The Holocaust Diaries

Someday We'll Be Free



Leibel Sanik

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SOMEDAY WE'LL BE FREE

LEIBEL (LEON) SANIK



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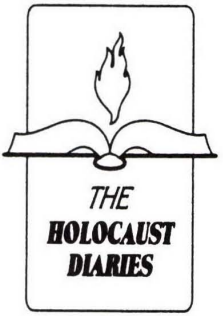
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Someday We'll Be Free



כָּל זֹאת בָּאַתְנוּ וְלֹא שְׁכַחֲנוּךָ

(תהלים מד:יח)

All this has befallen us
yet we have not forgotten You

(*Tehillim* 44:18)

ספר זה מוקדש
לזכר נשמות

אבי מורי
ר' אברהם אליעזר ליפא בן ישראל הי'ד

ואמי מורתי
מרת אסתר בת משה הי'ד

ואחותי
גיטל פייגע בת אברהם אליעזר ליפא הי'ד

ולכל בני משפחתי
שנהרגו על קידוש השם
ת.נ.צ.ב.ה

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

IN RECENT YEARS, THERE HAS BEEN A GREAT REVIVAL OF interest in the holocaust, perhaps because of the realization that the generation that experienced it is already in its twilight years; indeed, the *Holocaust Diaries* collection itself is a manifestation of that renewed interest. We read and hear about the experiences of the survivors—and about the millions who did not survive—and we inevitably try to visualize what it was like to suffer through those dreadful years.

How did it feel to be torn away from home and family and cast out like a piece of driftwood upon the waters? How did it feel to run in terror at the first signs of an *Aktion* in the ghetto? How did it feel to be herded into cattle cars at gunpoint and sent off to concentration camps? How did it feel to stand on selection lines, waiting to be designated for

life or for death? And finally, how did it feel to walk towards the gas chambers, knowing that there would be no reprieve from this brutal and senseless death?

Most of us are conversant enough with the scenes and images to recreate them in our imaginations so that we can explore the nagging questions that plague our generation. What if it had been us? What would we have done? How would we have handled it? Would we have found the strength to face our fate with courage and dignity? Thoughts such as these are important not only as intellectual exercises but because they form the foundations of empathy. We cannot truly empathize with those who perished in the holocaust or who suffered through it and survived unless we put ourselves in their place and try to understand their experiences.

There is another aspect of the holocaust experience, however, that does not come so readily to mind when we recreate the holocaust in our imaginations. It does not deal with great moral questions or moments of pathos and high drama. Yet this aspect was, in a very real sense, the most difficult for the victims to bear and for us to imagine. It was the endless battle against hunger, thirst, cold, disease and exhaustion.

How can we, who are discomfited if dinner is late, relate to people who had to perform hard labor from dawn to darkness with only a crust of bread and a cup of watery gruel for sustenance? How can we, who wrap ourselves in warm coats at the first wintry chill, relate to people who were forced to stand at *Appel* for hours with only tattered rags to protect them again the deep winter frost? How can we, who are accustomed to travel in the comfort of our cars, relate to frail and sick people taken on forced marches for hundreds of kilometers without adequate food and clothing? We look at

the survivors of our acquaintance, and paradoxically, we see ordinary people. How could these people possibly have endured all this? Where did they find the stamina and determination to persevere? It is beyond imagination, beyond understanding, beyond empathy. We can only shake our heads in perplexity and thank Heaven that we ourselves were not put to the test.

One of the most pernicious German atrocities of the holocaust was the grinding down of millions of noble human beings to scrabbling shadows of their former selves whose thoughts were occupied almost exclusively by the chronic aches of their tormented bodies. For in truth, those that were sent to the "right" during the selections had not really been chosen for life. They had merely been chosen for a different kind of death. Instead of a brutal but quick demise in the gas chambers, they would be starved, tortured and exploited until the last drop of vitality was sucked from their wasted bodies and they would wither away. This was the experience of all survivors of the German death machine; they survived because they clung to the last flickering spark of life with an illogical determination and tenacity and because liberation came before that spark was extinguished.

Someday We'll Be Free by Leibel Sanik, the eighth volume in the *Holocaust Diaries* collection, explores this state of mind and the faint glimmer of hope that sustained it. Through the eyes of the author, we see the gradual reduction of the Jewish existence to its most basic elements—bread, water and life.

What began on that fateful day in September of 1939 as a violent war, with its expected horrors and dislocations, soon deteriorated into something far more insidious and diabolical. The Germans sought nothing less than the demoralization and the destruction of the Jewish people. Huddled in the

familiar surroundings of Piotrkow, the Sanik family saw the writing on the wall. Reb Lipa Sanik, the author's father, withdrew into a fatalistic shell, emerging only to sacrifice his life so that his son might live. The others continued to battle more actively, but one by one, they fell by the wayside until only the author and his brother remained.

Eventually, the author, still in his teenage years, suffered through the agonies of Buchenwald and Dachau. In vivid terms, he describes the hunger, the thirst, the disease and the sheer physical agony of day-to-day existence in the camps. Some of the inmates had indeed given up. These people, known as *Musselmenner*, were mere husks of human beings in the final paroxysms of existence; they were as good as dead. But most of the inmates did not surrender to their circumstances. They clung to every moment of agony-filled life as if it were the most precious thing in the world. They did not think about next week or next year, only about getting through the day and living to see another tomorrow. They thought about the next piece of bread, the next drink of water, the next moment of life.

One cannot help but wonder about the source of this quite amazing determination to survive for just one more day. Most of these people did not have any realistic expectations of living through the nightmare. They understood that most probably their struggles and privations would, at best, only bring them a brief and temporary reprieve from death. Yet they struggled on, refusing to yield their tenacious grasp on that mysterious thing called life. Against all reason, they harbored in their hearts a wild hope that they might someday be free, that they might someday return to the world of life and sanity.

There is very poignant story in the book about a child

born in the ghetto and the joyous celebration that accompanied his *bris*. As everyone expected, the child did not survive more than a few weeks, but for the ghetto dwellers, religious and non-religious alike, it was an occasion of joy nonetheless. A new spark of life, a new particle of divinity, had appeared in the valley of death! Perhaps, after all, it was the instinctive appreciation of the divinity of life that made it so precious even to the most tormented victim of German oppression.

In addition to its dominant theme, *Someday We'll Be Free* also gives the reader a rare insight into the world of the Aleksanderer *chassidus*, the second largest *chassidic* movement in Poland, which was so totally devastated by the holocaust that only a small remnant remains. The images of the author's childhood visit to the Aleksanderer Rebbe are unforgettable, and the continued influence of this exalted environment through his formative years left a deep and lasting impression. Later, in the camps, these memories and the memories of his distinguished father sustained and inspired him; at one point, we even see him undergo great sacrifice to eat *matzah* on *Pesach*. The body may have been conquered but the spirit was undaunted.

The book concludes with the author's liberation following the capture of Dachau by American forces and his attempts to rebuild his shattered life. The reader cannot help but be touched by his hopeful return to Piotrkow, only to discover that the beautiful city of his youth would henceforth exist only in his dreams and memories.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the author for his patient participation in the long and often tedious process of preparing a book for publication. We would also like to acknowledge the excellent efforts of Rabbi Shmuel Yosef Klein of Toronto for his invaluable assistance

in the creation of the final manuscript, and the subsequent skillful editing of Gita Grossman. A note of recognition is due, as well, to Professor Andrew Linder of Toronto, for his assistance during the preparatory stages of the book. A special note of thanks is due to the author's daughter Mrs. Bluma Brodt, who meticulously reviewed and corrected each progressive stage of the galleys. And as always, Raizy Kaufman guided the book from its inception to its completion with her usual deft touch.

We are very honored to include Leibel Sanik's *Someday We'll Be Free* as the eighth volume in *The Holocaust Diaries Collection*, which has earned a reputation as a priceless collective testimony of the power of faith and hope in the darkest hours of history. Indeed, the recent passing of Moshe Holczler, the author of the classic *Late Shadows*, the inaugural volume in the collection, underscores the importance and timeliness of this project; his book has left a lasting impression on many thousands of people, and as such, it stands as a living memorial to the life and works of this remarkable man. We do not place any limit on the number of volumes we will ultimately include in the collection, and we welcome inquiries by survivors who feel they can add another facet to the composite picture that emerges from the collection. We thank the *Ribono Shel Olam* for the great *zchus* of proclaiming these priceless memories, and we pray that He continue to bless our efforts in the future.

Y.Y.R.
Lakewood, N.J.
Sivan, 5754 (1994)

BOOK ONE

A Shattered World

CHAPTER 1

The Rebbe of Aleksander

IT WAS ONLY A FEW DAYS BEFORE *ROSH HASHANAH*, AND preparations for the *Yom Tov* were in full swing. I was only about seven years old at the time, and I was overwhelmed when my father approached me with his unexpected offer.

"Leibel," he called with a twinkle in his eye. "How would you like to come with me to the Rebbe for *Yom Tov*?"

"Do you mean it, Tatteh?" I asked incredulously.

"Of course, I mean it," he replied with a smile. "Would you like to come?"

I would be spending the *Yamim Tovim* with the saintly Rebbe of Aleksander! My excitement knew no bounds. I danced around the room gleefully, celebrating the fulfillment of my greatest dream. The next few days passed slowly

as we made our preparations for the trip to Aleksander.

The small village of Aleksander, or Aleksandrow, as it was pronounced in Polish, was little more than a tiny suburb of Lodz. But although Lodz was a teeming metropolis of one million people, it is Aleksander that has left a tremendous impact as the pivot of one of the largest *chassidic* groups in the world. During the *Yamim Noraim*, the tiny population of the town would swell with thousands of *chassidim* who flocked from all over Poland to spend the holy days in the Rebbe's presence and be inspired by his saintliness.

The illustrious Rebbe, Reb Yitzchak Menachem Danziger *zatzal*, assumed the mantle of leadership in 1924 at the age of forty-four, when his saintly father, the Tiferes Shmuel, passed away. Reb Yitzchak Menachem considered himself a disciple of his renowned uncle, Reb Yerachmiel Yisrael Yitzchak *zatzal*, known widely in the world of *chassidim* as the Yismach Yisrael, after the title of his famous commentary on the Torah.

It was during the days of Reb Yitzchak Menachem that Aleksander grew rapidly, attracting thousands of the most scholarly and devout young men in Poland. During the fifteen years of the Rebbe's dynamic leadership, Aleksanderer *shtieblach* opened in nearly every town and village in Poland. The city of Lodz itself boasted more than sixty *shtieblach* for Aleksanderer *chassidim*.

As a child, I was always hearing of the saintliness of the Rebbe, and on the day we were to depart on our journey, I could not contain my excitement. Not only was I embarking on my first trip to Aleksander, but I was also taking my first train ride. My father and I boarded at Piotrkow's small station and settled down for the forty-mile journey that would take us to Lodz and then on to Aleksander.

At the sound of the whistle, the doors shut, and suddenly, I was thrust into a cacophony of noise and motion. I felt the train pick up speed as we rushed through the countryside towards our destination, and I peered about curiously at my new surroundings. But my fascination with the train subsided soon enough, and after an hour of watching the Polish landscape rush by, I foraged into the bag my mother had packed for me, delighted with the cakes and apples I found there. While my father was busy studying from his little *Gemara*, I entertained myself by nibbling and gazing distantly at the passing scenery, wondering what adventures the next few days would bring.

After only two and a half hours, we reached the small town of Pabinice, and I assumed that our train ride had ended. But my father, sensing my excitement, interrupted my thoughts.

"Relax, Leibel," he said with a smile. "We will not be in Lodz for another hour."

When we finally reached Lodz, we disembarked and transferred to the *Tramway*, a trolley on which we would travel the ten miles to Aleksander. At about two o'clock in the afternoon, we arrived at our destination. Bags in hand, we began walking to our lodgings.

"Where is our hotel, Tatteh?" I asked, wondering if it would resemble the comfortable accommodations I had imagined.

"It's only a few minutes away," he answered. "Are you tired already?"

"Of course not," I declared excitedly, trying to hide my fatigue.

Just then, I spotted an impressive edifice which appeared to house a tremendous *shul*. Before my father could point it

out to me, I cried out excitedly, "Is that the Rebbe's *hoif?*"

"That's right," my father explained, visibly proud. "And right behind it is the *yeshivah*. With the Almighty's help, Leibel, you will attend that *yeshivah* one day."

I was so taken by the massive structure which served as the Rebbe's court and house of study that I paid little attention to the inconspicuous building we entered a few minutes later, the one which was to serve as our lodgings for the next few days.

I found myself in a tiny room in the back of someone's cottage that was hardly bigger than the single bed it contained. Our host had prepared fresh bedding and a pitcher and basin for *negel vasser*, but otherwise, the room was bare. My father must have sensed my disappointment at our meager accommodations, and he reprimanded me gently.

"Leibel, this is where I have stayed for the past eight years. Not everyone is fortunate enough to find even such lodgings. With the Almighty's help, this will be our *stantzyeh* for many years to come."

I shall never forget how he proceeded to explain to me what a trip to the Rebbe for *Yom Tov* meant. He made me understand that one didn't come to a Rebbe the same way one visited a resort or a spa, and that luxurious lodgings were a trivial consideration in relation to the beauty of being near the Rebbe. That brief chat turned out to be one of the most important lessons in *chassidus* that I ever received, and unfortunately, the notion of self-sacrifice would be put to use in later years.

My father had no way of knowing then that our *stantzyeh* would not really serve us for "many years to come." Adolf Hitler's rise to power was still over three years away, and no one could have foreseen the horrors the future would bring.

With only a few hours left before *Yom Tov*, we wasted no time getting settled and rushing to the *mikveh* in preparation for the holy day. Despite the crowds of *chassidim* that filled the narrow streets, we managed to ready ourselves in time, and we joined the throngs outside who were making their way to the Rebbe's court. There, I was told, the Rebbe would soon begin greeting the thousands of followers who had journeyed from far and near to spend the *Yom Tov* with him.

When we were still some distance from the Rebbe's *hoif*, our way was obstructed by hundreds of men who looked like they were in some sort of a procession.

"Why are we stopping here, Tatteh?" I asked curiously.

"Where would you like to go?" my father replied.

"To the Rebbe's *beis midrash*. I mean, isn't that where we are going?"

My father chuckled. "We are there, Leibel. This is the line to greet the Rebbe."

This sounded like an exaggeration, so I left my father's side for a moment and ran to see for myself where the line began. I was amazed to discover that it really led right into the courtyard before the great building. I now saw how naive I had been to think that we were among the first.

Relatively speaking, though, we were not among the latecomers. My father explained that once the Rebbe began seeing his followers, the line would start to move briskly. And in fact, within minutes, the men began to make their way towards their destination. As we drew closer to the *hoif*, I felt like I would burst with anticipation. In a matter of minutes, I would gaze upon the visage of the *tzaddik* whose every utterance and gesture spoke volumes to thousands of Aleksanderer *chassidim* in Poland and beyond, filling their lives with substance and meaning.

When only ten or fifteen people remained ahead of us, I realized that the procession did not lead into a building but rather into a garden that was beautifully appointed with flowers and trees. Then, in a flash, I was inside, frantically holding onto my father's hand as I stood before the Rebbe, who was seated beside a table in the midst of his breathtaking garden. In a daze, I saw the Rebbe exchange a few words with my father, whom he knew very well. Then, in a moment I will never forget, he turned his attention and smiled warmly.

That smile has never left my mind's eye. It has accompanied me through the journeys to the darkest depths and throughout the decades that followed. The overpowering awe that I felt during those fleeting seconds that the Rebbe graced me with his glance has never faded. The subsequent encounters with the Rebbe in the years that followed that first meeting only served to reinforce the profound impact of that first smile.

I can still feel the pride that filled my young heart during that first visit to Aleksander. I was "by the Rebbe," and although I was merely a child, I felt like a different person. When my younger brother Shmuel came of age, he too joined us on the trips to Aleksander.

Those visits to Aleksander clearly meant even more to my father than they did to me. I was moved by his obvious joy and fervor each time we were in Aleksander. I can recall the many dozens of faces, long grown indiscernible in my memory, approaching my father with a "*Shalom aleichem*, Reb Lipa, how are you?" I was the son of Reb Lipa Sanik, and therefore, I was clearly an Aleksanderer *chassid*. Even at that tender age, I was heir to a treasure of traditions and values, charged with the holy task of being my father's son in every aspect of life.

CHAPTER 2

Reb Yankel Dayan

GROWING UP IN PIOTRKOW, WE WERE SURROUNDED BY tremendous spiritual leaders who guided and inspired us with wisdom and saintliness.

One towering personality who played a strong role in our everyday lives was Rav Yaakov Glazer, known in Piotrkow as Reb Yankel Dayan. A native of Pabinice, Reb Yankel became famous at a young age for his great mastery of Torah, particularly the areas of Jewish law. In 1902, upon the demise of Rav Avraham Steinberg, the *kehillah* elders of Piotrkow decided unanimously to invite Reb Yankel to assume the role of *dayan*. Recognized by the entire *kehillah* as a prominent *rav*, he spent much of his time in the Aleksanderer *shtiebel* where we *davened*.

My first experience with Reb Yankel Dayan occurred

when I was a mere child of seven years. It was *Erev Pesach*, and as my mother was preparing for the upcoming *Yom Tov*, she was faced with a *shailah* on a chicken she was cooking. Always extremely meticulous in matters of *kashrus*, she decided immediately to consult the *dayan* with the question.

(The *dayan* once mused that before he ever dared to go on a vacation, he had to seek the permission of two ladies in Piotrkow—his own *rebbetzin* and the wife of Reb Lipa Sanik, who inundated him with *shailos*.)

With no one else available to take the suspicious chicken to Reb Yankel, the mission fell on me. I considered it quite an honor to bring a *shailah* personally to the *dayan*, and I went eagerly, my head held high with pride.

My feelings changed rather quickly. When I caught sight of the enormous and ominous-looking house where Reb Yankel lived, the steps somehow looked very scary, and I was afraid to climb them. So much so that I decided there was just no way I could actually go up those front steps leading into the *dayan's* house.

But what about the chicken? After a few moments' thought, I reasoned that a simple lie would allow me to avoid any unpleasantness. Although I knew it was wrong to lie, I felt this was a different case. But what lie should I tell? If I told my mother that the *dayan* had said the chicken was kosher . . . well, if it really was not kosher, then my family might eat *treife* on my account. That responsibility I was not prepared to bear, even at that age. So I returned home, put on my most sincere expression and glibly informed my mother that Reb Yankel had decided the chicken was not kosher.

It must be understood that, in those years, such a lie had tremendous ramifications. One had to go to great lengths in order to have a chicken for *Yom Tov*. Purchasing the fowl,

getting it slaughtered and having it cleaned were all complicated processes, not to mention the great expense involved. To have a chicken declared *treife* was a disappointing and irreparable loss. But I was only seven years old.

As luck would have it, my father chose that same evening, the first night of *Pesach*, to discuss the question of our chicken with the *dayan*, who he assumed had seen it earlier that day. When he came to the *shtiebel*, he sought out Reb Yankel between *Minchah* and *Maariv* to discuss the details of the *psak* with him. Needless to say, Reb Yankel knew nothing about any *shailah*.

The look on my father's face when he entered the house that first night of *Pesach* made me realize right away that something was amiss. It didn't take too long to find out what it was, and to my dismay, my faltering explanation of the incident was not met with sympathy or understanding. Thus, whenever I recall the immense reverence we all felt for our illustrious *dayan*, I painfully remember the very uncomfortable first *seder* I experienced that *Pesach*.

Although Reb Yankel was the head of the rabbinical court of Piotrkow and thus a functionary of the entire community, he was an Aleksanderer *chassid*, and he nearly always *davened* in our *shtiebel*. The exception to this was *shalosh seudos* on *Shabbos*. Although the *shalosh seudos* in *shul* constituted a practice specific to *chassidim*, Reb Yankel used to conduct the third *Shabbos* feast at home.

Before long, however, the *dayan's* meal was transformed into a *tisch* of sorts for many of the Aleksanderer *chassidim* who joined him for the twilight hour at the end of each *Shabbos*. Known as the hour of "*raava d'raavin*, will of wills," this is a time when a Jew can rise to the greatest heights of spirituality if he merely wills it. Thus, many of the regulars

from our *shtiebel* made their way each and every *Shabbos* to Reb Yankel's *shalosh seudos*, where they were treated to the Torah thoughts of their beloved *rav*.

As a youngster, I was rather impetuous, and I was always manipulating things so I could be in the right place at the right time. Each week, I would tag along with my father to become one of the select individuals to partake in Reb Yankel's *shalosh seudos*. The pearls of *chassidic* wisdom were well beyond me, but I still felt like I was gaining something.

On one such occasion, I witnessed a minor episode so revealing of Reb Yankel Dayan's golden character, that it will remain forever in my memory.

As a leading rabbinical personality in Poland during the last three decades before the war, Reb Yankel's opinion on matters of *halachah* was sought by *rabbanim* and laymen alike. It was no wonder, therefore, that many students of *halachah* vied for *semichah* or similar ordination from him. Due to his exceptionally high standards and rigorous testing, however, he very rarely granted official ordinations. It was widely accepted that an approbation from the Piotrkower Dayan was as good as gold.

At one point, a young man who had studied the laws of *shechitah* and trained as a *shochet* to the satisfaction of numerous rabbis came to Piotrkow. He wished to receive a *kabbalah* from our *dayan*, as this would signify the final degree of acceptance as an approved *shochet*. Reb Yankel spent a good deal of time with him, testing his mastery of the intricate laws of *shechitah* and probing his personality to ascertain if he was inwardly devout.

After nearly six months of this intense investigation, the *dayan* still said nothing to the young man to indicate whether or not he would be granted a *kabbalah*. Then, on the final

Shabbos that the youthful *shochet* was scheduled to spend in Piotrkow, Reb Yankel invited him to join him for the *shalosh seudos.*

That particular *Shabbos* preceded the *yahrtzeit* of my grandfather, my father's father. Each year on that *Shabbos,* it was the *dayan's* custom to honor my father with the *bentching* after the third feast. Naturally, my father expected this year to be no different. It came as a great surprise, therefore, when he saw the *dayan* place the silver wine cup before the young *shochet* and instruct him to lead the *bentching.* My father was crestfallen, but he did a fairly good job of concealing it from the other men.

However, his chagrin was short-lived. Immediately after *Maariv,* Reb Yankel approached my father.

"Reb Lipa, I wish to apologize for not giving you the *bentching,*" he began. "Please let me explain. This young man has come to Piotrkow, as you know, to obtain my *kabbalah* for *shechitah.* In truth, I had found him to be most deserving of approval, but I wished to conduct one final test. I had to determine if his hands were steady, and by offering him *bentching,* I was able to observe how well he could hold the wine cup over a period of several minutes."

My father was speechless, but I could read the thoughts that crossed his mind. Though somewhat abashed that he had taken the matter so seriously, he was at the same time awed by the combination of cleverness and consideration that the *dayan* had displayed.

Many years later, in a strange twist of events, I was reminded of that episode once again. When my older daughter became engaged to Sholom Brodt, the *vort* took place in the home of our *mechutanim* in New York. An uncle of the *chassan,* the venerable Reb Berish Dembinsky, was given the

honor of writing the terms of the *roshei perakim,* a statement of intent about the future marriage.

I had no knowledge of the origins of Reb Dembinsky, and I was absolutely dumbstruck by his comment after the writing of the *roshei perakim.*

"Reb Leibel," he said, "with this, I am paying a debt I have owed you for several decades."

Seeing my puzzlement, Reb Berish explained that he had been that young man to whom Reb Yankel Dayan had given the *bentching* that *Shabbos* so long ago in Piotrkow. Now, he said, he was repaying that debt to the Sanik family.

Reb Yankel was acclaimed in the vicinity of Piotrkow, but he was also renowned throughout all of Europe. In the years preceding the war, many spiritual giants came to receive guidance from our saintly *dayan.*

Reb Alter Fuchs, a native of Vienna, had travelled to Lithuania to study under the illustrious Rogatchover Gaon, Reb Yoshe Dinenberg, eventually becoming the Rogatchover's protege. When the young man expressed to his Rebbe the desire to serve his people in the capacity of *rav,* the master acquiesced.

"You must first receive *semichah,*" the Rogatchover advised. "And if you want the highest ordination, you must get it from Reb Yankel Dayan."

Reb Alter heeded his teacher's words and took up residence in Piotrkow, where he spent most of the week in diligent Torah study. On Thursdays and Fridays, when the great majority of *halachah* questions were brought before Reb Yankel Dayan, Reb Alter was in attendance, observing the decision-making process first-hand and developing his understanding of Reb Yankel's reputed ability to *pasken.*

Reb Alter Fuchs was in Piotrkow for over two years. He

gave a *shiur* for a few *bachurim* in our *shtiebel,* and I was privileged to be among those *bachurim* who learned by Reb Alter. I shall never forget the fateful *Purim* morning that brought an end to his sojourn. The Rogatchover had become very sick and was taken to Warsaw to be examined by several noted physicians. Following a lengthy process, however, the treatments failed, and right before *Purim,* the Gaon passed away in Warsaw. On *Purim,* the coffin carrying the Rogatchover travelled from Warsaw to Rogatchov for burial. Reb Yankel learned when the train would be passing through Piotrkow, and before the reading of the *Megillah* that *Purim* morning, he ordered the *davening* to halt. With Reb Alter at the head of the procession, we all marched to the train station where we accompanied the train on its route through the city.

Soon thereafter, Reb Alter left Piotrkow and returned to Rogatchov, succeeding his saintly master as the *rav* of that town.

Reb Yankel continued to hold the position of *dayan* through the tenures of several *rabbanim* of Piotrkow, including the illustrious Rabbi Meir Shapiro who was to become the renowned *rav* of Lublin.

When Rabbi Shapiro was appointed *rav* of Piotrkow, Reb Yankel Dayan was already at an advanced age, and the *rav* showered him with an inordinate amount of respect. The rabbinical court remained in the *dayan's* house; whenever cases were brought before Rabbi Shapiro for adjudication, he would come personally to the *dayan's* home for the *din Torah.*

Not only was the *dayan* an unsurpassed Torah giant, each of his children was a treasure in his own right. His eldest son Reb Zanvel, a famous *illuy* like his father, was appointed at a young age to be the *rav* of the town of Zhelichov, while his

younger brother, Reb Yeshayah Yechiel, sat with his father on the *beis din* of Piotrkow. Years later, when Reb Yankel Dayan was killed in the early days of the war, this son returned from the city of Zdunska Wola, where he had become *rav*, to succeed his father as *dayan*. His youngest son Yosel, a big *talmid chacham*, was still a *bachur* when he gave a *shiur* for the younger *bachurim* in the *shtiebel*. Unfortunately, he became ill and was *niftar* before the war.

