lend-lease arms and equipment arriving daily from the United States. Every inch of land was fought over ferociously, and the casualties on both sides were extremely heavy. The civilian populations in cities that were the targets of constant shelling also suffered grave losses.

In Kamishenko and other remote places the work continued at its usual pace. Shipments of ammunition, food and supplies continued to arrive at the military bases the Germans had established in the conquered territories. From time to time, a few Hungarian camp guards accompanied by Jewish workers, were sent to a nearby German army base to pick up food and supplies for the camp.

On one of those trips commander Szabo himself went with

horse-drawn wagons to the German army base to bring the supplies, taking along a Hungarian soldier and four Jewish laborers. Early in the morning, shortly after they arrived at the German base, artillery shells came crashing down all around them. Explosions ripped through the air. Fires broke out left and right. The advancing Russians were shelling the base. Everyone dropped to the ground to avoid the rain of shrapnel and falling debris. Like scared rabbits, German soldiers were running in all directions. The base was the scene of chaos and pandemonium. This happened on January 15, 1943.

"Rueckzug! Retreat!" shouted the German officers.

Szabo was nowhere to be found. Confused and bewildered, the Hungarian soldiers started to run, following the fleeing Germans who themselves were running in circles.

"Let's stay here and sit it out, and join the Russians," some of the Jews said. "They're going to capture this base any minute now."

But their plan was spoiled.

"Anyone staying here will be shot on the spot!" the Germans screamed. Knowing that this was no idle threat, the Jews started to run in all directions.

The frigid wind fanned the flames as heavy snow began to fall.

The bombardment continued; the whining sound of incoming shells signaled the ear-splitting boom of the explosions. Acrid smoke filled the air as fires were raging throughout the base. Not

knowing which way to turn, people watched in amazement - Jews and Hungarians alike. Scared to death, white as a sheet, trembling in their boots, the Germans looked on with wide-eyed with terror.

Every time a hail of *katyushas* came down, people took cover. The German and Hungarians officers who were riding on horse-drawn wagons also jumped down and lay flat on the ground. During the shellings, one of the Hungarian wagon drivers, afraid for his life, jumped down to find shelter. Startled by the thunder of the blasts, and without a driver to control them, the horses became wild and went on a stampede. As soon as the explosions let up, the German officer, livid with rage, screamed at the Hungarian wagon driver, and with one quick burst of fire finished him off.

The German base was a madhouse. In the commotion no one could think straight, and everyone just began to run in a daze. Many people were killed by the explosions. The wounded tried to drag themselves to a place where they could tend to their injuries. Those that collapsed on the road waited for death to redeem them from their misery.

Before they retreated, the Germans carried out their threat, killing any straggler that tried to stay in the rear and detach himself from the column in order to join the advancing Russians.

Even while on the run, the Germans arbitrarily would kill any Jew that crossed their path. It happened once that a German soldier saw a Jew wearing a decent pair of boots. The German who wanted those boots ordered the Jew to take them off. The Jew handed him the boots, whereupon the German, without batting an

eye, simply shot the Jew, took the boots and nonchalantly continued on his way.

Moshe owned a very sturdy pair of boots. In a labor camp in Russia a good pair of boots was essential; they protected his feet on the long marches and saved them from frostbite in the frigid cold. But Moshe knew also that a German would not hesitate to kill to get his boots. So he chafed the top leather and tied rags around them to cover them up and to make them look worn-out.

Chapter Twenty

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

For the next few weeks, the situation was muddled. The labor camp was in turmoil and confusion. The German forces were retreating on all fronts as the Red Army pushed its way westward. Driven out of Russia, the Germans withdrew into the Ukraine, past Kiev into Belorussia, further into Poland.

The Hungarians pulled back along with their German allies, and so the camp at Kamishenko was evacuated before the advancing Red Army, and the Jewish work detail was ordered on a westward march.

Marching in the deep of winter was far worse than anything they had experienced before when they were walking in the summer.

To make things worse, they were not given any food. Hungry, footsore, and dead-tired, Moshe sometimes dozed off while walking. The worst were the nights. Exhausted from marching all day in the freezing cold, they had to start looking for a place to sleep. Occasionally, they found shelter and slept in a hayloft, barn

or stable. To them the main thing was to stay out of the bone-chilling wind that roared across the plains.

Late one evening, the troop arrived at a deserted village. Much as they tried, Moshe, his cousin Yechezkel Kraus and two other Jews simply could not find a place to sleep. The Germans and Hungarians had requisitioned taken all the available homes and barns for themselves. The four of them continued until they came upon a lone house at the edge of the village. They knocked on the door and the window.

"Please let us in," they pleaded. "Won't you allow us to spend the night with you. We're exhausted; we'll sleep on the floor, in the attic or in the cellar. We won't cause you any trouble, you may be sure of that."

"Get out of here!" the owner grumbled. "Beat it! Get lost, you hear!"

Yechezkel Kraus took off his watch and held it up to him.

"If you let us sleep in your house, I'll give you this watch. What do you say? How about it?"

The man, a Russian Jew-hater, took the watch and let them in. Still, it was well worth the price of a watch to sleep in a warm house rather than spend the night shivering in the cold.

The Red Army relentlessly continued their onslaught, pursuing and encircling the retreating German forces, attacking them with artillery, tanks and bombing them from the air. The Jews were

caught in the worst possible situation. In addition to the anxiety about being hit by Russian artillery and bombs, they had to worry about their German and Hungarian masters who were tense and high-strung and likely to act irrationally. As confused and scared as the Germans were, they kept up their barbaric treatment of the Jews. The Jews in turn, had to be extremely careful not to attract the attention of the Germans who were ready to kill at the slightest provocation. But worst of all were the hunger and the biting cold. Moshe saw many of his team mates looking like living skeletons, marching on and on like walking phantoms. If one of them collapsed and died, his lifeless body was pushed off to the side of the road like a bag of trash, so that people should not trip over him. Weak and starving himself, Moshe had to watch helplessly. Horrified, he saw bodies lying frozen stiff by the shoulder of the road, other bodies grotesquely blown up from hunger. Then there were bodies oozing streams of blood on the pure white snow. These were people who had been shot by the Germans because they could not keep up with the march and were falling behind. Moshe could tell that they were Jews by the yellow band on their arm or the yellow patch sewn on their coat.

There was no food to speak of. The little there was, the German and Hungarians kept for themselves, leaving nothing for the Jews. The cold and the food shortage affected also the horses; they dropped dead, one after another. Many Jews, hovering on the brink of starvation, cut pieces of meat from the carcasses, roasted it and ate it. It had a disgusting taste, and it turned out to be harmful, causing sickness and in some cases, death.

Although Moshe was weak, starving and tired, the thought of

touching horse meat repelled him. Being famished, there were however moments when he felt the temptation, but he resisted the urge. Seeing how sick those who ate the meat became and how much they suffered strengthened his resolve not to eat *treif* food.

"I'll make do with the piece of bread or the mouthful of potatoes I manage to scrape up," he said to himself.

To fight the hunger pangs he would cut a thin sliver of the piece of bread ration he carried in his knapsack, leaving the rest for later. That way he never was full, but whenever he was famished he would cut another sliver of bread. Thus he always managed to have something to still his hunger. He lived by the *maamar Chazal*, "You cannot compare a person who has bread in his basket with one who has no bread in his basket" (Yoma 18b).

While on the road, the Jews in the work detail made it a point to split up into small groups. The idea was that in small groups one man would take care of another, and as buddies they would help one another to survive their ordeal. Moshe's buddy was his friend from Bistritz, Shmuel Schpeiter. Moshe happened to have some bread which he shared with his friend Shmuel whose bread had run out. The poor fellow was craving something to eat. Shmuel carried an extra pair of shoes in his knapsack, and on the way he sold them to a peasant in the Ukraine for two kilos (4 1/2 pounds) of flour. Since Shmuel had no strength left, and Moshe had a lightweight knapsack they made up that Moshe should carry the flour, and when they got hungry they would share the flour. But as fate would have it, the two friends became separated somehow. The next several days, Moshe went all out trying to find his friend and share

the flour with him, which would be of vital importance since for a few days no food rations had been distributed at all. Although he was ravenous Moshe restrained himself and was not going to touch the flour until he found his friend Shmuel. He did not give up hope of locating him. Then, a few days later, to their joy and delight, they found each other in the village of Neviusku. That day they both had marched a great deal, and were famished and at the end of their strength. Now they went to look for lodging for the night, but much as they tried knocking on doors, no one would let them in. Suddenly they spotted an abandoned old ruin of a house.

"That's where we'll spend the night," they said.

The flour was like man from heaven. As tired as they were, their grumbling stomachs were demanding their due. They built a fire, boiled up some water and cooked the flour. The bland, pasty dish tasted like the finest delicacy and stilled their voracious hunger. At last, they were able to lie down to a restful night's sleep.

Chapter Twenty-One

ACCUSED OF ESPIONAGE

Every morning the men were ordered to form up and continue marching under the watchful eyes of their German and Hungarian guards. As a rule, the Germans were far more barbaric than the Hungarians. Often they would kill a Jew out of sheer boredom or simply because they did not like his looks. But there were instances when the Hungarians rivaled the Germans in cruelty. At one of the rest stops along the road a Hungarian soldier was poking fun at some Jews in his detail, and because to his mind they were not working fast enough, he suddenly tied their hands behind their backs and hung them by their arms from a tree. The hapless Jews screamed and howled with horrendous pain. All the pleadings and entreaties of their colleagues fell on deaf ears. The Jews remained dangling from the tree until they died. In stunned silence the others then dug a grave and gave them a Jewish burial. *Ad masai resha'im ya'alozu*, "How long shall the wicked exult? Your nation, Hashem, they crush, and they afflict Your heritage" (Tehillim 94:3,5).

One night on their endless wandering, the work detail stopped

at a Ukranian hamlet. Moshe, together with his cousin Yechezkel Kraus, explored the area in search for a place to sleep and to find some food. As usual, they tried to stay as far away as they could from the center of the village so as not to run into any vicious Germans or Hungarians. Although tired after a long day of marching, they still walked around for quite a while late at night when finally, beyond the fields at the outskirts of the village, they found a house with a dim light shining through the window. Blue with cold, their teeth chattering, they knocked on the door.

"Come on in, fellows," a kindly old peasant woman said with a creaky voice. "You look like you're ready to pass out with cold. I'll fix you some hot coffee. That'll do you good."

"Thank you so much," they replied. "You are so very kind."

The old woman's gentle words warmed their hearts. They hung their snow-covered clothes to dry and warmed their frozen hands by the crackling fire in the big black cast-iron stove.

"Here, have some bread with jam and a cup of coffee," she said, placing in front of them a loaf of savory Russian dark rye bread, and two cups of piping hot coffee. Moshe and Yechezkel ate their fill; to them the simple meal tasted like a royal banquet.

After the meal the woman prepared the beds for them, and gratefully they prepared to go to sleep. Before they had a chance to fall asleep, a Jew from Czechoslovakia who worked in a Czech labor unit entered the house and also was offered a tasty meal. Meanwhile, another peasant woman - obviously a neighbor - came in. The Czech Jew who spoke Russian struck up a conversation

with her, and after a few minutes of small talk the woman suddenly left. Moshe and Yechezkel who did not understand a word of the conversation, asked the Czech Jew in Yiddish,

"*Vos iz di mayseh?* What's going on here?"

"*Zorg zich nisht,*" he replied, "Don't worry. Everything's alright."

After he finished his meal the Czech Jew got up to leave.

"I just want to go back to my detail to find out at what time we start marching in the morning. I'll be right back," he explained.

Just as Moshe and Yechezkel were going to sleep, a heavily armed Hungarian soldier suddenly came barging in. Without saying a word he started beating them up, slapping and punching them.

"You're a bunch of Russian spies!" he yelled at the top of his voice.

Evidently, the neighbor woman had reported to the Hungarian that there were Jews staying in this house who spoke Russian and who are Russian spies.

"We're no spies! Please believe us!" Moshe tried to convince the soldier. "We don't speak a word of Russian, and we don't even understand Russian! You're making a big mistake."

It was useless. The Hungarian refused to believe them and continued clobbering, pounding and kicking them. He then searched their knapsacks to see if they were carrying any spying

paraphernalia maps, codes or short-wave radio equipment.

Meanwhile, the Czech Jew came back, totally unaware of what had transpired. Now the fuming Hungarian jumped on him and started giving him a thrashing.

"All right," the Hungarian said, all out of breath. "I'm taking you all to Headquarters. The captain will know what to do with the likes of you!"

At Headquarters, the beatings started all over again - only much worse. Bleeding from his nose and mouth, his eye swollen, Moshe pleaded,

"Please believe me; I'm not a spy!" he begged. "My father, Shmuel Rosenberg, fought valiantly in the Hungarian army during World War I. Don't you see, we don't speak a word of Russian. So how could we be Russian spies?"

It was all in vain. Grim and unmoved, the captain summoned a soldier.

"Take them to the Main Office at the base," he ordered tersely. "There they'll pass sentence."

The situation looked hopeless. The men knew that wartime espionage meant death by firing squad. As they walked they said *Kerias Shema*, *Viduy* and *Tehillim*, and pledged *nedarim* if only Hashem would get them out of the mortal danger that hung over their heads. When they reached the Main Office they were told that, as a result of the general retreat, the Main Office had been

relocated to a point further west, so the soldier proceeded with them to the new location. On the way there, they were stopped by a Hungarian officer who noticed their yellow arm bands.

"Where are you taking these Jews?" he asked the soldier.

"To Headquarters, Sir," the soldier replied, saluting respectfully.

The officer whispered something into the soldier's ear and went on his way. Turning to his three prisoners, the soldier suddenly said,

"Start running as fast as you can, guys! Get away from here, so nobody sees that I'm letting you go! Get moving! On the double!"

Without losing a second they started racing at break-neck speed and did not stop until they had rejoined their work detail..

Who was this mysterious officer? Moshe often wondered. Was it Eliyahu Hanavi or a *malach* in disguise sent by Hashem to save their lives? *Harbeih sheluchim laMakom*, "Hashem has many messengers," and sometimes they even wear military uniforms.

Later on, recalling the incident, Moshe commented with a chuckle,

"I was running for my life. I ran so fast, I never looked to see what was behind me. I was afraid I'd turn into a pillar of salt!"

By the time they rejoined their group, it was morning already. They had to continue on their march without having slept at all that night.

Chapter Twenty-Two

A BREATHING SPELL

During the first two months of the German retreat the situation was chaotic. Confusion reigned supreme. But gradually the Germans recovered. In February 1943, they launched a counteroffensive and threw back the Soviet forces. By mid-March they had retaken Charkov in the eastern Ukraine. The Hungarians meanwhile, reorganized the Jewish work details, and so it happened that one day, the Bistritz detail was once again placed under the leadership of commander Szabo whom they had not seen since the day he left Kamishenko to pick up supplies at the nearby German base and got caught in the artillery barrage. The four Jews who traveled with him that day to load the supplies on the wagons vanished without a trace. Szabo had no idea what happened to them.

As things began to settle down, living conditions of the Jewish work detail began to improve. The Hungarian officers began to provide lodging and provisions for the Jews who heaved a sigh of relief. At long last they had a chance to rest up from the hardships and regain their strength.