Reb Yankel's son-in-law, Rav Shimon Huberband, was a noted rabbinic figure in our city and later, during the early war years, in Warsaw. Married to Reb Yankel's only daughter, he was an eminent personality, very well-read and involved in various social matters affecting Polish Jewry. When his family perished early in the war, he left Piotrkow and moved to Warsaw, where he became involved with the Oneg Shabbos Society, an organization devoted to the preservation of vital historical documents. (The archive was discovered after the war, buried beneath the streets of the city in milk cans.) In 1942, Rav Shimon, a broken man, contracted typhus in the Warsaw Ghetto and died soon afterwards.

Tragically, nothing has remained of the holy and noble house of Reb Yankel Dayan. In one way or another, these eminent personalities were all wiped out by the Nazi beasts in the Warsaw Ghetto, Treblinka and Sulejow. Nothing but fading images survive.

CHAPTER 3

Beginning Tremors

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1939, IN PIOTRKOW BEGAN LIKE A typical *Erev Shabbos*. The bustling *Yiddengasse*, as we called Old Warsaw Street, saw the same purchases for *Shabbos* and the same hurried cleaning and preparing that took place on an ordinary Friday.

Therefore, no one was prepared when the relative tranquility of the day was destroyed with an earthshattering fury. War had erupted early that morning, when, without warning, the German Wehrmacht crossed onto Polish soil under the canopy of the deadly Luftwaffe, the air force of the Third Reich. The news of war was announced on radios and broadcast from trucks with mounted loudspeakers. Within hours, the war became a reality in our city. With a deafening explosion, the notorious *blitzkrieg* was upon us, and German

warplanes mercilessly discharged waves of bombs upon the helpless civilians in and around Piotrkow.

The city was overcome with panic. Confusion and chaos prevailed as sirens wailed and loudspeakers ordered everyone off the streets. People scurried about frantically as all business came to a complete halt. Shopkeepers quickly closed their shutters, and the farmers fled the open-air market, leaving many of their goods behind.

Not fully cognizant of the overwhelming power of the German forces, the Polish army tried pathetically to mobilize its ill-equipped forces. Mobilization orders were hurriedly announced, and men and boys, many of them Jewish, bade tearful farewells to loved ones as they rushed to their respective bases.

That Friday ushered in a fiercely raging storm that would last over five years and leave destruction and indescribable bloodshed in its wake. I could not have known it then, but that *Shabbos* signified the end of normal life for my family and all of European Jewry.

Each time the Luftwaffe jets approached, sirens throughout the city wailed their mournful warning. The city authorities of Piotrkow declared a curfew that first day, but no one was anxious to venture outside in any case. The bombing continued all day and into the evening hours, and although the holy *Shabbos* had arrived, we knew better than to leave the relative safety of our homes. We *davened* at home, and we ate our Friday evening meal hurriedly, speaking infrequently and in hushed tones.

What awaited us? The same question was on everyone's mind, and it was the sole topic of discussion. My father, though, reminded us that it was *Shabbos*, and that the purity of *Shabbos* was the source of all blessings. After that, out of

reverence for the holy day, and for my father, we ate the rest of the meal in silence, save for the traditional *zemiros* we always sang. If only we had known how few *Shabbosim* remained for us to be together as a family.

After a fitful night's sleep, we arose early the next morning, and my brother and I peered out the window to find as tranquil a Piotrkow as we had ever seen on a *Shabbos* morning. Naively, we assumed that the horrors of the previous day had passed and that the worst was over.

In this spirit of optimism, my father, my brother and I made our way to the Aleksanderer *shtiebel*, just as we had done every *Shabbos* morning since I could remember. The large room, which we all regarded as a source of warmth and purity, was alive with animated discussions about the events of the previous twenty-four hours. As the debates intensified, the *shammash* signaled that the hour had come for our prayers to commence. The room became electrified as we all felt the tremendous urge to pour our hearts out before our Father in Heaven. How fervently did our *minyan daven* that morning, as no doubt the *chassidim* in the other *shtieblach* of Piotrkow and in *shuls* throughout Poland *davened* that *Shabbos*, the second day of September! We were all overcome with foreboding as we listened attentively to the Torah reading that *Shabbos* morning.

Ironically, that *Shabbos* we *lained Parshas Ki Savo*, wherein the *Tochachah* is found. I remember being transfixed by the ominous words of the *Tochachah*: "Hashem shall bring upon you a nation from afar . . . who will swoop down like the eagle; a people of fierce countenance who shall neither respect the old, nor show favor to the young . . . until you be destroyed . . . and your life will hang in doubt before you; and you shall fear day and night with no assurance of life . . ." The *baal korei*

continued to recite the *pesukim*, and we listened anxiously, unable to imagine how real these terrors were to become.

Suddenly, as if it had been orchestrated in the Heavens, a loud crash interrupted the stillness in the *shul*. The bombing raids of the previous day began again with renewed vigor, and we were all seized with fear. Amidst the blaring sirens and constant explosions, we dropped our *siddurim* haphazardly on the tables and stormed out of the *shtiebel* towards our homes.

No one paused to say farewell to our beloved *shtiebel*, for we could not have known that this fateful *Shabbos* would mark the end of the Aleksanderer *shul* of Piotrkow. It was really nothing more than a bare room filled with crude wooden tables and chairs, the walls lined with cases full of holy books. Yet, for all its simplicity, our *shtiebel* was a place of great light, fervent prayer and diligent Torah study.

When we reached the open door of our house, my mother, who had been awaiting our return nervously, cried out with relief. "*Baruch Hashem*, you're all back. Come to the table for *Kiddush*."

"We haven't *davened Mussaf* yet," my father answered. "Our duties to the Creator come first, despite the bombs."

We finished our prayers and sat down fearfully to our second *Shabbos* meal. Moments later, the sirens started up again, and we could hear the bloodcurdling whistle of the bombs as they plummeted to the earth all about us. In terror, we made our way to the cold cellar beneath our house, where my brother, my sister and I held on to our parents for dear life.

"Lipa," my mother commented softly, "many Jews are fleeing Piotrkow."

"Yes, I know," he responded simply.

"Maybe we ought to think of leaving as well," my mother continued after a moment.

"For all we know, it could be worse elsewhere," my father remarked, his voice betraying more than a trace of doubt and confusion. "Let us wait until tomorrow, and then we shall see." The bombs continued to fall on *Shabbos* and on Sunday as well.

It was not until Sunday evening, after much agonizing and deliberation, that my father announced the decision to leave Piotrkow immediately. We would attempt to escape the terrible bombings.

CHAPTER 4

Escape to Wlodzimierz

ALTHOUGH WE HAD HEARD THAT THE ROADS LEADING into and out of Piotrkow had been extremely chaotic on that first Friday of the bombings, they could not have been as hectic as they were on Sunday, two days later. Large buildings had been reduced to rubble, and people ran about frantically, creating utter pandemonium. Meanwhile, the air-raid sirens continued to wail ceaselessly.

For the thousands of Jews and Poles who converged on the road leading out of the city, confusion reigned. Even though many had a specific destination in mind, most people had nowhere to go; they knew only that they must escape the incessant bombardment. Hence, as many headed toward the eastern frontier, they came across others who were travelling west. Little did they realize that the bombing was no less

intense outside of Piotrkow than it was in and around it.

No less reassuring for the frightened civilians was the sight of countless Polish soldiers, who looked equally bewildered and lost. The trust that had been placed in the Polish military was hopelessly shattered.

In this manner, driven by panic and ignorance, thousands left Piotrkow that day. On foot, in makeshift carts or in an occasional automobile, they fled their homes, hoping to find a haven. Most, however, would return before long.

My parents had a specific destination in mind, and we dragged ourselves on foot throughout the night, arriving early the next morning in Wlodzimierz, a small, charming hamlet ten miles north of Piotrkow. Surrounded by dense dark forests and drained by seemingly endless streams and brooks, Wlodzimierz served as a summer resort area for many of the Jews of Piotrkow.

The previous summer, we had rented a quaint little cottage in the town for my grandparents. My grandfather, who was frail and in failing health, benefited greatly from the fresh country air and from the peaceful way of life. When the end of the summer approached and my grandparents were about to return to Piotrkow, my parents had decided that another week in the country would be a good idea. After all, it was a warm and pleasant summer, and the fine weather was holding up.

Accordingly, the outbreak of hostilities found my grandparents still in the relative safety of Wlodzimierz, and my parents viewed this as an indication from Above that we, too, would find safety there.

My mother's father, Reb Moishe Epstein, known by all as Moishe Chaskele's, was a pious and learned Jew who served as one of the *gabbaim* in Piotrkow's Aleksanderer *shtiebel*. In

my mind's eye, I can still see him surveying the *shtiebel* lovingly each morning to see that all was in order before the others arrived for *davening*. I recall the way he looked as he stood wrapped in his *tallis* and *tefillin*, catching the morning sunlight on his face as the rays shone through the window. The images of my *zeide* still fill me with wonder; he belonged to a breed of Jews that existed only in that lost world of pre-War Poland.

As a child, I loved spending time with my *zeide*, and despite the fear and the ominous circumstances that had brought us to Wlodzimierz, I looked forward to seeing him again after all those weeks of being apart.

After a tearful reunion, we acquainted ourselves with our new lodgings. Although it was very crowded, we appreciated the comforting silence. Far away now from the relentless blasts of bombs and the frightening roar of collapsing buildings, the most we heard now was a faint rumbling in the distance.

We had brought some food with us from Piotrkow, but when our resources began to diminish, we went foraging in the other cottages. Most of the other tenants had either left for the season or fled at the news of impending war. Our searches were richly rewarded, and the next few days were relatively tranquil. Still children, we were quite successful at blotting the war from our young minds almost entirely.

However, our peace was not to last, and one night, without warning, the Luftwaffe staged a bombing raid on Sulejow, a small town just a short distance up the road from where we were. As soon as the explosions began, we were overcome with a renewed sense of panic, a feeling that was becoming rather familiar to us. Fearfully, we ran outside our cottage to find the skies nearby ablaze, as if in flames.

Sulejow, a village of no military significance, had been a prime destination for hundreds of Jews fleeing Piotrkow. Now the results of their efforts became sickeningly clear. Among the many who were killed that night in Sulejow was Reb Yankel Dayan, the aforementioned head of the rabbinical court in Piotrkow and one of the holiest figures I had ever been privileged to know.

We stood in the September darkness watching helplessly as German bombers rained untold destruction on our brothers nearby, and we realized that the safety we thought we had found in Wlodzimierz was really illusory.

Once again, we were struck with terror. We had no way of knowing what was happening elsewhere, and therefore, it was impossible to decide on a reasonable course of action. Food supplies in the surrounding cottages were growing scarce, and our concern now was with immediate survival.

My father seemed quite calm despite these worries, but my mother was obviously agitated.

"Lipa," she asked fearfully, "what shall we do? We cannot stay here much longer."

"Tomorrow is *Erev Shabbos*, Tatteh," my sister Gittel Feiga added, "and there is hardly anything left with which to make *Shabbos*."

It was the first Thursday night of the war, and we could still afford to be concerned with matters like cooking for *Shabbos*.

"Perhaps we ought to head back to Piotrkow, Tatteh," Gittel Feiga suggested.

My sister was extremely mature for her age, and my parents took her opinions seriously, although she was always careful to voice them respectfully. I remember feeling that it would be a better idea to remain in Wlodzimierz a little

longer, but as I was still quite young, my opinion was probably based on the attachment I had formed for the deserted resort town.

Eventually, my father came to a decision. "It is more than likely that the bombing has already stopped back home."

"I think so, too," my mother agreed. "Even if the German army has entered Piotrkow, the worst is probably over by now."

"I am certain it is," my father added, growing more confident. "If the bombs and the explosions are over, what is the worst that can happen?"

At that point, we could not imagine the horrors that the future held, and we made plans to return home without further delay.

The following morning, at five o'clock, we ventured forth, retracing our footsteps along the same road to Piotrkow we had travelled five days earlier. We all walked, with the exception of my grandfather, whom we wheeled in a pushcart we had found near our cottage.

Suddenly, as we reached the edge of the forest in the pre-dawn darkness, we were paralyzed by blinding lights. It was our first encounter with German soldiers. They materialized in front of our eyes, pointing their rifles menacingly.

"Halt!" an officer barked. "Where are you going?"

Faced with the terrifying machine guns of the soldiers, we remained surprisingly collected. Gittel Feiga, who was quite fluent in German, answered for all of us.

"We are on our way to Piotrkow," she said calmly.

"And what business do you have there?" the same soldier asked.

"Well, we are from Piotrkow," she explained. "We are simply returning to our home in the city."

"And from where are you returning?" the soldier persisted.

"You see, we were in Wlodzimierz for the past several days . . . since the bombings began."

"And now that the bombings are over, you are going back to the safety of your home in Piotrkow," the Wehrmacht soldier continued, completing my sister's thought.

"Yes, exactly," she replied in agreement.

I was very impressed with the way my sister handled the situation, for there was no further trouble. In fact, the soldier who had questioned her was even smiling. I was a bit suspicious of that smile, though, as we trudged the rest of the way home. Still, I remember thinking that our first experience with German soldiers had been only mildly unpleasant. I still knew nothing of the vast differences between the relatively unassuming gray-uniformed soldiers of the Wehrmacht and the brutal SS guards clothed in black. Even as we entered Piotrkow, I was sure that life would once again assume its familiar dimensions.

I was terribly mistaken.

CHAPTER 5

Increasing Tensions

WE DISCOVERED VERY QUICKLY THAT LIFE COULD not go on as before. That first *Shabbos* under German rule was spent in the relative calm of our home. We *davened* at home and hastily put together the *Shabbos* meals.

It was only when I ventured forth and met some acquaintances that I began to hear what had happened in Piotrkow since our departure the previous Sunday. The Germans had entered the city on Tuesday, the fifth of September, and within hours, they had established their presence in virtually the entire city.

During this time, the *chevrah kaddisha* was kept very busy. Hundreds of Jews had been killed in the bombardments, and dozens more had been murdered cold-bloodedly by German

soldiers for no valid reason whatsoever. If a Jew was in the wrong place at the wrong time, he would simply be shot. Unaware of the new regulations the Germans had imposed upon the city, I was walking down a nearly deserted street on one of my first evenings back, when I ran into a friend

"Sanik," he said, "you know about the curfew, don't you?"

Seeing my confusion, he explained that Jews who were found outside after the stipulated time would be killed. In other instances, a Jew who was perceived as disobedient would be beaten or killed outright.

The pieces of this new puzzle sent wave after wave of shock into our hearts. With each day, the rumors multiplied, intensifying in their horror.

As we sat in our apartment one night, we shared the rumored descriptions of German brutality with one another.

"It is impossible to understand," my mother cried. "Killings for no reason? With no provocation? No warning?"

"I have heard that entire *shtetlach* have been emptied of their Jews," I said.

"And what do the Germans do with them then?" my mother pondered.

"This morning I heard something new," Gittel Feiga added. "The Germans are planning to form special agencies to deal with us and what they call 'Jewish Affairs.'"

"It looks like they already know how they want to deal with us," I retorted. "I've heard that they are rounding up large numbers of Jews and carting them off somewhere to serve as slave laborers."

My father tried to remain optimistic, and he attempted to change the tone of the conversation. "Rumors and more rumors. We cannot know what to believe. Certainly, most of these stories cannot be true."

However, as the days passed, we heard more and more evidence to substantiate these rumors. The gravity of the news, which was becoming more of a reality, began to weigh down unbearably upon our hearts.

Still, even as the vague details of atrocities continued to be heard during those frightful days of *Selichos*, we went ahead with our preparations for the impending *Yamim Noraim*. These days were normally filled with excitement and awe as everyone prepared for the sanctity of *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*. Aware of the restrictions that would affect the upcoming holy days, we made our plans accordingly.

My father, though, could not contain his despair. "This is the first time since my marriage eighteen years ago that I will not be in Aleksander for *Rosh Hashanah*," he said bitterly.

I saw the expression of pain on my father's brow and felt a sudden and inexplicable sadness.

"With Hashem's help, maybe next year, Tatteh," I answered unconvincingly. The thought of missing a *Rosh Hashanah* in the court of the Aleksanderer Rebbe was one that I, too, could not easily absorb.

Unbeknownst to us, the Rebbe and the world of Aleksander had been shattered by the brutal Nazi beasts and no longer resembled the peaceful haven we remembered.

CHAPTER 6

Danger for the Rebbe

AT THE OUTBREAK OF THE WAR, THE REBBE FOUND himself in the resort town of Ravkow in the vicinity of Cracow. When news of the hostilities reached him, he immediately decided that he must return to Aleksander without delay.

However, since the roads were prime objectives of the German air attacks, travel was very risky. Any moving vehicles on the highways would make easy targets for the German planes that flew menacingly overhead.

Notwithstanding the danger, the Rebbe and his entourage made the journey in two automobiles that were furnished by his *chassidim* in Cracow. Still, the trip which would normally have taken several hours lasted five days as a result of frequent and prolonged stops. By the time the two cars

rolled into Aleksander, the German army had already occupied the town.

As in the other cities that the Germans occupied, the devastation in Aleksander was horrifying. In the span of a few days, hundreds of Jews had either been shot, beaten or transported from the town to serve with work details in unknown places. But the Germans were not satisfied. For in that otherwise anonymous village lay one of the major objectives of the German occupation–the capture of the Grand Rabbiner Danziger, our saintly Rebbe. In Aleksander, the Poles of German extraction, known as the *Volksdeutsch*, rallied to the Nazi cause and aided the Germans in their search.

Incited by the articles in the Nazi propaganda press, *Der Sturmer*, young German patriots joined the hunt for the "arch-enemy" of the Reich, *Der Wunderrabbiner von Alexandrow*. Incredibly, the Nazi regime found it so crucial to capture a *chassidic rebbe*. It is obvious that theirs was a war against all that was sacred; they fought against the Almighty and against *Yiddishkeit*. What could they have hoped to accomplish with the elimination of the Aleksanderer Rebbe and other *rabbanim*?

News of the hunt met the Rebbe upon his return to town, and he was compelled to leave at once. In the dead of night, the Rebbe, the Rebbetzin and their closest relatives inconspicuously fled the city. Without any fanfare, the Rebbe took leave of the town he had helped build, never to see it again.

As they left their home, the seat of one of the world's noblest *chassidic* courts, Reb Avraham Chaim Danziger, the Rebbe's brother, turned to the Rebbe.

"Who knows if we are not headed for another tragedy like the *Gezeiros Tach VeTat*!" he murmured, referring to the dark

years of 1648-1649, when hordes of Cossacks killed hundreds of thousands of Jews with untold cruelty.

After a second or two, the Rebbe replied, "I see more. Much more."

In somber moods, the Rebbe, the Rebbetzin and family members fled Aleksander, headed for the nearby metropolis of Lodz, where arrangements had been made for them to go into hiding. In their haste, they left nearly all their personal effects behind, arriving in Lodz with little more than the clothes on their backs.

Much later, we learned of the events that followed the Rebbe's secret departure. The Nazis were so enraged at their failure to secure their prize that they vented their fury on the holy *beis midrash* of the Rebbe, setting it afire along with the dozens of *Sifrei Torah* and sacred books that were inside. Yet even this did not satisfy the monstrous Nazi ruffians. Enlisting the help of the *Volksdeutsch*, the Germans marched from house to house and forced the Jews to produce any religious articles they owned. Then, in a massive act of desecration, the Jews were led to the burning *beis midrash* and coerced into throwing their *talleisim, tefillin* and sacred books into the flames. It was the first day of *Selichos.*

Upon the Rebbe's arrival in Lodz, the Aleksanderer *chassidim* there, caring little for their personal safety, set themselves to the task of caring for their distinguished guest. While one devotee ran to purchase warm clothing and food for the Rebbe and his family, another, Reb Chaim Goldman, cleared out the attic of his house on Piotrkower Gasse for the Rebbe and his son. The Rebbetzin and other family members were put up elsewhere.

As was to be expected, however, the ambitious soldiers of the Third Reich did not abandon their vital mission of

capturing their prize, the Grand Rabbi of Aleksander. With the aid of informers, Nazi authorities learned that their quarry was almost certainly hiding in Lodz, the textile capital and the second largest urban center in Poland.

Immediately, the search was commenced. A painful and arduous chase began, with the Rebbe being taken at undetermined times from hiding place to hiding place, in hopes of leaving behind a trail of confusion with which to confound the German hounds.

Other factors, though, brought an actual end to the Rebbe's sojourn in Lodz. The city had become a haven for many thousands of frightened Jews from the provinces and the surrounding villages. Even before the Lodzer Ghetto was officially sealed off by the Reich and before the Germans began their organized relocation of thousands of Jews in cities like Lodz, the Jewish population of the city had swelled with masses of refugees who hoped to find a modicum of security there.

However, it was not long before it became evident that life for the Jews of Lodz would be anything but pleasant. The crowding was breeding disease, and hunger became rampant. Combined with the steady increase of cruelty against the Jews, these conditions made life a continuous torture.

After much deliberation, the prominent Aleksanderer *chassidim* decided that their saintly Rebbe must move on to Warsaw. With Warsaw's enormous Jewish population, it would be a simple matter to hide the Rebbe and keep him away from the evil clutches of the Nazis. But by that time, many of the Jews who had originally sought shelter in Lodz were escaping to the countryside, and flight was becoming increasingly perilous. With the roads overrun by German soldiers, travel was risky for any Jews who ventured forth.

Getting the Rebbe to Warsaw, therefore, would be complicated.

Finally, in exchange for a magnificent bribe, a small group of Gestapo guards agreed to secretly escort the Rebbe, his family and a number of loyal *chassidim* on their journey from Lodz to the Polish capital.

In the cold winter of 1940, the Aleksanderer Rebbe arrived in Warsaw. Here, too, hiding was mandatory, and the Rebbe was kept away as much as possible from the eye of the public. He *davened* with a small *minyan* that was comprised of family members, and he rarely conducted a *tisch*, save for special occasions such as the *Yamim Noraim.*

Thus, life settled into a new pattern for the Rebbe, amidst continuing hopes for the possible conclusion of the inferno.

CHAPTER 7

Days of Awe

DAY BY DAY, THE GERMAN OPPRESSION BECAME MORE OF a reality in Piotrkow. A few days before *Rosh Hashanah*, I was taken, along with a number of other Jews, to the city hall. There, we were made to perform menial and degrading tasks such as cleaning and polishing the already shiny boots of SS officers.

After a few hours of work, I was called over by one of the guards who were supervising us.

"Jew!" he barked. "My boots could use a shine."

I looked down at his glistening boots, and I slowly looked up at the demonic smile on his face. It was not only pride that I swallowed as I crouched down to polish the brilliant black leather yet again.

Ignoring the pain which shot through my right shoulder and forearm from the strenuous work, I polished those

accursed boots with what must have been borrowed vigor. Just when I thought I was finished, the guard laughed wickedly.

"You call that a shine, you stinking Jew? Do it again!"

As I suppressed the tears that welled up in my eyes, I felt my strength and dignity withering away. By that time, a small group of guards had gathered to enjoy the spectacle. Once again, I mustered all my energy and started to polish. But with each stroke of the brush against the leather, I imagined that I was striking at the satanic, clean-shaven face of the guard, avenging not only my own honor but that of the other Jews who were so brutally disgraced.

When I finished the second shine, the SS guard nodded and motioned for me to stand. For some reason, I entertained the foolhardy notion that I would be rewarded for the work I had done. I expected a coin or even just a pat on the back, but I was quite mistaken. The guard grabbed the thin wisps of beard that graced my sixteen-year-old face and yanked at them harshly. The pain was excruciating, but the shock and humiliation were much worse. And although I resolved to hide the incident from my parents, the emotional pain I had endured was too much to keep inside, and I related the entire episode to them.

That encounter was an early lesson of what lay in store for us under the German occupation. Now, as the month of *Tishrei* drew near, the Nazis, in a macabre way, helped set the mood for the Days of Awe. They announced a new curfew that was to be observed during *Rosh Hashanah*; the streets of Piotrkow were to remain totally deserted. All *shuls* and *shtieblach* would remain shut this year, with all ostensible signs of the *Yom Tov* taking place behind closed doors.

With so many observant Jews in Piotrkow, these days had

always been intensely religious ones, and the blasts of the *shofar* accompanied by the soft tears of repentance could be heard emanating from dozens of *shuls* and *shtieblach*. Now, with hearts bursting, Jews tried to hear the muffled strains of the *shofar* from under the cover of blankets and coats, fearful that the Germans would burst in at any moment.

We dared not go out into the street that *Rosh Hashanah*, but fortunately, the men in our building were able to arrange a *minyan* in one of the residents' flats. Afraid of being discovered, though, we *davened* quickly and quietly.

A group of Amshinover *chassidim* was steadfastly determined to gather in their *shtiebel* for prayers. However, it was not long before the illegal activity caught the attention of several SS soldiers. My friend, Moshe Marmer, was among those gathered there that morning. Although he was a Strikover *chassid*, he came to the Amshinover *shtiebel* that day since it was the only *shul* where a *minyan* had gathered. When the Germans burst into the building, Marmer and another young man by the name of Avraham Gleich jumped out of the window and were saved. The rest, though, were not so lucky. The entire group was shipped off to Germany within hours, never to be heard from again.

With time, we learned that annihilating our religion was just as important to the Nazis as taking our very lives. There was a cosmic and spiritual dimension to their war; we discovered that the Germans would not endure the slightest sign of Jewish religious life, especially if it was organized. We thus grew increasingly anxious as *Yom Kippur* approached.

For the Day of Atonement, our apartment was designated by our fellow tenants as the site of the building *minyan*. Before we began *Kol Nidrei*, a few girls, including my sister, were instructed to be on the lookout for German soldiers. We

had not *davened* for too long when the girls suddenly came running with the frantic warning that the Germans were approaching. Before we could establish that it was a false alarm, everyone had dropped his *tallis* and fled.

It was obvious that the Germans were well aware of the significance of *Yom Kippur*, and we assumed that they were preparing their own commemoration of sorts. Therefore, my father and I formed a counter plan. The next day, while my father would hide, I would watch over my frail grandfather. In this way, we figured, the Germans would not extract labor from us on the holiest of days. The women were not yet in danger, as the Nazis were concentrating only on the men at that point. Our primary concern was to avoid profaning the sanctity of *Yom Kippur*. How were we to know that there was so much worse to dread?

At eight-thirty the next morning, German soldiers began rounding up all able-bodied men for forced labor. Needless to say, my plea that I was needed at home to care for my infirm grandfather was futile. When I told them that I couldn't leave my grandfather alone, they went next door and brought two girls over to stay with him. I was taken, along with the others, to the local Polish army barracks. When we arrived, we were ordered to clean it up for the German army, who would soon be housed there.