The Bistritz group had dwindled to only 120 Jews. Some of the men had escaped into the forests, but only a few of these survived. Many of those who stayed with the unit and marched along in the general retreat froze to death, died of starvation, or were murdered by the Germans and their Hungarian stooges. Now that life was becoming somewhat more normal, hope of survival began to blossom again.

Nevertheless, food was still in short supply, and the icy cold caused a great deal of suffering. As they were marching they had to do a variety of chores for the German army: clear the road, chop down trees, dig ditches, carry heavy loads, and generally make themselves useful. It was strenuous work under normal conditions, but in the numbing cold weather it was downright appalling. One day, one the Jews in the group, a fellow named Lipa Friedman, complained of frostbite on his foot, and much as he tried hobbling along trying keep pace with the detail, his foot just gave out. He stumbled, fell and could not go any further. The Hungarian officer gave him permission to ride on one of the wagons to rest his foot, but that did not help. The poor fellow moaned and groaned, knowing that his prospects were very dim indeed. His friends tried to cheer him and keep up his spirits. After two or three days of this, the officer gave orders to drop him off in one of the villages they were passing.

"Please let him stay with us for a few more days," his friends pleaded. "He'll get better for sure."

"Nothing doing," was the officer's curt reply.

They brought him to the local clinic, and the group marched on without him. He was never heard of again.

One day on their endless odyssey they stopped at the village of Vassilovska. When the commander decided to stay there for a few days, the Hungarians quartered the Jews with the local population, and everyone was happy to have a break in the daily drudgery. Moshe was billetted with the local shoemaker. Looking forward to a relaxing evening, he entered the house and put down his knapsack. But before he could sit down, the shoemaker, a rabid anti-Semite, came in yelling and screaming, spewing a torrent of the vilest curses and insults.

Anti-Semitic sentiments were widespread among the Ukranians. On their march through the Ukraine, especially during the retreat of the German army, the Jews encountered many nasty people who slammed the door into the faces of Jews shivering in the cold who were looking for a place to rest their weary feet late at night. The shoemaker did not stop ranting and raving, and, needless to say, he did not give him any food or a decent bed to sleep in. At the crack of dawn, Moshe left and went to a different house where a number of Jews had been put up. Graciously they squeezed together to make room for Moshe. The owner of the house was a middle-aged lady whose husband was serving in the Red Army, fighting at the front. The woman wept with compassion for the pathetic Jews and with anger at the wretched Germans. She was extremely kind to the Jews, gave them food and even brought in a barrel of water to wash and freshen up. After weeks without being able to cleanse themselves this was a truly a luxury. The few days they spent in Vassilovska were a rare treat.

Before leaving, Moshe said goodbye to the generous woman.

"I'd like to thank you for your thoughtful kindness. You restored our faith in humanity," he said. "May G-d reward you for your benevolence, and may he bring back your husband from the war unscathed and in good health. Just like you helped us, so too, there will be good people who will help your husband in time of need."

Deeply moved, the lady wiped tears from her eyes.

"Thank you," she said softly, her voice choked with emotion.

Chapter Twenty-Three

SAVED IN THE NICK OF TIME

The wandering and roaming resumed, with no end in sight. Digging, lifting loads, pushing wagons, pulling them out of the mud, carrying beams, laying tracks, whatever the job, Jewish laborers were put to work. In snow, sleet and bitter cold, their feet like blocks of ice, their fingers and ears numb with frost, they labored - on empty stomachs. They felt how the Tochahchah was being fulfilled,

"In the morning you will say, If only it were evening! And in the evening you will say, If only it were morning!'- because of what your heart shall dread and your eyes shall see" (Devarim 28:67).

Each day brought new surprises, new dangers, and the haunting thought of how to make it through the day. It ended with worries about where to sleep and where to find a bite to eat.

The weeks passed in dreary monotony as the men felt their strength ebbing. Hunger, hard work and the cold were sapping their vitality. Suddenly, one morning Moshe woke up with an excruciating, stabbing pain in his right hip. Limping badly, he

excruciating, stabbing pain in his right hip. Limping badly, he dragged himself along among the stragglers at the end of the column. His brain ordered his leg to move, but the leg simply refused to obey. For the first time since leaving his family Moshe felt dispirited and broke down crying. He knew that in order to stay alive he had to stay with his unit - but he simply couldn't. Unable to keep up with the formation, he fell back. It would not be long before the Germans would suspect him of being a defector and shoot him.

"Hashem, You have shown me so many *nissim*; please don't forsake me now," he *davened* fervently. "*Ata Hashem magein ba'adi*, "You Hashem, be a shield for me!" (Tehillim 3:4).

In his mind's eye he saw the image of his *kinderlech*, his wife and his mother whom he had not seen for almost an entire year. He was at the point of fainting, but did not give up. "For their sake I've got to keep going," he said to himself. Pulling his leg behind himself as if he were tugging a heavy object he struggled on. There in the distance on the horizon, he saw what looked like a settlement. He rubbed his eyes.

"Is this a mirage? Am I hallucinating?" he wondered.

It was indeed a village. His heart filled with hope, he dragged himself forward with superhuman strength. Imagine his joy when he learned that, not only was his detail going to stop at this village but they were going to stay there for the next several days. *Chasdei Hashem ki lo samnu*, "The *chasdei Hashem* have not ended," he cried gratefully. It was clearly *Hashgachah peratis* watching over him. His

emunah was reinforced. Yes, with Hashem's help he was going to make it! *Lo amus ki echyeh*, "I shall not die! But I will live and tell the world the deeds of Hashem who saved me."

After four or five days, and with the devoted help of his friends in the work detail, Moshe's leg got better, and he was once again able to march in formation with the others.

One night, while in this village, Moshe and several others were billetted with a local farmer who gave them sleeping quarters but refused to feed them. Since they had not eaten all day, the men were half starved. Turning and tossing from side to side, they could not fall asleep. One of them, Zelig Friedman, (the brother of Lipa Friedman, the fellow whose foot froze off and who was abandoned in a village), grumbled, "I can't take it any more!"

While everyone was fast asleep, he tiptoed into the kitchen, and made off with a loaf of bread. In the morning, finding the bread missing, the farmer began shouting obscenities and cursing them till he was blue in the face.

"Get out of my house, you filthy . . ." he roared. Happy that he did not call the police, they ran as fast as they could; they had a pretty good idea of what had happened.

When they returned to the detail, they found Zelig waiting to share the loaf of bread with them. At least they were able to still their hunger a little, and they thanked him for that, although they did not particularly approve of the means by which he got hold of the bread.

The Germans continually dreamed up new schemes to torment the Jews. Although the Jewish work detail was under the control of the Hungarian miltary police, the Germans occasionally grabbed some Jews to torture them just for fun. After sadistically tormenting a Jew, they usually shot him to death.

Watching Jewish blood flow freely was a favorite German pastime, and they all enjoyed the spectacle with utter delight, roaring with laughter. It should be noted that these were ordinary Wehrmacht soldiers, average Germans, sons of ordinary German families, educated in German schools and universities, who performed the most gruesome acts of brutality and reveled in the suffering and killing of Jews. The ordinary Germans were "Hitler's willing executioners." Without their help he could not have carried out his program of incredible cruelty.

On one such occasion, a German officer and his adjudant were hunting for Jews, when they came upon Moshe and three friends. They ordered the four to follow them to the nearby German army base. But before taking them to the base, the Germans wanted to give the Jews a foretaste of what was in store for them. They gave them a whipping, beating them black and blue, cursing them with choice German profanities.

Fortunately, from the distance a member of the labor group was watching the scene and understood what the Germans were up to. Without losing a second, he and a few other Jews quickly ran to commander Szabo and implored and begged him, to do everything he could to get the four Jews released.

"Alright, I'll see what I can do," replied Szabo.

He then sent his deputy to the German base with the following urgent message, scribbled on a piece of paper:

"I hereby demand the immediate release the four Hungarian citizens who are under my protection. These men are indispensable for the important work they perform for the German war effort. Any delay will seriously impede the successful conduct of the war. Those responsible for their detention will be will be prosecuted for sabotage."

At first the Germans tried to ignore the message, but Szabo insisted that they surrender the four men. Having no choice, they yielded and let the Jews go, but not without first kicking and cursing them for depriving them of their fun.

Moshe thanked Szabo from the bottom of his heart, realizing that Szabo was Hashem's *shaliach* to save him from certain death.

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Ever since the labor groups were reorganized, the treatment of the Jews improved somewhat. But new problems continued to crop up to make their lives miserable. A source of much trouble was the shameful behavior of the Ukranian population, most of whom were blatant Jew-haters

At a stop in a small Ukranian village, the local peasants refused to offer lodging to the Jewish workers. The men had to fend for themselves, but wherever they went the door was slammed in their

faces. Moshe and a few friends simply gave up and went looking for some hay or straw to bed down on in a field under the open sky. Fortunately, the weather was fairly mild that night; the snow had melted, and spring was on the way.

Suddenly a deranged Hungarian soldier made an appearance. Foaming at the mouth, with a frenzied look in his eyes, he started swinging his rifle, hitting them with his rifle butt. Fast and furious the blows came raining down on the head, face and other parts of the body. On and on he went until he got tired, spit out in front of them and walked away, muttering curses as he went. Their faces bloodied, their arms swollen - one of them with a broken nose - the men lay down in agony, trying to get some sleep. But their ordeal was not over, for it was not long before two Ukranian soldiers who served in the German army showed up. To announce themselves they fired into the air.

"*Davai tchassi*, Hand over your watches!" they demanded. Those that owned watches quickly gave them to the Ukranian. Moshe had no watch to give since he had traded it for a loaf of bread. So he received his second thrashing for the night. After that, they were afraid to close their eyes and spent the rest of the night dozing and waking up intermittently, too scared to fall asleep.

The rigors of the long marches continued to take their toll. Many Jews died from exhaustion and disease or were shot by the Germans. One of the victims was the son of the Rabbi of Lechnitz, a gentle, noble-minded young *talmid chacham*, twenty-eight years of age. He fell ill and steadily became weaker until one morning, he did not get up any more. A few friends hastily dug a grave and

buried him by the side of the road. The deceased's twenty-six year-old younger brother who helped dig his brother's grave marked down its exact location in a *sefer* he carried with him. Shortly thereafter, the brother too, lost his life when he and several other Jews were hanged by a brutal Hungarian officer. After many wanderings, the *sefer* came into Moshe's possession toward the end of the war. Being well-acquainted with the family of the Rabbi of Lechnitz, Moshe guarded the *sefer* like a cherished treasure. After the war, he was able to hand the *sefer* intact to one of the brothers who survived the holocaust and told him all that happened during the final days of the martyred brothers.

Chapter Twenty-Four

THE BLAZING INFERNO

Three months had gone by since the beginning of the frantic German retreat, but now the lightning-swift advance of the Red Army began to run out of steam. As a result, the stops of the work detail grew longer, giving the men the opportunity to recover somewhat from the strain of the continual long marches.

At one of these stops, Moshe together with five medical doctors was quartered with a Russian villager who lived in a comfortable house. Because of their status, the doctors enjoyed preferential treatment at the hands of the Hungarians. Dr. Klein, a close friend of Moshe, pulled a few strings to have Moshe lodge together with the doctors.

Before the detail started off again, the Hungarians realized that there were quite a few Jews who were too sick to resume marching with the group. They announced that those unable to go along would be taken to a makeshift hospital in the nearby village of Dorshitz where the sick of all work details in the region would be taken.

It so happened that Dr. Menashes, one of the doctors staying in the house together with Moshe, was sick in bed and could not possibly join the marchers. Moshe attended him and took care of him as best he could. When the doctor was being transferred to the Dorshitz hospital, Moshe helped him climb on the wagon, carried his bag, said good-bye and wished him *refuah sheleimah.*

The next morning, the work detail pulled out of the village and continued marching. On the way, Moshe suddenly felt a splitting headache, fever, dizziness and loose bowels - the distinct symptoms of typhus, a life-threatening disease that is rampant among people living under unsanitary conditions. On the verge of collapse, he could not possibly go on. Fortunately, just then they reached a village and were ordered to stop there for a few days. Moshe was not the only patient in the group; quite a few people came down with typhus, and a number of men had died of it already.

It was a few days until Pesach, food supplies were running low, and everyone was famished, especially the sick people who were too frail to gather up scraps of food. Moshe carried in his knapsack a few slices of bread he had garnered when he was housed together with the doctors; this bread now saved him from starvation. On *erev Pesach* he did not have in mind to remove the *chametz* in his possession, but, as it turned out, someone else did it for him. On the night of *bedikas chametz*, while he was asleep burning with fever, Moshe did not notice that someone stole his little bit of bread out of his knapsack from underneath his head. The next day, the first day of Pesach, the Hungarians gathered up all the sick, lifted them on wagons and shipped them off to the "hospital" in Dorshitz.

The wobbly, shaky ride to Dorshitz over the gravelly country road was sheer torture for the ailing patients who were being tossed from side to side. The ride seemed to last forever. At last they arrived in Dorshitz. With his last ounce of strength Moshe climbed down from the wagon and, supported by Jewish male nurses and doctors, he made it to the building. This so-called hospital was nothing but a compound of rickety old barracks. The narrow barracks were about 250 feet long, and filled to capacity. The sick were bedded down on straw, packed tightly together; Moshe was placed in the loft of one of the barracks. The air was foul-smelling and stifling. Afraid of catching a disease, none of the Hungarians dared set foot inside any of the barracks. Without medicines or instruments at their disposal, the courageous Jewish doctors cared for the sick. The filth and stench were breeding grounds for lice, and the barracks were infested with the horrible little insects which were swarming over the sick, stinging them, causing their entire bodies to itch. To relieve the itching people were scratching themselves until blood ran from their flesh, and the resulting wounds became terribly infected. People were lying unconscious and dying, others were wailing and moaning, asking for help that was not forthcoming. Meanwhile Moshe was lying on the floor, feverish and dazed, but still conscious. In his mind the entire insane scene took on a surrealistic aura, a spectacle straight from Gehinnom. Straining every nerve he dragged himself to the latrine whenever nature called and returned to his place on the straw in the attic.

The moment Moshe stepped off the wagon in Dorshitz, he was greeted by Dr. Menashes who had been Moshe's roommate in the Russian village. Moshe had taken good care of the doctor when he

was sick. Now Dr. Menashe wanted to return the favor, and so he dropped everything to look after Moshe.

"Don't worry, Moshe, I'll take good care of you," he said soothingly.

Dr. Menashes was in an ideal position to help Moshe, for the Hungarians had placed him in charge of the distribution of food and clothing for the patients.

"Here is a warm coat for you," the doctor said, gently placing the coat on Moshe who was shivering with high fever. "It'll help to bring down your fever."

Minutes later he came back with some decent food.

"Here have some of this," he said, smiling warmly. "It'll get you back on your feet. And remember, there's more where this came from."

Day after day, Dr. Menashes brought nourishing dishes. The fever began to subside, and Moshe slowly began on the road to recovery.