With a heavy heart, I followed the orders as I tried to focus my mind on the parts of the *davening* I knew by heart. The minutes weighed upon me like hours, and each time I desecrated the sanctity of the day, I was overcome with pangs of bitterness and guilt. At noon, German guards brought in trays bearing thick Polish sandwiches made with *treife* meat. They obviously knew we would not eat the forbidden food especially on that day, but they tempted and teased us.

Somehow, all of us managed to hide the sandwiches we were given. We did not eat; we were Jews first.

Just then, without warning, a German officer appeared before me. He slowly and deliberately removed the leather glove from his hand and reached for my right *peyah*, which was neatly curled up and tucked away from sight. Grinning, he unraveled first one then the other *peyah*, stretching them slowly. "*Scheine locken!*" he exclaimed sarcastically. "Such pretty curls!"

Then, as if possessed, he turned around and bellowed, "Is anyone here a barber?"

No one replied.

"Bring me a pair of scissors," he ordered, visibly enjoying himself. Then, as if he was playing with a cat, he cut off what was for me an essential link to my religion and my people.

We continued to work hard all day. At five o'clock, when the work shift was over, I spotted Gittel Feiga looking at me from behind a wall. She had followed me when I was taken to work and remained there, motionless, for hours, to see if harm would come my way.

My mother, stricken by the loss of my *peyos* and my labor on *Yom Kippur*, wept copiously. We were still living in the relative innocence that this was the worst event that could occur.

"My child . . . working on *Yom Kippur*," she moaned over and over again.

As nightfall approached, my father emerged from his hiding place. My mother was still beside herself with anguish, but we all turned our attentions to our religious duties. My father, brother and I put on our silk *kapotes*, and we readied ourselves for *Neelah*.

Our *davening* was cut short by a sudden commotion.

Outside, we heard shouts, cries and the stamping of jackboots.

"*Raus! Schnell!*" they shrieked. "Get out! Fast!"

Within minutes, a hundred and fifty Jews huddled together in the courtyard, terror-stricken and helpless. In a vain attempt to elude the Germans, my father and I hid in a small structure adjacent to the main yard where the toilets were housed. But moments later, we were found and ordered outside to join the others.

They made us line up so close to one another that our shoulders touched. In this way, we were made to march to the parade grounds in front of the city hall. There, at the same time that we would normally have begun the *Maariv* marking the end of the fast, we were met by SS and Gestapo officers. Their flashlights illuminated the darkness as they pushed and shoved us brutally.

Suddenly, with no provocation, these gallant soldiers of the Third Reich, dressed in their black uniforms and red armbands, fell upon us mercilessly. With their whips, they began to beat us like madmen.

"You Jews, you started the war!" they cried as they hurled themselves upon us. "You are to blame!"

In an attempt to protect themselves, some of the men pulled their *kapotes* over their heads, but to little avail. Only after what seemed like an eternity did the madness subside. As I looked about, I noticed a young *chassid* from a neighboring *shtiebel* whose face had been so battered, he was hardly recognizable. Many had their beards cut or torn from their faces in bloody clumps. My poor father, too, lost most of his beard that night.

At once, an SS officer stepped forward. "Who among you is the *rabbiner*?" he asked loudly.

No one volunteered an answer. The Germans, however, were intent on beating, tormenting or even murdering a rabbi, and they would not be stopped.

"You have three minutes to produce your *rabbiner*, or you will all be killed," the officer announced, slowly taking out his pocket watch. We were quite certain that they meant exactly what they threatened, but there really was no rabbi among us.

"Two minutes," he shouted, cracking his whip. There was still no response.

"One minute."

Then, in a flash, the German stepped toward my startled father, who looked somewhat like a rabbi with his gold-rimmed glasses, his tremendous personal dignity and his remaining beard.

"You . . . you are the rabbi!" he declared, ordering my father to step forward. I moved to protect him, hoping futilely to come to his defense. My father simply waved me away; he saw that there was no use, and he had no intention of sacrificing me.

I stood helplessly and watched as a revolver was pointed at my father's head and he was marched against the wall. My heart nearly stopped in panic. The German told my father to say his final prayers, and my father did as his faith dictated. As he recited *Shema Yisrael*, the German interrupted.

"What are you saying?" he asked, shoving the revolver closer to my father's head.

My father saw through the psychology of the accursed Nazi, and he knew that he could not address that sadistic logic with an explanation of the *Shema*.

"What would you like me to say?" he responded.

"Say 'G-d curse me and all the Jews' three times," the Nazi instructed.

My father complied in a stammering voice and was immediately released by the German, who was very pleased with himself. Shaken, my father returned to the line as I uttered a silent prayer of thanks to the Creator.

Just when I thought our ordeal for the evening was over, new instructions were forthcoming. We were ordered to march to a gate, where we were greeted by several lines of uniformed SS guards with whips in hand. We were then commanded to run between these lines, where we were whipped almost beyond our endurance. Even my attempt at resourcefulness proved futile. I figured that if my father and I waited to be among the last ones to run between the lines, the cruel guards would have spent their energies and sated their sadistic desire. To my dismay, however, their energy turned out to be a replenishable resource. My father and I suffered as much as our fellow Jews as we ran the gauntlet.

Eventually, we were loaded onto trucks, and we were driven off in the darkness of Piotrkow. I realized that all the men in the trucks were still fasting, but that fact paled in comparison with the overall predicament in which we found ourselves. We lurched violently from side to side as the trucks zoomed over the potholes in the road. The wounds, the fasting, the blood and the vomit were unbearable, and I tried to inspire myself with the words of our Sages, who explained that suffering reduces the sins of man.

Just then, a startling if slightly muffled shout was heard.

"*Kiddush Levanah!* Let us be *mekadesh* the *levanah*!"

The cry came from a young Gerrer *chassid* whom I knew quite well. In that unlikely place and in those gruesome circumstances, he called upon us to fulfill our duties to our Creator. And slowly but surely, the men began to recite the *brachah*. Broken in body, we were not yet broken in spirit.

Frightened as we were, we still remained collected enough to say the proper prayers. *Mi ke'amcha Yisrael,* I thought to myself; what other nation would do the same?

We ended our ride at a train track not too far away, where we were ordered to unload heavy canisters of gasoline. Each canister weighed fifty pounds. It was then that I learned that fear of death can produce surprising surges of strength. We were frightened, and we lifted and ran without a pause. Because the canisters were very heavy and we had to run with them, they realized we might not last.

At midnight, the guards called us over, checked our pulses and released some twenty of us, including myself. Still fasting, I was eager to leave, but I was reluctant to abandon my father. The choice was not mine, though, and I left.

Since a curfew was in effect, they escorted us back to our own houses, and when I neared my home, I was greeted by a crowd of women who were anxious to hear information about their husbands and sons. I answered as many questions as I could, trying to sound reassuring. Deep down, though, I worried for my father.

At home, there were mixed emotions. Relieved that I had returned, my mother was still extremely anxious about my father. I told her everything that had happened, and she withheld an immediate reaction. But a few minutes later, she left the room, and I could hear her sobs from the other side of the door. We spent that night in great fear.

My grandmother went out the next day to try to locate my father and bring him some food. She searched all over, asking everyone she met if they had seen her son-in-law. Finally, she stopped a man and asked him if he had seen her son-in-law. Imagine her shock when this very same man turned out to be her own son-in-law, whom she did not recognize after the

blows and beatings he had received.

That day, the eleventh of *Tishrei*, though quite early in the war, marked the beginning of the end for my father. I shall never forget the shiver I felt when I saw him returning from the work detail. He came home in body, but his spirit was never the same. He had been reduced, subdued and shamed. And though with time his body healed and his beard regained its fullness, something was missing from his eyes. Those eyes became windows to a desolation and a fear that never left him. The same man who taught us never to be afraid of anyone other than the Creator was now moved to constant fear. He became remote, unresponsive and disconsolate. Worst of all, my father realized that he was powerless to protect his family and that we could be taken from him at any moment. For him, that was the profoundest of all fears.

That year, *Sukkos* barely resembled the joyous festival to which we were accustomed. As in hundreds of other *shtetlech*, *Sukkos* in Piotrkow had always been an exciting and busy time. Each year, on the second night of *Yom Tov*, many of the regular *mispallelim* of the Aleksanderer *shtiebel* would come to our *sukkah* for a *Simchas Beis Hashoevah* celebration. Everyone always enjoyed the gala event, which featured *divrei Torah,* singing and dancing and all sorts of delicacies which my mother prepared for our guests. However, it all vanished by that first *Sukkos* of the war. Instead, everyone stayed at home and ate their scant meals in tremendous anxiety, incapable of envisioning the trials that the first winter would bring. The world where I had grown up now seemed so small and uncertain. The joys of Piotrkow were lost already then, for all eternity.

BOOK TWO

Ghetto Days

CHAPTER 8

Stifling Conditions

THOSE FIRST FEW MONTHS OF THE WAR BROUGHT THE worst winter in decades. Snow fell in torrents and lay in immense piles on the streets of Piotrkow, covering everything. It was colder than anyone could remember, and there was no escaping the furious force of the howling wind. We were so very cold all the time.

With the arrival of the Germans, shipping and transportation had ground to a virtual halt all across Poland. Aside from the seemingly endless traffic of German military vehicles, regular commercial traffic grew increasingly rare. Agricultural production decreased rapidly, and the markets were understocked, often all but empty of the hustle and bustle of farmers and consumers. The war, compounded by the harshness of the elements, created havoc in a country that was

totally unequipped for that harsh winter of 1939-1940.

The food situation became worse still with the transport of Jews to Piotrkow from the outlying areas. Newcomers lived in row upon row of makeshift barracks, using whatever building materials they could find for shelter. As the cold and hunger increased, new threats began to visit upon the Jews of Piotrkow. Many died from malnutrition and starvation, from typhus and tuberculosis. Little children scampered through the streets in tatters, shivering uncontrollably. And just when we thought our beleaguered town could bear no more, the Germans resumed the transports, bringing thousands of dazed Jews to our already overcrowded city. Thus, to Piotrkow's population of eighteen thousand Jews, an additional fifteen thousand souls were added.

Some of these fled to our town on their own from harsher conditions in other territories annexed by the Third Reich. Many came from Warsaw and Lodz to relatives in Piotrkow, hoping the situation there would be better than the one they had escaped. The vast majority, however, were Jews who were simply moved by the Germans from the outlying *shtetlach* in order to facilitate the Reich's administrative control over them.

Slowly but surely, our apartment became more and more crowded as we took in relatives and, later, even others. Every day, it seemed, our world shrank smaller and smaller as our living conditions grew increasingly cramped. The evil Germans delighted in pitting us against one another and forcing us to the ultimate tests of *chessed* and *bein adam lechaveiro*. With deranged cynicism, they seemed to be waiting for us to destroy each other.

How the poorest of the Jews suffered! I often have nightmares about them alone. They were crowded together

in *shuls*, schools and other communal buildings with no heat and barely any food. The bitter cold and the ravaging diseases only increased their misery. The images of how those poor ones shivered and starved shall never leave me.

Still, the weather and the severe food shortages were not to be the worst of our trials. For it was in Piotrkow that the Germans first experimented with the creation of the ghetto. At first, this not-so-gradual relocation of Jewish people into small, restricted areas did not appear as sinister as it later turned out to be; it was merely one more curtailment of our freedom. It soon became apparent, though, that the Nazi masterminds had much more violent and brutal plans for the Jews than mere confinement.

Many restrictions soon followed, as the most horrendous persecution in the annals of human history began to take its ugly shape. Every Jew was to wear a yellow star on his clothing; every Jewish identity card had to be marked with a yellow stripe. Cars, radios, telephones, bicycles and cameras were confiscated from the few Jews who owned them. Every Jew over the age of ten was obliged to wear a white armband with a blue star of David at its center. Jews were not allowed out of their homes between seven o'clock in the evening and five o'clock in the morning; this curfew was strictly enforced with the most severe punishments and often resulted in tragic deaths. The *shuls, shtieblach, batei midrash* and even secular Jewish cultural organizations were closed down, making all too clear the sinister intent of the Nazis. Once the Jew was removed from his spirituality, his dignity would be no more.

Piotrkow, which was my entire world, was for the Third Reich scarcely more than another dot on the map. Eventually we would fall prey to the monstrous killing machine they were perfecting, but for now, they contented themselves with

creating a way to manage us in the short run. At the time, they made us believe that the restrictions and laws they had instituted were the only inconveniences we would have to endure. We would indeed have hardships, they admitted, but as long as we obeyed the decrees, we would be left in peace. Their attempt at deluding us was extremely successful. We wanted to remain optimistic, and at first, we trusted them.

The Judenrat, a Jewish community council organized by the Germans as an administrative mechanism, was a prime instrument of Nazi deception. We believed that the Germans would leave us in peace if we simply kept the regulations and worked diligently. Therefore, we were relieved when the management and control over our lives fell to a Jewish council. We welcomed and fiercely respected the people of that first Judenrat. Its deterioration did not take very long, however, and its true nature became clear very quickly.

The Judenrat was an unusual organization. At first, we thought of it in positive terms, perhaps as a successor to the *kehillah* of old. We all thought the new council would serve the Jewish community well and represent us faithfully to the German authorities. Soon after the formation of the Judenrat was announced, I approached my father.

"Tatteh," I suggested hopefully, "doesn't this mean that things will get a little bit better for the Jews? After all, they are letting us rule ourselves!"

"We shall see," was all that he answered.

Before the German onslaught, I remember my father as a decisive pillar of inner strength. His opinion was universally sought after and cherished by the members of our community. Suddenly, though, after his traumatic experience at the hands of the Nazis, this same man became wary and pessimistic. For months afterwards, my father was unable to venture

out of the house; long after his body healed from the physical wounds, he was seized by terror and anxiety. He became captive to his fear, and though he valiantly tried to conceal it from me and the rest of my family, it raged in his heart. He spent most of his time at home and was frequently visited by a few of his friends. They would spread newspapers out in front of them, even German ones, and they read them all day, discussing and debating each new development. At these times, his mind would become animated, and the fire in his eyes would once again come to life. Still, his determined optimism had left him, never again to return. The only comment he could be heard to utter was, "We shall see, Leibel," or "With the *Ribono Shel Olam*'s help, Leibel." And now, with regard to my optimistic assessment of the Judenrat, he once again responded with his cautious "We shall see."

At first, the Judenrat was responsible for providing the meager services of housing, police, public health and sanitation that could be said to exist in the ghetto. Originally composed of prominent individuals, the Judenrats all across Poland carried out many needed functions.

Slowly but surely, though, the Germans transformed the council into an organization that would meet their needs exclusively. They knew we would be easier to manipulate if our orders were given to us by our own brothers. To ensure that Judenrat members remained faithful to them, the Germans would murder any representatives who stood in the way of their evil plans.

The Judenrat soon had to deal with forced labor, supplying Jewish workers to meet German demand. Eventually, the brilliant German deception became clear as Jews were forced to impose harsh German orders on their fellow Jews. I, too, had several experiences with the Judenrat's labor details, one

of which I will never forget.

It was a cold Friday morning in the winter of 1940, and the council's president, Zalman Tenenberg, was personally supervising the gathering of a work detail to shovel snow. There had been a huge storm, and people were needed to clear the roads for the Wehrmacht's vehicular movement. They needed a great many youths, and I was taken along with the others.

As we made our way to the highway on foot, with shovels in hand, I stepped forward brazenly and said, "Pardon me, Mr. Tenenberg."

With a look of surprise, he waited curiously to hear what I had to say.

"Mr. Tenenberg," I declared, gathering courage as I spoke, "I am a religious boy. If I am sent out, sir, I will be unable to put on my *tefillin* on time because we will return late at night."

If the truth be told, I cannot say if I was really concerned about my *davening* at the time or if I was just looking for a way to avoid the hard labor. Nevertheless, Tenenberg, who belonged to the deeply atheistic, socialist movement known as the Bund, was taken completely by surprise.

As I braced myself for a tongue lashing, he smiled and motioned for me to leave the group and return home. My mind was reeling. Could he, a sworn non-believer, have reasoned in those few seconds that *tefillin* and prayers were more crucial than the snow removal that would help the movement of the Third Reich? Could he suddenly have been overcome with a *hirhur teshuvah,* a feeling of deeply felt remorse for his own lack of faith?

I shall never know the answer to those questions, but I do know that he was a good man in a bad time. I will never forget him for his gesture.

It was then, as I left the dreaded work detail and made my way home, that I came to a powerful resolution. Despite the severe trials and suffering this war would bring, I would live and help my family survive as well. I was determined to use the decisiveness and the boldness that Hashem had given me to endure whatever the future would bring.

CHAPTER 9

A Generation Long Gone

I AM VERY OFTEN DISMAYED TO BEHOLD THE BRAZEN AND audacious manner in which today's youth address their parents and grandparents. I cannot help noticing how far removed these new attitudes are from the true Torah lifestyle we knew as youngsters. The awe and reverence upon which the observance of *kibud av va'eim* were once predicated in the long gone world of Europe were intrinsic facets of our existence. We maintained total decorum in our parents' presence; if we were told to do something, we complied without so much as an inner questioning thought. I am sadly aware that these notions cannot be expressed nowadays without causing disbelief or disapproval. How times have changed!

Looking back at the personalities who surrounded us as

we grew up, it is no wonder that we were filled with unwavering respect and awe.

My paternal grandfather, Reb Yisrael Sanik, was an example of the special piety found in the Jews of Poland only decades ago. Reb Yisrael was a very prosperous Lublin merchant, known far and wide among Polish Jews for his devoutness and Torah scholarship. To this day, he remains in my mind as the personification of the deeply and sincerely religious European Jew.

My grandfather's humility and modesty were exemplary, even among the outstanding individuals of his time. Although it was traditional at the time for religious Jews to write about themselves as "unworthy" and "sinful," my grandfather would not do this. He feared that only pride would result from this form of public confession of one's sins, thereby negating the very content of the admission. That is how meticulous he was in every aspect of his life.

He concluded his life in no less a humble way than he had lived it. Shortly before his death, my grandfather sent out a request that he be visited by two close friends from the *beis midrash.* When they entered the house, they were shown into the chamber where my grandfather lay in the last days of his final illness. They could not have been in the room for longer than four or five minutes, but when they exited, they looked pale and upset, as if agitated by some terrible news. We could not guess what had transpired during their brief visit.

Later on, when my *zeide* passed away, the family was shocked to discover the last wish he had issued to the two friends who had come to visit him several days before. He asked them to see to it that he was buried by the gate of the cemetery, where the poorest of the poor were generally buried. Specifically, my grandfather's wish was to be buried

beside a certain *oremman*, a pauper.

Needless to say, his children were horrified. In those days, beggars, ragpickers, drunks and even thieves who had no one to tend to their burials were interred by the members of the Jewish community against the fence of the cemetery. And my grandfather, Reb Yisrael Sanik, head and shoulders above his peers, would be buried among them.

Still, a dying person's wish is law, and despite their reluctance, the family ordered the burial of my grandfather beside the designated pauper. Reb Yisrael must have known something, it was reasoned later. Perhaps that poor man beside him had been a hidden *tzaddik*, one whose goodness helped to sustain the world.

Ironically, the spot where my grandfather was buried quickly became popular among the Jews of Lublin. They recognized that there must have been extraordinary depth to my grandfather's last wish, and they, too, wished to join him.

Not only was my *zeide* a source of great inspiration to me, but my father, too, taught me a great deal about living one's life according to Torah.

It is nearly impossible to explain what a father meant in those days. My respect for and awe of my father belong to another age, an age when a father could not be addressed directly. When speaking to a parent, we would employ a separate vocabulary, with its own variations of grammar.

In my mind, I can still see my father with his full beard and gold-rimmed glasses, the radiant light shining from his face as he prayed. *"Or zarua latzaddik*—Light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright of heart."

It was common in those days for a young man to move to where his bride's family lived. That is how my father came from Lublin to Piotrkow, where he eventually established a

wholesale leather business, travelling twice a month to purchase the leather. He spent the remainder of his time in the shop, dealing with the Jewish tradesmen who came to do business with him.

My father worked hard at his business. He came home very late at night, did his books and then sat down to study Torah for several hours before retiring in the wee hours of the morning. A very respected man, he was also a *maggid shiur*, leading one of the study groups at the *shtiebel*. In addition, it was his self-assumed responsibility to make sure that poor, homeless Jews had somewhere to go each *Shabbos*. He frequently brought several of his charges home when they had nowhere else to go, and we would share our meals with them. He was a father to me, but also a hero.

To be sure, my father was not the only provider of the parental virtue and values that were so integrally a part of our childhood.

I clearly recall my dear, youthful mother, who had all the blessings of a potential life before her. She was a paragon of gentle kindness, devoted to her family and anyone else in need. While we were the primary focus of her care and compassion, she helped out whenever it was necessary in the shop, and she was always active in charity work in Piotrkow.

I remember many instances where my mother sacrificed everything she had to help others who were in distress. On one occasion, my mother travelled to Lodz to stay with her sister who had given birth prematurely. This sister had recently lost one child, and there was not much hope for the new baby. Upon hearing the news, my mother dropped everything at home and rushed to help out, staying in Lodz for several months until her sister and the newborn child were nursed back to health.

And when my maternal *zeide* became old and infirm, my mother exhibited an endless amount of love and devotion. Oh, how she worried about my grandfather, making sure he was well cared for in his last months! She always made sure that the help was offered in a way that would not hurt his pride, for my grandparents would never have accepted financial aid from their own children. With wisdom and tact, my mother found ways to avoid this problem. Although my grandparents' small shop was not doing very well, my parents secretly made sure that the cash register always had money in it, allowing my grandparents the feeling of independence.

When my *zeide* Reb Moishele Chaskele's became bedridden, we all took turns caring for him and keeping him company. My brother Shmuel and I were taught early on the meaning of responsibility and kindness to others.

At the end of his life, my grandfather confessed to his close friends that he was in great fear. Upon hearing this, they tried to reassure him that a man on his level of faith and purity had nothing to fear.

"You take with you so many *mitzvos* and *maasim tovim*," they replied. "What do you have to worry about?"

My grandfather explained to them that he was not afraid of the inevitable approach of death. What worried him at the end of a life given to religious duties was that he may have committed a sin unknowingly and not done the proper repentance.

"I feel I am not ready," he kept saying over and over again.

And on *Shushan Purim*, just as that miserably harsh winter of 1940 began to show signs of letting up, my mother's father passed away. I had the *zechus* of spending the last night of his life with him.

When my grandmother was told of his death, she cried

out loudly and clearly, "Moishe Tzaddik!" as if to announce him to the Heavens, or perhaps to alert the community to the passing of my grandfather whom they so revered.

Fortunately, despite the war that was raging all around us, we were able to bury my grandfather according to tradition. The place where my grandfather was buried, like the site of my paternal grandfather's grave, became an honored spot in the cemetery of Piotrkow. I remember, in fact, that two people were vying for the spot that was adjacent to his grave. It was agreed in the end that the first to pass away would obtain the plot.

My mother was grief-stricken when my grandfather died, and she went into deep mourning. As long as the Piotrkow ghetto was open, permitting access to the cemetery, she went two or three times a week, often spending hours beside his grave. The urgency of those tearful supplications only became obvious to me later on in life. My dear, gentle mother realized that in the forthcoming years we would need boundless mercy from Above.

CHAPTER 10

My Piotrkow, My People

THE PIOTRKOW THAT WE KNEW BEFORE THE WAR HAD the full name Piotrkow Trybunalski. In 1939, there were some eighteen thousand Jews in the city, making up about one-third of the total population. There was a large central *shul* in the town, and dozens of *shtieblach* represented the followers of many *chassidic rebbes*, so few of whom survived the war. On holy days, when we hurried along the streets of the town on our way to *davening*, earnestness, fervor and the deepest intensity of devotion could be felt in the air. As we filled the avenues, our very beings were joined together in one communal spirit. At these times, even sworn unbelievers would step aside with grudging respect for our singleminded faith. Home to some of the foremost *rabbanim* in Poland, Piotrkow was one of the important centers of

vibrant Jewish life; proud was the *rav* who was chosen to serve in Piotrkow.

Our town, like most Jewish communities at the time, had a particular system of Jewish self-organization in the form of the *kehillah.* Taxes appropriate to each member's wealth were levied and collected by the organization according to guidelines set by the *Shulchan Aruch.* These helped cover the costs of social and religious services such as *shechitah* and the *mikveh,* and from these funds, too, the rabbis and officials of our town were paid.

There were all types of Jews represented in the *kehillah.* While my father was always very active in the organization, there were also representatives from numerous other groups who had unfortunately strayed from Torah observance altogether.

Often, heated debates and even quarrels would break out among the widely contrasting groups, but beneath all the superficial hostilities, we were united as one people. We supported and helped one another, observant and non-observant alike. In this way, we prospered, and we managed to build a sophisticated hospital, advanced educational institutions and a town that was so special for all Jews of that period.

Needless to say, we were not rich, especially by current standards. A well-to-do middle-class family like mine was able to have a nice apartment in a good section of the city. We ate well, and by working hard, we were even able to put away some savings. Still, our most valuable asset was the genuine quality of Jewish life and unity that we enjoyed at the time. If all we owned was the store and enough money for a short period of time, it was enough. We were happy.

When I was growing up in Piotrkow, the family was a truly

close-knit unit. It was typical for children who went out to work to hand over unquestioningly their entire salaries to their parents. All possessions were shared; individuals did not think in terms of "yours" or "mine."

I remember when my sister reached the age where she began to earn some money by taking in work at home. This money was usually spent on things my brother and I needed, or else it was deposited into the general family savings. It was not considered extraordinary in those days to consider the needs of one's family above one's personal needs, and this unselfishness made family life strong, rich and full.

Piotrkow was a center of textiles and leather manufacturing, woodworking, ceramics and flour mills. There was a very organized system of trade in which the Jews played an active role. Polish farmers came on Tuesdays and Fridays, bringing with them fresh butter, eggs and flour. In turn, the farmers would use their earnings to purchase clothing, farming supplies and other necessities.

Working together as a community, we built an up-to-date Jewish hospital, and we maintained our own free loan society. In addition, we saw to it that the poor were accommodated and the orphans housed, educated and nurtured in model orphanages.

Most of all, I remember how life in Piotrkow revolved around personal relationships. On warm, lovely summer evenings, the streets would be full of Jewish children, men and women, old and young, all greeting each other in a friendly and convivial atmosphere. As relatives and acquaintances met, different conversations could be heard. While some discussed a difficult passage in the *Gemara*, others debated the latest politics or just exchanged small talk. It was no wonder, then, that in this atmosphere of complacency, the

unexpected horrors of the war caused tremendous upheaval.

It was in that time of peaceful and uneventful existence that my father came to Piotrkow and set up his leather business. It wasn't long before he established a reputation for his goodness and refinement, gaining the respect of our neighbors and the community as a whole. Business was prosperous, and my father was kept very busy. In ordinary times, he would travel to different places to buy the leather, selling it in Piotrkow to manufacturers of shoes and other leather goods.

However, now that the gray shroud of darkness had descended upon Piotrkow and upon European Jewry as a whole, our lives were changed drastically. Since Jews were restricted from practicing professions and operating their businesses, many people were forced to find new ways of earning their livelihoods. Still, some of us tried to get around the prohibitions, and we surreptitiously continued doing business for as long as we were able.

My father, who had a stock of leather left over in the shop, sold off his merchandise little by little over an extended period of time. Often, I would strap layers of leather under my overcoat and make deliveries to the Polish districts in town. We conducted some business with individual gentiles whom we knew from the days prior to the German invasion. I had spent about a year helping out in my parents' store before the war, so I understood the basics of the business, and I enjoyed making these deals.

After continuing in this manner for a while, I joined with several other boys to organize a more ambitious scheme. At that time, Jews were not allowed to travel by train in Poland; defying this rule, we acquired false internal passports with Christian-sounding names displayed on them. Before I went

anywhere, I folded the yellow star of David into the sleeve of my coat and travelled together with the Poles, most of whom were fully aware that I was Jewish. In this way, I was able to overcome the German restrictions, continuing to do so through 1940 and into 1941.

I clearly recall the exhilaration and excitement that was attached to each of these business trips. At that young age, I was responsible for helping my family in such an important way. I travelled to Czestochowa, to Radomsk and many other places, frequenting whatever remained of the former Jewish hotels and restaurants. I felt free and quite proud of myself; as a youthful Aleksanderer *chassid* turned entrepreneur, I was a man of the world.

Nevertheless, there were great threats and dangers during this period. In the summer of 1940, the Judenrat was ordered to gather five thousand boys to perform the dangerous and unhygienic task of clearing a swamp near Lublin. It was possible to be exempted from this work battalion, but such freedom cost a great deal of money. My uncle was the one handling the negotiations with the contact who could grant this valuable exemption. When my case came up, my uncle anxiously approached my father.

"Lipa," he asked, "what shall I do if he asks me for an enormous amount of money?"

"There is not a sum of money too great to pay for my son," he replied.

Soon afterwards, I was exempt.

We continued to exist for some time in this tenuous manner. Oddly, I was under the delusion that we could survive like this indefinitely. Granted, life would be harder and more limited, I figured, but survive we would. We only had to hold on until the madness passed. We would bribe

anyone who could be bribed and use our influence to make our lives a little more bearable. Jewish survival, after all, had become refined through centuries of persecution, and as a people, we were experienced. I thought often of the words in the *Pesach Haggadah: "Shebechol dor vador omdim aleinu lechaloseinu.* In every generation, there are those who seek to do away with us. But the Creator always saves us from their hands . . ."

Matters did not proceed, however, as we hoped. My business trips came to an abrupt end one day when I was stopped by two German soldiers who were guarding the ghetto of Czestochowa. I could tell right away that these men meant business. After scrutinizing my travel documents, they accused me of forgery.

"You should get a bullet in your head for this!" they cried.

I resourcefully offered them some money, unaware that an indignant German official could shoot me for that offer alone. Miraculously, though, they accepted the bribe and allowed me to go on my way. Still, I never again went outside of our ghetto on a business trip.

With the passage of time, the old, sympathetic Judenrat became a thing of the past. In September of 1941, without warning, the entire original council was arrested and brutally shot. The Germans had discovered that the Jewish body had been cooperating with an underground ghetto movement, and this was the way they were punished.

This second Judenrat was not at all like the first. Its members viewed their positions on the council as the means of saving their own lives. This could only be done by carrying out German orders rigorously and unquestioningly. To enforce their jurisdiction, this Judenrat used Jewish police as an instrument with which to limit our freedom still further.

These Jewish policemen were ingenious creations of the Nazi fiends; nothing delighted the Germans more than using Jews to betray, demoralize and ultimately destroy their fellow Jews. It was just as the *Tochachah* had predicted: our greatest enemies would be amongst our own ranks.

We used to tell an ironic story at the time which illustrated the demonic pride that the Nazis took in the creation of the sadistic Jewish police force. The anecdote was about Hans Frank, the infamous German who ruled our section of Poland, referred to as the General Government. After viciously persecuting the Jews for some time, he was said to have returned to Berlin to report his accomplishments in Poland to the Fuhrer.

"I persecuted the Jews," he said. "I confiscated their diamonds, their gold and their furs. I took away their houses and money. I have been working them like slaves. I have punished every last one of them . . . " The list went on and on, but much to his chagrin, the Fuhrer was unimpressed. No matter how many restrictions and punishments he related, Hitler only commented, "What else, what else?"

Finally, Frank concluded, "And to carry out all these orders, I created a Jewish police force."

At last, the Fuhrer broke out in a beaming smile, patting the underling on the back. "Well done, Frank, well done."

The special police were easily identified. Wearing unique hats and wielding menacing police sticks as they patrolled our streets, they spied on us incessantly, causing divisions among a people that should never have been divided. In truth, some of the individuals who joined the force were totally unaware of the treacherous acts the job entailed, and by the time they realized what was occurring, it was too late

to quit. However, most of the policemen were people of bad character who simply lusted for power over others. Some of them thought joining the force would be the best way to save themselves. One way or another, the Jewish police soon became a familiar part of our lives, just another symbol of our abject humiliation.

Meanwhile, the rumors that were circulating became more and more terrifying. Each new bit of information magnified the extent of the horrors that were to come. The Germans, in their eternally scientific manner, had begun experimenting with different methods of exterminating the millions of Jews assembled in the ghettos of Poland and other parts of Eastern Europe. They chose the area around Lublin for the first sites of the death camps, where they would begin the use of poison gas and mass crematoria for the Jewish bodies.

Somehow, while we were still in ignorance of what was occurring, my father learned of the gruesome fate that was in store for the Jews of Eastern Europe. All at once, he became a living picture of terror, trembling inside at the new threats that lay waiting for his family. Before long, my father's fear was noted by others, who were deeply affected by his reaction. They recognized that if a pious Jew from an illustrious background such as my father's was so afraid, then he must know something they did not. Eventually, they summoned my father and asked him to reveal the information he knew. He never did tell anyone what he had learned, ignoring their questions and retreating even further into himself.

The real horror of the German occupation only became apparent to all of us at the approach of *Pesach*, 1942. By this time, the Lodz Ghetto was totally encircled, with the people who inhabited it virtually locked inside. Fortunately, my

father's brother, who had been living in the ghetto, succeeded in escaping to Piotrkow with his family before it was too late. They moved into our spacious apartment, as did many others in those few months. As conditions became worse and worse, it became apparent that we were not to go through the war as an intact community, or even as a stable family unit.

The German forces continued to make rapid progress. Hitler sent his armies deep into the Soviet Union, bringing even more of the Jewish people under his authority. The Germans went on with their plans for the mass extermination of our people, who were already concentrated in ghettos and surrounded by an unsympathetic, if not hostile, population.

Although the Germans in Piotrkow tried to delude us with false illusions of security, mounting evidence to the contrary convinced us of the real dangers that the future held. No mirage of safety could comfort our people when the first fragments of information reached us describing the liquidation of the Lublin Ghetto. There were words being whispered about gas vans and the mass murder of Jews. Still, we instinctively tried to remain somewhat optimistic, hoping the rumors would prove to be unsubstantiated.

Day by day, life became harder. My parents saw what was coming, and their hearts cried out for their children. There was nothing they could do, although my father would make the most supreme effort when the time came.

CHAPTER 11

New Hopes

IN MOST RESPECTS, THE WINTER OF 1940 WAS THE MOST severe one I can remember living through. The harsh weather conditions added to the new realities presented by the ever-worsening German occupation took a heavy toll on Jewish lives throughout all of Poland. But as we were to learn in unbelievable ways, the human being is incredibly resilient; somehow we adjusted to the harsh realities of the war. The armbands, the food shortages, the curfews, the forced labor and even the killings soon became routine parts of our lives. Deep down, we kept trying to believe that the worst was indeed behind us. I know now that it was the strength of our *emunah* and *bitachon* that kept us going, that gave us the will to adjust to each new difficulty.

Thus, when the summer of 1940 drew near, we welcomed

the warmth of the sun's rays and the greenery of the season's blossoms. The heaviness which had lain upon our hearts since the German invasion the year before somehow felt a little lighter. Underfed and diseased though we were, we took once again to the thoroughfares to stroll, meet friends and to pretend that life could continue its ordinary, gentle rhythm. Children could be seen playing in the streets, and half-hearted smiles could often be detected on Jewish faces.

I remember that day in late July when my father ventured forth from the apartment on one of his rare walks. My poor father, whose spirit had been viciously broken so early in the war, hardly ever spoke now and almost never left the house. It seemed like he was incessantly overcome by a mood of foreboding and sadness.

Except that July afternoon. After about an hour, he returned home, a broad smile on his face. That smile imbued us with as much joy as the best news could have caused; such was the impact of my father's happiness, albeit short-lived.

"What is it, Tatteh?" Gittel Feiga asked, beating us to the question by a split second. "Is there good news?"

"Yes, *baruch Hashem*," my father replied joyously. "It's the Rebbe. He has moved to Otwock, and things appear to have returned to normal."

"How did you find out about it?" I probed.

"I just spoke to one of the men from our *shtiebel*. Last week his brother-in-law came with his family from Warsaw."

"Is he also an Aleksanderer *chassid*?" I interrupted.

"Yes. In fact, he was able to see the Rebbe several times while he was in hiding in Warsaw."

"And he knows for sure that the Rebbe has left Warsaw?" I continued.

"He is positive," he said. "The Rebbe is in Otwock.

Aleksander is once again."

The new facts were immediately interpreted in my mind as indications that conditions were finally beginning to improve. If the Rebbe was once again able to pick up the reins of his leadership, it could only mean that the future was brightening.

It was only after the war that I learned the actual details of what happened to the Aleksanderer Rebbe that summer of 1940.

When the Rebbe observed that the situation in Warsaw was growing increasingly unbearable, he decided to relocate his family to the small resort town of Otwock, where there were several *yeshivos* prior to the war. In that picturesque town, the atmosphere was not yet heavy with the imminent threat of the Angel of Death.

In Otwock, the Rebbe once again began to conduct his *tischen* on *Shabbos*, lecturing on Torah and *chassidus*. He resumed receiving the *kvitlach* from those *chassidim* who were able to send their letters to the Rebbe. Despite the numerous difficulties and restrictions on travel in Poland, many Jews succeeded in making their way to the town of Otwock in order to spend time with their beloved leader. The mood among Aleksanderer *chassidim* in Poland during those fleeting weeks was drenched with optimism and hope.

However, it was not very long before the informers caught up with the Rebbe even in that out of the way hamlet. One day in late summer, three Gestapo officers arrived at the little house which was occupied by the Rebbe and his family, asking if the Grand Rabbiner Danziger lived there. Panic seized the members of the household, who realized the gravity of the situation. In silence, they nodded their heads in the affirmative.

At once, the three Nazis began to conduct a thorough search throughout the house in the hope of discovering the presumed wealth of the Aleksanderer Rebbe about which they had so often heard.

Of course, with the exception of a single gold pocket watch belonging to the Rebbe, they found nothing. Gathering his courage, the Rebbe explained to the officers that the watch was all that remained of his possessions, and he asked them not to take it. To everyone's surprise, the three soldiers of the Gestapo heeded the Rebbe's request and left the precious watch in his hands.

Obviously disappointed that they did not uncover the great treasure they had hoped to find, the trio left the Rebbe's house without a word. How were they to understand that the legendary treasures of the Aleksanderer Rebbe consisted of nothing more than the immense library which had already fallen victim to the flames of the German invaders almost a year before?

It was not long after the visit of the Gestapo that the Rebbe observed increasing tensions in Otwock and the small towns surrounding it. He also realized that it was more difficult to remain inconspicuous in a tiny village than in a large city such as Warsaw. He thus decided to return to the big city.

Within a few weeks, my father learned of the Rebbe's move back to Warsaw. He was crestfallen, not only because the Rebbe would once again have to undergo the severest of conditions, but also because of the frightening implications the move brought with it.

The Germans' response to the Rebbe's return to Warsaw was quick and direct. An advertisement was placed in *Der Sturmer*, seeking information leading to the arrest of the

"Grand Rabbi of Aleksander." The message did not go unnoticed; the hunt was reported in the London press, where it was seen by countless Jews who were overcome with horror and dismay. The report, which appeared in the German weekly *Londoner Wochtzeitung* quoted, "The Rabbi of Aleksander has received his punishment. Thousands of holy books and Torah scrolls have been burned inside the Rabbi's mansion which also was burnt to the ground. Many letters and manuscripts have been shipped to Frankfurt for examination. Three hundred of his followers have been imprisoned on charges of overdue debts to non-Jewish creditors. Additionally, photographs depicting the Rabbi have been sent to hundreds of cities throughout Poland with instructions that he be apprehended."

The Jews of London were totally shocked. They could not fathom how one of the greatest *tzaddikim* of those times could be so besmirched in the public eye. At the same time, they also realized the great danger that loomed over the life of the Rebbe.

Immediately, Aleksanderer *chassidim* who were fortunate enough to be beyond the valley of death employed whatever means were available to save their illustrious Rebbe. Letters that quoted passages from the vicious press releases were sent to all parts of the world, urgently calling on the Aleksanderer *chassidim* to unite in trying to save the Rebbe and his family. The objective was to secure the Rebbe's exit from Poland and enable him to make his way to Eretz Yisrael.

The letters sent by the Jews of London reached their destinations around the world. Posters announcing the urgency of the situation were plastered on the walls of *shuls* everywhere, and community meetings were hurriedly convened in order to rally the efforts of Aleksanderer *chassidim*

everywhere to help save their beloved Rebbe.

Within hours of receiving the letters and reading the notices, *chassidim* all over rushed into action. The first goal was to obtain travel documents and exit permits for the Rebbe and his family. Money was spent without limit and without hesitation toward this end. One of the hurdles that had to be crossed was procuring entry visas from the British authorities to gain passage into Palestine. Tremendous efforts went into this, and finally, entry permits were obtained for the Rebbe, his wife and his son Reb Yerachmiel Yisrael Yosef; with the assistance of the Italian consul, the permits were delivered to the Rebbe in Poland.

Finally, in the winter of 1941, the *chassidim* were ready. After so many months of bribing, manipulating and negotiating with an endless list of officials, all the arrangements were made and all the necessary documents were furnished by the relevant authorities. Now, the *chassidim* who were intimate with the Rebbe came to him excitedly with the news that he would be able to save himself and his family.

The Rebbe's reaction was totally unexpected. Gazing at them with wide-eyed amazement, the Rebbe asked, "Plans for my escape? I should leave you and flee? How did this even enter your minds?"

"Rebbe," the *chassidim* pleaded, "do not extinguish the candle of Israel. We mourn every year because of the saintly innocence of Gedaliah ben Achikam, who was martyred needlessly. We are aware that the *reshaim* are bent on catching the Rebbe as soon as possible. Please take this opportunity and escape!"

"No, never," the Rebbe replied with finality. "The One to Whom you will answer in the world to come is the same One to Whom I will have to give an accounting. It is not my will to

forsake my congregation. I shall sit amongst my people; only death will separate us."

Years after the war, the sacred teachings of the Rebbe were published in the *sefer Akeidas Yitzchak*. When I saw it for the first time, a passage in the introduction caught my attention and has never left my mind. It quotes a letter that was written by the Rebbe's son in the Warsaw Ghetto during those tension-filled days of 1941.

"Several of the *chassidim* are pleading very emotionally with my saintly father, the Rebbe *shlita*, trying to convince him to save himself and his family with the documents they were able to get. However, my father is firm in his decision not to leave the congregation of Israel during such a terrible time. My father has instructed them not to speak further about the matter. 'What do you want?' he asked them. 'Should I save myself when *Klal Yisrael* is in such tragic condition? No, I sit amongst my people. I shall sanctify the Name of the Creator together with the ones I have always lived with.'"

Meanwhile, conditions in Warsaw worsened. The Rebbe was compelled to move every few weeks to a different flat in order to evade the clutches of the authorities, whose pursuit of him was relentless. But what bothered the Rebbe most during those difficult times was constantly imposing upon the devoted *chassidim* whom he so dearly loved.

At the beginning, the Rebbe often *davened* with a large *minyan* of *chassidim*, but as the danger mounted, he was compelled to stop this practice. By mid-1941, the Rebbe remained almost totally hidden, with only a select few allowed to visit. During this time, we were in contact with the Rebbe by writing. We consulted him on certain issues and received his response.

On one occasion, the Rebbe was in one of the supposed safe houses with a faithful follower, Reb Mordche Ber, when all of a sudden, German soldiers broke into the apartment. At once, the Rebbe lay down in bed with a towel around his head. On the nightstand next to the bed lay a small flask of *Wohlerion*, a powerful medicine that was placed there to reinforce the impression that a gravely ill patient was lying in the bed.

The first person the SS guards came across was the Rebbe's son. Promptly they cut off one of his *peyos* and half of his beard but then left him alone.

When they saw the Rebbe lying in the bed, they simply turned around and left, undoubtedly unaware of the prize that lay before them.

Two years into the seemingly endless darkness of the Second World War, the German monsters still had not come up with the Rebbe's whereabouts. Until now, the *tzaddik* was successful in staying out of danger's path, but it would not be very long before the tide would turn and the fortunes of Aleksander would change for the worse.

CHAPTER 12

The Horror Begins

THE YEAR 1941 LEFT AS IT CAME, WITH EACH NEW WEEK bringing more horrifying news. There was news of starvation and disease ravaging household after household, news of fresh *gezeiros* and untold degradations. There was news of slavery and torture, of strange disappearances, and worst of all, there was news of countless deaths.

But it was war, and eventually, we became accustomed to the horror. Strange as it may seem, we made a peace of sorts with our own dehumanization. While we never fully lost touch with the concept of *tzelem Elokim*, we generally submitted to the degradation and humiliation which we were powerless to oppose.

My father's faith made a deep impression on me, remaining in my mind through all the *tzaros* I was to experience. His

words fortified me and provided me with an invigorated sense of survival. Times were worsening now, and we needed every bit of inspiration to pull us through the hardships. As the summer of 1942 came to a close and the cool breezes of autumn started to blow through Piotrkow, the horrors of the Third Reich's diabolical imagination began to unfold.

There was no longer a thought in anyone's mind of travelling outside the ghetto. We were paralyzed by fear, well aware that the daring ones who had tried to defy the Nazis' restrictions almost invariably met with disaster. Everyone dreamed of going to Eretz Yisrael. Practically speaking, it was understood that a position or job in a local factory would ensure some measure of security. Fortunately, I was able to land a job in the nearby Huta glass works.

It was obvious that we were at the mercy of a monstrous and powerful people. Still, many of the Poles, *Volksdeutsch* and even Germans could be bribed or charmed into acting on our behalf. Our survival became increasingly dependent on the use of valuables. My precious job, too, was only obtained through bribery, teaching me the value of resourcefulness.

Late in September, disturbing rumors began to circulate in the Jewish ghetto of Piotrkow. Large numbers of Ukrainians were arriving in the city to reinforce the local German authorities. Suddenly, we began hearing rumors of a forthcoming evacuation of Jews. It was said that we were to be sent to the eastern territories of the Reich to work for the Germans. It wasn't too long before the rumors became reality. After the first wave of transports, we received cheerful-sounding postcards from the evacuees, describing their relocation in the most positive terms. We learned later that the people had actually been brutally massacred and that the letters were totally false.

We were terrified by these stories and by what actually began to materialize before our very eyes. Hoping to avoid the increasing number of transports, we joined with our neighbors to build a hiding place in the attic of our building. I was at work all day, so my brother and father took care of most of the construction. My brother was old enough now to participate fully in the execution of this delicate plan. They proved to be reasonably skilled laborers, and they produced a fine hiding place in the corner of the attic. It had one window facing the courtyard, but it was a small area, with no toilet facilities. They enclosed it with a false wall which they smeared with dirt in order to conceal its purpose. This would now be our "home."

As far as I was concerned, my work enabled me to escape the immediate threat of deportation. On October 13, 1942, we were told to prepare for a long period of work. We were also told that the Germans had designated the following day, October 14, for a mass deportation of Piotrkow Jews.

Trying to remain unemotional, we made ready for the events of the next day. Five knapsacks stood side by side, packed with all the food, money and jewelry that would be used by my family in case of need.

On the night of the thirteenth, I prepared to leave our flat and join the work detail together with the other young men. I glanced from the five prepared knapsacks to the five people whom I feared I might now be leaving forever. My brother and sister, my grandmother and my parents all waited to say good-bye.

"Will everyone be all right, Tatteh . . . Mammeh?"

"Yes. Just fine, Leibel," my mother said, painfully unconvincing. "We will all see you later when you get home from work."

"Go Leibel, you will be late," my father added with a nervous smile.

Soon afterwards, as I was marched off to work under the watchful escort of the Jewish police, my family was locked into their hiding place by a neighbor who sought shelter elsewhere.

At the Huta works, I toiled all week, not knowing what had happened to my loved ones but anxious about them every minute. I worked in fear and anguish, noting the trains that constantly passed the factory. Once, a train stopped, and notes and messages were passed to us from the Jews inside.

"Tell my father . . ." one note read.

"If you see my mother . . ." was scrawled on another.

And as the notes and cries continued to filter out of the putrid boxcars, I couldn't help wondering if my own family was aboard those trains.

At the time, no one could know that these passengers were on their final journey, on their way to Treblinka and to death. We did know, however, that something horrible was happening in our beautiful Piotrkow that would forever change it.

What terror must have taken place while I was away! Those who could hid themselves in attics, in cellars and behind false walls. But the Germans were already quite experienced. They roared through the streets, charging into houses with axes in their hands, destroying countless walls and false partitions. They broke down doors and dragged out their helpless victims. The cries and pleas of the hapless Jews were futile. How could they have resisted the SS with no armies or guns to fight with?

Mothers were separated from their children, husbands from their wives. The streets were filled with constant crying

as people were marched away to unknown destinations. Those who were spared one day could only wait in agony for what the next day could bring. And those that would survive would never forget the heartwrenching cries that reverberated in their minds.

In those tragic and calamitous circumstances, there existed a special spiritual dignity and courage in the face of death. One such episode that occurred at that time often comes to mind. There was a baker in Piotrkow who had come many years before the war from the town of Kalisha, or Kulish as we pronounced it. In those days, people were often known by a nickname of some kind, and he came to be known as "*der Kulisher bekker.*" Formerly, I knew him simply as a pious older Jew, one of the Aleksanderer *chassidim* who *davened* at our *shtiebel.* But at the end of his life, this simple Jew displayed the greatest dignity before the German brutality. This simple man was not prepared to leave the town where he had lived, worked and served Hashem for so many years to an unknown destination that almost certainly would be disastrous.

The Germans were going from house to house, door to door. At last, they arrived at the house of the Kulisher *bekker* and his wife. They were not prepared for the sight that greeted them when they broke down the door of the house. The Kulisher *bekker* lay on his bed, fully clad in *tachrichim*, the white burial gown, and his wife was similarly adorned and calmly awaited her fate.

"*Raus!*" screamed the Germans.

The pair did not budge. When the order was repeated, the two offered their last prayers to Hashem. The baker and his wife were shot, but they robbed the soldiers of the Third Reich of the chance to humiliate and destroy them spiritually. Theirs was perhaps a minor victory, but a completely spiritual

one. This act made it clear to the Germans that although the Torah Jew does not fight with weapons, he is armed with intense spiritual fortitude. That cannot be called acquiescence.

The SS, the Gestapo, the Ukrainian henchmen and the Jewish Police were extremely busy during the next few days. Each day they came into the ghetto and before the day was through, three to four thousand Jews had disappeared. Their methods were brutal and thorough; walls were broken down without hesitation, and victims were dragged out helplessly. The hapless Jews were then marched off to the *Umschlagplatz*, where they were met by the trains that would transport them to their deaths. Shots rang out all day, and the atmosphere in the ghetto was one of anxiety and terror. Some of the people who were taken had an inkling of what was to happen to them, and as they left, they took only their *tallis* and *tefillin*, for the Jew goes nowhere without these. Others, though, really believed that they were going to be working for the Germans in an ordinary environment, and they took with them the tools of their trade.

To my horror and dismay, the Germans showed up at my factory on the last day of this wave of deportations. I had been sure the Huta works would be safe, but when the Germans needed twenty more people for the last transport, they showed up at the door. Unfortunately, I was working the night shift at the time, and before I knew it, I was taken along with the others. I remember feeling a strange sense of relief in the thought that I would now be reunited with my family if they had been taken in one of the transports from Piotrkow. Still, I knew this was the slimmest of possibilities, and that I had to escape their clutches.

I had some *protektzye* at Huta in the form of a Polish

supervisor, Mr. Kuchamer, who knew my father very well. Aware of the danger of my predicament, I instantly mustered up all my courage and called out to the supervisor, hoping his fondness for my father would force him to help me. Only the powerful will to live could have caused me to risk my life at that moment.

"Mr. Kuchamer!" I cried. "I am Sanik."

To my astonishment and relief, within seconds, I was grasped by the hair and pulled violently out of the line.

At the time, I did not realize the magnitude of this miraculous incident. It was only later, when I learned that the other nineteen boys had been sent to the gas chamber, that I truly appreciated the daring initiative that had saved me from certain death.

That was what survival depended upon—sudden initiative. There were no rules to follow; every situation called for the right split-second decision. And everyone had his own theories. While some believed in staying towards the front of the lines, others thought their chances were better at the back. However, the most important element of survival was simply the will to live. One had to truly want to withstand the severe trials and once again taste the freedom and the goodness of life. In addition to having *bitachon* that the evil would soon be vanquished, there had to be a deep faith, an iron determination that could not be extinguished by anything.

There were times when I could almost feel this tremendous urge to live controlling my very actions. At these moments, there was no time for thought and reflection; there was only time for that type of action which came from an inner core, a thirst for life and an absolute trust in Hashem. This clinging to life was born of the terrible suffering to which

we were subjected; it was a force within me which I had never known existed.

We were marched home at the end of that week, aghast at the sight that greeted us when we entered Piotrkow. Jewish possessions lay scattered all over the streets, evidence of the uncontrolled looting that had taken place after the transports. The houses were all deserted; there were no obvious signs of life to be seen. Friends and acquaintances, rich and poor, all were deported to their uncertain fates by the Nazi invaders. We did not know then that our brothers were to be gassed at Treblinka; we knew only that Piotrkow was a thing of the past. Still, for many of us, a glimmer of hope remained. Was it possible that those who had gone into hiding could have survived it all?