But just as his health began to improve, tragedy struck. It was two days after Pesach, in the middle of the night, when Moshe woke up, horrified. Hideous shrieks and shrill screams pierced the air. Insane sounds of howling, shouting and moaning resounded through the barracks. It seemed as if the whole compound had gone berserk. Before he realized what was happening, suddenly, ten feet in front of him he saw flames flaring up, huge tongues of fire

eagerly devouring the straw, setting the rafters ablaze . . . Overpowering heat, smothering smoke . . . no time to think. The ladder to climb down from the loft was burning. Pushing and shoving, yelling and screaming, everyone ran to the far end of the barracks to get away from the fiery flames. Barely able to stand on his feet, Moshe was pressed along with the crowd. Suddenly the floor where he was standing gave way under the weight of the crowd. He dropped to the ground floor, falling on top of the people below, others helter-skelter falling on top of him.

Pandemonium; a mad jumble of people all pushing to get out through the door. Yelling and screaming, people stepping on one another, but no one was moving. Moshe, holding on to his knapsack for dear life, tried to worm his way forward only to find that the barracks door was burning, roaring flames blocking the exit. He was trapped, a fiery death staring him in the face. He had to act. Without thinking twice he dashed into the fire, jumping through the blazing door. His coat and his hair on fire, he tried to smother the flames with his hands, quickly throwing off his coat, throwing himself on the ground, rolling around trying to put out the fire. Lying on the ground, he heard bursts of gunfire coming from all directions. Then it dawned on him that the fire in the barracks was no accident at all. It was set deliberately and willfully by the Germans to get rid of all the sick and the infirm. Anyone trying to escape was finished off by gunfire outside. Quick as lightning Moshe ran through the volleys of murderous gunfire, ducking and staying close to the ground. Aching from burns on his head and body, he managed to slip into a nearby barracks where Jewish doctors treated and bandaged his searing wounds with strips of paper. He examined his entire body to make sure he did not get

hit by the German bullets.

The excruciating pain of the severe burns coming on top of his already weakened condition and high fever made life almost unbearable. Lying in agony, feeling feverish and frail, Moshe pondered the horrendous events that had transpired. "Where did I find the strength to escape from this monstrous Gehinnom?" he wondered. The dreadful screams of the sick and the infirm being burned alive mingling with the groans of those who tried to flee and were shot were ringing in his ears. Writhing on the ground, blood oozing from their bodies, they died in anguish and misery. The place was a *gei tzalmoves*, "a valley of the shadow of death."

He realized that he was literally an *ud mutzal me'eish*, "a firebrand saved from a fire" (Zechariah 3:2). Deeply grateful to Hashem, he thanked Him *al nisecha shebechol yom imanu*, "for Your miracles that are with us every day."

Others too, made it through the fire and the bullet salvos, and reached the barracks where Moshe was staying. But many of them died of painful burns, others died of mortal gunshot wounds they received as they were running from the Germans. Of the more than 700 patients in that barracks, only a few dozen managed to escape, and some of those succumbed to the effects of injuries and burns.

David Riesel, one of the people who escaped from the fire with only minor burns became a close friend of Moshe. Throughout this appalling period the two men stuck together through thick and thin, sharing misfortune, facing all adversities like brothers.

While Moshe was thankful to Hashem for miraculously saving his life, he was despondent over the fact that, while dashing though the fire, he lost his knapsack which contained all his earthly belongings, including - worst of all - his *tallis* and *tefillin*. On all his wanderings, no matter where he was, regardless of the circumstances, he never let a day go by without putting on *tefillin*. Even while sick with typhus and burning up with fever, he did not skip the *mitzvah* of *tefillin* even for a single day. And now, his *tallis* and *tefillin* had gone up in flames. No wonder Moshe was downhearted. Aside from the loss of the *tefillin*, the atmosphere in the barracks was dreary and oppressive. People were walking around barefoot, wearing the same dirty old rags for months on end, looking hollow-eyed, on the brink of starvation. To make matters worse, the place was crawling with lice, the little pests were creeping into the folds of his paper bandages, stinging and causing a ceaseless, maddening itch. The dreadful experience of the fire gave Moshe terrible nightmares. Several times each night he woke up screaming, bathed in cold sweat, as he relived the hairraising ordeal. Plagued by stabbing headaches and wrenching stomach cramps he staggered around like in a stupor. As a remedy for diarrhea he used to roast the few potatoes he received as his daily ration.

Chapter Twenty-Five

HUNGER, PAIN AND DISAPPOINTMENT

In the sea of misery of Dorshitz there was one man who stood out for the unselfish way he took care of the sick. Shmuel Schaefer was his name. Due to his and his team mates' extraordinary dedication the condition of many of the sick gradually improved. Not only did he dress their wounds but, more importantly, he lifted their spirits.

"Don't give up the fight," he used to encourage people who had lost their will to live. "Hashem tells us, *Imo anochi betzarah*, 'I am with you in your *tzores*.' He is with us right here in the filth and the stench of this barracks. He watches over us, and He'll send you your refuah. *Hashem li lo ira*, 'Hashem is with me, I have no fear.'"

Inspired by his words of *emunah* and *bitachon* they regained hope and spiritual strength, and they got better. Moshe too, took a turn for the better; he was able to get up and walk a few steps all by himself. But not everyone pulled through. At first, the barracks housed 250 patients, but sadly, in the aftermath of the fire several people died each day. The others took care of the burial, and day

after day, the sickly men dug communal graves and laid the victims to rest.

One of the patients in the barracks was a Jew from Bistritz, an acquaintance of Moshe by the name of Levi. Looking haggard and gaunt, he was frail from sickness and hunger. One nice spring day, Levi sat down on a block of wood in front of the barracks to warm himself in the soothing glow of the bright sun. Just then a Hungarian soldier passed by. Annoyed by the sight of a Jew enjoying the sunshine, he beat up the hapless Levy, slapping and kicking him.

"Taking a siesta instead of working, eh? That's what you get for goofing off!" he barked, punching and hitting the poor fellow. Seeing his victim lying face down on the ground, the Hungarian left. Moshe who had watched the beating from afar ran over to Levy and helped him get up and walk back to the barracks.

Levy was devastated. Already weakened from his sickness, the beating was more than he could endure. The pathetic fellow broke down crying.

"I always dreamed of the day when I would see my wife and children again," he moaned, sobbing bitterly. "But I just can't go on any more. I'm worn-out, reduced to a skeleton. I have no strength left. I just wanted to take in some sunshine to help me get better; and now I'm worse off than before."

Moshe tried to allay his fears and cheer him up.

"Keep your chin up," he tried to reassure him. "The Germans

are on the run. Just hang on. The *Ribbono shel Olam* will help and you'll see your family again. *Vehabotei'ach baShem chesed yesovevenhu*, "He who trusts in Hashem shall be surrounded with *chesed*."

But it was in vain. The poor fellow could not bear the pain and suffering, and after a short while he died in agony. The next day he was buried together with the other men who passed away that day.

A month after the big fire, the Hungarians ordered everyone to stand in formation. Those physically fit were ordered to start marching, and Moshe was classified as sufficiently recovered to go back to work with the others. Of course, he was still quite weak and often suffered from bad headaches and dizziness. Luckily, they only had marched a few miles when the order came to stop at the village they had reached. The next few days the men were idle, sitting around doing nothing, which gave Moshe an opportunity to rest up. As they passed the time waiting for instructions they were joined by more Jews from Dorshitz who had recovered. Several weeks of unemployment went by, but in spite of the life of leisure people did not noticeably gain strength because food was extremely scarce. If a person did not have the right "connections," he might have to go for several days without any food at all.

When it came to food, Moshe was no better off than most of the others. Half-starved, he resorted to cooking weeds, wild herbs and plants to stay alive.

One day, a local farmer entered the camp.

"I need farm workers," he announced. "Instead of paying money

I'll give you milk, bread and other food items."

Since they were famished, many of the men jumped at the opportunity of earning some food. Even people who had not fully recovered were eager to get in on the wonderful deal of working for bread and milk. Hoping to still his hunger pangs, Moshe too, went to work on the farm. But after a day or two of hard work, the Jews realized that while they were working their fingers to the bone the Hungarians collected all the food and the milk and kept it for themselves instead of distributing it to the starving workers.

Meanwhile, the hunger became unbearable; the men were literally starving to death. In light of the critical situation, several men decided to take action.

"In view of the severe food shortage, we request permission to go into the forest," they asked the officers. "We want to try and gather edible berries and fruit to stay alive. Without that we are doomed."

The Hungarians granted permission, and under the supervision of a Hungarian guard, the men roamed around the forest. To their utter joy and relief they found an abundance of blueberries, raspberries, blackberries, wild apples and pears.

"Wow! Look what I found! A blueberry patch! Blueberries by the millions!"

"Hey, come over here! Apples galore! Come and get it!" they shouted, dancing and jumping from tree to tree and from one bush to another.

While the men were dispersing in all directions, happily picking berries and fruit, Moshe suddenly noticed two men carrying rifles, emerging from among the thick bushes at a distance of less than a hundred feet away, their backs turned toward him. He realized at once that they were partisans.

"Let me join them and be free of the despicable Germans and their miserable Hungarian stooges," was his initial thought. "The Hungarian guard and the men of the work detail are a good distance away," he figured. "It's now or never!"

But somehow he did not like the looks of the two partisans. An inner voice told him not to trust them. He changed his mind and ran back to his detail. A few days later, word had it that a number of Jews from other Hungarian labor groups had run away into the forests to join the partisans. They all were killed by the partisans who were virulent anti-Semites. Moshe realized at once that the *Hashagachah* had guided him and prevented him from making a disastrous mistake.

One day, a high-ranking Hungarian officer was scheduled to arrive on an inspection tour of the camp. In anticipation of his coming, the camp grounds were cleaned up, and the men had to put on clean clothes. Those that had only rags were issued new overalls. All of a sudden there was plenty of food. The quantity of food they were given that day ordinarily had to last for three days.

The officer asked specific questions about the operation of the camp. He wanted to know if there was a rabbi among the Jewish workers. There happened to be a rabbi present who stepped

forward. The officer inquired about the living conditions of the Jewish workers. He sounded as though he was interested in their welfare and cared about their needs. The officer's visit and his apparent concern sparked new hope in the hearts of the Jews. But their expectations were quickly dashed, for as soon as he left life returned to its sorry routine of hunger and harrassment.

Good days followed bad days. Days of decent food followed days of nothing but a bowl of watery soup. New overalls were issued, and whoever had torn shoes was given a new pair. The yellow patch did not have to be sewn onto the new overalls, but that did not bring about a change in the nasty attitude of the guards toward the Jews.

As the war progressed, the labor units were moving westward, along with the retreating German forces. It was the workers' job to help the German army in their effort to slow down the relentless drive of the massive Russian offensive. But the Germans received drubbing after drubbing, suffering defeat all along the eastern front. Like a steamroller, the unstoppable juggernaut of the Red Army kept pushing westward, heading for Berlin, routing the Germans and inflicting heavy casualties on their troops

Chapter Twenty-Six

THE FINAL SOLUTION

All German attempts to throw back the advancing Red Army failed miserably; the German army was decimated and forced to withdraw from all the territories it had conquered. But the more losses the Germans sustained on the battlefield, the more determined they became to destroy the Jewish people and wipe them off the face of the earth.

Initially, the Germans tried to exterminate the Jews by using automobile exhaust fumes. They would pack their victims, like sardines, into large vans. They then connected a hose to the exhaust pipe and blew the deadly carbon monoxide fumes into the van, killing all those inside. Then the bodies were stacked on wooden logs, doused with gasoline and set afire. But the German leaders were unhappy with this method. It was slow and inefficient, they claimed; not enough Jews could be killed that way.

On January 20, 1942 a conference was held in Wannsee, near Berlin. A major effort was to be made for the "Final Solution of the Jewish Problem." The Jews were to be killed in large numbers, in a systematic, organized manner. A new and better system of

annihilation was developed by German scientists and engineers.

Extermination camps were constructed in Sobibor, Chelmno, Belzec, Treblinka, Majdanek, and Auschwitz. Day after day, ten thousand people and more were to be killed in gas chambers by means of Zyklon B gas which was developed by German scientists. Let us remember that, unlike the pogroms in Russia which were carried out by crude peasants and uneducated rabble, the holocaust was the product of the highly educated German elite, its engineers, scientists and medical doctors.

The Jews were rounded up and concentrated in the ghettos of Warsaw, Lodz, Lublin and other cities. They were told that they were going to be moved for the purpose of *Aussiedlung*, "resettlement." In overcrowded cattle trains, without water, ventilation, or sanitary facilities the unfortunate Jews were shipped to the death camps.

Here and there Jews tried to resist, but it was a handful of Jews against the overwhelming fire power of the Germans. When a Jew shot a German in Pinsk, they retaliated by killing five thousand Jews. In the Lemberg ghetto a Jew killed one of the guards. In reprisal, one thousand Jews were murdered. Realizing that such heroic acts on the part of the Jews did not slow down the German annihilation machine, the Jews preferred to bide their time in the hope that they might survive somehow. The main Jewish resistance lay in remaining human in the face of German bestiality. Living in the cesspool of German depravity, Jews preserved their dignity,

emunah, bitachon, kindness, and a sense of solidarity.

On the 18th of January, 1943 the Germans entered the Warsaw ghetto to gather up the daily quota of Jews to be shipped to the Treblinka extermination camp. It was then that a group of young men fired at a company of German soldiers, killing several of them. Caught by surprise, the Germans were forced to fall back and call for reinforcements. After a short battle they killed one thousand Jews, and 65,000 Jews were rounded up and sent off to be gassed.

The Germans tried to lure the remaining Jews out of their hiding places in cellars and attics. They came around with loudspeakers announcing that they needed workers for their labor camps. Volunteers were promised abundant nourishing food. To the starving Jews in their hiding places this sounded very tempting. Nevertheless, only a handful of people responded.

"If they kill us, at least we'll have one good last meal," they argued, blinded by a voracious hunger.

The vast majority did not believe the German promises.

"They'll kill us anyway, and they won't give us a bite to eat," they reasoned. "We're are not going to fall for their cunning schemes. We'll die fighting. We'll never surrender!"

Hiding in sewers and cellars, many of the ghetto fighters were frail, sick, and starving. Others were holed up in underground bunkers. They all decided to stay and fight, come what may. Anticipating a German attack, they manufactured by hand their own primitive bullets, explosives and hand grenades.

On the 19th of April, 1943 the German onslaught began. It was the first day of Pesach. Two thousand S.S. men armed to the teeth with heavy weapons, protected by tanks, marched into the ghetto. The Jews were not surprised. They were ready. From the rooftops, treetops, and from windows they prepared to fight the enemy.