CHAPTER 13

Torn Apart

WHEN I WAS ABOUT TO ENTER THE BUILDING THAT had once been my home, the front door opened. To my immense relief, my family emerged, visibly shaken but alive. Slowly, other neighbors began to come out of hiding. It was obvious that our new world was now very small, very closed in and very sad.

There were precious few of us remaining, only a ghost of what was once Piotrkow, and we were still in great danger. But again, in our naivete, we tried to believe that the worst was behind us, that the *Aktion* which had taken so many of Piotrkow's Jews would be the last. We unwittingly made up our minds to return to our ordinary routines of living in every possible way. However, the harsh realities we were constantly faced with quickly dispelled our illusions.

The Germans ordered barbed wire fences erected around the small area still left to the Jews of Piotrkow. There were new problems and new perils every day, with the Germans and their cohorts entering the ghetto daily. All too soon, we understood that the Nazis aimed to remove the survivors of the first mass deportation in short order.

In their macabre quest for entertainment, the German authorities sought to humiliate us in every way they could. Ultimately, this pursuit would give them the joy of witnessing the gentle nation of Torah reduced and stripped away by their very own actions. The Germans were often the sadistic spectators to scenes in which one Jew was compelled to act against another, or more likely, against himself. On many occasions, parents were given the cruel choice of saving their own lives or the lives of their children; sometimes they were permitted to save one child but not the other. Those who were forced to make such decisions would become tormented by guilt as were those who were spared at the expense of their loved ones.

We knew one such family, the Weinstocks, who were among the Aleksanderer *chassidim* of our town. They had two beautiful daughters who were taken to the holding center for deportees that the Germans had set up in the *shul*. As their daughters were about to be taken to the *Umschlagplatz*, the parents rushed to the Judenrat, begging to be sent in the place of their children. They were granted their request, and they sacrificed themselves for their two beloved daughters, who would survive the war knowing that their parents had given up their lives for them.

Before long, the Germans concentrated their attention on searching for the remaining hiding places of the "illegal" Jews. Living in the ghetto without a work card or proof of

special residence status constituted illegality. I knew that it was only a matter of time before we would be discovered.

"Tatteh," I pleaded, "we cannot continue to hide from them much longer."

"Yes, I know they are bound to discover us soon," he replied.

"But Lipa," my mother interjected at this point, "you are the only one without a job. You must find something."

"I could never get work," my father replied despondently. "I am not a tradesman, and besides—"

"Tatteh," I interrupted suddenly, "perhaps I can find something for you at Huta."

Hoping that this would solve our immediate problems, I managed to get my father into our factory. My brother worked at another factory, my mother had a job in a kitchen, and my sister did sewing work in yet another place. For the time being at least, we felt secure.

Those without proper papers were rounded up day after day and kept for a short time at the *shul* before joining the others in death. Eventually, the Germans grew impatient with the slow process of transporting the Jews by train through the Polish countryside, and before long, they began to kill the remnants of our community in the local Rakow forest. Tragically, within a short time, this place became veritably soaked with Jewish blood.

The ghetto was now only one street, our *Yiddengasse*, and the Germans erected a wire fence down its center. The remaining Jews of Piotrkow lived on one side, our side of the street, while the houses on the opposite side were left empty. Two gates at each end of the street controlled the limited movement of necessary workers in and out of the ghetto. Even that trickle of activity to our places of work took place

under armed guards. We were made helpless, if by nothing else than the excessive and overbearing omnipresence of SS personnel with pistols and rifles forever poised.

Still, the *Ribono Shel Olam*, in His splendid ways, was able to bring an occasional smile to our steadily pursed lips and occasional joy to our steadily pounding hearts. I remember a miracle that briefly illuminated the tense, anxious atmosphere we had grown used to. At that time, the human condition was stretched to its limits; many men were living without their wives and children, and virtually all Jewish infants had been sent to their "relocation." It was around this time that the wife of my mother's brother, Lipa Epstein, was about to give birth.

The couple had been childless through eighteen years of marriage, and now, in the closing weeks of 1942, when the deportations from Piotrkow were in full operation, my aunt was in her seventh month. Actually, she had found a safe haven in a gentile's house outside the ghetto, but she decided to return to the ghetto so she could be near her anxious husband, who awaited the *simchah* for which he had prayed so ardently for nearly two decades.

On the last day of the mass deportations, when we were all beginning to think we had survived yet another hurdle, Uncle Lipa was taken as well. Drained of his will to protest or perhaps fully aware of the immediate dangers of resisting, he left his wife to give birth in solitude in that diminished ghetto to which she had returned just to be with him.

We were all living in a small area of a few blocks, encircled by barbed wire and under the watchful eye of the Gestapo and the ghetto police. No one could truly afford the risk and the burden a new baby would entail, but ignoring these considerations, we welcomed in my aunt and her newborn

child, who was to be the last Jewish baby born in Piotrkow.

What a sensation that baby caused! Amidst the greatest levels of fear and restriction, this delicate child was a fresh symbol of hope and a positive future. While that baby was with us, I could feel its tiny life somehow towering over the collective mass strength of the entire Nazi empire. It was Hashem's gift of hope, temporary though it was.

Unfortunately, this joy, too, was not to last. Due to medical complications, the tender infant soon passed away. My aunt fled the ghetto, and somehow, she managed to stay in hiding until the end of the war.

It was only a long time later that I was able to appreciate the significance of that brief spark of Jewish life. When all about us bespoke doom and the bleakness of our impending fate, the soft gurgling noises of that child rang more loudly than the fiercest cannon fire and shriller than the fearsome hissing of the German bombs. The only power we had was our cleavage to life. In the very face of death, we clung tenaciously to our existence.

Following the mass deportations, we were subjected to a long period of cruelty at the hands of the Germans, who prided themselves on the violent methods of torture they had devised.

At one point, they gathered forty-two Jews and forced them to dig a large grave, ostensibly to be used for others. However, as soon as the digging was completed, the Nazis' bestial intentions became clear as these unsuspecting victims were shot without warning, filling the very grave they had dug. On another occasion, Jews were again ordered to dig an enormous grave; this one was used to bury one hundred and fifty elderly people who were simply taken from the ghetto and shot. The killing went on everywhere and without stop.

The local *chevrah kaddisha* was kept so busy that the head of the organization was permitted by the authorities to reside outside the ghetto, nearer to the cemetery. Death was all around us.

I was grateful that despite the horrors that were occurring everywhere, my immediate family was still intact as 1942 drew to its end. By that time, we had taken some ten additional people into our apartment, most of them able-bodied men who had lost their wives in the *Aktion.* As it grew more crowded, we built bunkbeds in the kitchen for our guests, and we lived from day to day in great fear but still stubbornly clinging to the goal of survival.

Then, near the end of December of 1942, our fortunes took a terrible turn, as the divine canopy of protection seemed to remove itself slowly from above us.

The first blow came when my grandmother was suddenly taken to the holding area at the *shul.* She was still a healthy and vibrant woman with many years before her, but now she faced death, together with my Aunt Gutcha and her two daughters, who were taken to the same place.

We frantically expended every effort to gain my grandmother's release, and we sent her a message describing our endeavors and telling her not to lose hope. Within a couple of hours, though, a Jewish policeman arrived at our door with a note.

"Please do not do anything for me," my *bubba* wrote back. "If you have any influence, use it to protect Ettel and Gittel Feiga." Her last thoughts were not for her own safety but for my mother and sister. All she asked for was a clean nightgown; she was preparing for death.

"Lipa, is there nothing we can do?" my mother cried despairingly.

But she expected no real reply from my father, who helplessly remained silent. At that point, there was nothing any of us could say or do.

Several days later, my grandmother, aunt and cousins were killed in the Rakow forest, along with five hundred and fifty others.

As time went on, we slowly lost the neighbors, friends and relatives we held so dear. As a family, we clung to one another, cherishing every moment of survival as a beloved treasure.

Nevertheless, it wasn't long before another catastrophe struck us, destroying the nucleus of our family. In January of 1943, Gittel Feiga was taken away.

My sister was three years older than I, but it had always seemed like she was many years ahead in wisdom and stature. She was the crown jewel of our family, much loved and admired by our friends and relatives. Together with the daughter of the Radoshitzer Rebbe, Gittel Feiga had headed the Bais Yaakov school for girls in Piotrkow, a position much respected and appreciated in our city. In fact, a year before the war, she and her colleague represented Piotrkow at a convention of Bais Yaakov teachers held in our city. It was a monumental event convened under the direction of Rav Itche Meyer Levin, the son-in-law of the Gerrer Rebbe.

On a personal level, I remember Gittel Feiga for her inordinate kindness to my brother and me. She was always buying us presents with her hard-earned money, always helping us with our schoolwork and forever looking out for us in every way.

Now, when the transports seemed to have halted and we thought we would have some respite, they came for Gittel Feiga in the middle of the night. The Germans were fond of

pouncing upon us in the dead of night, when the terror would be even more magnified.

For some inexplicable reason, the Germans decided that two hundred women were needed to fill a transport, and they went from house to house, grabbing young girls for factory work at a nearby munitions plant serving the German military.

I learned that Gittel Feiga would be taken to a plant that was part of the Reich's network of labor camps. It was known as Skarzysk, after the town next to which it was built. Located one hundred miles southeast of Piotrkow, the camp never developed into a death camp such as Auschwitz or Treblinka, but the conditions there were still wretched, and death was a constant threat over its thousands of inmates.

The enormous facility consisted of three sections, *Werke* A, B and C, where the main industrial activity of the inmates was in the production of ammunition. This brought the prisoners into contact with the infamous yellow gunpowder that infected the skin and lungs of those who handled it on a daily basis. Years later, I learned that my wife, unknown to me at the time, also worked in Skarzysk, in Section B. My sister worked in Section A. Naturally they knew nothing of each other at the time, but the irony is inescapable.

The morning after my sister was taken, I immediately launched a plan to save my sister, who was still at the holding center in Piotrkow with the other young girls. When I got to work, I quickly went to speak to Micklfreigt, my German manager at Huta. He was a decent person and had often protected and assisted my father and me.

Without hesitation, the supervisor gave me a letter addressed to the Jewish authorities, asking them to release my sister. After work, I planned to register the request with the

proper Jewish officials in the ghetto. I learned that the man I needed to speak to was Gomberg, the Assistant Police Chief, and that I could find him in the Judenrat building.

However, there was a curfew in the ghetto, and Jews were not permitted to roam the streets after the designated time. Naturally, knowing how urgent my mission was, these rules could not deter me, but to my dismay, I was discovered.

"You there, come here!" a voice snapped at me as I rushed through the streets. I turned around to face the Jewish policeman who had ordered me to stop.

"What is your name?"

"Sanik," I replied in the vain hope that the name would mean something to the man. It did not.

"What are you doing out on the street?" he asked indignantly. "Don't you know it's past curfew?"

"Actually, I was headed for the Judenrat building," I replied, feigning confidence.

"Oh, were you?" he asked with pronounced sarcasm.

In a flash I wondered if I should show the man my letter, but I decided against it; it was too valuable to risk losing it. Instead, I persisted in my defense.

"Yes, I really was going there. I must speak to Mr. Gomberg."

The policeman ignored my request and barked at me, "I am placing you under arrest! Come with me."

"Where are you taking me?" I asked, frightened that my chances to help Gittel Feiga were escaping me.

"My, my, so many questions," he replied. "Just come along with me if you know what's good for you."

Despite my repeated protestations, he pulled me in the direction of the Judenrat building. "You wanted to go to the Judenrat," he remarked sardonically. "Well, here we are!"

I was indeed brought to the Judenrat building, but once there, I was locked up in a cell, with no opportunity to show anyone my letter.

Still, I did not give up. My unexpected predicament was merely another obstacle that would have to be overcome. I would not rest while Gittel Feiga's life was at risk. I peered desperately out of the jail's small window, hoping to see someone who could help me. As I waited, I realized that my absence at home would dramatically increase the anxiety of my parents, who were already quite beside themselves since my sister was taken.

Just then, my hopes were aroused once more. Spotting the Jewish policeman on guard that night, I recognized him as a man who knew and respected my father. He was one of those who had innocently become a policeman before the true nature of the force was revealed. I called to him hopefully.

When the guard saw me, he ran to the Chief of Police, who happened to be in the building at the time.

"The boy in prison is Sanik," he cried, evoking my family's name. "We should release him."

Although that name had helped me so many times, on this occasion it was useless. The Chief of Police, an assimilated Jew, reveled in his rapid rise to power under the German leadership, and he thoroughly enjoyed exercising his authority over others.

"What if it is Sanik?" retorted the Chief of Police. "Let him stay in jail. We have regulations in this ghetto."

Moments later, the guard returned to my cell. "I am sorry, Sanik, but I cannot get you out."

I was devastated, but I continued to plead with him. "I simply must get released. My sister's life may very well

depend on my ability to help her. Surely, you don't imagine that I can just sit here when so much is at stake."

"I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do," he repeated quietly as he headed back up the stairs.

With my mind racing, I turned to stare out the window again. After what seemed like hours, I suddenly saw another Judenrat official that I knew. His name was Marek. As he passed, I called to him in a loud whisper.

"Pssst!" I uttered quietly, afraid my voice would catch the attention of the officials upstairs.

Fortunately, he heard my call, and I saw him searching for the source of the sound. As he approached the window and peered inside, I repeated his name until he was looking directly into my eyes.

"Sanik," he said in astonishment, "what on earth are you doing in there?"

Trying to control my nearly bursting heart, I filled him in on the events of the past day, begging him to assist me.

"Try to understand," I explained. "I must get out of here so I can speak to Gomberg and help my sister."

"I'll tell you what I'll do," he suggested encouragingly. "It might be faster and simpler for me just to go to Gomberg's house and wake him up. I'll tell him you are in jail, and maybe I can get him to come here."

"Thank you," I said with obvious desperation. "Please hurry."

It was two o'clock in the morning, but Gomberg came at once, and I was released. I showed him the letter, and my heart pounded loudly as he read through it.

"Sorry, Sanik," he said, as he slowly folded the paper. "There is nothing I can do."

Even if I had tried to plead my case at that moment, I don't

think I could have uttered more than a bitter cry of disappointment. I was crushed, but I knew I would have to think of an alternative plan to help Gittel Feiga.

As I made my way home, I was painfully aware that there was nothing I could do under the restrictions of the curfew. The thought of my parents' certain anguish over my disappearance made me hurry my steps, and I was greatly relieved when I finally drew near the house. With a contrived smile, I walked through the front door.

"Where have you been?" my father asked, with a mixture of relief and anger.

"*Baruch Hashem* you're home," was all my mother managed to utter.

When they had regained a measure of calm, I recounted the details of my detainment and futile efforts at gaining Gittel Feiga's release. We decided that nothing further could be undertaken until my work shift at noon the next day.

"Our only prayer is that the girls won't be transported before that," my father said.

My thoughts turned to the holding center at the *shul*, to Gittel Feiga and the dozens of others who were being kept there in utter degradation and intense discomfort as they awaited an uncertain fate.

The next day, as soon as I arrived at work, I sought out Micklfreigt.

"Mr. Micklfreigt," I said in despair, "your plan did not succeed."

Startled, he asked, "What happened? Did you not get to see the proper officials?"

"I saw them, but the letter did not help," I replied, and once again, I proceeded to relate the events of the night before. When I was done, I ventured a brazen request.

"Mr. Micklfreigt," I stammered, "would it perhaps be possible for . . . for you to go to the German authorities in person?"

Expecting a negative response and even a possible rebuke for my presumptuousness, I was totally unprepared for what followed my suggestion. The supervisor immediately grabbed his fur coat and left right away for the holding center where the two hundred girls were being kept.

When he arrived at the *shul*, the girls were already on the trucks that would take them to Skarzysk, waiting to depart on their journey. Micklfreigt went to see Herr Ronik, the German factory chief, who was the official that supervised these deportations. He was heartened when Ronik agreed to release my sister, even leading him to the truck she had been loaded on.

"Where is that girl with the black hair?" he shouted.

Neither German had ever actually met my sister; they had only my description. However, although my depiction of Gittel Feiga was quite detailed, it was still not specific enough to guarantee her rescue.

"That girl with the black hair. . ." These were the words that had the power to bring Gittel Feiga back to her family, but under the circumstances, these words proved to be pathetically inadequate. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, havoc broke loose.

"It is I!" a voice shouted from inside the truck.

"No, they mean me," another claimed insistently.

"Let me out, let me out. I have black hair!" yet another shouted.

Naturally, every girl was desperate to be released, and many a black-haired young woman probably believed that she was the one being sought. As dozens of frantic girls

clamored to jump off the truck, the commotion grew more and more vociferous. Within seconds, the guards began to lose control of all the girls on the truck.

Eventually, Ronik lost his temper. "Lock the truck!" he ordered impatiently.

"But what about the girl who is to be released?" one of the guards asked.

"Just lock it!" Ronik shouted.

They closed the iron doors upon the protesting girls and upon my sister, who was taken away despite all my efforts. I couldn't help thinking that if I had been one hour earlier, my sister could have been released. Apparently, though, it was not meant to happen that way.

CHAPTER 14

A Tragedy Unfolds

THE OPENING MONTHS OF 1943, DIFFICULT AS THEY WERE, were relatively uneventful in Piotrkow. We concentrated all our efforts on staying out of harm's way and appearing at our work posts faithfully, seven days a week. We all learned very quickly what fate was in store for those who remained at home instead of reporting for work. Thus, day in and day out, we rose at dawn, *davened* hurriedly and joined our respective work details to be escorted by armed guards to our various destinations.

By that time, the day of *Shabbos* had turned almost completely into a distant concept, replacing the much-cherished reality it has always been to the Torah-observant Jew. The Germans were adamant that *Shabbos* was just another work day, but the SS exhibited obvious glee at the sight of our

forcible desecration of the sanctity of our holiest day. I could almost feel their delight each *Shabbos* as they ripped us away from the relative stability of our homes.

It was only when we arrived home each week in the late afternoon, when the fleeting moments of the *Shabbos* were all but gone, that we tried to salvage a tiny bit of the *menuchah* for which we so yearned. At those times, we would quickly don *kapotes*, *daven* and sit down to the meager rations we received, trying to imagine that what lay before us was the *cholent* and *kugel* whose aromas had long since become faded memories.

Thus did life settle into its perpetually sad but uneventful pattern. The battles we fought daily consisted of our attempts at staying healthy enough to continue working and maintaining at least a minimal level of determination and hope.

Optimism became almost nonexistent for my parents, however, since Gittel Feiga's deportation. A mere few miles away, Skarzysk may as well have been on another planet.

Despite the gloom that had descended upon them, my parents resolved somehow to establish contact with my sister. We were determined to make every effort to let Gittel Feiga know we were thinking about her plight. However, we knew this was easier said than done and that getting messages through German security was nearly impossible.

Our apartment was now occupied by provisional beds for a total of thirty men, relegating our living space to the kitchen. It was there that we would sit each night as we discussed Gittel Feiga's predicament and contemplated the various methods of communication.

Finally, we discovered a method of communicating with her, and we wrote her a lengthy letter with words of encouragement and love. A gentile who worked with me at Huta

gave the letter to a driver who often made the trip to Skarzysk. Eventually, several other families began to use this means of communication to send letters to their loved ones, paying a price, of course, for the service. My friend Moshe Marmer's sister had also been taken to Skarzysk, and the same courier we used brought mail to her as well.

Soon we began to receive letters from my sister as well. We learned that at the Skarzysk munitions factory, Gittel Feiga was put to work with the rest. Her working and living conditions made the ghetto seem like Gan Eden, but her greatest suffering came from her separation from her family. In every letter she would write, "I cannot live another day without you. I miss you more than I can say. You are in my thoughts day and night." Then, after a short time, the letters began to express a new message which caused us great anxiety. "I must come home again," she wrote. "I have some valuables hidden, and I will use them to escape."

The thought of seeing Gittel Feiga again was so exciting for my parents that they could have been easily blinded to the dangers inherent in any plan of escape. But my father, ever the pillar of rational wisdom, remained realistic. He tearfully described to my mother the terrible risks of attempting escape, and reluctantly, she joined his opposition to the idea.

Still, we missed each other terribly, and the possibility of reuniting could not be dispelled so easily. Gittel Feiga was truly determined to flee, and though we tried to convince her otherwise, she would not be swayed. So, as *Purim* approached, we learned that my sister would be making her planned escape approximately one week after the ordinarily joyous day. A mixture of fright and joy filled our hearts.

Meanwhile, the days passed slowly as we went through our typical routines, slightly more hopeful now that we

anticipated my sister's homecoming. I clearly recall the events that took place during the few weeks that preceded Gittel Feiga's anticipated arrival.

On the *Shabbos* before *Purim*, which fell on a Sunday that year, my father and I went to work on the six a.m. to three p.m. shift. When we returned home, we washed up and put on our *kapotes* to *daven*. Since the beginning of the war, all our *shuls* and *shtieblach* had been shut by the Nazis, and faced with no choice, we quickly adjusted to the harsh restriction. Many months had passed since the last time I had heard a *Kaddish*, a *Kedushah* or a reading from the Torah.

But that Shabbos was *Parshas Zachor*, a day ordinarily commemorated by an especially important reading of the Torah. Men, women and children would gather each year to recite the *pesukim* which recount the attack of Amalek against our ancestors in the wilderness. Now, in the midst of the cruel and terrible war, I couldn't help comparing the Amalek of old with the Third Reich to which we were currently subjected. After all, did the Reich not have the exact same agenda as Amalek, or even as Haman? Did they not all aim to destroy the Jewish nation? Steeped in these thoughts, I sat with a *Chumash* opened before me to the appropriate spot. At that moment, I gazed up at my father, who must have sensed my musings. He looked at me fixedly.

"Zachor, lo tishkach," he said, in slow, deliberate syllables. "Remember, do not forget."

As if I could ever forget!

A few hours away was the day on which we were to commemorate the deliverance from Haman's extravagant plan to exterminate all the Jews of his time, from young to old. We could not have guessed that the Germans would use this day to demonstrate their respect and, perhaps, kinship

for Haman and his sons in their very own way.

In a strange development, the Nazis gave the word to Warshawsky, the head of the Judenrat, that some sort of exchange of prisoners was being considered. To our astonishment, we learned that a number of Jews would be leaving Piotrkow to settle in Palestine! The story they told was complicated, but believable. There was a German colony that somehow wound up in Sarona, in Palestine, and they were now under the authority of the British. These Germans, who wished to be repatriated to their homeland, would be ransomed for Jews, but only educated Jews, who possessed university degrees. A group was needed at once for the exchange, the Germans said. To a group of people who were willing to cling to any hope, the deal did have an appearance of plausibility. It was just possible.

The Germans said that the people for the transfer had to be chosen within the hour. One can hardly imagine today the efforts that people expended to participate in the exchange. In a short time, the people were chosen, with our most prominent citizens among the group.

Many tears were shed as those innocent and trusting Jews took their leave from the others that *Purim* afternoon. For those leaving, a mixture of sorrow, guilt and happiness over their good fortune filled their hearts. For those who remained, a blend of envy and concern. Finally, the moment of departure arrived, and amidst rushed hugs and kisses, amidst blessings and last-minute bits of advice, the group walked toward the vehicles that would take them to their supposed freedom.

Tragically, the presumed exchange proved to be yet another sadistic act of deceit on the part of the Germans, and the thirty-five chosen Jews were taken in the Gestapo cars to

the Jewish cemetery and brutally shot. With this, the Nazis were compensating for the deaths of the ten sons of Haman.

It may well be imagined that there were no costumes and carnivals, no plays, masquerades or dancing that *Purim*. Only the Germans had fun as more Jewish blood drenched Polish soil.

Later that day, Ronik, the German supervisor, was leading a group of Hitler Youth on a tour of the Reich's "accomplishments" in the area. When he came to the cemetery, he pointed out the dead bodies to the *Jugend* members. "That is how people look who have no country of their own," he said.

A few days after we were forced to digest this latest manifestation of Nazi brutality, we turned our minds to Skarzysk and to Gittel Feiga, who hopefully would be returning home soon if all went well.

However, in a devastating twist of fate, Gittel Feiga was never to be reunited with us. It was only later on that I learned the tragic details of her foiled escape.

After the war, Malkah Granatstein, a childhood friend of Gittel Feiga's who was with her in Skarzysk, described to me my sister's feelings and actions during the short time she spent in the labor camp. According to her account, Gittel Feiga did not complain about the difficult work or hunger and suffering she experienced. She was only concerned with finding some means of escape so she could be reunited with her parents and brothers and help them get through the trying times. Whenever the two friends met, my sister would talk of her tremendous urge to leave the camp, ignoring the obvious dangers involved.

Malka was in the camp together with her parents, the Radoshitzer Rebbe and Rebbetzin, and every Friday night, Gittel Feiga would go to their barracks to hear *Kiddush* and

absorb a little of the *Shabbos* warmth amidst the darkness around them. And when *Shabbos* drew to a close, my sister would return to hear the Radoshitzer Rebbe quietly sing the *zemiros* and make *Havdalah*.

One day, my sister approached the Radoshitzer Rebbe and described to him how she suffered from her separation from her family. Seeing her determination to escape, he begged her not to attempt it, pointing out that her marked Jewish features would identify her at once. However, it was to no avail. Gittel Feiga was firm in her decision.

With time, my sister became acquainted with two German policemen who worked at the factory. Hoping that her valuables would act as sufficient incentives, she pleaded with them to assist her in planning the dangerous escape. The policemen seemed sympathetic to her plight, and after examining the value of her possessions, they agreed to help her. The plan they presented her with seemed like a good one.

On the appointed day, Gittel Feiga would disguise herself as a Polish gentile girl, and the policemen would escort her through the exit that was used each evening by the Poles who worked at the factory. From there, they would take her to the town's train station, where they would see that she boarded the first train to Piotrkow.

Since we knew of her plan to escape, I tried to expedite matters on our end. I visited Micklfreigt and his wife frequently. They lived on the grounds of the Huta factory where I worked. I tried to befriend them and offered them bribes, and so, by the time Gittel Feiga had made her plans to escape, I was able to arrange for her to go directly to the Micklfreigt home, not the ghetto in Piotrkow, which would be much safer for her.

On the day of the planned escape, Gittel Feiga was apprehensive, but she assured herself that the policemen were truly acting in her best interest. That evening, when the first workers began to file out of the factory, my sister slipped into her disguise and joined the line of Polish laborers. The policemen saw to it that she exited the premises safely, and within moments, they met her at the designated location. Casually, they made their way to the railway station, where the men wished Gittel Feiga a hearty farewell as she boarded the train.

If only my sister would have questioned the true intentions of those German beasts and fled on her own! But the relief that she must have felt as she got on the train that would take her back to her beloved family outweighed any suspicions she might still have had. And halfway to Piotrkow, when she was sure that the danger was over, the horror that she was faced with must have been so much greater. For at that point, a group of German soldiers boarded the train and arrested my poor, unsuspecting sister.