No sooner did the Germans enter the ghetto than they were greeted by a barrage of small arms fire and hand grenades. Death rained down on them from all sides. Dead and mortally wounded German carcasses littered the main street. Stunned by the fierce attack, the Germans did not return the fire but ran for their lives, seeking shelter outside the walls of the ghetto. This time at least, the small band of poorly armed Jewish fighters had gained the upperhand over the powerful German forces. The Germans, never dreaming that the Jews would offer resistance, thought that they would finish off the ghetto fighters within a few hours. Instead, they suffered a humiliating defeat. But their retaliation was not long in coming. On April 23, the ghetto was bombed by the German Air Force. Many buildings were flattened, and the ghetto was turned into a sea of flames and covered with billowing clouds of black smoke. Yet there still were some survivors who refused to give up. In the end, the Germans subdued the ghetto on May 8, 1943. Several ghetto fighters chose to commit suicide rather than be killed by the Germans. The ghetto lay in ruins. The once thriving Jewish life of Warsaw came to an end. Its yeshivahs, *shuls* and *shtiblech* were devastated; its rabbanim, rashei yeshivah and chasidic rebbes together with their *kehillos* were brutally murdered. The ghetto was completely leveled. However, the German "victory" was really a disgraceful defeat. It took them longer to crush a handful of emaciated Jewish fighters than to defeat the

entire Polish army.

In September 1943 the German atrocities mounted. The Vilna ghetto was liquidated, and the last Jews were shipped off to the extermination camps of Treblinka, Sobibor, Belzec, Maidanek, and Auschwitz. Long trains made up of boxcars filled with human cargo arrived there from Russia, France, Belgium, Holland, Yugoslavia, Italy and Greece. They also carried German Jews who had fled their homeland when Hitler came to power, and with the German conquest of western Europe these Jews were caught once again in the German claws.

The train ride itself was sheer hell. Overcrowded to the point that there was no room to sit down they traveled without food, drink or sanitary facilities for days on end. Many people went mad or died under those atrocious conditions.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

AUSCHWITZ

When the victims arrived in Auschwitz, dazed, famished, and confused, they were greeted by a sign in large letters that read, *Arbeit Macht Frei*, "Work Will Set You Free."

On the platform stood S.S. men with tommy guns, holding ferocious dogs that were barking and tugging on their leashes.

"*Alle raus*! Get out, everyone! *Schneller, schneller*! Faster, hurry up!" they yelled, as blows of their wooden truncheons rained down on people's heads. "Leave your luggage on the platform; you'll get it later! Los, los! Hurry up!"

"Men to the left! Women to the right! Line up five abreast!"

"Los, los, schneller, schneller!"

The shouting, the insane screams and the barking dogs created a tumultuous, deafening sound. The stunned arrivals thought they had landed in hell. The place was surrounded by a high-voltage elecrified barbed wire fence. Not a chance to escape. In the

distance five chimneys were belching huge clouds of smoke. "What are they producing in those factories?" people wondered. "What is that sickening smell of burned flesh?"

On the platform, the line slowly moved forward toward the dreaded "selection." Dr. Joseph Mengele, the "*malach hamaves* of Auschwitz", decided on life or death. With a flick of his finger he arrogantly sent the elderly, the infirm, the sickly, mothers and children to die in the gas chambers. The strong and healthy were dispatched to do slave labor in ammunitions factories or coal mines where they were worked to death. But at least these slave laborers still had a spark of hope that they would survive this Gehinnom.

Those condemned to death were herded in front of the five gas chambers and told to remove their clothes in order to be deloused. Large signs reading "Cleanliness Promotes Health" suggested that they were going to take a shower. They were forced to hand over their watches, jewelry, rings and eye glasses. They usually complied without any protest, looking forward to a refreshing shower after the dreadful train ride. The victims were then pushed into the gas chambers which had shower heads installed on the ceilings. When the chamber was tightly packed, the heavy steel doors were closed and the deadly Zyklon B gas discharged through special vents in the floors and the walls. Those who who were closest to the vents perished very rapidly, but the others, feeling the horror in their throats, screamed and banged on the steel door until the fumes finally killed them.

It took twenty-five minutes for the elctric pumps to remove the gas from the chambers. Then the steel doors were opened and

groups of Jewish inmates, called *Sonderkommandos*, entered to haul the corpses out of the death chambers. They removed gold teeth and human hair. The gold, clothing and jewelry of the victims was taken to a sorting office to be shipped to the German Reichsbank to be deposited in Swiss banks.

Meanwhile the bodies had been transferred by small wagons to the four crematoriums capable of detroying more than 17,000 bodies per 24-hour shift.

Many people died as subjects for "medical research". German doctors carried out various horrendous experiments on pregnant women and twins. Others were placed in tubs of freezing water to determine how long the human body can survive in extreme cold. Then there were German doctors who specialized in the effect of poison bullets and other gruesome experiments.

Those who were sent to the right became slaves and were worked to death in labor camps, various industries, stone quarries and coal mines. Before being sent off, every prisoner had his or her head shaved and had a number tattooed on his arm. That number was going to be his new name. He thereby lost his identity and was reduced to a non-person, a mere number. He was issued one striped prisoner's pajamas and cap which was the only garment he had.

Fed a starvation diet and deprived of drinking water, the prisoners soon became walking skeletons. When it rained they used to hold up their soup bowls to catch the precious drops of water to quench their thirst. They were forced to perform hard labor for fourteen hours a day, accompanied by constant brutal

beatings and harrassment. If a prisoner went to the latrine without permission, he was slapped and kicked to within an inch of his life. Often prisoners were tortured in the most sadistic ways. Those suspected of escape attempts were lined up in front of a wall and, in the presence of thousands, shot or hanged, as a deterrent to others who might want to try the same thing. In desperation, some people committed suicide by touching the high-voltage wire fence. But most prisoners were inspired by an invincible will to survive. With *bitachon* in Hashem they made up their mind not to surrender to beatings, slave labor and hunger. *Mir vel'n zei iberleben*, "We will outlast them and dance on their graves!" was the rallying cry of the concentration camp inmates. With these words they encouraged each other to hold on and not to buckle under. Nevertheless, many

grew weaker by the day. The Germans conducted periodic "selections", and those judged too frail to work were sent to the gas chambers.

In the long and anguished history of the Jewish people there has been no chapter that can compare to the monstrous events that befell European Jewry at the hands of the Germans during the years of 1939-1945.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

THE GERMANS MARCH INTO HUNGARY

Early in 1944, the German defenses on the eastern front collapsed. Outflanked and encircled by the Red Army, the German forces abandoned vast territories and retreated in a rout. The once mighty German *Wehrmacht* was on the run. Allied bombers were flattening German cities and industrial centers in round-the-clock raids. The Germans were driven out of North Africa, the Allies landed in Sicily and Salerno and marched north through central Italy, reaching Rome in January of 1944.

By now it was clear that Germany was losing the war. Nevertheless, obsessed with hatred, the Germans continued their program of extermination of the Jews with renewed vigor and frenzied speed.

In the spring of 1944, there lived in Hungary about one million Jews as yet untouched by the flames of the holocaust. The Hungarian government, in full compliance with its German ally's intructions, issued a series of anti-Semitic ordinances, confiscated Jewish businesses and properties, and dismissed Jewish officials and employees. Gangs of rowdies harrassed Jews in the streets and

conducted small-scale pogroms. But the bloodthirsty Germans were not satisfied; Jews were not being killed fast enough to suit them. Hitler's patience ran out, and on March 19, 1944, German troops occupied Hungary. Immediately thereafter, Adolf Eichmann, the "Minister of Death," was sent to Budapest to assume control of the Hungarian "Jewish problem," meaning the deportation of the Jews to Auschwitz. However, he had to work faster than usual because of the Russian threat to the Hungarian border provinces. By the summer of 1944, as many as 12,000 Jews from greater Hungary were arriving at Auschwitz day after day.

On July 24, 1944, the Majdanek death camp was liberated by the Russians, but the daily transports from Hungary to Auschwitz continued unabated. Insanely, trains that were badly needed to ship German troops and war materiel to the front were requisitioned for transports of Jews to the gas chambers. The gas chambers and crematoriums were running at full capacity day and night, with alternating shifts of workers toiling at a feverish pace. When the crematoriums were unable to handle the load, the excess bodies were burned in huge pits.

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In their hasty withdrawal on the eastern front, whenever the German forces paused for a while, they regrouped and reorganized their lines and began to dig in, in the hope of mounting a counter-offensive or of slowing down the relentless Russian onslaught. What they needed most was a labor force to do the heavy work in establishing a base. Moshe's labor battalion had dwindled to twenty-five Jews. They had a new Hungarian

commander with a staff of several Hungarian soldiers. Each day they had to walk about seven miles to their work site which was in the middle of a forest. Their job was chopping down trees and carving a road through the forest. After a while, other work details joined Moshe's group to reach a total of one hundred Jewish workers. A few days later, a Hungarian doctor showed up to examine the workers and to eliminate those unfit to do the hard work.

"What is the meaning of this?" people wondered and worried. "What will happen to those he rejects?"

Moshe who had just begun to recover from his bout with typhus was still exhausted and very weak. Since he could barely lift three pounds, much less chop trees, he was given easy odd chores to do like handing tools to the workers and tidying up the work place, picking up twigs, raking up dead leaves and the like. Moshe too, was very much afraid of the upcoming doctor's check-up. Among his co-workers in the detail there was a pharmacist who knew quite a bit about remedies, cures and medicines.

"What shall I do when that doctor examines me," Moshe asked him anxiously. "What shall I tell him?"

"You've got to tell him that you are in good shape," the pharmacist told him bluntly and forcefully. "Tell him that just today you happen to have a headache and feel a little dizzy, but that you will be alright in no time at all."

Moshe followed his advice. The army doctor declared him fit to work and told him to stay in the work detail. On top of that he was

given a few days furlough to recover fully. The food rations too, were decent so that Moshe gradually regained his strength.

Although conditions were relatively good, there still was a sword hanging over the heads of the Jews. After all, they were working for the Germans, and the murderous Germans who were in charge of the opration did not miss an opportunity to inflict harm on the Jews. For example, workers were warned not to wander off into the forest when they had to answer a call of nature. For after receiving permission to go, several Jews who modestly relieved themselves behind a tree or a bush were shot to death by the German guards, although it was quite obvious that they were not planning to escape. As a result of these incidents many workers restrained themselves all day.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

HORIDI KANACHAL DIM'AH SHED TEARS LIKE A RIVER (EICHAH 2:18)

Three months went by. The work progressed, and the road through the forest grew longer every day. One day, Moshe's work detail received orders to move to a different location, while the other groups remained in place. And so, the twenty-five men traveled by train to Bobrujsk in Belorussia.

It was in Bobrujsk that the men sensed for the first time that something terribly wrong had happened. It was here that they had their first inkling of the horrendous catastrophe that had befallen the Jewish people. Rumors began circulating about the extermination of Jewish communities all across Europe, whereby women, children and the elderly had been slaughtered in cold blood. But this was unsubstantiated hearsay without reliable sources. With typical Jewish optimism, the men rejected these stories.

"Don't believe such tales. They're just wild exaggerations, the product of a feverish imagination," they tried to cheer each other

up. "Everything will turn out alright, you'll see!"

Up to this point, the German and Hungarian soldiers still felt a spark of patriotic pride, thinking that the fortunes of war still might turn in their favor. Now that they were retreating, they recognized the hopelessness of their battle and were overcome with deep despair and bitter disappointment. What a waste! All their dead comrades had died in vain! What was in store for them now? Would the Russians hold them accountable for their crimes? They were tense and worried. But the Jews too, became more and more depressed. As the days went by, rumors about massacres, burnings and killings of Jews by the Germans kept mounting. Even the optimists could no longer deny them. Everyone was gripped by an undefinable sense of profound sadness. Could the stories of appalling horrors be true?

The work detail was housed in empty homes. They were Jewish homes, no doubt about it. The *mezuzos* were still attached to the door posts. Everyone realized that these homes belonged to Jews who had been deported to the extermination camps. In the house where Moshe was quartered he found a *sefer Shulchan Shlomoh.*

"Not long ago a Yid learned in this *sefer*," Moshe thought, as he lovingly pressed the *sefer* to his heart.

He opened the *sefer* and began to learn in it. How long has it been since he had learned Torah! Tears flowed down his cheeks as he recalled the days when he learned Torah under his father and grandfather and later under his rebbe'im in yeshivah. Now he was all alone, in a strange town.

"I wonder what happened to the pitiful Yiden that used to live here?" he thought, downhearted as he carefully placed the sefer in his knapsack.

Walking through the narrow side streets and alleys of the town he came upon charred pages of *sifrei kodesh*, the remnants of a big bonfire in which the Germans burned the *sefarim* after ransacking the Jewish homes and looting anything of value. The *shul*, a spacious building, had been converted into a stable for horses. The Germans housed all their horses in the shul, and it was Moshe's job to feed these horses and give them drink. The walls of the *shul* were dripping with cold water, but Moshe could not understand the language the stones were speaking.

"They surely are weeping and lamenting the destruction of its flourishing *kehillah* that is no more," Moshe thought.

Steeped in a mood of deep despondency, Moshe *davened* to the *Ribbono shel Olam*.

"I implore You, Hashem, please put an end to this tragedy. Bring me home to my family *beshalom*. May it be Your will, that I will find my wife and children in good health."

A few days later, another work group joined Moshe's detail in Bobrujsk. To his great delight Moshe found among the laborers an old friend from Horvath by the name of Ezra Weiss. Ecstatically happy to see a familiar face in the desolation far away from home, the two friends embraced and related to each other their experiences in exile.

"Look, I am the assistant to the Hungarian commander of our two labor details," Ezra Weiss explained. "I have pull. If there's anything you need that I can help you with, please let me know."

Their meeting was a bright ray of light in an atmosphere that was growing more gloomy and somber by the day. Insistent rumors kept cropping up with shocking details about the bitter end of the Jews of Bobrujsk in the extermination camps. Could such things happen in the twentieth century? Could a civilized and cultured nation be capable of committing such monstrous atrocities?

Chapter Thirty

WANDERINGS

A while later, the work detail was ordered to move to a new site. This time their destination was the city of Pinsk where they were housed in a large established camp that contained many warehouses and served as the central supply depot for all the other camps in the region. Their new commander was a fiendish Jew-hater, worse than any previous camp commander they had encountered. The brute enjoyed harrassing the Jews, making them do all kinds of senseless chores.

One day he sent a soldier with two Jewish workers to Minsk to buy two cases of nails. On their return trip by train, one of the cases was stolen. It is hard to describe what the commander did to those two unfortunate fellows and the savage beating he gave them. It was a wonder that they were still alive after he got through with them.

Sleeping quarters for the group was an overcrowded barracks where the men lay tightly packed together with barely enough room to move. They had to work extremely hard and for very long

hours, doing road work, repairing rail lines, loading supplies on trucks and into box cars, storing building materials and similar chores. All the while they were exposed to the taunts and torments of this new commander.

One day, a high-ranking Hungarian officer arrived at the labor camp for a brief inspection. One plucky Jewish worker got up the nerve to approach the Hungarian officer in the presence of the cammander and saluted him.

"Sir, with your permission, I'd like to lodge a complaint," he said resolutely, standing smartly at attention.

"Alright, let's hear what you have to say," the officer shot back.

"Sir, our camp commander is treating us with contempt. He ridicules us, harasses and torments us. For the slightest offense he beats and kicks a person until he falls unconscious to the ground. Please ask him to change his attitude, Sir."

The officer listened attentively, while the camp commander's face turned a crimson red.

"OK, I'll look into the matter," he replied, looking grim.

He then walked over to the commander, discussed the issue with him and left.

"Everyone stand in formation!" the commander roared. He then let loose a long tirade of threats, curses and unmentionable epithets, screaming at the top of his voice. His choicest obscenities he reserved for the fellow who had told on him. But all he did was

hollering and thundering; no physical violence at all. His attitude improved noticeably from that day on, and the harassment and beatings ended.

Since Pinsk was the supply center for the entire area, the work detail had the job of unloading incoming freight and loading outgoing supplies on the freight trains. Being close to the source of all kinds of merchandise gave the men the opportunity to help themselves to some much-needed clothing. After two years of rough work, their garments were in shreds, no more than worn-out rags. Now they exchanged them for some good warm woolen suits and underwear that would stand them in good stead during the upcoming winter.

A month later the group moved on to Osipovitch. The commander of Pinsk remained behind, and a new commander took over the leadership of the detail. In Osipovitch they were put to work as construction laborers, carrying bricks, sacks of cement and other building supplies. Like in Pinsk, they were housed in a barracks, only this one was somewhat roomier than the one in Pinsk. The Hungarian commandant was also more easy-going than the previous one. For example, when they arrived there in Elul of 1944, the new commander, upon the insistent pleadings of the Jewish workers, released them from work on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. To their great joy he also gave them permission to hold services in their barracks. They *davened* with deep *kavanah*, pouring out their hearts to the *Ribbono shel Olam*, pleading that He may end their *tzores* and the affliction of *Klal Yisrael*; that He may reunite them with their loved ones, and protect their families from all evil.

Their stay in Osipovitch lasted only about one month, after which they were ordered to resume their wanderings. Marching on unpaved roads and trails, winding their way through thick forests and fording swift-running streams was laborious and very tiring. Nights were spent in the hamlets and villages they passed. One night they stayed at the village of Nadborny where they detected unmistakable signs of the havoc and devastation the Germans had inflicted on the local Jews, the burned down shul and empty ransacked Jewish homes. In the dark of night, Moshe and three of his friends, speaking in whispers, concocted a plan to escape into the forest.

"For days now, we've been marching through dense forests on winding and twisting trails," Moshe laid out the strategy. "Let's stay in the rear of the column, and at the next bend in the trail we'll disappear into the woods. The soldiers in front won't notice that we're missing until much later. By that time we'll be well out of their reach."

It sounded so very simple. But the next day, after marching a short while, the column emerged from the forest, and the path continued through open wheat fields and pasture land. Besides, they were told to place their knapsacks on the wagons, so that their escape plan fizzled. Later on they found out that these forests were swarming with Germans hunting escapees and partisans. Moshe realized at once that by foiling his plan Hashem had saved his life once again.

Once in a while they ran into an artillery barrage, shells crashing all around them with ear-splitting explosions. On one

such occasion they came under artillery fire near a hamlet not far from Nadborny. Everyone threw himself on the ground by the side of the road seeking cover from shrapnel. Tragically, two Jews who found shelter beneath one of the wagons were killed instantly when a shell struck the wagon. As soon as the shelling stopped, the two victims were given a Jewish burial on the spot. Several Jews lost their lives when the town of Sokolov came under heavy artillery fire. The powerful explosions caused terrible devastation within a radius of more than a mile.

For weeks on end, they marched for up to fifteen miles a day. Worn to a frazzle, footsore and slouching they dragged themselves along, wobbling and shuffling as they trudged forward. One day they were allowed a short break in a wheat field, since the previous day they had marched until late into the night. Overtired and exhausted, Moshe picked a quiet corner to take a nap and asked one of his colleagues to wake him up when the column resumed marching. The fellow evidently forgot to do so. A short while later when Moshe woke up, he had the shock of his life. The detail had left without him! He knew that if a Jew was found wandering about by himself, he did not stand a chance. The rule was: Kill first, ask questions later. Without losing a second he started running like a streak of lightning trying to catch up with the group. He ran and ran but not a trace of the work detail. After racing for three hours, at last he caught up with them. Completely out of breath and dripping with perspiration he joined the ranks. Luckily, they had just arrived in a small village where they were going to spend the night, so that Moshe finally could lie down and get some much-needed sleep.

Chapter Thirty-One

DISQUIETING REPORTS

The time was early 1944. The winter was waning, and spring was approaching. One day Moshe heard that one of the Hungarian soldiers was going on a furlough to his hometown of Varmash which is a short distance from Bistritz. Jumping at the rare opportunity to send word to his family, Moshe asked the soldier to deliver a letter for him. Imagine Moshe's indiscribable joy when, on his return, the soldier brought back a letter from Moshe's wife with pictures from her and the children. Moshe was ecstatic. Holding the letter with both hands, he jumped with pure elation. Almost two years had gone by since he left home, and *baruch Hashem*, they were fine, in good health and unharmed. Gazing at the pictures of his children, he felt a gnawing feeling in his heart. They had grown so much, he had trouble recognizing them. Little Shmuel was four-and-a-half years old already, and sweet baby Zelda was three years old! But his heartache was outweighed by far by his happiness, and he quickly banished all morbid thoughts from his mind.

"*Im yirtzeh Hashem*, I'll be home soon. Then we'll make up for

lost time," he consoled himself.

Filled with hope and joyous anticipation, he started to look forward to the day he would return home when all the misery of his present condition would be forgotten.

Reality shook him out of his daydreams. Back to work! On the march again from village to village. The food was minimal; all they ate was the little they could scrape up at their nightly rest stops. But for the first time they received a small amount of pocket money and a few cigarettes. Moshe used the money and the cigarettes to buy some food from the local villagers. By nature a thrifty person, he carefully saved the money. Being staunchly opposed to smoking, he sold the cigarettes.

One day, the Jews in the work detail received permission to send one letter to their families back home. Putting his saved-up money to good use, Moshe bought from an unattached fellow worker his right to write a letter. And so Moshe wrote one letter to his wife and another to his mother, dividing his remaining currency, placing half in one envelope and half in the other. This was characteristic of Moshe's selfless and magnanimous quality. In spite of all his deprivations and troubles, he always was more concerned about his family than about himself.

The time he wrote these letters was shortly after Pesach 1944. The Jews of Hungary had not yet been shipped to the death camps, but they had already been herded into the various ghettos in preparation for the final fatal journey. And so, a while later, the letter with the enclosed money bills to his mother in Butshum was

returned to him as undeliverable. The letter to his wife did not come back. Evidently, in Bistritz someone had grabbed the money and destroyed the letter, since the people were no longer living at that address. The failure to receive an answer worried him a great deal. A feeling of deep uneasiness and anxiety took hold of him. "What could be the reason?" he wondered with nervous foreboding.

From the Hungarian soldiers and guards Moshe learned that the Jews from Bistritz and Butshum had been carried off to Auschwitz. At the next letter-writing opportunity which was after Shavuos, he sent a letter to a friendly non-Jewish neighbor in Bistritz, asking him to find out and let him know what happened to his wife and children. The neighbor did send him a brief and straightforward answer.

"As far as I know," he stated in his letter, "your family, together with all the Jews of Bistritz, were put on a train and taken across the Hungarian border to an unknown destination."

Needless to say, this answer only heightened Moshe's fears. Nevertheless, he still harbored the hope that all would turn out well. After all, the Hungarians had told him that Auschwitz was a kind of assembly point for Hungarian refugees - no more than that. To him "Auschwitz" sounded like the name of a town; and so, naively, he kept up his hopes.

Moshe's dreary daily routine continued unchanged. Hard work on a grumbling stomach, followed by long marches and more hard work on a grumbling stomach. At one of the stops, he and a few

friends were given the task to take care of a herd of cows. For them this was a very good deal, since they could drink an abundance of fresh milk, and swap milk for things they needed. One day, as usual, they were grazing the herd close to the forest, when a noisy freight train passed by, blowing its shrill wistle. Startled by the clamor, the cows stampeded into the dense forest. As soon as the train was out of sight and the rumbling sound died down, the four men went into the forest to retrieve the lost animals. Much as they tried, it was to no avail. The entire valuable herd was a total loss.

After the futile search, Moshe's three friends came out of the forest to return to the work detail, Moshe trailing after them. As Moshe was about to emerge from the forest, he saw a sight that made him freeze in his tracks. There in front of him, looking like a ghost from another world, stood a Jewish woman, about thirty years old. With her was her daughter, a girl no more than ten years of age. The woman's facial features were young-looking, but her threadbare clothes made her look much older. The shoes they were wearing were torn and tattered. The woman was gaunt and emaciated, her haunting black eyes reflected deep sadness, and her unkempt bushy dark hair stood in sharp contrast to her pallid, anemic face.

"We are hiding out from the Germans in this forest," she said timidly, speaking in Yiddish. "The Germans shot and killed my entire family."

"We were a large *frum* family," she continued, speaking in an eerie-sounding monotone. "And now all that is left of our entire mishpachah is my daughter and myself. Our only possessions are

the rags we are wearing. That's all."

Listening to the woman's heartrending tale, Moshe was overwhelmed with deep compassion.

"We are staying alive by eating wild fruits, berries and herbs," she explained. "We're afraid to come out of the forest, because the Germans are offering to pay a bounty of two pounds of sugar to anyone showing them the hiding place of a Jew. And there are lots of people who would betray a Jew to get their hands on two pounds of sugar. That's why the safest place for us is right here in this dense forest."

Moshe's heart overflowed with pity with the unfortunate mother and daughter, but there was no way he could help them. The best thing for him to do was not to tell anyone about the two pathetic fugitives. While he was pondering the bizarre encounter, the woman and her daughter, like scared rabbits, disappeared into the forest. This was the first time Moshe received a eye witness report about German atrocities and mass murders of an entire Jewish population. Suddenly, doubts about the fate of his family began to rise in his mind, as his mood was swinging wildly between the extremes of hope and desperation. The question as to what happened to his wife and children obsessed him. It consumed his every waking moment, and tormented him in his dreams.

Chapter Thirty-Two

THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING!

By Shavuos of 1944 the work detail had reached the outskirts of Warsaw. This Yom Tov was no different than any of the previous Shabbosim and Yamim Tovim - the work went on as usual, without any semblance of *kedushah* or Yom Tov atmosphere. At night, the men nostalgically reminisced about the happy aura of Yom Tov of the past, the hauntingly beautiful *niggun* of *Akdamus*, the beautiful floral decorations at home and in *shul*, and recalled the various delectable *milchige* Shavuos dishes their wives and mothers used to prepare. For a brief spell they forgot their heartache and grief as they relived the glories of the past. In spite of their present degradation they felt sublimely proud to be members of the *Am hanivchar*, the nation chosen by Hashem to receive His Torah on Har Sinai. With *simchah* in their hearts they thanked Hashem, *shelo asani goy*, "for not having made us *goyim*." For even the simplest Yid is holy, pure and exalted - infinitely greater than *lehavdil* the German murderous scum.

In Warsaw the Poles rose up against the German occupiers, expecting the Russian army to come to their aid. Exploding bombs

and artillery shells ripped through the skies above the city in an around-the-clock bombardment. The nights were lit up brightly by the flames that were devouring the Polish capital while during the day heavy clouds of black smoke blanketed the area. The city was almost totally devastated; its industrial plants and domestic housing lay in ruins.

After a two-week pause, the work group continued on their westward trek. Moshe was ordered to guard the wagons that carried the kitchen utensils and the food supply. Occasionally Jews were assigned to this task, but instead of a gun they were given a spade to scare off would-be pilferers. Guarding food supplies was a job that had its pros and cons. Being close to food offered many opportunities to still your hunger, but the drawback was that since you were responsible for the food supplies you had to be alert at all times. Everything went fine until one night Moshe was caught napping, and the spade which had slipped out of his hand was found lying on the floor. The Hungarian soldier who found him asleep at his post immediately rushed to report him to the commander. Moshe suddenly woke up. Seeing the soldier run to the commander's office, sent chills off fear down his spine.

"Please Hashem," he *davended* silently, "please get me out of this jam."

In similar cases, the offenders were always severely punished. This time, however, the commander yelled and screamed, ranted and raved and gave Moshe a stern dressing down, but he let it go at that.

"Dismissed!" he said curtly, in an obvious goodwill gesture toward the Jews. It was clear that the Hungarian saw the inevitable end of the war approaching and wanted to get in the good graces of the Jews.

Shortly before the Yamim Tovim, all the supplies and utensils were loaded on a train, and after a journey of about two weeks, the work detail wound up in the city of Grossvardein, Hungary. Their new assignment was to take care of a stable of horses, feeding and watering them. They also had the task of tending sick and wounded horses, washing them and bandaging their injuries. In Grossvardein they spent Rosh Hashanah, and on Yom Kippur they received instructions to continue on. Early in the morning they organized a *minyan* for an abbreviated *davening*, and the rest of the day they spent marching. This was Moshe's third Yom Kippur away from home, in the work detail. As on the previous occasions, Moshe fasted this Yom Kippur in spite of his debilitating weakness. With Hashem's help, the *taanis* passed without any ill effects.

It was the middle of autumn, the weather was atrocious. Heavy rains made the dirt roads just about impassable. Huge potholes filled up with water, a slithery mass of gooey mud covered the roadbed. In view of the weather conditions the horses were transferred to a different detail while Moshe's group was sent marching once again.

Rumor had it that the Russians were approaching rapidly. In their push toward victory they secured the bigger cities first, leaving the mopping up of the villages, hamlets and the countyside for later. Mindful of this, the Germans ordered the work detail to

avoid the cities and take the back roads on their march from village to village. Suddenly the attitude of the Hungarian commander and the soldiers toward the Jews took a radical turn for the better. Anticipating an early Russian victory, the Hungarians figured on being taken prisoner by the Russians. By treating the Jews kindly they hoped that the Jewish workers would put in a good word for them with the victorious Soviets.

One night in a small village, as they sat huddled together in a cowshed, the owner, an elderly farmer, barged in.

"Listen guys, the Russians are just a dozen or so miles from here," he said excitedly. "They should be here in a couple of days at the most!"

The men of the detail tried to drag out their stay in the village for as long as possible, but the Germans ordered them to keep moving. In the next village they were put up in a wine cellar.

Hardly had they settled down when they heard loud cheering and shouting outside in the streets.

"The Russians are here! Hurrah for the Red Army! Well done! Long live the brave soldiers of the Soviet Union!"

One of the Jewish workers took a chance to go outside to see if it was really true that the Red Army had entered the village. Within a couple of minutes he came back, jumping for joy.

"*Mazal tov* fellows!" he shouted. "We've made it, *baruch Hashem*! The Russians are here!"

Before he could finish the sentence, the entire group burst outside, all fifteen of them. Whoever still had his yellow Jew-patch quickly put it on to demonstrate to the Russians how the Germans had singled out the Jews for abuse and mistreatment. They then presented themselves to the commander of the Russian tank battalion.

"Greetings, comrades, valiant soldiers of the Red Army!" one of the men tried to say in broken Russian. "We are Jews who have been forced to do slave labor for the Germans. For three years the Germans have tormented and starved us. We are famished. Thank you for coming to our rescue. You have saved our lives. Spassiva! Thank you!"