Gittel Feiga was taken back to Skarzysk, and the very next morning, she was shot before the entire inmate population, to the merriment of the two policemen who had so cruelly betrayed her.

We all knew that something terrible had happened when my sister did not arrive in Piotrkow on the designated night. A few days later, I learned the truth of my sister's death, but I knew that somehow, I would have to keep the truth from my parents.

My father, who was driven by unimaginable fears, was totally distraught when Gittel Feiga did not come home. Every day, he begged me to tell him what had happened, strangely suspicious that I knew.

"I don't care where she is, Leibel," my father told me. "I don't care if she is working in a factory, if she is living among gentiles, if she has been sent to the farthest corners of the earth. I do not care . . . as long as she is alive."

And each day, I reassured my father that Gittel Feiga was well and safe. However, my eyes must have betrayed me, as his questioning would not let up.

"Tell me the truth, and I will never ask again," he pleaded every day. "Is Gittel Feiga really alive?"

Then, when he finally did learn the truth, I saw him break down for the first time in my life. He blamed himself for her death, though he knew that my sister had made the ill-advised decision on her own. I, too, cried bitter tears for Gittel Feiga, and I cried for my father, whose inner strengths seemed all but gone by this point. In a sense, I cried for all of us.

My father wasted away, as the month of *Adar* made way for *Nissan*, the month of redemption. Whatever was holding him up until now seemed to collapse. He could not tear his thoughts away from the responsibilities he bore towards his family and his guilt-ridden inability to fulfill them.

"If only I could have made her stay there . . ." he said more than once, obsessed with my sister's death. Although he tried to expel from his mind the thought of his daughter's death, it always seemed to return with even greater force. He was terrified for what the future would bring, knowing that slowly, he would lose us all.

My mother, brother and I were more precious to him than ever. He told us that his only thought was for us to be saved, but when he spoke in this manner, we all tried to dissuade him.

"Tatteh," I would interrupt, "please do not talk in such a pessimistic fashion. Somehow, we will pull through together

and live to see the end of all the Germans."

But my father would just continue. "Do not be afraid to separate. If one of you gets into trouble, the other should run and save his own life. If you can save yourself by any means, do not hesitate. Save yourselves." These words, depressing though they were, infused us with a powerful charge. Live! Survive! At any cost, preserve yourselves!

When he was not speaking in this manner, my father would gaze blankly into space or bury his face in the *Tehillim* from which he recited almost incessantly. I often wondered if those *Tehillim* were for Gittel Feiga's soul or for his own.

CHAPTER 15

The Holy Ark is Captured

AT ABOUT THE SAME TIME AS GITTEL FEIGA'S TRANSFER to Skarzysk, a calamitous bit of news travelled from Warsaw and succeeded in making its way to Piotrkow and other towns across Poland. The Akeidas Yitzchak, our beloved Aleksanderer Rebbe, had been killed by the Nazis. The tragic tidings came as a crushing blow to his devoted *chassidim* all over Europe.

It was my father who broke the terrible news to us. We were speaking of the Rebbe one day, when my father uttered almost inaudibly, "I fear the Rebbe is no longer here." After a brief pause, he continued, "The holy Ark has been captured," invoking the famous verse from the Book of Samuel.

By that time, I had almost become numb to any additional pain and suffering, and when I first heard of the Rebbe's

death, my reaction was not too severe. However, my father's obvious despair as he spoke of the tragedy was heartrending.

It was only much later that the impact of the Rebbe's demise struck me in the fullest sense. Decades after the war was over, my frequent visits to the Aleksanderer Rebbes of Bnei Brak and of New York allowed me to realize what a tiny fragment of Aleksander had actually survived the abyss. It was then that I began to comprehend how insufferable the loss truly was.

More than a decade after the liberation, I was able to piece together the tragic events that led to the end of the Rebbe's life.

In the months following the Rebbe's return to Warsaw from Otwock, conditions continued to worsen in the Polish capital, with the cruel oppression of Hans Frank's General Government reaching untold proportions. And as the killing machines at Treblinka went into full operation, the *Aktionen*, the deportations of Jews from the ghetto, became much more frequent. Conditions were so bad that for many the thought of making that final journey to the city's *Umschlagplatz* to be sent into the dark unknown was actually a relief. For although they faced almost certain deaths, it still meant leaving the disease, squalor and starvation of the ghetto.

The Poles who lived on the other side of the barbed wire enclosing the ghetto now observed the plight of their former Jewish neighbors from their vantage point. It is hard to forget how the upright citizens of Warsaw took advantage of the conditions inside the ghetto in order to benefit themselves. Eager to make a profit, they bartered with the starving residents of the ghetto, offering them miserable scraps of food for the few precious valuables the Jews still owned. And as conditions in Poland grew worse, the "price" of potato

peels and the like climbed higher and higher.

Nevertheless, despite the agonizing pangs of hunger that brought so much suffering to the Jews of the ghetto, it was the daily degradations and dehumanization that made their lives during this time so unbearable.

I recall an incident told to me by Reb Avraham Handel, a well-known *chassid* from Warsaw. He was the work foreman in a shoe shop operated by the Jews of the ghetto. One day, a group of Wehrmacht soldiers marched into the factory looking for some entertainment. They started snooping around, and they came upon a young man named Baumzetzer, an Aleksanderer *chassid* from Lodz, who was trying to *daven* quickly before starting the day's work. Caught in the middle of his prayers, the man was wrapped in his *tallis* and *tefillin*. Overjoyed at the special prize they had found, the Germans ordered him to perform a number of degrading activities and menial jobs while still wrapped in his *tallis*. And throughout his ordeal, they stood by and watched, laughing uncontrollably. They had found the entertainment they were looking for, and immediately afterwards, they left the factory.

The venom of the Germans was particularly directed at the religious Jewish leaders, whom they scoffingly referred to as *Rabbiner*. Thus, when the order to liquidate the ghetto was announced, bringing divisions of SS soldiers to carry out the jobs of killing and deporting, the Nazi tormentors turned their special attention to the *Rabbiner*. Even as mass killings were being devised for all the Jews of the ghetto, it was the *Rabbiner* whom they wished to sink their claws into first.

At that point, one of the Jewish managers of the shoe factory was hauled before the head of the Warsaw Gestapo on Suchaw Street. There, they only demanded one thing.

"Tell us exactly where the rabbis live in the ghetto!" they

commanded. The poor man was tortured for hours as the Germans tried to draw from him the valuable information.

As for the *rabbanim* themselves, many were registered as tradesmen in one shop or another. Rav Klonimus Kalman Shapiro, the Piasetzner Rebbe, Rav Moishe Bezalel Alter, brother of the Imrei Emes and the Aleksanderer Rebbe were all registered with the officials as experts in the production of shoes.

Their registered titles were actually the only connections these *gedolim* had with the shoe industry, for they knew little about being cobblers. In reality, they spent nearly all their time immersed in *davening*, in acts of kindness and, most importantly, in the study of Torah.

The Warsaw Ghetto, where the difficulties and suffering were even worse than we had known in Piotrkow, saw tremendous sacrifice for the study of Torah and the fulfillment of *mitzvos*. Even the simplest Jews in the squalid ghetto made superhuman efforts to keep the faint ember of Yiddishkeit glowing, lest it be altogether extinguished. In attics, behind false walls, in the cellars and in the sewers, there were regular *shiurim* in the study of Torah, and there were *minyanim* which convened regularly to bring the supplications of a suffering people before the *Ribono Shel Olam*.

Oh, the sacrifices that were made for the sake of *davening* in the Warsaw Ghetto! Despite the German bloodhounds that relentlessly conducted searches to unearth the illegal prayer meetings, the brave ghetto Jews did not refrain from conducting their *tefillos betzibbur*, fully aware of the risk of death that was involved. One of the regular places where Jews would meet to *daven* was a tiny flat on the fourth floor of 3 Malawska Street, home of Rav Avraham Chaim Danziger, brother of the Aleksanderer Rebbe.

Day by day, the situation was becoming more desperate for the poor Jews trapped within the ghetto walls, yet amidst the greatest suffering, the innate heroism of our people could be seen. It was against this backdrop of *mesiras nefesh* that the extraordinary self-sacrifice of the Aleksanderer Rebbe in those final months can be understood.

Most of the Aleksanderer *chassidim* in the Warsaw Ghetto were not informed of the Rebbe's whereabouts, for it was feared that a steady flow of adherents would inadvertently lead the accursed Germans to him. Nevertheless, the Rebbe's followers knew that their leader was somewhere in the ghetto, and that knowledge served to give them a measure of hope. Perhaps in the Rebbe's merit they would all be spared in the end.

Whenever possible, the Rebbe wrote letters of encouragement to his *chassidim*, both in the ghetto and beyond. In one such letter, written in 1941, the Rebbe stressed the importance of the *Ribono Shel Olam* as a *Melech Hakavod*. He explained that a "King of Honor" is a King of subjects who are honorable. And in the merit of Hashem's being a *Melech Hakavod*, the salvation of the Jewish people would surely come. Taking the thought a step further, the Rebbe continued with a question. "What honor could come to the Creator if His sons allowed themselves to fall spiritually?"

In another letter, which was smuggled to his *chassidim* in the town of Malawa, the Rebbe wrote of the importance of *tefillah*. The *Gemara* teaches us that *teshuvah*, *tefillah* and *tzeddakah* are the three elements which can abolish the evil decree in Heaven. In the ghetto, the Rebbe pointed out, where there are no resources from which to give charity, and fasting in atonement is not permitted because it would endanger lives, *tefillah* is the method which must compensate

for the other two. The Rebbe entreated his *chassidim* to *daven*, to raise their voices to the Almighty.

On another occasion, in the summer of 1942, the Aleksanderer *chassidim* in the ghetto of Czestochowa also received a note from the Rebbe. This one was very brief, containing merely two words that were followed by the Rebbe's signature. The two words were "*rachamim gedolim*," great mercy.

During that summer of 1942, the Nazis' war against the Jews reached full steam. The Rebbe's deep understanding of what awaited his fellow Jews must have led him to write that terrible note to the *chassidim* in Czestochowa. The deportations from all of Poland's Jewish ghettos increased, leaving all their remaining inhabitants in grave danger. In Piotrkow, Warsaw and the other ghettos, survival depended on one thing alone: official registration as a worker in one of the many shops and factories that served the German war effort. At this point, there was no possibility of hiding any more. No apartment, no shed and no bunker was safe from the Germans' scrutiny.

When the Rebbe was faced with no alternative, he, too, left his hiding place and sought work in Schultz's Shoe Shop. It was there that Handel was the main foreman, and numerous other Torah luminaries were among his "workers."

In this way, the Aleksanderer Rebbe, formerly the leader and the inspiration of thousands of *chassidim*, assumed the role of a common cobbler. Day after day, the Rebbe sat deep within the factory compound, learning and *davening*, offering genuine tears to the Creator on behalf of His nation.

However, after continuing in this manner for some time, the Rebbe noticed that several of the *chassidim* who worked near him in the shop appeared to be toiling strenuously and

unusually quickly, as if they were rushing to go somewhere.

"Why do you work so hard?" the Rebbe inquired.

Despite their efforts to conceal the truth, he quickly realized that they were working to fill the order that would be demanded from the Rebbe. From that moment on, the Rebbe put a halt to the learning and *davening* he did in the shop. He picked up the crude tools of the craft, and to the best of his abilities, the Rebbe did the work that was demanded of him and of all other workers.

Alarmed at the Rebbe's actions, the devoted *chassidim* protested. "Is it the labor of the Rebbe that will save us, or is it the Rebbe's Torah and *tefillah*?"

"Correct, correct," the Rebbe affirmed. "But I am unable to stop working if it is on the account of others."

The *chassidim* at the plant tried to convince the Rebbe to refrain from doing the crude work of the shop and resume his service of the *Ribono Shel Olam*, but to no avail.

Then, one morning in mid-*Elul*, the Rebbe announced to Reb Avraham Handel that he would not go to the shop that day, preferring to remain at home. Handel protested that the factory was safer than any home in the ghetto, and finally, the Rebbe agreed to go.

The Rebbe must have sensed that something terrible was to happen at the factory that day, for after a few hours had gone by, a group of SS guards suddenly stormed in, ordering all the workers to move outside quickly.

The working papers meant nothing now, as the frightened Jews were told to line up for a selection. These infamous selections were the demonic processes in which the fates of thousands of innocent people were determined by the whim of the German official who directed them.

The Rebbe stood among the rest, completely tranquil. He

waited on line, never pausing in his silent recitation of *Tehillim.*

The Rebbe was directed to the left, the side which signified an early death. Together with hundreds of others, he would board the rail car that would transport them to Treblinka.

The Rebbe quietly entered the line at the left and made his way onto the car. He immediately placed himself in a corner of the rail car and began *davening.* When his son Reb Yerachmiel Yisrael Yosef saw what had become of his father, he ran across the line and boarded the railcar. Although he could have been spared, he would not forsake his father.

Horrified at the Rebbe's fate, Reb Avraham Handel raced toward the SS officer who was in charge and began pleading with him.

"That man over there," he said, pointing at the Rebbe, "is the best worker in my shop. You cannot take him!"

Shouting frantically, Handel showed the officer an official document which certified that he was allowed to choose the workers for his factory. He knew full well that any document in the hand of a Jew could be rendered absolutely worthless, but he had recently given this same officer a special pair of boots, and he hoped that the bribe would stand him in good stead at this crucial moment.

To his immense relief and amazement, the officer conceded and motioned for the Rebbe to be let off the train.

However, a second SS officer suddenly approached to see what the commotion was about. He was enraged at Handel's explanation, declaring that such an elderly man could not possibly be a good worker. Furiously, he punched Reb Avraham repeatedly, knocking him to the ground. "That is a good worker?" he screamed. "That is a filthy *rabbiner*!"

The Rebbe remained on the rail car.

There were a few people in that rail car to Treblinka who miraculously survived to tell what happened on that fateful journey. They testified that during the trip, which took several hours, the Aleksanderer Rebbe spoke words of Torah to all who would listen, dwelling on the topic of Rabbi Akiva's execution by the Romans.

In that same car was Reb Mendele Alter, the *rav* of Pabinice, who was the brother of the Gerrer Rebbe. After these two giants of Torah and *chassidus* discovered one another, they spent the rest of the trip in quiet conversation.

Another survivor reported that when he and several other Aleksanderer *chassidim* approached their saintly Rebbe, he greeted them with profuse words of encouragement and consolation, spending his final hours in the service of his flock.

Eventually, the journey came to its end. The train reached the clearing in the forest near Lublin which was the site of the infamous Treblinka.

The people aboard the cars understood the terrible fate that awaited them. Displaying an inner peace, the Aleksanderer Rebbe put on the *tachrichin*, the special death garments he had kept with him for the occasion. In a loud voice, he began to recite the *Vidui*, readying his pure soul for death.

Shortly afterwards, he sanctified the Name of Hashem in the gas chambers of Treblinka amidst the people he had adamantly refused to forsake.

BOOK THREE

Destruction of a People

CHAPTER 16

Heroism of the Spirit

THE SAINTLY ALEKSANDERER REBBE WENT TO HIS DEATH like the proverbial lamb to its slaughter. Still, he went as majestically and as proudly as a lion.

His murder, as well as the slaughter of the millions of others, must be understood with all its deeper ramifications. The Aleksanderer Rebbe remained a paragon of dignity to the end, and for all posterity, we will view him as a holy martyr. Holding his head high, he willingly sanctified the name of the Creator, rising above his immediate circumstances to gaze at the event from a higher perspective.

The executioners, on the other hand, bloodied their filthy hands forever with their brutal actions. The Germans will forever retain the stain of their guilt, much as the beast is condemned to remain a beast for all times.

And in contrast, the Aleksanderer Rebbe will continue to remain "the Rebbe" long after he was taken by the lethal fumes of Treblinka. For it was he who inspired and elevated the many souls that came in contact with his saintliness.

The very thought of this *tzaddik* giving up his life in the supreme manifestation of *Kiddush Hashem* helps me rise above the petty anxieties and concerns that life brings and view the world in the proper perspective.

However, it took years of healing for those feelings to crystallize in my mind, for that objectivity was not readily available to me during those difficult years. I was still an adolescent, and although I was compelled by the circumstances to develop the outward maturity and resourcefulness of an adult, I remained an adolescent at heart, battling all the confusion and misgivings that were so hard to understand.

Aware of my own bewilderment, I had a difficult time trying to grasp the diversity of reaction that people displayed in response to the grave conditions of the war.

It is impossible to generalize on how the observant Jews were affected by the deprivations they were made to suffer. Some grieved incessantly after seeing their loved ones taken away from them. These were strong fathers, heads of families, honored members of their communities and resourceful, talented and learned men, but when their loved ones were chosen for the Germans' infernal transports, their hearts burst with pain and frustration.

Still, most of the others simply became numb to all religious feelings. As the war progressed and the conditions worsened, all their efforts were diverted to survival, leaving little energy for religious considerations.

There were some people who became more religious with the trials of the war. My father was among these, becoming

an outspoken defender of *emunah* during that endless, hellish night.

I clearly remember a conversation between my father and uncle one *Shabbos* afternoon in which this issue of *bitachon* came up. That day, when we returned home from Huta, we changed into our *kapotes*, *davened* and sat down to the meager semblance of a *seudas Shabbos* that we still had. It was at the end of December of 1942, only a few days after my Aunt Gutcha and her two daughters were killed in the Rakow forest.

Her husband, Uncle Yechiel Sanik, was understandably overcome with grief at that time. Gittel Feiga was still with us, and as Uncle Yechiel sat talking with my father, he must have observed subconsciously that our family, by contrast with his, was still intact. It is unfair to suggest that jealousy inspired his words; it was merely the obvious contrast between our situation and his that magnified his insufferable loss.

Uncle Yechiel, a devout Aleksanderer *chassid*, murmured softly in a voice cracking with sadness and muffled tears. "Where is the Creator of the Universe, Lipa? Why has He allowed this dark tragedy to happen to me? To all of us?"

"You must not say such things, Yechiel," my father protested. "How can you let your mouth utter such things about the *Ribono Shel Olam*?"

I do not know how I had the nerve to interrupt them at that tense moment, but something caused me to speak up. Never had I been so bold before; brazen outspokenness was completely unacceptable, a violation of all that governed the relationship between father and son in Jewish Poland. Still, I said what was on my mind. I reasoned that if someone did give in to irrational thinking and suspected that Hashem had forsaken us, what right did anyone else have to criticize him?

After all, had we not been made so much smaller now by terror and daily humiliation? In these circumstances, one who doubted deserved to be pitied even in his fallacies.

"Leave him alone!" I cried. "He has just lost his wife and daughters." Only silence, I felt, was justified in the face of such devastation.

My father turned to me, looked deeply into my eyes for a long moment and then turned away. At that moment, if I had been able to crawl away and hide, I surely would have. I suddenly felt terribly ashamed, aware that somehow I had betrayed the father whom I held so dear.

Despite the severe trials and suffering we experienced, however, I can recall many amazing acts of faith under quite incredible circumstances.

One Jew I knew, for instance, chose to endure the beatings by the ghetto police each *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov* rather than desecrate these days by going to work. Once, after he was forcibly taken from his home and beaten, a group of us carried him back to the flat where he lived and hid him inside a crate. And the other boys, the non-religious ones, also helped carry that pious young Jew, showing their respect for his faith and courage. Ironically, in prewar Poland, the irreligious Jews would have nothing to do with their observant brothers, but the war awakened a renewed willingness in these people to remember the *Ribono Shel Olam* and the very fact that they were Jews.

Another show of extraordinary devotion often comes to mind. It was about six weeks after *Pesach*, and quite familiar with the sadistic nature of our German oppressors, we were constantly on the alert, never sure when the next bestial act would be upon us. Since the episode of the previous *Purim*, we had discovered the extent of the Nazis' coldly rational and

systematic methods. It was nearly impossible to hide from them; they were everywhere. Ultimately, the enemy could not even be bribed or bought off. They believed firmly in what they were doing and would not be appeased until the last Jew disappeared from the face of the earth.

Thus, it was with great consternation that we greeted the latest news. We were told that the Germans had dug numerous large holes as big as city blocks just outside of Piotrkow. Following this, we received the frightening instructions that we were not to report to work for the next three days, although we would continue to receive the same rations as before.

We were terrified. It did not take too much imagination to surmise what those holes in the ground meant. People were frantic, helplessly asking one another what would happen. No one could eat or sleep. No matter how we turned the matter over in our minds, our ultimate fates appeared obvious. We would all be killed, and in one stroke, the final liquidation of the Piotrkow Ghetto would be accomplished. These were to be our last days.

Only my father did not worry, unwilling even to discuss the issue. He had a small copy of the *Chorev Shas,* and it was in this book that he sought inspiration during those crucial hours. While everyone around him lost hope and courage, he acted like a true Jew, learning from his *sefer* constantly and *davening* to Hashem.

Whenever we brought up the subject of the ominous holes, my father cut us off.

"I'm not worried," he would say. "If I get shot, I'll get shot."

In this manner, he sat quietly, studying and praying peacefully for three days. In later years, I looked back with

awe and envy at his ability to transcend the anxiety of the moment and view the possibility of death with such a serene outlook.

And then, at the end of the three days, when our nerves were completely shattered, we were lined up and marched to work, as if nothing out of the ordinary had ever taken place.

We never did discover what happened to those holes, our potential graves, or why we escaped death. Perhaps there had been an operational disagreement among the Nazis, or perhaps they had a specific reason for keeping us alive a little longer. Regardless, I quietly thanked the Creator for the miracle of the extension of life, wondering how much longer things would hold out.

CHAPTER 17

Painful Sacrifice

MEANWHILE, AS THE BELEAGUERED JEWS WHO REMAINED in the Warsaw Ghetto's sewers and bunkers readied themselves for their most valiant, quasi-military stand against the Germans, the few thousand Jews who were still in Piotrkow prepared, to the best of their abilities, for *Pesach* of 1943.

Though all the food we received was rationed, we were able to set aside small bits of flour, a few potatoes and various other scraps that would enable us to put together a *Pesach* of sorts. A mere shadow of the holiday we had always celebrated before the war, it was *Pesach* nevertheless, the festival of redemption.

My parents, my uncle, my brother and I celebrated the *sedarim* in the tiny kitchen of our flat, which by that time, was

our entire living space. For me, the air was saturated with gloom and despair. However, it was not the lack of the customary luxuries of *Pesach* that was difficult for me to bear. Rather, it was Gittel Feiga's absence and the thought of her terrible fate that made it so difficult for me to celebrate our redemption from Egyptian bondage.

But unlike that *Shabbos* when I had dared to intervene in the dramatic discussion between my father and Uncle Yechiel, this time I would not give voice to the question that rang out in my mind. Under the terrible circumstances at the time, what point was there in commemorating the exodus from Egypt? But knowing how much pain this question would cause my father, I kept silent.

It was only later that I realized the importance of commemorating *Yetzias Mitzrayim* even while suffering from our own form of slavery. Specifically in that situation, celebrating the redemption of long ago was so crucial, for it affirmed within us a basic faith. Just as we were redeemed from that bondage, so would we be redeemed from our German oppressors. At the time, however, I could not see this truth.

Still, as we read the *Haggadah* that night, I remember my heart racing and my pulse surging as we came to the passage of *Shefoch Chamascha*. For in that verse is the entreaty to Hashem that He pour His divine wrath upon all our tormentors throughout history. I knew that I would truly savor that wonderful day when Hashem would avenge the blood of the Saniks, of Polish Jewry and all of *Klal Yisrael*.

And again, moments later, when we sang, albeit in hushed tones, the incredible-sounding words "Next year in Jerusalem," I said to myself, yes, next year we will be there, and we will look back at the *Pesach* of 1943 as a terrible nightmare.

But amidst the doomed hopelessness that I felt as I sat at

the *seder* of 1943, there opened a wellspring of hopefulness for life and for a better future. That drive, which surfaced frequently, often at the most improbable times, saw me through many a dark day and many a defeating moment. In the coming years, I would comprehend that this inner drive was Hashem's special gift and the means He had granted me by which I would survive.

As we observed the remaining days of that *Pesach* of 1943, I couldn't help but contrast the toned-down *Yom Tov* celebration with the way it used to be before the war, before our world was turned upside down. For example, I vividly recalled the yearly tradition in our home on *Achron Shel Pesach*. This day was the *yahrzheit* of the Vurker Rebbe, and every year on that day a group of men from the Alexanderer *shtiebel* would gather at six o'clock in the morning to say *Tehillim* for two hours. Then, a group of about a dozen men, well-known and prominent elders of the community, would come up to our apartment. There they sat and discussed *divrei Torah* and told stories of *chassidus*, while I served them tea. At eleven o'clock, they would return to the *shteibel* and *daven* with the second *minyan*. The poignant memories of this yearly tradition warmed my heart on this difficult *Pesach* of 1943 and, at the same time, filled me with feelings of pain for the lost way of life that seemed to be no more.

Pesach passed as uneventfully as it had come. As matters turned out, I was rather mistaken in my belief that the next *Pesach* would find us in Jerusalem, for there would actually be two more years under the reign of Nazi terror.

And unwittingly, we proceeded to count down the days of the *Omer*, unaware that we were actually counting the days to impending disaster.

It was at this time that the actions we had performed to

help my sister in Skarzysk began to catch up with us. Somehow, the Germans had unravelled the courier system we employed to communicate with Gittel Feiga when she was alive. A contact person by the name of Novak, who lived near the labor camp's munitions plant, used to carry our messages to the girls at the factory, and he brought their messages back out again. A second courier then did the rest of the work, travelling back and forth between Piotrkow and Skarzysk.

A few weeks after *Pesach*, Novak was arrested, and the other courier was also "invited" to visit the Gestapo. At that point, the courier had come by to see me, giving his firm assurance that he would not betray the Jews that had hired him.

Although I sincerely believed in the courier's good intentions, I was very frightened. I knew full well that many a strong-willed individual had broken down helplessly in the face of the torturous devices of the Gestapo. I could not blame the courier, therefore, when my fears turned out to be well-founded.

So it was that as I counted each day, ostensibly in anticipation of *Shavuos*, I sensed I might also be counting toward disaster. I greatly feared that we would soon be made to suffer for the crime of trying to help Gittel Feiga in her hour of need.

Early in June, two days before *Shavuos*, disaster struck. A few days before, we had begun to work the afternoon shift, starting each day at two o'clock. Now, two Polish security guards came from the gate of the plant to tell us that the Gestapo was waiting outside the gates for two men: Sanik and Marmer.