The Russians took the group to Bihur, a village close to Grossvardein, where they had established temporary army headquarters. On the way there they saw a dead German soldier lying by the side of the road. Smiling broadly, the Russian officer who led the convoy poured a can of gasoline on the corpse, set it on fire and cavorted around it in a happy victory dance, hugging and kissing his rifle.

On arriving in Bihur the men were interrogated and asked to relate their experiences as slave laborers. They told them everything that had happened to them from the time they were forced to leave their homes; they also showed them the yellow Jew-patch they had to wear.

"I am not authorized to release you," the commanding officer said after listening carefully to their accounts. "I have to send you

to Grossvardein to District Army Headquarters. There they'll be able to resolve all questions regarding your status and set you free."

Freedom seemed so close, yet it was still so far. More patience was required. On the way to Grossvardein they saw dozens of bodies strewn along the roadside, Germans, Hungarians and even a few Jews. Moshe recognized the body of one Jew who belonged to his detail. His heart ached to see Jews being killed after suffering hardship for such a long time and not being able to taste freedom and return home. The Russian drivers occasionally stopped to enter farm houses and help themselves to some food and other items that caught their fancy. They enjoyed seeing the Hungarians cringe as they looted their homes. The Russians generously shared the food with their Jewish passengers who seemed to hover on the brink of starvation.

In Grossvardein they were not released immediately. For some reason they were detained for a few days. This camp seemed to be an assembly point for homeless people from various places. After a few days, when about 650 people - Germans, Hungarians and Jews - had gathered there, they were all sent to a Russian army camp in Nodsolonto. The camp commander was a Russian Jew.

"Are there any Jews here who speak Russian?" he asked.

One of the Jews raised his hand. He was asked to step forward and translate the Russian announcements to the group.

"Form lines, four abreast!" the commander ordered. Everybody obeyed.

"All Jews step aside and line up separately!" the order rang out.

"Look at your neighbor on the right and on the left and see if he is a Jew. Make sure no Germans or Hungarians have sneaked into your lines!"

"All of us are Jews!" came the reply.

"My fellow Jews," he hollered. "Take off your caps and shout Hitler kaput!'"

This was one order everyone was happy to obey.

"OK brothers, that's it! You are free! Feel free to go anywhere you want to go! Good luck!"

The non-Jews were ordered to stay in the camp.

A collective sigh of relief rose from the mouths of the liberated Jews. *Baruch Hashem*, free at last!

The time was Cheshvan 1944.

The commandant was extremely kind. He reiterated that they were free to go. "But if you want to stay in this camp for a while to rest up from all the hardship you are welcome to do so."

Many people left immediately to enjoy the newly-won freedom. Moshe decided to stay for the night. For the first time in years he had a restful, worry-free night of sleep. Early the next morning he woke up, invigorated and refreshed. With a heart overflowing with gratitude to Hashem he *davened Shacharis*. However, he realized

that his troubles were far from over. The war was still raging, the extermination camps had not yet been liberated. For the present his primary and overriding concern was to look for his family hoping that they were in good health.

Chapter Thirty-Three

THE AGONIZING SEARCH

By November 1944, the German army had suffered a crushing defeat. The Russians had massed 225 infantry divisions and 22 armored corps in preparation of a major offensive. The breach of the German lines was 200 miles wide and, after the capture of Warsaw (January 17, 1945) and Lodz (January 19, 1945), the Russians advanced 100 miles in a week. The arrogant Germans received a drubbing that sent them fleeing in wild disarray.

The Majdanek death camp had been liberated, yet in spite of their losses on the battlefront the German murderous program of annihilation of the Jews continued full speed ahead. The cremariums of Auschwitz were working overtime, and under the direction of the monster Eichmann, the trains from Hungary kept coming without letup.

After the fall of Warsaw and Lodz in mid-January, Auschwitz was within a mere 100 miles of the advancing Russians. The Germans knew that they were doomed. On Himmler's instructions all traces of the Auschwitz atrocities were to be destroyed. The gas

chambers and crematoriums were to be blown up, the accumulated loot and all relevant documents were to be shipped to Germany, the camp was to be evacuated and all surviving slave laborers were to be transferred to concentration camps inside Germany. The piles of clothing, human hair and eye glasses were to be burned and the entire camp leveled and covered with earth.

It was freezing cold in Auschwitz that year. In sub-zero weather the remaining men and women of Auschwitz were sent on death marches into Germany. Without food, exhausted, plagued with sicknesses, barely clinging to life, wearing flimsy prison pajamas, some going barefoot, they were told to march. Some were shipped to Germany in freight trains, squeezed into open boxcars, 120 prisoners to a wagon, without room to move. On the death marches, the Germans prodded the unfortunates to walk quickly. Those that fell behind or fell exhausted by the wayside received a bullet through the head. Thousands died of starvation, froze to death or were killed; the roads were strewn with frozen bodies. The bodies of those that had died on the freight trains where tossed overboard. Those that were still alive envied the dead; at least for them the misery had ended. How much longer could the living last before the cold, the hunger or a German bullet would finish them off?

On January 27, 1945 Auschwitz was liberated by the Russian army. Battle-hardened soldiers were stunned and stupefied by the scene of the abandoned death camp. In spite of their feverish efforts, the Germans failed to erase the evidence of their bestialities. Thousands of corpses were lying around like so much discarded debris. Gaunt, shriveled creatures of mere skin and bones

were lying on the ground, more dead than alive, too weak to move or cry out. Those who were able to stand looked like living skeletons, shivering in the biting cold, their eyes bulging from their sockets, looking for crumbs of food. The cowardly Germans had long since fled in panic to escape the wrath of the Russians who were closing in on them.

Meanwhile, immersed in thought, Moshe was roaming around the streets of Solonto. He was a free man to be sure, but he was penniless. The image of his wife and children was on his mind all the time; with heart and soul he yearned to see them again. As he criss-crossed the town he noticed many abandoned Jewish homes. What had happened to the occupants, he wondered. He entered a deserted house; it was plain that its contents were hefker, ownerless property. Looking in the closet he found a nice suit that fit him perfectly as well as a good-looking hat. He quickly took off his ragged, shabby slave-labor overalls and walked out a well-dressed free man. Food was easy to come by. The Hungarians, eager to impress the Russians conquerors, offered the returning Jews anything they asked for, bread, milk, butter, fruits, vegetables, even chocolate and candy.

Once his initial hunger was stilled, Moshe did not want to waste any more time in that town.

"I've got to go and find my family," Moshe said to his friend Yerachmiel Schaefer. "Why don't you come along with me?"

Moshe became friends with Yerachmiel when they were working together in the labor detail. He was the brother of Shmuel

Schaefer, the man who selflessly took care of Moshe and other victims of the ghastly fire in Dvorshitz. As a result of an exploding bomb Yerachmiel had become hard of hearing. Moshe was delighted to have the opportunity to repay Shmuel for his kindness by helping his brother.

In the wake of the wartime battles many of the railroad tracks were wrecked, so that Moshe and his friend had to walk a good distance to the nearest station from where trains were running. On the way there they were stopped by a Russian soldier who wanted to recruit them to do work for the Russian army.

"Please let us go," Moshe begged. "We've just been liberated by the Russian army after three years of doing slave labor for the Germans. Don't you see, we're run-down and worn-out. Come on, have a heart!"

"Alright, I see what you mean," replied the soldier, and reluctantly let them go.

At the railroad station Moshe walked up to the ticket window.

"We've been liberated just a couple of days ago," he explained. "We've been away for three years doing forced labor, and now we want to go home to our families. We haven't got a penny to our name. So would you please let us ride the train without paying for a ticket?"

The agent took one look at them, pulled two vouchers out of the drawer and stamped them.

"Here are two free passes," he said. "Show them to the conductor when he comes around!"

After living under German sub-humans for almost three years, it felt wonderful to meet decent people and to be treated with dignity and respect.

They boarded the train heading for Arad, Romania, where they were warmly received by the Friedman family. Mrs. Friedman, an aunt of Moshe's wife Chanah Leah, made them feel comfortable and provided for them a home with a genuine *heimishe* atmosphere. For the first time in three years they enjoyed a real Shabbos.

The *Kiddush* over real wine, the *challahs* under the sparkling white *challah* cover, the Shabbos candles burning peacefully, the *divrei Torah* and the harmonious singing of the familiar *zemiros* . . . they felt as though they were in a higher world, where the *malachei hashalom* of peace and serenity ruled. Truly uplifted, they sensed the *mei'ein Olam Haba*, "the semblance of *Olam Haba*". For a moment they experienced the feeling of *venos yagon va'anachah*, "that grief and sighs had fled."

Moshe was reminded of his own family and the Shabbosim at home. His heart almost burst with yearning. He could hardly wait to see them again. The Friedmans were unable to tell him anything about the fate or the whereabouts of his wife and children. During the war years they had been living in complete isolation, cut off from the outside world.

"We are sorry, but we can't help you," they answered with deep sympathy. "We have no idea what happened to them or to any of

the other Jews. We hope and pray to Hashem that you'll find them very soon."

However, they eased the lot of the two men a great deal by offering them the glorious Shabbos. That first Shabbos after the liberation was an experience Moshe would never forget. Early Sunday morning, Moshe and Yerachmiel said goodbye and warmly thanked their gracious hosts for the beautiful Shabbos.

Filled with hope and anticipation they went to the station to catch the train to Bucharest. On arriving there they headed straight for the office of the "Joint" (short for Joint Distribution Committee) where they received a small amount of money. They then went their separate ways. Yerachmiel set out to look for his relatives, and Moshe went directly to the home of his older sister Zissel whom he had not seen since she got married to Chaim Shalom Kleinman in Butshum fifteen years earlier.

The moment he entered the house he recognized his sister, but he realized at once that she did not recognize him. This did not surprise him. When Zissel left home he was still a young boy, and the intervening years, coupled with the pain and the tzores, had left their mark. So, in order not to startle or frighten her by suddenly revealing himself, he told her that he was a friend of Moshe's.

"I served in the same labor unit with your brother Moshe," he said with a straight face. "Moshe asked me to give you his regards."

"Where is Moshe? How's he doing? Why didn't he come himself?" she asked, unsuspecting. The questions kept coming in

rapid-fire succession. After a while, Moshe could not keep up the charade any longer.

"I must tell you the truth," he suddenly blurted out. "I really am your brother Moshe. A few days ago I was liberated by the Russians, and I made my way here from the battlefield."

For an instant Zissel stood there, bewildered. Speechless, she stared at him with wide-eyed wonderment.

"Of course you are my little brother Moishele!" she exclaimed, passionately embracing him. Overcome with emotion, Moshe and Zissel wept, unable to utter a word. Tears of joy, grief, relief and heartache blended into one and flowed freely down their cheeks.

To Zissel's knowledge, Moshe was the first member of the family that had survived. The fate of all the others was as yet shrouded in uncertainty. Neither good nor bad reports had been received.

Chapter Thirty-Four

RETURN TO BISTRITZ

Although the Jews of Bucharest were spared from the fires of the holocaust and lived in tranquility, their existence during the war years was not without hardship. Zissel and Chaim Shalom were feeling the pinch. Chaim Shalom was the *shochet*, and Zissel made the rounds of the Jewish homes trying to sell chickens. They had five children; the oldest, Feiga, was only twelve years of age. Living in a small delapidated hovel, it was obvious that they had a hard time making ends meet. Moshe found out that the director of the Bucharest office of the International Red Cross was a relative of his uncle by the name of Goldstein. Wasting no time, Moshe took his brother-in-law Chaim Shalom to the office of the Red Cross where he introduced him to Goldstein and told him about Chaim Sholom's straitened circumstances. Goldstein lent a sympathetic ear to the tale of woe. He did not disappoint them. Right then and there he gave both of them a pair of new shoes as well as shoes for every member of Chaim Shalom's family, (at that time the cost of a new pair of shoes amounted to a week's salary). He also gave him a small amount of cash to tide him over.

"Call on me again in a month from now," Goldstein said with deep understanding. "I'll try to help you some more."

Now it was time for Moshe to return to his hometown of Bistritz. By talking to neighbors and police officials he would surely be able to track down his family, and once he knew their whereabouts a team of wild horses could not deter him from racing toward them for a happy reunion.

Before leaving Bucharest he bought a few small items that he planned to sell in Bistritz, things like cigarettes, soap, nylon stockings and flashlight batteries. He planned to open a small store in Bistritz selling general merchandise. After bidding farewell to his sister and brother-in-law he left Bucharest, setting out on the next leg of his search.

At that point in time, the Romanian government had annexed Transylvania and was the undisputed ruler over that region. The train ride which took Moshe through the entire length of Transylvania, traveling from south to north, was a very long and tiring journey. The railroad cars were crowded with Hungarian soldiers returning from the battlefield, villagers and Russian army personnel.

Late at night the train pulled into the Bistritz station. During the long journey, Moshe struck up an acquaintance with a Hungarian non-Jew who now invited him to sleep over in his house. Realizing that no one was expecting him, Moshe accepted the invitation. The next morning Moshe walked over to his house to discover that a Hungarian family had taken up residence there.

"Folks, I'm sorry but I must ask you to vacate the premises," he said politely. "This is my house."

"We don't dispute that," the Hungarians replied, "but we rented part of this house from your father-in-law."

"Wait a minute," he said as an afterthought. "I have something here that belongs to you. It's your wife's wedding ring and a few trinkets she left in the house when she was taken to the ghetto," handing him his wife's small jewel box.

They went on to describe in detail the events of the days before Chanah Leah and the children were taken to the ghetto. Trembling with agitation Moshe listened to what transpired during those fateful days. It was ominous, yet he still did not give up hope. "Who knows . . . " he thought, recalling the many miracles that had happened to him.

Moshe allowed the tenants to stay in the house while he went to look for an apartment for himself in one of the buildings abandoned by Jews. The furniture he owned before the war had been appropriated by a Hungarian who wanted it and simply took it.

"This furniture is mine," Moshe said without mincing words.

"I've come to pick it up."

At first the Hungarian refused to give up the stolen items, but when Moshe insisted and threatened to take legal action, the *goy* gave in.

Moshe then went to Butshum to inquire and investigate, hoping to learn what happened to the deportees. The dismal scene of abandoned Jewish homes and properties was repeated. Deeply despondent he went to the cemetery to *daven* at his father's *kever*. Standing there all alone, overcome with grief and despair, he cried bitterly. Whispering softly he recounted his tale of woe, his life of adversity beginning with his father's *petirah* when he was only seventeen years old, the dreadful hardship of the last three years

until the present moment.

"*Tatteh*, I ask you," he sobbed, "please be a *meilitz yosher* for me and my family. Plead before the *Kisei Hakavod* on my behalf, on behalf of my wife and my children and on behalf of *Klal Yisrael*. Let there be an end to all the *tzores*, the anguish and the distress."

Heaving a sigh of relief, he placed a small pebble on the matzeivah as he turned to leave. He derived a measure of comfort from the fact that in this town of desolation at least his father's *kever* was left intact. At this *kever* he had unburdened his soul, poured out his tormented heart and gained new hope to face an uncertain future.

Moshe's grandfather, Reb Yosef Zev Gutman, owned several tracts of farmland in Butshum. On his death he left these properties to Moshe's mother. Moshe now sold these holdings at bargain prices to his relatives, the Spitzer brothers. He then returned to Bistritz, and with the newly acquired capital he opened a small grocery store in the heart of town, hoping to get back on his feet financially. His staples and produce he bought from wholesalers and distributors in Klausenburg and Bucharest.

A few weeks after that, he managed to convince his sister and brother-in-law to move away from Bucharest and join him in Bistritz as partners in his newly established business. He prepared a spacious apartment for them in one of the abandoned Jewish houses close to his residence. The family of five children with all their possessions left Bucharest and settled in Bistritz. Thanks to Moshe's helping hand their standard of living improved markedly, and shortly after their move a daughter was born. They named her Eidel, after Zissel and Moshe's mother.

Chapter Thirty-Five

THE APPALLING NEWS

As the weeks went by, a small number of survivors of Auschwitz and other death camps began to trickle back to Bistritz. Human wrecks, shattered in body and soul, they came limping into town, telling tales of horror, blood and death that staggered the imagination.

Running from one concentration camp returnee to another, Moshe tried to find out what happened to his family. It was all in vain; not the slightest clue. Not a single lead that he might pursue. The more survivors he questioned, the more he realized that the chances of his family having survived were very slim indeed. Still, he did not give up and kept asking questions, thinking, that maybe, just maybe, there was still a ray of hope.

One of the earliest returnees was Moshe's brother-in-law Zev Fischman. Like Moshe, he had served in a Hungarian forced labor battalion on the Russian front. Zev's first stop was in Butshum, but when he heard that Moshe had survived and was in Bistritz he rushed over to see him. Dressed in his shabby, threadbare laborer's

clothes he entered the grocery store. His arms outstretched, he ran toward Moshe and embraced him, breaking into tears.

"Moshe, Moshe," he moaned. "I'm left all alone in the world. The German murderers killed my Devorah (Moshe's sister) and all our children in Auschwitz! They are all gone!"

Moshe tried to find words of consolation, but in the face of such overwhelming sorrow, holding his hand in silence was more compassionate than words. He went with him to buy new clothes and found a position for him as a *shochet* in Kroli.

As the enormity of the tragedy began to sink in, Moshe became deeply depressed. So many of his sisters, nephews, nieces and other members of his flourishing family had perished. It was impossible for the human mind to fathom the immensity of the calamity. *Ki rabos anchosai velibi davoi*, "For my groans are many, and my heart is sick" (Eichah 1:22).

Quite unexpectedly Moshe found out one day that his two sisters-in-law - his wife's younger sisters - had come back from the German concentration camps. Without delay he joyfully ran over to meet and greet them. But his happiness was shortlived, for they brought him the news he had been dreading to hear all the time. They told him that his wife Chanah Leah, five year-old Shmuel and three year-old Zelda were killed by the Germans. They were sent to the gas chamber and their bodies destroyed in the crematorium.

"Mengele was in charge of the selection," the young women said. "Those who looked healthy and strong he sent to the right to

work at hard labor. The elderly, the weak, the infirm and mothers with small children were dispatched to the left to die in the gas chamber."

Moshe was thunderstruck. Until this moment he still harbored the hope that they had survived somehow. The reality of their cruel death hit him like a hammer blow to his head. Despondent, he slumped down on a chair, staring blankly into nothingness. All his hopes and aspiration had gone down the drain. For twenty-eight months he had suffered the Gehinnom on earth under the brutal German and Hungarian slave drivers. The one thing that kept him going was the prospect of seeing his wife and children again. He carried their image in his heart. It was the secret element that gave him the strength and willpower to endure all the trials and tribulations that came his way. And now, all his expectations had gone up in smoke. Dumb with grief, he was a broken, forlorn wreck of a man.

The sisters-in-law told him that his sister Rachel, the wife of Zalman Wachsman, together with her week-old daughter were killed on the same day.

"They were pushed onto the train, along with all the inhabitants of the Bistritz ghetto," the women recalled with a faraway look in their eyes. "On the day they arrived in Auschwitz they were killed. It was the 13th of Sivan, 1944."

Moshe learned that his mother perished two days earlier, on the 11th of Sivan, together with the transport from the Simlau ghetto. Moshe was very close to his mother; after his father's passing he

was her mainstay, the devoted son who helped her in the difficult times, the one she could always rely on.

Crying bitterly, Moshe tore *keriah*, sat down on the floor and bewailed the loss of his precious loved ones.

A few days later, his father-in-law returned from the e*mek habachah*, the "valley of weeping", together with one of his young daughters. They sat *shivah* together with Moshe and mourned the appalling losses. Of his father-in-law's eight children, three sons and two married daughters and their children were killed.

The days that followed were very difficult. The searing heartache was unbearable, keeping him awake most of the night. When dozing off, he was plagued by nightmarish dreams and monstrous visions that caused him to wake up screaming wildly, cold sweat dripping from his forehead. Much as he tried, he simply was unable to banish from his mind these horrible thoughts and ghastly fantasies. The image of his little innocent children crying out to him was constantly on his mind. Other than his sister Zissel he knew of no surviving family members.

The dreadful, horrible events of the holocaust brought about a drastic change in people's lives. The calm, sedate and orderly ways of pre-war Europe were gone forever. In the wake of the holocaust Jewish life in Europe was radically altered. Lonely survivors, desolate orphans, widows, and widowers whose children had been killed wandered about the continent in search of relatives, hoping at least to find someone from their neighborhood or hometown. Everyone craved a familiar face, someone with shared memories

and experiences. Among the survivors there were hardly any children; the sound of children's songs and laughter could not be heard, children's heartwarming smiles were only faint memories. To the barbaric Germans, children were useless; they were killed immediately on arrival at the death camps. If a young survivor ran into an older friend or acquaintance, in his terrible loneliness, the younger one would envy the older friend, out of the morbid thought that the older one would meet his departed loved ones sooner in the *Olam Ha'emes*.

Chapter Thirty-Six

BUILDING A NEW LIFE

A year went by, and the burning pain in Moshe's heart slowly began to subside. The gaping wounds gradually began to heal. Moshe gradually came to the realization that he could not spend the rest of his life mourning his terrible loss.

"I've got to pull myself together," he said to himself. "My whole life lies ahead of me, and I have to start thinking about the future."

One day, his wife's uncle, Yomtov Ganz, dropped in for a visit.

"The time is ripe for you to begin looking for a partner in life," he gently suggested.

One thing led to another, and in the end Moshe went along with Yomtov Ganz to Sasregen. There a *shidduch* was proposed with Reizel Apter. Having lived in Sasregen for a short while before the war, Moshe knew the Apter family to be highly respected and *frum* members of the *kehillah*. A meeting was arranged, and Moshe was introduced to Reizel, after which he returned home. A short while later, Reizel came on a visit to her

uncle in Bistritz, at which time they met once again. The two souls found each other, and then and there they decided to build a new life together. Reizel's father came to Bistritz for the engagement celebration (her mother and two sisters were killed by the Germans). The engagement was held on *Rosh Chodesh Adar*, 1946, and two-and-a-half months later the *chasunah* took place. The date of the *chasunah* was *erev Lag Ba'omer*. That year, *Lag Ba'omer* fell on Sunday, and the *chuppah* took place in Sasregen on Friday afternoon. The *mesaddeir kiddushin* was the rav of Sasregen, Rabbi David Yehudah Freund, and the *chasunah seudah* was held Friday night at the house of the *mechutan*, Reb Yisroel Yitzchok Apter. After *Kabbalas Shabbos*, about twenty relatives and friends gathered around the festive table, happily singing *zemiros* and *chasunah niggunim*. They danced joyously until late into the night and wished *chasan* and *kallah mazal tov* and a long life together with much happiness.

Immediately after the week of *sheva berachos*, Moshe and Reizel traveled to Bistritz to begin their new life together.

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It was around that time that the Communists came to power in Romania. Many Jews, afraid to get caught in the Communist web, decided to emigrate while the doors were still open. About four months after the *chasunah*, in the month of Elul, Moshe and Reizel too, made up their minds to leave Romania. They wanted to depart as soon as possible. Since Reizel was expecting, it would be much easier to travel now than later when they would have to carry a new-born baby in their arms.

Moshe tried to persuade his sister Zissel and her husband Chaim Shalom to join them, but they were unable to do so. Their son Simchah who was nine years old at the time was sick with a bad case of rheumatic fever. He was so weak that he could not stand straight. As a result, they were forced to postpone their emigration to a later date. (It would take twenty years of much trouble and misery until Chaim Shalom and Zissel and their family finally were able to reach Eretz Yisrael).

Moshe did not want to waste precious time and began packing his belongings. He did not take along a large amount of money, because he did not want to sell his share of the stock of the grocery store and leave his brother-in-law and sister with empty shelves.

He went to say tearful goodbye to his only sister and to his father-in-law Reb Yisroel Yitzchok who bid him farewell and wished him well. Before making their final break with Romania, Moshe and Reizel took a train to Tzatza, where they hired a coach to take them to Butshum. This was to be Moshe's last opportunity to *daven* at his father's *kever*. Standing at the *kever*, Moshe reminisced about the misfortunes that had befallen him. He *davened* that Hashem should protect him and his wife, that they should be successful in getting to Eretz Yisrael, the land of their dreams; that the terrible losses he has sustained should be restored to him and he be granted the *zechus* to raise a new family.

Leaving the cemetery, he walked down the hill toward the village. His head bowed, immersed in deep thought, he recalled his happy childhood days surrounded by his father, mother, brothers and sisters. All that remained of that glorious time was his father's

kever in the *beis olam* on the top of the hill. His mother, brothers and sister who perished in Auschwitz were not *zocheh* to a *kever* or a *matzeivah*.

Absorbed in these thoughts, he entered the abandoned house that once was his home. The walls that once reverberated with so much joy, song, love, and Torah learning, now stood there in silence and utter desolation. Every room held countless precious memories. Ambling slowly he looked around, trying to find some odds and ends that might hold priceless memories, picking up scraps and broken pieces of junk that lay scattered all around. Suddenly he caught sight of a small piece of paper that was rolled up like a scroll. He picked it up, carefully unwound it, and before his eyes there appeared the handwriting of Chanah Leah, his first wife. It was a letter she had written to her mother-in-law during the time he was away in the work detail. Here is the text of her letter, translated from Yiddish:

> B.H. Dear Mother, sisters-in-law and brothers-in-law, may you live long and be well, I am surprised that I have not heard from you in such a long time. I admit that I, too, have not written for a long time. I was hoping that Moshe would come home, so that we would have some happy news to report. I did receive a postcard from Moshe, dated the third of the month. He tells me not to be concerned, that he is feeling fine, *baruch Hashem*. All he is asking is that I should send him a picture. Of course, I sent him one right away.
>
> Hashem should have mercy on us and make us happy, that we should see him again soon. Hashem should send us the *geulah sheleimah* in the *zechus* of the little children.

Moshe asked in his letter if I receive any subsidies from the government. My application was turned down twice already. Hashem should help that Moshe comes home in good health, so that I will not need any government assistance. Shmuel can't wait to go to *cheider* after Pesach and to be able to go to *shul* with his Tatty. Zelda is *kein ayin hara* a very sweet child. That's all the news for now.

Heartiest regards and many kisses to you and each and everyone,

your daughter-in-law, sister-in-law and aunt

Chanah Leah Rosenberg

Reading the letter, looking at the familiar handwriting, Moshe felt torn with conflicting emotions. On the one hand he was elated to have found this precious treasure, yet at the same time, reading how his wife and children struggled during those difficult times stirred painful feelings. With a lump in his throat he read how his children were growing up during his absence, and how they yearned for his return. And now he was standing here. He had come back, but they were gone.

Reizel understood the thoughts that were going through his mind, sensed the pain that was tearing him apart. With deep sympathy she tenderly tried to soothe his grief. Moshe's greatest source of consolation was the fact that in Reizel he had found a sensitive wife to whom he could pour out his heart. In those difficult moments she was his devoted helpmate who knew how to encourage him, strengthen his *emunah* and inspire him with new hope.

They continued on the journey, heading north for Satmar. The train ride was quite strenuous, especially for Reizel who was pregnant. Their food supply ran out, so that they went hungry throughout most of the long trip. After crossing the border, they finally arrived in Budapest where they spent Rosh Hashanah of 1946 in a local lodging. They fervently davened that Hashem should grant them a *shanah tovah umevoreches*, that should arrive in Eretz Yisrael safely and find there the peace and tranquility they were craving.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

ON THE MOVE AGAIN

Immediately after Rosh Hashanah, they got ready to continue their journey. They were joined by several refugee couples who also wanted to get out from under Communist rule and head west for the free world. For a substantial sum of money they persuaded a Russian officer to take them in a van across the border into Austria. They all squeezed into the van, and after a few anxious moments at the border check point, they all arrived safely in Vienna.

In Vienna they found a veritable "ingathering of the exiles." Jewish refugees, concentration camp survivors, displaced persons and Jews escaping from Communist countries all converged on Vienna where they were housed and taken care of by the Joint. These people were despondent, tired and exhausted, longing for a little calm and serenity. For the first few days Moshe and Reizel were put up in the Rothschild Hospital of Vienna. Then they were transferred to a camp in the vicinity of Vienna made up of ramshackle bungalows. It was late in the fall, and whenever it rained the water came dripping through the leaky roof. The

bungalows were overcrowded, ten people to a room. Meals were dished out in the main house, and people ate the food in their rooms. A few weeks later Moshe and Reizel were moved to Salzburg where they were given much better accommodations. The rooms there were nicer and more spacious, and fewer people to a room.

While in Vienna, Moshe made the rounds of the various agencies and organizations hoping against hope to find out something about the fate of his two brothers and his sister who lived in Belgium before the war. Grabbing at straws, he scanned the lists of survivors that were made available to him, looking for the names of relatives. Wherever he went, no matter how hard he tried, he came up empty-handed. Not a hint of information about anyone he knew.

In Salzburg, Moshe received a letter from his sister Zissel in Bistritz who used to write to him on a regular basis. "Good news," she wrote. "*Baruch Hashem*, our brother Chaim Dov survived and returned from concentration camp."

This is what happened. Chaim Dov together with his wife, son and daughter were hauled off from Antwerp to Auschwitz. His wife and children were killed on arrival. Chaim Dov was sent to various slave labor camps. After the liberation, he returned to his empty and desolate apartment in Antwerp, lonely and forlorn. His brother Feivel Hirsch, his sister Channah and their families all had perished. Deeply dejected, he asked people who arrived from Bucharest whether they could tell him anything about his sister Zissel. He was overjoyed to learn that she, her husband and family

were spared from the horrors of the holocaust and had moved to Bistritz. He immediately got in touch with Zissel and from her he found out that Moshe had survived, but that his family had been murdered.

The happy news that Moshe's brother was still alive was a source of consolation. It gave him reason to continue his search for relatives. "If Chaim Dov turned up alive and well," he reasoned, "perhaps other relatives will surface too."