I knew at once what it was all about, and I knew I was the one they sought. It was not my father, but I, who was

responsible for the transactions with the couriers. I was the one who had arranged everything in those winter months, for my poor father was too distracted by his worries to have negotiated such complex arrangements. Moshe Marmer's sister had also been receiving letters from her family by these illicit means.

My father had risen to leave when someone whispered, "Sanik, send your son. He is still young, and they will spare him."

That advice triggered in my father the sudden show of fortitude that had been lying dormant within him. "I shall do nothing of the kind!" he announced. "I can go. Why should I send my son?"

At that point, I interjected, "No, it is I whom they are after. I was the one who carried on the correspondence with Gittel Feiga when she was in the camp."

My father only shook his head more firmly. "No. This is what I have been waiting for. Now I can actually do something to save my child."

"But Tatteh—" I persisted, giving way to the panic erupting inside.

"Enough, Leibel," he interrupted with finality as he prepared to leave. "You shall remain here, and I will go with them."

It had been quite some time since my father had spoken with such force and determination, and I was not accustomed to it. I had a sickly feeling at the pit of my very being that there was nothing I could say to sway my father from his decision.

As he walked towards the door, he suddenly stopped and came back, but it was not to change his mind. My father owned a silver pocket watch which he always kept with him in his vest; he now removed it and gave it to me. He also gave me

a small diamond, which had been sewn into the lining of his pants. My hand trembled as he placed the precious items into it, and I searched my father's face for some sign of reassurance. Gazing into his eyes, I saw an iron will and even a certain serenity, but no reassurance. In an instant, he averted his gaze to look away.

"Here, take these, Leibel," he said matter-of-factly, as if he were just going out to the corner store. "You might need them."

"Tatteh," I stammered, choking on the sobs I tried so hard to suppress.

"I must go now," he said with certainty. Then, as if in exchange for the watch and diamond, he took a loaf of bread and a tin of tobacco and walked away.

He walked with his head held high, and he went quickly, so they would not change their minds and come for me instead. The whole incident had taken a few minutes, and as I stood watching his receding back, I wondered if I would ever see him alive again. Mr. Marmer was also taken away at the same time.

Oh, how cruel those times were for us. Immediately after my father walked away from me, perhaps for the last time, I had to resume my work on the shift until ten o'clock at night, when I was permitted to march home with the others. It was the first time I had come home without my father.

As usual, my mother was still awake when I opened the door to the room in which we lived. As I entered, she greeted me with her customary welcoming smile and then looked to the doorway behind me for my father.

Several seconds passed, feeling like an eternity, before she asked where my father was. What could I say to my poor mother to assuage her fears? How could I give comfort and

reassurance when we were dealing with demons, not humans?

It was nighttime, well after curfew, and we dared not set foot outside. Besides, the next day we would have to go back to work, and we had discovered long ago that rest was as vital as food, if not more often available. Ultimately, we would be expected to function as if nothing had changed.

We were beside ourselves with grief, but I was resolved not to succumb to despair. I realized that the greatest temptation we faced under the cruel reign of the Reich was to give up hope. Despair was far easier than determination, and it often seemed to make much more sense, but I would resist that lure of hopelessness and maintain my fortitude.

I moved heaven and earth to try and help my father, never resting for a second. I rushed to the highest level of the Judenrat and of the Jewish Police, pleading with them to intervene on his behalf. In my frustration, I begged them, at the very least, to give me some information regarding his welfare. I was more than ready to give up any wealth we still had to save my father from death, but it was to no avail. Nothing helped.

Shavuos passed, and we continued to live with the hope that my father would be spared. I ran from person to person for news, for information, for help, but no one knew anything, and no one could help.

Friday and *Shabbos* after *Yom Tov* passed, and still we heard nothing. Now, my inner reservoir of determination started to subside. We all knew that there was no such thing as longevity in the cellars of the Gestapo headquarters, and that most decisions were made quickly by those agents of Satan. By Sunday, when almost a week had transpired since my father had taken those courageous steps out of the gates

of Huta, I assumed that there was little we could still hope for.

Sunday afternoon, as I was on my way home from work, I heard the dreaded news. By that time, I had been growing increasingly frustrated with the futility of my efforts to save my father. Adding to my despair was the knowledge that no one would transmit our messages to the Gestapo, informing them that we were willing to part with our last penny to ransom my father. In retrospect, this may have helped save my own life, for if the German officials had been told that there were valuables in our house, they would have confiscated them and taken our lives as well.

As I walked home despondently, I met Yosef Benchkovsky, a friend of my father. Motioning for me to draw near, he sadly revealed to me the tidings of my father's death.

A strange set of circumstances led him to learn of the tragedy. On the previous Thursday, the second day of *Shavuos*, the Radoshitzer Rebbe had passed away. An eminent personality from Warsaw, the Rebbe had come to Piotrkow several months before to take refuge with his brother. The authorities of the Judenrat, in deference to the prominence of the Rebbe, permitted his burial in the Jewish cemetery, a privilege that was not easily obtained. That Sunday, with a few Jewish policemen accompanying the coffin to the cemetery, the Radoshitzer Rebbe was buried.

Near the cemetery lived a Jewish couple employed as undertakers. When the Germans arrived, they were permitted to remain on the premises and continue their former jobs. Obviously, Jewish death was the only business that the Nazis would permit to thrive without interruption. When the Rebbe's coffin was brought for burial that day, the couple told the Jewish policemen of the terrible incident they had witnessed a few days before.

They said that on Wednesday afternoon, the first day of *Shavuos*, three people were led by the Gestapo to the gates of the cemetery. Immediately, they recognized my father, Chaim Shmuel Marmer and a third man named Handel.

The local chief of the Gestapo personally ordered the three men to walk forward in the direction of the cemetery, and as they began to walk, he suddenly shot them in cold blood. This officer was later hanged for his war crimes, I am told, an end worthy of a butcher such as he.

I learned a few more details from the undertaker who had witnessed the incident. He said that it had been a cool June day, and my father was not wearing his coat. However, he still had his *tallis kattan* on when he was killed, and he was buried wearing it. It was little solace at the time that he had been buried according to Jewish law, which requires that a murder victim be interred in the garments he was wearing at the time of death.

My father did not die alone. A few months earlier, forty-nine Jews were discovered to have been carrying false Polish internal passports, and they were all shot and left in a mass grave in the cemetery. Thus, as my father and the two other men innocently walked to their deaths on that first day of *Shavuos*, they joined the other bodies in the collective grave.

At no other time during the war did I feel as vanquished as I did then. My father had personified the ideal way of life, and now that he was gone all that he symbolized was gone with him. At that point, my life seemed to have terminated as well.

Nevertheless, I forced myself to return to the realities and necessities of life, aware that I was now faced with the ominous task of informing my mother and brother of the tragic event. I felt as if I had been called on by Hashem in the

midst of my own profound personal weakness to provide strength for the remaining members of my family.

So, after wandering about aimlessly for several minutes, I made my way home. Gazing at my mother and brother, I tried desperately to summon the words that would express the terrible news. But with all my efforts, I could say nothing, and I simply looked down at the floor, weeping silently. I needed to say nothing more, for they understood. Reb Lipa Sanik, the gentle husband and father who had brought so much light into our lives, was no more.

Naturally, we began saying *Kaddish*. And while we said the prayer for my father, we thought of the entire regal and spiritual community of Jews that was now being marched rapidly to extinction. The task of mourning had grown so enormous, we could hardly live up to it any more. And still, despite the overwhelming sadness, life had to go on. No matter how much pain we felt, we had to go back to work each week. Our struggle would have to continue.

It was only after the war that I came to terms with my father's death and truly appreciated the enormity of his sacrifice to save my life.

My father's picture, recovered from the archives of Piotrkow, hangs in an honored place in my home in Toronto. Everyone who comes to visit is struck by the beauty and spiritual strength that radiates from his features. But they cannot comprehend the extraordinary debt I shall forever owe to that man. For although every child is indebted to his father, as to his mother, for bringing him into this world, very few have been granted their lives twice as a result of a parent's sacrifice.

I was left with his incredible appreciation of life, which urged me on in the most hopeless situations, exhorting me to

climb further against all odds and all rationale. "Live, survive, everything will be all right," I always heard him say.

And as I peer into the eyes of my father that look back at me from behind the glass which covers his portrait, I often consider the words of *Chazal, "Masai yagiu maasai . . .* ? When will my actions ever reach the magnitude of those of my forbears?"

CHAPTER 18

Tentative Stability

AS TESTIMONY TO THE AMAZING RESILIENCE OF THE human spirit, we somehow picked up the shreds of our lives. With Gittel Feiga and my father no longer with us, the rest of us, my mother, my brother Shmuel and I, all drew closer to one another.

The fear we all shared that another loved one would be taken from us nearly drove us insane, as did the maddening insecurity we each felt for our own lives.

During that time, I often thought of the ominous curses found in the *Tochachah*: "In the morning you will say, 'If only it was evening,' and in the evening you will say, 'If only it was morning.'" The fright we felt each morning that some satanic hand would descend and pluck us from the world before evening gnawed away at all of us. And the fear we felt each

night as we retired was equally unsettling. Would we be awakened tonight to the infernal shrieks of the SS guards? We fearfully awaited the cries that would order us into the cold darkness to be surveyed yet again for the dreaded selection of victims, as the liquidation of the Piotrkow Ghetto crept toward completion.

The relentless anxiety became so intense that eventually it turned into a permanent condition, one which would never relinquish its hold on the inner reaches of my soul. Even after the war, when there was nothing more to fear, countless nights' sleep were cut short by chilling nightmares in which black-uniformed SS guards loomed over us, with machine guns poised and German shepherds barely restrained.

Still, despite the terror and fear, my father, who had nearly succumbed to the instinct of defeat, beckoned to me from another world. "Do not succumb," I could hear him say. "Save yourselves!" In the end, my father had risen to the highest potential height of a living being. And it was that image of a veritable tower of strength that prodded me on.

Thus it was that the three of us rallied around one another, and except for the hours when each of us went his separate way to work, we became virtually inseparable. We began to allow the current problems to help us forget to some extent the problems of the past and the painful memories.

Indeed, there was no end to the problems that kept arising, as we lived only at the sufferance of the Germans and by their scarce mercies.

One day, during the summer of 1943, it was announced in the ghetto that we were not to report to work. We knew what that could mean, and we were reminded of our narrow escape from death's clutches only a few months before.

The Germans ordered everyone to assemble in our

courtyard, which was now extended by the removal of the surrounding fences. It was obvious that they were coordinating another major thrust in the continuing move to liquidate our ghetto. They started shipping people out on trucks at eight o'clock in the morning, and they continued until about two o'clock in the afternoon.

I was still relatively safe because I worked at the Huta factory, but my mother and brother were not as secure. At first, I considered myself fortunate that I was scheduled to work on the afternoon shift so I could be on hand during the activity at the makeshift *Umschlagplatz*. But when I realized that all the work details were suspended for that day, I suddenly feared that we all faced the possibility of being transported in the *Aktion*.

I had to work hard to keep my dear ones off those trucks. I approached an old friend of my father's who had some minor administrative role in the ghetto.

"Please help me save my mother," I pleaded. "If it means bribes, I am ready to pay. I'll do anything to save her."

We still had some resources hidden away, including the two valuables my father had given me on the day he was taken from Huta. I had a feeling that some day these valuables would prove instrumental in the preservation of our lives.

Suspecting the great extent of the danger which lurked ahead, I was determined to do all I could to prevent it from happening. But to complicate matters on that day of upheaval, it became nearly impossible to figure out exactly what was going to happen. One minute my mother was safe, and moments later, she was marched to the trucks again. If I succeeded in saving her from danger at ten o'clock in the morning, by eleven o'clock, she was in trouble once again.

I thought I would go mad. All day, I ran across the

forbidden lines of demarcation with as much mobility as a Gestapo official. I forgot my fear in the consuming frenzy to keep my family alive. I ran about desperately, shouting requests for my mother's release to whomever would listen. Without hesitation, I approached anyone who I thought would be helpful in obtaining my mother's release. My frantic desperation may have seemed abnormal, but it was very much in keeping with the abnormal circumstances.

Around noon, Warshawsky, the head of the Judenrat, came up to me, obviously exasperated with my behavior.

"You have been driving me crazy with your constant screaming and fussing the whole day about your mother," he growled. "Well, you know what? I am going to send you away among the first!"

I was instantly overcome with panic. From a man in his position, these words were like a sentence of death. I knew that had the matter been left to Warshawsky, I could have been on my way to the grave within an hour.

Enraged, I had to clench my fists to keep from crying out. I wanted to ask him what he expected me to do in the face of the tragic fate that awaited my mother. Did he truly expect me to acquiesce and stand by idly as my mother was forced aboard one of those trucks that would take her away forever? I wanted to hear if this Warshawsky had any concept of what a mother means. But most of all, I wanted to shout out the true disgust that I felt for him at that moment. I remained silent, but in my mind, I addressed him contemptuously: How low have you let yourself fall?

I knew that despite the threats, I had to continue my efforts. All I cared about was saving the lives of my remaining family members, and I went on running and pleading, as if the Judenrat official had never spoken to me. Even if I was

putting myself in danger, I had to prevent them from shipping my mother away.

Ironically, at the end of that day, my brother and I were the ones who found ourselves in the most danger. We were grabbed at the last minute, together with the two sons of Mr. Marmer, who had gone to his death with my father. As the four of us were marched through the streets, the young Marmer, who was not yet in his adolescent years, began to cry as we passed his house.

Upon witnessing the scene, the chief of the Huta factory, who happened to be nearby, stepped forward sympathetically and attempted to intervene on the boy's behalf.

Even in the midst of that inhuman activity, the human condition had not been altogether reduced to naught. I recall thinking at the time that in spite of all the cruelties, we were still living in a world where the sobs of a child could kindle a spark of compassion in the heart of a man who was almost completely hardened.

At any rate, a tumult erupted as an argument broke out over the boy's fate. Miraculously, in the confusion, we all managed to run away, narrowly escaping a certain death.

Thus, despite Warshawsky, my dwindling world remained intact in the Piotrkow which was all but extinct.

It was the middle of the afternoon, and the survivors of that most recent episode of the destruction of a dwindling community gathered to see who was lost and who still remained. But as we offered thanks for surviving thus far, we wondered what horror would next descend upon us.

Only a few weeks later, the Germans liquidated the Piotrkow Ghetto completely and moved us to new places of work on the outskirts of town, where we would be housed in barracks that were just being completed. Together with my

mother and brother, I was employed by Bugi, a company which produced furniture for the military. I had worked as a glass blower at Huta; now I became a carpenter at Bugi. Working in the kitchen of the plant, my mother had access to leftover portions of food which she was able to bring us in the men's barracks. It was at Bugi that I met up with the undertaker who had witnessed my father's brutal murder.

I reflected on our good fortune even in those miserable conditions. Who among my fellow Jews still had a mother living? And at that time, a mother and a brother was really considered an extended family. What an age we lived in if that alone could be considered such a blessing!

While at Bugi, I became friendly with a man by the name of Mr. Weinberg, who worked next to me in the factory. One afternoon, as the year 1943 was drawing to a close, Weinberg expressed optimism over the recent news of Allied advances.

"*Mir halten shoin neinter vi veiter,*" he said hopefully. "We are already closer to the end than farther."

In truth, even in that nearly hermetic environment that was so shut off from the world at large, news had an uncanny way of getting through the lines of German oppression. Up to a point, the news had been bitterly disheartening, but of late, we had heard that the military prowess of the Third Reich was starting to take a serious beating at the hands of the Allied forces. This news came crashing through the barriers that surrounded us to bring us hope that the kingdom of evil would soon topple.

"Listen, Weinberg," I answered cheerfully. "I am willing to accept that prediction, but we still have plenty to overcome before it's all over."

As if to prove the truth of my words, our friendly discussion was harshly interrupted.

A group of German guests was being shown around the factory by Herr Fischer, the German supervisor, who was always accompanied by his German shepherd dog, Ips. They came upon us just as we were immersed in our bantering, oblivious to them.

"Ips, grab that Jew!" Fischer suddenly commanded. In a flash, the dog leapt at my legs, driving his teeth right through two layers of trousers. Thoroughly enjoying the entertainment, Fischer and his honored guests burst into raucous laughter as I cried out in pain and shock.

Herr Fischer and his partner Dietrich had come to Poland in the wake of the lightning victories of their nation's armies, ready to demonstrate how the lives of Jews were to be properly dealt with. His notorious acts of violence made him feared and despised among all the Jews of Piotrkow. Once, when we still had our last tenuous hold on our small ghetto, nine young Jewish boys managed to avoid the six a.m. to two p.m. shift of their work detail and attended the afternoon shift instead. It was these supervisors, Fischer and Dietrich, who ordered the nine young boys executed. That same day, the boys were rounded up and shot.

As I winced from the pain, I couldn't help thinking that Ips, who had acted out of instinct and rigorous training, was morally superior to his master. We could not be safe while our lives were in the hands of men like these.

In a way, I suppose I was fortunate that I got away with torn pants, a bloodied leg and a life-long fear of animals; I knew it could have been much, much worse. But the episode, which had occurred with perfect timing, proved one important fact. Even as the news of Germany's military setbacks began to filter through to us, we had to realize that we could still expect a lion's share of degradation and humiliation.

CHAPTER 19

Persistence of Evil

BY 1944, THE GERMAN MILITARY WAS SUFFERING DEFEAT after defeat, first from Allied bombing raids and, later, from close combat. The imminent American-British offensive loomed across the English Channel to the west, and at the same time, to the south, Mussolini fell. Added to the increasingly dramatic victories of the Red Army to the east, these developments put an end to the fantasies and dreams of a victorious Third Reich for even the most obstinate diehards in Berlin.

After the war, it was learned that, at this point, Hitler, Goebbels and other prominent German officers discussed a peace initiative that would end the war in some spirit of compromise. However, the maniacal Fuhrer opted instead to dig in his heels and see the war through to its dismal finish,

though he knew clearly that he would be bringing ruin upon himself, upon his henchmen and upon his country.

Obviously, even the blindest of Nazi ideologues knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that there was no longer any hope of their winning the war. One would think, then, that this would have brought an amelioration in our condition. It would be quite reasonable to assume that since the Reich's resources and energies had to be diverted to the military effort on all fronts, fewer energies were left for the destruction of the Jewish people.

However, the year 1944 brought only an intensification of the misery for the Jews in the occupied territories, for we were dealing with a national obsession which was not linked to logic or reason. The German agenda regarding the Jews had little, if anything, to do with the realities of the world or with victory in the war.

For example, at the end of April of that year, Hungary's one million Jews were deported to the extermination grounds on Polish soil. Who would have expected the Germans to launch such an undertaking, one that would take the lives of over a half-million Hungarian Jews, at such a late date?

Still, as experienced victims of Nazi brutality, we understood that we were dealing with a war of destruction against the Jewish people. Normal considerations were immaterial in light of the obsessive drive of the German killing machine.

Years later, I heard an account from another survivor that also demonstrated the German obstinacy and consuming drive to achieve Jewish annihilation despite all odds. This man had lived in the Polish town of Klimantow before the war, and his odyssey during the holocaust was different from mine. In April of 1945, he found himself in the Czechoslovakian concentration camp known as Theresienstadt, which

was one of the "model camps" open for inspection by the International Red Cross.

Several thousand emaciated Jewish inmates were in Theresienstadt under the watchful eyes of SS guards and German soldiers. However, the Russian army was approaching from the east. Each day and throughout the night, the roar of cannons and the explosions of the Russian artillery drew closer and closer. The inmates eagerly anticipated the end of the war, but they forced themselves to control open displays of elation for fear of the ever-present German guards. These guards, who logically should have been fleeing from their rapidly approaching enemies, were busy with one task. The soldiers at Theresienstadt were constructing a gas chamber and crematorium with which to destroy the thousands of Jews still under their wing. Fortunately, this facility was never used, for it was not completed on time.

Thus, while 1944 should have been a year when hope and salvation were the orders of the day, I remember it as a year that produced the darkest of memories. In fact, there seems to have been an inverse proportionality between the fortunes of the Allies and those of the poor Jews who were still under the reign of the Third Reich: the greater the subjugation of Germany, the worse we fared.

For a while in 1944, while we were still working at the Bugi factory, we would naively entertain the illusion that we would go on living, that we would survive. Yet during the darker and more realistic moments, we knew even then that it was not to be.

By this time, we had seen the German masters at close range. We knew how tricky they were and how capable they were of lulling us into a false sense of security. We knew that their promises were worthless, and we sensed that our peace

at the factory would be only temporary.

What we did not know at the time was how carefully and effectively the Germans had put their machinery of death into operation. We heard stories, but we could not have imagined the extent to which they were true. It was early in 1944 when we first heard of the gas chambers and the other unimaginable horrors taking place in the concentration camps.

Within days, we were inundated with details, with eyewitness reports of levels of cruelty we could not believe, or simply chose not to accept.

Denial, which was our instinctive reaction, delayed the effects of the rumors for a while. However, it was short-lived. As accounts of the concentration camps, with the rows upon rows of barren barracks, gas chambers and crematoria, started to filter through, we were overcome with an anxiety that has left its residue in every bone of my body.

In addition, even in the early stages of the war, the Germans' "special project" was no secret. When I was growing up, I remember my father reading *Der Heint* each day, a noted newspaper that was not always to be found in a *chassidic* environment such as ours. Early on, my father had taken to poring over the papers in Polish and German in order to learn and understand the meaning of the events unfolding around us. Even then, the master plan of the master race was discussed openly and vividly. One did not have to be too perceptive to realize that the fate of Poland's Jews would be gruesome if these machines of death were actually put to use.

Therefore, when the minute details of the camps surfaced in 1944, we grappled briefly with denial, but we understood with great clarity what lay in store for us.

When I look back at the vague hopes to which we clung

at those times, I wonder how we could still have allowed ourselves these illusions. But I know now that the faint glimmer of hope we managed to maintain guided us through the worst trials and experiences. This spark, which was unwilling to be completely extinguished during that late and most horrible stage of the German occupation, saw me through to my ultimate survival.

Even at the worst of times, I would often take stock, determined to conclude with an optimistic opinion. My father had walked to his death, eager to give up his life for mine. My sister had been shot for the heinous crime of trying to be re-united with her family. Now, many months later, the small bits of information that formed a composite of the concentration camps that awaited us made the fates of my dear father and sister seem enviable. Nevertheless, I told myself, we were still alive, and most importantly, we were together. Perhaps we would really make it through.

My brother and I still received the food that my mother brought us from the kitchen where she worked. This food, which was cooked by her own hands, was so delicious that I have never again tasted its equal. Despite all, we were able to put the problems aside for a while, as we sat together in our barracks, a family circle. We had her near us at the end of our work day, and we were still in Piotrkow. The hope was emblazoned on our hearts: perhaps we would really make it through.

CHAPTER 20

Facets of Defiance

STANDARD DESCRIPTIONS OF THE HOLOCAUST YEARS are of sudden and dramatic events, of trains, of gas chambers filled to overflowing and of Jews in hiding, such as Anne Frank, who was much celebrated through the diary discovered in Amsterdam years after the war. Other well-known accounts of the war are of groups who fought heroically to the last man, as in the case of the Warsaw Ghetto, which ultimately fell and was liquidated in May of 1943. In truth, entire volumes have been written on the theme of armed Jewish struggle during the war. Bialystok, Treblinka, Czestochowa, the list goes on and on.

Long ago, however, I came to a harsh realization. Despite the glory and heroism of the figures who enacted these heroic acts, in reality, they were all failures. Save for the acts of

spiritual heroism such as those of the Kulisher *bekker*, the Weinstocks and myriad others like them, no attempt succeeded in the long run, despite the desperate heroism of the people behind them. For the uprisings were cruelly put down, and for each German killed, hundreds of Jews were eliminated in an instant. I instinctively honor those who did resist in their way, but with mixed feelings: there is honor for their bravery and sadness for their ineffectiveness.

Among the fifteen hundred remaining Jews of Piotrkow that worked at Bugi, there were numerous heroic acts, too, many of which we applauded wholeheartedly. For instance, there was one German foreman who was particularly reviled at Bugi. He was out one day with his wife in his *droshke*, completely at peace with himself, a picture of the finest external respectability. All of a sudden, a Jewish-Polish partisan unit struck him with their revolvers, killing him instantly. Oh, how joyful we were to learn of his well-deserved end. But our joy did not last, for we feared the repercussions of this brazen act.

By that time, we knew to greet such heroic actions with a measure of apprehension and even mounting terror. The Germans would not hesitate to shoot all of us if it so suited them, just to set an example for others. One never knew what they would do.

As it turned out, we were not punished at all for that incident, but we speculated endlessly on the possibilities of our retribution.

"Leibel, what do you suppose they're going to do?" my friend asked me the evening after the assassination.

"Well, meanwhile they haven't done anything, so maybe they'll just forget about it," I answered hopefully.

"The Nazis have good memories," my mother cautioned.

"Perhaps the Germans hated the man, too," I suggested, recalling that the foreman was not that popular even among the Germans at the plant.

"You know, they still need us all for the factories. Maybe they can't afford to kill any more of us," my friend said.

"Wishful thinking," my mother replied. "And even if that is true now, they may not always need us here for these factories."

I could not help thinking that evening that the defeatism that had afflicted my father so early on was now becoming noticeable in my mother as well. I feared that the attitude was really a function of greater maturity or more knowledge. Maybe I was the one who was deluded and living in an unrealistic domain of fantasy.

But in truth, even I realized that my mother was quite right. There was no telling what the foul Germans intended in the long run. After all, the SS and the Gestapo actually persuaded themselves that the Jews, who were always so intent on a peaceful life, were to blame for the start of a world war. It was obvious that a twisted mentality such as theirs was impenetrable for all our repeated attempts to predict their strategy.

And there were other acts of defiance, too. On one occasion, two young boys at our factory decided to escape, planning to join up with underground partisan units to fight the Germans. After hurried planning and arranging, they were successful at getting out of the factory, which was completely surrounded by German and Ukrainian guards, and reaching the forest.

At that point, I, too, became entangled in a plot to escape. A friend of mine was in contact with a *Volksdeutsch* who would permit us to move in with his family for the duration of the

war if we managed to escape.

This was the chance I had been waiting for, I thought excitedly. I knew how tenuous our chances for survival were if we would rely on the mercy of the Germans. Looking around and seeing how few in number we were, I knew that one day or another, I, too, would be taken to where all the others had gone. Suddenly, I had a remote chance of doing something to avoid that end.

Because of the great risks involved, my friend and I looked at the plan from all angles and debated its every peril and risk. There was a good chance we could succeed, but an equal chance that we would be discovered and killed.