Since the gates of Eretz Yisrael were tightly closed by the British, Moshe began to consider the possibility of settling in Belgium. But he soon found out that the Belgian authorities were not too keen on admitting penniless refugees. The only thing for him to do was to stay in Austria and wait patiently for an opportunity to emigrate. Salzburg was only a transit camp, and after a short while they were transferred to a DP camp in Bad Reichenhold. That too turned out to be only a temporary stay, and before long they were relocated to Eichstaett in the American-occupied zone of Germany. They were to remain there until they would be admitted to one of the countries of the free world.

At first the Eichstaett camp was in complete disarray. People were leaving, others arriving, all at the same time. There was great commotion and total chaos. Shouting, screaming and angry recriminations could be heard all day. After a few days, however, things settled down. Order was restored, everyone received adequate housing and satisfactory meals. Moshe and Reizel were very happy when they were assigned a pleasant, quiet private room.

Moshe was put in charge of the Office of Religious Affairs, which meant taking care of the religious needs of the refugees in the camp, organizing *minyanim* and *shiurim*, providing *siddurim* and *chumashim*. He also took up jewelry making as an apprentice to a local jeweler who gave him cigarettes and other small items in exchange for his services. Since Moshe did not smoke, he sold the cigarettes and saved the money for more vital necessities.

Before Pesach, matzos, wine, potatoes, eggs and other essential foods that had been supplied by American relief organizations were distributed among the refugees. Everyone did his own cooking. There was a *shochet* among the refugees, and whoever managed to buy a chicken was able to enjoy a delectable meal at the seder. Moshe and Reizel bought a few pots and pans, dishes, glasses and silverware and got ready for Pesach to the best of their ability. In one of the buildings they set up a makeshift *shul*. The rabbi of the camp was Rabbi Lipa Rosenberger, and the place began to take on the semblance of a full-fledged *kehillah*.

Now that things were beginning to run fairly smoothly, Moshe found time to write to various relatives and friends in an attempt to find find out about prospects for emigration, what country had the most lenient policy about admitting new immigrants, and in what country would he be most likely to succeed. His brother-in-law Moshe Tzvi Apter, Reizel's brother, was interned in Cyprus waiting to make *aliyah* to Eretz Yisrael. The British navy intercepted 85% of the incoming boats, boarded them, arrested the "illegals" and deported them to Cyprus, where they were interned in hastily erected camps. Yaakov Rosenberg, an uncle of Moshe, who lived in Montevideo, Uruguay tried to persuade him to settle

in that country, but Moshe did not want to go to a place as far away as South America, all the more so, since he first had to go to Paraguay and wait there for an immigration visa to Uruguay.

He kept in close contact with his cousin Yechezkel Kraus who had been with him during the hard times when they both worked in the labor battalion in the Ukraine. Yechezkel had managed to emigrate to the United States shortly after the end of the war. Now that he was firmly established, he did not forget his relatives and friends. He sent Moshe parcels with clothing that came in very handy in his straitened circumstances. Of course, Moshe kept up a correspondence also with his brother Chaim Dov in Belgium who sent him clothing, food items and other necessities.

In spite of all the letters, applications and inquiries, Moshe and Reizel did not receive entry visas to even one country. Moshe and Chaim Dov made a major effort to obtain just a visitor's visa for him so that they could at least see each other again after what they had been through. They had not seen each other for almost twenty years. Of course, Moshe had no chance of obtaining an entry visa to Belgium. But Chaim Dov too tried repeatedly to get a visa, but the American occupation authorities turned him down each time. Thus the two brothers remained separated by an unbridgeable gap, their only connection - a steady stream of letters.

Undaunted by beaurocratic refusals, Chaim Dov came up with an ingenious solution to the problem. He applied for a visa to Czechoslovakia. Since he knew that the train from Belgium to Prague made a two-hour stopover in Nuremberg, Germany, he figured on meeting Moshe there. Everything worked out as

planned. He received the Czech visa and made up with Moshe to meet him on the platform at the Nuremberg station. Well before the scheduled arrival of the train, Moshe was standing on the platform, waiting with bated breath to meet his older brother whom he had not seen for such a long time. The three of them - Moshe, his brother Chaim Dov and his sister Zissel - were the only survivors of their large family.

With an ear-piercing whistle the train from Brussels pulled into the Nuremberg station, crammed with passengers. Running back and forth the length of the train, Moshe tried to make out his brother. He had no idea what Chaim Dov looked like. How was he going to recognize him? While he stood there thinking, he suddenly heard a voice rising above the din of the crowd of arriving passengers, shouting, "Rosenberg! Rosenberg!" Turning in the direction of the voice, Moshe saw a haggard Jew calling from a window whose looks and age matched that of his brother. Moshe ran toward the window.

"Chaim Dov, it's me, Moshe! Over here!" he exclaimed, waving his arms.

Like a driven man Chaim Dov elbowed his way through the crowd, and within seconds the two brothers tightly embraced each other, sobbing silently. For the next two hours they tried to tell each other all that had transpired during the intervening years. Much too soon the "All aboard!" was sounded. Before boarding the train to Prague, Chaim Dov handed Moshe a package containig food and clothing, and bid him a tearful goodbye. He stayed in Prague for a few days after which he took the train back to Belgium

with another scheduled stopover in Nuremberg. He was looking forward to having another two-hour meeting with Moshe on the platform of the station.

This time Moshe brought along his wife Reizel, so that she and his brother could get to know each other. After a cordial encounter, Chaim Dov resumed his journey to Belgium, while Moshe and Reizel returned to Eichstaett to wait for further developments.

On the second of Sivan, 1947 Reizel gave birth to a daughter in the nearby hospital. The new parents were ecstatic, their joy was boundless. This was their first *simchah* after the dreadful loss of both their entire families. The birth of this child gave them renewed hope and faith in the future. The baby was named Leah after Reizel's mother who had perished in Auschwitz three years earlier. Using a small wooden crate, some padding and blankets they fashioned an improvised crib for the baby. Since they did not have diapers, Reizel cut a bed sheet into strips which she used for that purpose. Baby food was hard to come by, but their happiness with the little baby overshadowed any discomfort that arose.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

ERETZ YISRAEL AT LAST

Another year went by, and still no progress regarding emigration. Reizel was pregnant again; this time a boy was born on Shabbos, the 6th of Iyar, 1948, one day after the declaration of statehood for the new State of Israel. Being very weak and run-down, Reizel was confined to a nursing home even before she gave birth. The nursing home was in Bad Werishofen, a three-hour drive from Eichstaett, and it was there that the baby was delivered. A week later the bris took place at this nursing home. Moshe was the *sandek*, and the baby was named Gershon. Reizel stayed in Bad Werishofen for four more weeks, and Moshe joined her only for Shabbosim.

By the time Reizel came back to Eichstaett, the camp population gradually began to dwindle. With the establishment of Israel, people were free to immigrate there, and Jews arrived in droves. Israel was the only country that welcomed them with open arms. When Moshe and Reizel's neighbors and close friends, Yitzchak Sehlfreund decided to go on *aliyah* to Eretz Yisrael, they made up their mind to join them. They still had to wait for specific

instructions from the Histadrut. As soon as these arrived they all traveled to the French Mediterranean port of Marseilles, and in Adar 1949 they boarded the ship bound for Eretz Yisrael. It was an Italian ship named "Casserta" that was chartered by the Histadrut and the Joint to bring Jewish refugees to Eretz Yisrael. It was a very stormy voyage. The ship was tossing and careening in the turbulent sea, the babies were shrieking, wailing and whining most of the time. There was no kosher food; all they ate was some cookies and candy they had brought along from Germany.

They celebrated Purim on the high seas. They had no kosher *Megillah*, so Moshe who had a *Chumash* with him read the *Megillah* from it, and everyone crowded around to hear *kerias haMegillah*. Whenever the name Haman was mentioned, the whole crowd stomped their feet and banged on the tables in a wild cacophony of noise. At the end of the *Megillah* reading, the people joined in singing *Shoshannas Yaakov* at the top of their voices. It was a song of happy yearning to be in Eretz Yisrael. After sailing for two weeks, the ship arrived at its destination and cast anchor in the port of Haifa.

With deep emotion the passengers gazed at the marvelous view of the coastline of *Artzeinu Hakedoshah* extending before their eyes. Cries of happiness and cheer rose up as they marched down the gang plank. Many fell to their knees and kissed the cherished ground. They were greeted by police officers who directed them toward the various groupings for which they had registered while still in Germany. Back in Eichstaett Moshe and Reizel had registered as members of Po'alei Agudas Yisrael, and now they were welcomed by representatives of that organization who took them

to the reception center for new *olim* in Ra'ananah.

The sudden influx of large masses of refugees brought about a shortage of vacant bungalows in which to house the new arrivals. Moshe and Reizel were put on a waiting list for a bungalow, but for the time being they had to make do with one of the tents that had been set up in the courtyard of the reception center. Fortunately they did not have to wait too long, for a few days later they were assigned a small bungalow of their own.

The change of climate and food had some adverse effects on people. Especially the children were seriously affected; many came down with upset stomachs, vomiting and diarrhea. Leah who was two years old quickly adapted to the new environment and did not suffer too much, but little Gershon who was only one year old, became very ill and ran a high fever. He was hospitalized in the clinic that was set up in one of the bungalows. However, when his condition worsened and his temperature continued to rise he was transferred to Hadassah Hospital in Tel Aviv while medication was being administered intravenously into his little arm. The hospital was overcrowded to the point that they could not accept any additional patients; there simply were no vacant beds available. Several hours later little Gershon was sent back to Ra'ananah. Looking at their little son as he lay there in convulsions and fading slowly, hovering between life and death, Moshe and Reizel's mood alternated between hope and despair. Fervently they said *Tehillim*, that Hashem may spare their precious child. When his condition became extremely critical he was taken to Hadassah once again. This time, in view of his grave condition he was admitted immediately as an emergency case. Moshe and

Reizel commuted back and forth from Ra'ananah to Tel Aviv each day.

A few days later, on *erev* Shavuos, when they came to visit him, they were given the bad news: unable to fight off the disease, little Gershon had succumbed and passed away. The doleful parents were heartbroken. They thought they had reached peace and tranquility at last, but misfortune seemed to pursue them. They had been dealt another blow. Moshe was asked to identify the remains, and two young yeshivah *yungeleit*, members of the *Chevrah Kadisha*, managed to arrange the *kevurah* right away, since it was the afternoon of *erev* Shavuos. Moshe and Reizel rushed back to Ra'ananah and sat shivah for just a few hours to mourn the great loss, before the onset of the Yom Tov ended the *shivah*.

The hardships of absorption in the new country were not over. They moved to a settlement in Masmiah, an abandoned Arab village near the intersection of the roads to Tel Aviv, Yerushalayim and Be'er Sheva. This too, turned out to be a only a temporary arrangement. Ultimately the people of Masmiah consolidated with a group that was forming an agricultural center, and together they established a religious *moshav* Benei Re'em which is named after the Gerrer Rebbe, Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Alter z'tzl (the Imrei Emes).

In Benei Re'em they finally found the serenity and calm they had been longing for. Gradually things began to improve. It was in Benei Re'em that they raised a family, and it was there that their other children were born: Adina, Tzipora, Miriam, Eliezer Lipman, and I, Zvi Shmuel, the youngest of the children.

I herewith conclude the chronicle of my father's life and his ordeal during the dreadful years of the holocaust, the worst calamity ever to befall the Jewish people.

EPILOGUE

My parents have been living in Eretz Yisrael for many years, and *baruch Hashem*, they had the *zechus* to marry off their children and to derive a great deal of *nachas* from their grandchildren.

Upon reaching retirement age, my father went back to the *beis midrash* and resumed his Torah studies with the zeal and *bren* of a young yeshivah *bachur*, with my mother's enthusiastic encouragement.

One day, my father approached me with the idea that he would very much like to go to *kever avos*, to visit the graves of his father and grandfather in Butshum and Krasne.

"Would you please come along with me on this journey," he asked me. "Of course, I'll go," I replied enthusiastically. "I've alwayd dreamed of seeing the places you've been telling me about." Wasting no time, I excitedly made all the necessary travel arrangements. We flew to Budapest where we rented a car and a driver to take us to Romania. En route, my father worried whether he would be able to identify the *matzeivah* on his father's *kever*. After all, fifty-seven years had gone by since his passing.

"But I have a definite and unmistakable mark," Father said.

"After the war, before leaving Romania, I went to visit my father's *kever*. Sadly, I noticed that the *matzeivah* was slightly damaged; one of the corners had broken off in a straight diagonal slash. Since I was pressed for time, I was unable to restore the *matzeivah*."

"Now this will turn out to be a 'lucky break,' Father continued. "For even if the writing on the *matzeivah* has worn away, I will be able to recognize it by the broken off corner."

That is exactly what happened. When we arrived at the cemetery, we found in the family section a *matzeivah* whose inscription had been completely erased by the ravages of time and weather, but the slanted break proved conclusively that this was the *kever* of Reb Shmuel Rosenberg. Alongside his kever we found the *kevarim* of Reb Yosef Zev, Reb Shmuel's father-in-law, and other relatives who died before the war. We then continued on to Krasne where we visited the *kever* of Reb Eliezer Lipman. The inscription on his *matzeivah* was quite legible, perhaps because he had died several years later.

As we were traveling through the charming Transylvania countryside, Father pointed out to me the various villages and nostalgically told me about his childhood and adolescence, and about the vibrant and dynamic Jewish life that once pulsated here. Tragically, these flourishing *kehillos* are gone forever. Only the *matzeivos* remain - silent witnesses to the disaster that has befallen our people.



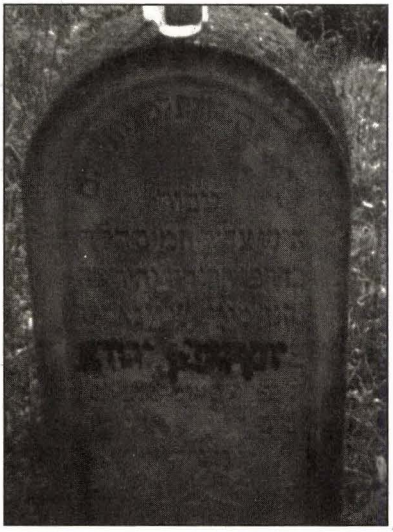
Chana Leah with Shmuel and Zelda הי"ד



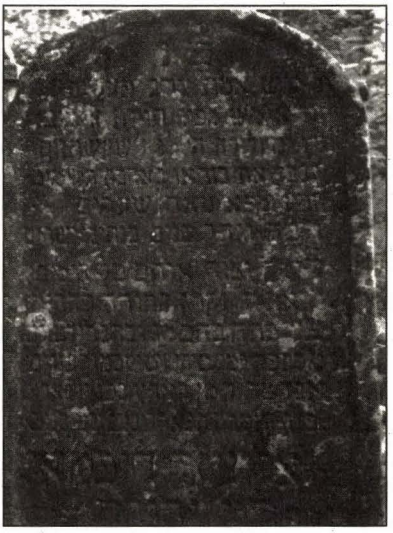
Moshe, Reizel with their children in Eretz Yisroel in 1963



At R' Shmuel's Matzeivah in Butshum



The Zayda R' Yosef Zev's Matzeivah



The Zayda R' Eliezer Lipman's Matzeivah



Zvi Shmuel and Family 1997