In addition, tormenting me silently and privately was the question of leaving my mother and brother behind. How could I possibly do it? I asked myself repeatedly. But as soon as I decided that I could not forsake the two people whose lives were as vital to me as my own, the echo of my father's words resounded through my mind. "If one gets into trouble, the other should run and save his life," he had told us. "If you can save yourselves by any means, do not hesitate." I felt certain that my father's words were meant to be remembered on occasions like this, when there seemed to be something real that I could do to avoid the dreaded fate. My father must have realized that the only way a person would survive was to go his individual way and overcome his sentiments.

Then, just as I was confident that escape was the only recourse, my doubts were renewed. I debated the issue with myself over and over, but I was unable to come to a decision. One day it was "yes," and the next it was "no." I went on like this from day to day.

My friend, however, had enough of this. "Sanik, you've got to make up your mind. Yes or no?"

"I can't decide whether or not to try it," I replied feebly.

"Listen, if you are afraid—"

"It's not that I am afraid," I said. "I am having a terrible time deciding for other reasons."

"But surely you can't expect those reasons of yours to get in the way of our chances to escape," he argued forcibly.

I had to admit to myself that he was right. "I'm sorry." I said feebly, "I just need a bit more time."

"Sanik, try to understand," he declared finally, visibly nervous and upset. "The longer we take in making the move, the more dangerous it becomes. The Germans might hear about it. We have got to go now, if we are going to go at all."

"All right, just give me one more day to decide. I give you my word that by tomorrow I will know one way or another."

Just then, we received a tragic bit of news at the factory. The two boys who escaped had been betrayed, and they were caught by the SS in the forest. They were shot immediately.

This piece of information put an abrupt end to all our plans. My difficult decision would not have to be made after all.

CHAPTER 21

Our Hopes are Crushed

THE SCHEME TO ESCAPE FROM BUGI WAS AN IMPORTANT aspect of my physical and emotional survival, because it brought me to understand the importance of preserving the crucial independence of action. And as the power of the Germans seemed to become so overwhelmingly complete, this control became essential to my psychological well-being. It was vital to believe that I could somehow take matters into my own hands.

The Nazis understood all too well this feeling of independence, and they did their best to destroy it from the outset. Since their arrival in Piotrkow, they pounded into us a surreal terror and fear, making us so afraid that we would not even dream of obstructing the mechanisms of annihilation that were descending upon us.

Thus, in addition to the daily physical struggles with which we had to contend, there was also a more profound conflict between Jew and Nazi that was fought on the battleground of the emotions. Through the fear they instilled so effectively, they sought to vanquish us emotionally and spiritually. We wrestled mightily with this threat in an effort to maintain equilibrium. There were times that we won, but often we did not.

Throughout the trials and suffering we were faced with at every turn, I always managed to cling to some form of boldness and determination that would prevent me from losing my last ounces of courage and resistance.

During the first year of German occupation, my travels to other towns for business had provided me with strength and a sense of worth. Then, during the ongoing nightmare of deportations, my supreme effort at survival and my evasion of the transports made me feel that my own initiatives were indeed worthwhile. And now, during our stint at the Bugi factory, as the war began to approach its devastating climax, we found new ways of giving vent to our spiritual expression and of emotionally outmaneuvering our cruel foe.

At the very foundation of these attempts was our sense of identity and the pride in what we represented. We instinctively realized that the moment we would lose sight of who we were, or forgot what it meant to be a Jew, we would begin to be defeated.

The Baal Shem Tov once remarked so profoundly, "Would you like to know what *galus* is? It is forgetting. And *geulah*? That is remembering."

That, then, was our primary struggle. I was driven by an internal voice that constantly entreated me, "Do not be crushed by them. Do not forget who you are."

And that was the *kiddush Hashem* we were able to perform. By taking pride in ourselves under those daunting circumstances, we glorified the Creator.

I will never forget a young boy in the ghetto by the name of Noach who refused to yield to the Germans' attempts at crushing our identities. Aware of the inherent dangers involved, Noach stubbornly clung to his observance of *Shabbos*, defying the German regulations that demanded unquestioning obedience. This young boy's determination proved to be a tremendous inspiration for all of us. The extent to which he adhered to this *mitzvah* showed us that it was not only *Shabbos* he was trying to uphold. It was his own sense of self, the goal of his spiritual and mental welfare.

Noach would not do work on *Shabbos* even though, according to the *halachah*, the holiness of the day may be violated in order to save one's life. Each week he would hide out and be chased, whipped and threatened when he was found.

"Noach," I commented to him once. "Do yourself a favor and work on Shabbos like the rest of us."

"Leibel, I would rather die," he replied, and I knew he was serious.

"Seriously, you know that you are not going to be able to avoid it forever," I said realistically. "Sooner or later, you'll have to go to work on *Shabbos*; that is just the way it is."

"Then I'll hide," he repeated adamantly. "I'll pretend to go, and in the end I'll conceal myself. I don't know exactly how I'll do it, but they will not bring me to be *mechalel Shabbos*."

Despite my arguments with him, I fully understood what the battle for *Shabbos* meant to him and to the rest of us that witnessed it.

Surprisingly, the other Jewish workers at the factory seemed to understand him just as well. For we all conspired to help maintain the purity of Noach's religious practice. He became a mascot of sorts, a joint and collective cause. We sensed that if we could only safeguard Noach's keeping of the *Shabbos*, we would all be honoring the holy day in our own way.

The unity for Noach's cause was amazing. It was understandable that someone like me, from a well-known *chassidic* family, felt the urge to help such a sacrifice for the *mitzvah*. What was unusual, though, was the assistance that Noach received from Jews who had been totally remote from all religious observance before the war. Jews who were Bundists helped, and Jews who were Communists helped, all joining together for the cause. The root conscience of every Jew moved all of us to help as one. This was our joint spiritual struggle against our Nazi taskmasters.

Each week, when *Shabbos* came, we hid Noach in a crate, covered him with sawdust and removed him as if we were taking garbage out. Not only did we go out of our way to carry Noach to the barracks at the risk of beatings and even death, but we all had to do extra work to complete the quota demanded of each man. Still, we did this all willingly, for it meant a small but important victory for us each and every time.

This was the only form of resistance that was left to us. Noach awakened in us the collective soul we shared as Jews and reminded us of a world we treasured in the deepest core of our hearts.

Outside, the streets of Jewish Piotrkow lay in ruins. Our apartments were now occupied by strangers. Our *shtieblach*, our shuls, our stores and our shops were put to use by the vile

German conquerors. All our Torah learning lay in the scrap heap where the Germans threw Jewish material. And yet, something of our old lives was carried by Noach into the factory-prison each morning. We knew that it was his special mission, albeit an unwitting one, to protect that particularly Jewish part of us that was at such great risk.

As I think back, I can recall other instances of spiritual heroism that served to raise our flagging spirits and imbue us with a drive to live on.

I heard an incredible story about a little girl named Rivkale, one of a large group of children placed in a separate barracks in the concentration camp. The children knew that certain death awaited them, and a few brave youngsters resolved to escape. Led by Rivkale, a small group of children climbed through the small window near the ceiling of the bunker and managed to reach the roof. Terrified, they waited until the SS officer rounded the corner, and one by one, they let themselves down.

Suddenly, the stillness was pierced by a burst of gunfire, and several youngsters fell to the ground, covered with blood. Rivkale escaped into the toilet and crawled into a hole beneath the floor. She lay shivering in her hiding place all night, and the next day, she heard inmates discussing an SS announcement that, due to the escape of one child, a hundred inmates would be executed.

In the several hours that preceded the selection, Rivkale fought an inner battle. Then she remembered her mother, who had kept a small Torah in the concentration camp, until the Germans had discovered it. Furious, the SS had threatened to hang every tenth woman in the camp until the guilty one admitted to the "crime." Rivkale's mother had come forward immediately, fully aware of the grisly death that

awaited her. Rivkale knew what she had to do.

The prisoners were all lined up outside, when suddenly, as if from nowhere, the little girl appeared, her arms raised.

"I'm the girl who ran away!" she cried. "I'm the one you want!"

Rivkale, the precious little Jewish child, was executed for the crime of trying to escape, but because of her heroic sacrifice, a hundred others lived to see another day.

Among the workers at the Bugi factory was a young Gerrer *chassid* who had been a *shochet* in Piotrkow before the war. He was known to all as Reb Leibel Shochet.

During those grim winter months of 1944, Reb Leibel organized a group of *chassidic* boys and men that would gather each week to observe *shalosh seudos* or *melaveh malkah,* depending on the season and on the clock. Gerrer, Aleksanderer, Strykover and other *chassidim* were represented, as we could not afford to have boundaries between us anymore.

As the situation around us just continued to get worse, we met each *Shabbos* evening after work in one of the barracks of the Piotrkow camp, and over a tiny crust of dried bread, we conducted our end of the *Shabbos* "feast." We *davened*, sang *zemiros* quietly and shared words of Torah, together resisting the Nazi bid to devour us totally. This, too, was done at great risk, but this, too, was so important for our survival.

Spring dissolved into summer, bringing us to the last summer under the rule of the German demon. It was a sweltering day in July, and from my workbench inside the oppressively hot factory, I noticed a couple of friends whispering excitedly.

"What's the story?" I asked curiously. "What are you boys talking about?" It had been a long time since I last noticed such animated excitement among my fellow inmates.

"You haven't heard the news?" one of them asked me.

"No! What news?" I asked, getting excited. "What's going on?"

"Poland is about to be liberated, Sanik. We shall soon be free!"

He happily continued, relating the information he had heard. The Red Army had entered Polish territory in the east and was pushing the Wehrmacht back steadily, freeing town after town as they came.

The news spread like wildfire, albeit couched in hushed whispers for fear of the infernal guards, and our spirits soared hopefully. Could it be true? we asked ourselves incredulously. Could it all be coming to an end?

In July of 1944, a provisional Polish government was established, and in August, the underground Home Army reorganized and rose in rebellion against the German occupiers. The Poles fought the Germans for months, often block by block and building by building. The Russian Army was not far away and would, of course, come to the assistance of the Poles before long. And, as the sketchy reports came in, we started to envision our sweet liberation.

But first, there was plenty of work to be done. Truckloads of Poland's valuables began arriving at our factory. Piles of textiles, leather and similar commodities were to be transported back to the Reich. Our German boss, Herr Fischer, personally supervised the shipping, as we built an endless number of crates which would carry the goods back to Germany. We worked with renewed energies, driven by the adrenalin of our hopes and excitement. Let the Germans

take their filthy spoils, we thought. They are on their way out anyway.

Then, at the beginning of October, our hopes died down as suddenly as they had risen. The Polish Rebellion ended with the beautiful city of Warsaw flattened, literally razed to the ground. The Russians did not want a Polish government, for they had their own plans for Poland. So Stalin halted his armies on the eastern bank of the Vistula, close to Warsaw. There he waited until the Germans beat the Poles and bombed the old city of Warsaw to the ground.

Now we saw that nothing had really changed. Our chains were as tight as ever; our hopes were dashed. We settled into a fresh sense of despair, losing all hope of ever escaping the German death machine. Trapped in a world that was totally dominated by the Nazis, all we could do was wait helplessly until we, too, would become the bits of wreckage in the current which was flowing against us. We sank into a gloom that was deeper than any we had known before.

BOOK FOUR

Loss and Upheaval

CHAPTER 22

Transports and Terror

ONE DAY IN EARLY NOVEMBER OF 1944, WE AWOKE AND assembled for the usual roll call to be told that our factory was surrounded by the SS and that we would not be going to work. We were ordered to pack our bags and be ready in an hour.

They did not tell us the reason for this sudden change or what was to happen to us. We were thrown into a panic, and the worst nightmares came rushing into our heads.

Although there was no longer any work, my mother went back to her post in the kitchen. There, she made a large pot of soup for my brother and me, for my uncle and his son and for an elderly *talmid chacham* from Piotrkow to whose needs she tended.

Not long afterwards, as my mother sadly watched us eat,

she said, "My children, this could be our last meal together, the last time I might serve you a meal."

Our instinctive denial emerged at once. "Why do you say that, Mammeh?" I asked. "Everything will be just fine." Needless to say, however, I was not too sure of my own words.

At this juncture, now that exile from our home was both certain and imminent, we gathered our valuables and hid them in the secret hiding place in the attic that my father and brother had constructed in the fall of 1942. We hid all the *sefarim*, some leather, our *Chanukah menorah*, some other silver and my father's *tefillin*. My Uncle Yechiel noted our departure in the *Sefer Yismach Yisrael*. He wrote: "Today we leave the Piotrkow ghetto. Anyone who survives this ordeal and returns to this place should know that the Saniks lived here."

At the last minute, before we left our home forever, I decided to leave my own *tefillin* behind and take my father's *tefillin* with me. I left my own *tefillin* and my father's Rabbeinu Tam *tefillin* in the attic.

Soon, with little left to do, we gathered in the factory's courtyard to discuss the frightening events and contemplate the future. No one knew too much, and we were all confused and terrified. It was part of the sadistic German plan to keep the Jewish people from knowing what would happen to them from one minute to the next.

After several minutes of standing in the crisp November air, we were suddenly ordered to gather at a specific assembly spot inside the factory. We took our knapsacks and stood in the designated area. From there, we were again ordered outdoors, and we were made to march to the train station at the other end of the city. When we realized where we were heading, our hearts sank in despair. We would now all vanish,

as if we had never been in Piotrkow at all, as if we were simply shadows and shapes in dreams.

It was an eerie feeling walking along those streets where we now felt as if we did not belong. We were like total strangers, or even fugitives. The German and Ukrainian guards were the masters of the streets now, not us. Moreover, our Polish neighbors crowded the streets to watch us leave, gazing silently as we marched by. Not only were we leaving, but we were now taking centuries of Jewish existence in Piotrkow with us forever. And silently, they stood by.

My mother, my brother and I marched with the rest, carrying our remaining possessions in the packs over our shoulders. We divided our possessions, as always, into three equal parts. The way was long and the packs were heavy, so my brother and I took turns carrying our mother's pack in addition to our own.

Then, without warning, just as we were approaching the railway station, a group of German guards came running towards us like a team of wild dogs. Before we could understand what was happening, my mother was grabbed by the German monsters and taken away, leaving us horror-stricken. Still holding her pack in my hands, I stared in the direction that she had disappeared, overwhelmed by the tumultuous thoughts that raced through my mind.

Would I ever see my mother alive again? We had no opportunity to embrace her, or hand her belongings to her, or say the endearing and encouraging words we longed to express. Would we ever be reunited with her once the nightmare was over? Would we ever feel her comforting warmth or eat the food she cooked for us? Would there be another *challah* baked by her gentle hands, or another *Shabbos* candle lit? Would she die, my dear and cherished

mother, alone among strangers?

All these questions flashed in my head in the instant that I stood gazing at her rapidly receding figure. And I reminded myself that I was not only ignorant of my mother's future, but equally unaware of what awaited me and my brother.

Moments later, our guards ordered us into the freight cars that were waiting at the station. We knew that these trains had already carried countless Jews across Europe to unknown destinations, and we greatly feared what the future would bring.

Crammed tightly into the freight cars, we moved slowly along the tracks. The air was filled with noise. Among the passengers in the cars, some were alert and excited, others were fearful, and still others simply sank into apathy. Our utter helplessness was the one quality that united us.

Ironically, Warshawsky, the former head of the second Judenrat, was in our freight car. Stripped of the power to destroy or to save lives, he was not giving any of his obscene orders now. In fact, the same Warshawsky who nearly sent me to my death once long ago was now even acting friendly to us. In his mind, he must have been afraid to face the same men he once ruled over. He'll need all the help and protection he can get, I thought as I turned away, too frightened to pay attention to him now.

As the train moved, we rocked violently to and fro, knocking into one another. With time, the discomfort increased, and the air became oppressive and heavy. Every once in a while, I would check to see if my mother's knapsack was still by my side, and my thoughts would return to her. Had I lost her, just as I lost my father and sister? Or would the fragments of a life long gone be somehow salvaged?

CHAPTER 23

Arrival in Czestochowa

LULLED BY THE CLACKING OF THE TRAIN WHEELS, IT WAS almost tempting to slip into silent delirium, swathed as I was in feverish perspiration and terribly alone with my thoughts. With the stench mounting at the same rate as our desperation, each long hour we spent in the boxcar was filled with incomprehensible terror. Yet, as before, I was determined to rise above the conditions without losing or giving up any part of my sanity.

I pondered the implications of the horror around me. Despite the experience I already had since the German occupation, I still could not fathom the evil that continuously unfolded on all sides. After all, were the Nazis not human beings just like myself? What could have moved human beings to such unspeakable levels of inhumanity to others?

Some time after the war I discovered the Nazis' justification for their violence and cruelty. Heinrich Himmler, the man who was behind the Final Solution, delivered a speech in 1943 in the city of Poznan: "Whether other people live in comfort or perish of hunger interests me only insofar as we need them as slaves for our culture . . . it is a crime against our own blood to worry about them." Bestial brutality had been elevated to the plateau of an "ideology," self-centered and sadistic though it was. The Germans simply believed that the lives of certain people were valueless, other than in their potential to serve the goals of the Aryan "supermen." The masses of Germany were exposed to these theories, eventually accepting them as reality. It is in this philosophy that the seeds of the holocaust took root.

Finally, our journey came to a halt. We pulled into the train station of Czestochowa, where we remained locked in the freight cars without food or water while the Germans tried to decide what to do with us. The utter helplessness was overwhelming. We knew that our lives were totally in the hands of others, and it was they who would decide if we were to live or die, stay in this labor camp or be shipped to another. The Germans had the power of life and death over us. We had to remain silent.

From my freight car, I could hear the talking outside. The representative of the Gestapo headquarters in Piotrkow was having a heated discussion with a local Gestapo official. They had no place for us, it seemed, in Czestochowa, and there was no useful work for us to do there.

"Listen, we were given orders to bring them here to Czestochowa," I heard one of the disputants say.

"As I told you before, we are filled to capacity," the local official stubbornly retorted. "We have neither room nor

work for them here. We don't want them here."

"Well then, perhaps you would like to suggest what I ought to do with them."

I tried to imagine the discussion taking place in a different setting. It certainly would have made more sense if the subjects of contention were disposable and expendable objects, instead of human beings. It was difficult to fathom that they were actually speaking about hundreds of people like inanimate commodities. But the conversation went on.

"I am afraid that I have no choice but to leave them here," the first voice said.

"We have enough of that garbage here already," the local Gestapo official insisted. And so on and so forth. Meanwhile, the Jews in our car were beginning to pass out from thirst and lack of fresh air.

As the argument continued, we learned that the Germans had recently evacuated a great number of Jews from the ammunition factory in Skarzysk, which had come under sustained Allied bombings, and brought them to Czestochowa. Therefore, the camp was crowded already, and they had no use for us. Eventually, though, the SS officer from Piotrkow prevailed, and we were finally allowed to enter the camp.

We were admitted to Czestochowa, and we were overcome with relief at just being allowed to disembark. After the long train ride in such cramped conditions, we now went wherever they told us to go, without asking any questions.

Czestochowa was a factory-camp similar to Skarzysk, inasmuch as it employed slave labor for industries that produced war material. It, too, was not a death camp like Treblinka or Auschwitz, yet, in its own way, it was really little more than a different sort of death factory.

Before the war, Czestochowa had been a thriving Jewish

community, similar in many respects to our own. Under German occupation, Czestochowa was converted into a ghetto. However, in the spring of 1943, the Jews of the ghetto, perhaps inspired by the Warsaw uprising, rebelled against their German oppressors. In June of that year, the Germans proceeded to commit the final destruction of the Czestochowa Ghetto, and soon, a slave labor camp that would serve the Reich's war effort was constructed nearby.

Now, along with hundreds of fellow Jews from Piotrkow, I joined the six thousand inmates who were already in the camp. I realized immediately that the people around me were reduced to a bestial level and worked to death in unimaginable conditions. Coming from Piotrkow, where our factory had still been considered the earlier stage of the Nazi processing of human beings, we were now faced with a sudden and rude awakening.

They marched us to our barracks. The unit was a cramped, awful place, crawling with lice and other vermin, and afflicted with every disease a human body can contract in such crowded quarters. That was what welcomed us to our new surroundings on that chilly mid-November afternoon.

The Jewish people we encountered there looked like they were from some other planet. They wore nothing but tatters, which barely covered their skin. Closer scrutiny revealed that these were not really clothes at all, but paper-like materials which barely covered their nakedness. They certainly did not provide any protection in the face of the bitter Polish winter, which had already begun in earnest. The skin of these inmates was covered by something else, though—festering, running sores. This was largely due to their work with weapon grease in the factory. The oil got into their wounds and infected them, causing a condition for which they

received no medicine or treatment. Unfed and unwashed, these people were barely alive and scarcely recognizable as humans, as fellow Jews.

At the time, we were still well-dressed, still *mentschen* in a sense. Not they. The people doing the work around us had once been *rabbanim* and *shochtim*, tailors and bakers, *yeshivah* students and Bais Yaakov girls. They had once aspired and dreamed, rejoiced and grieved. Now, as I looked upon my fellow Jews, my brothers and sisters, I saw an indiscernible and indistinguishable mass of human misery. I shuddered to note that in this state, they were little better than the beasts of the field and treated much worse.

The tragic scenes I saw in that place defy belief. Young Jewish girls were monstrously abused by their SS captors. How pure they were, those Jewish girls from Poland in those years, how refined and well brought up! Many of them were modest students of Bais Yaakov, trained in the lofty ideals of Jewish womanhood. Now I saw them dragging their skinny, weary bodies, hardly able to hold their heads up straight. The torture and the hunger were too much for the strongest men to endure, let alone these sheltered and protected girls, the flowers of the Jewish people.

I, who thought I had seen so much cruelty and suffering since 1939, now realized that I had seen nothing in comparison to what these girls had experienced. Before my eyes, they were whipped and abused for not moving fast enough or for going too fast, for holding their heads in a certain way or just for a certain look the Germans thought they detected in the young girls' eyes. Or, as was often the case, the girls were beaten simply because a German monster felt like abusing and whipping them for his own perverse pleasure.

I could hardly bring myself to look at these girls, for each

time I did I saw the face of Gittel Feiga staring back into my eyes. And I wondered if she had not actually fared better than these poor souls who had to endure so much senseless pain and shame before they, too, would surely die.

Even in the worst days in Piotrkow, I had not seen such sights. I saw Germans literally beating the flesh off countless Jews. Oh, how my heart still aches when I recall those terrible scenes! I will never be able to forget them.

The Jews from Piotrkow really had nothing to do, as there was no room in the Czestochowa work system. We stayed together, fearful and quiet, but slowly losing all of our shame. We were men and women together in a place crawling with every imaginable vermin, rats, mice and lice. We could not change our clothing, and we grew more filthy and disease-ridden by the day. We were simply the next group of people the German machine would process, I thought miserably. We would just wait our turn in line.

I remember on one occasion, a Ukrainian guard called Butonschlager, a well-known sadist from Skarzysk, found me doing something of which he disapproved. I cannot even remember what it was, but he was determined to "punish" me for the crime. As I saw him preparing to beat me, I put my hands up to protect my head, but the force of the blows fell equally on my head and fingers. He beat me so hard that I was able to feel the concussion his stick had made in my head for a long time afterwards and I had a deep hole in my middle finger for months. And even after the physical wound healed, the humiliation, the mental pain and the memory of the torture I suffered were not so easily erased. Indeed, those feelings have never left.

Degradation is a powerful tool, and the Germans perfected its techniques. Our human deterioration was no accident,

nor was it an inevitable feature of the conditions in the camps. Rather, the humiliation was a conscious methodology, an instrument of policy, a sure-fire way of making us quiet and docile.

The sullenly proud Piotrkower Jews clung together as a group with their very own group mentality. And the Germans, sensing that we might become troublesome or restive, set their attentions now to changing this mentality. To accomplish this, they sought to degrade us in the same way the other inmates were humiliated by putting us into conditions where we could not uphold any sense of dignity or worth. They insisted that the upstanding, religious young men and women live together in common barracks, insulting and undermining the fundamental sensibilities that we all shared.

On another level, the degradation was injected into the very basics of our hygiene. The so-called latrine was filthy, and we, too, were inevitably covered with sweat and dirt. We spent day after day in that camp doing nothing but lowering ourselves further and further into the abyss of oppression.

It was not very long before we all became despondent. At the very pit of my stomach I now felt a despair, the likes of which I had not yet known through all the trials I had suffered. I viewed the creatures who walked all about me as ghosts, and I knew that I would soon be one of them.

In Piotrkow there had been some resistance to the suffering, but here it was not possible. The struggle to maintain any measure of control over one's life was almost impossible. And in terms of rebellion, a mere angry glance could mean instant and certain death. Planning resistance among a shifting, transitory prison population that hovered closer to death than life could not even be done in our dreams.

Then, one day, the Germans decided to send us away. As the borders of the mighty Third Reich continued to contract in the face of the Allied military initiatives, the authorities in Berlin decided that the retreating armies of the Fatherland should bring their human cargo back with them.

This would begin the infamous death marches, with inmate populations of concentration camps all over Poland once again uprooted and transported. And so, the Jews of Czestochowa were led to the railway station where they would be taken on yet another journey.

I had been in Czestochowa several weeks in total, but I had aged several years. Now I went quietly with the rest as the SS loaded us onto the trains, wondering where this newest stage in my journey to oblivion would take me.

There were two German guards assigned to each rail car, and when they grew bored during the long stretches of the trip, they allowed themselves to talk to us. They told us that we were going to a very large camp and that we would not be killed. Life would not be easy, they added, but we would not die. For days, that was all the information we were given until finally, the Gehinnom of that train ride came to an end.

It was the end of December, and we had arrived in Buchenwald.

CHAPTER 24

The Vale of Tears

SEEMINGLY ENDLESS LINES OF SS MEN IN THEIR NEATLY laundered black outfits waited for us as the door of the boxcar was pulled open. With pistols and machine guns trained on their harrowed victims, the SS guards cracked their glistening black whips in the air around us.

"*Raus! Schnell! Raus!*" they cried menacingly. "Move! Quickly!"

Those of us who were still able to exit with their own energies filed out of the cars while the SS guards shouted and showered us with blows and kicks. "*Raus, Juden! Schnell!*" they yelled, over and over. Many SS men stood with vicious dogs that were tugging at their leashes, snarling at the Jews they were trained to hate.

This was our reception committee to Buchenwald.

We got out of the train as fast as we could and somehow absorbed the violent combination of whips, clubs and the menace of the dogs.

After a short march, we reached a courtyard with a fence enclosure. Soon prisoners came up to the fence, and I looked at their faces to see if I could recognize anyone. I was grateful that I had my brother Shmuel by my side, and I felt slightly less alone.

Just then, I heard my name called.

"Psst, Sanik," a familiar voice whispered.

I turned around and stared at the person who had called me, not recognizing him immediately. Then I realized it was Mr. Gomberg, the chief of the Jewish Police in the Piotrkow Ghetto.

"Is that you, Mr. Gomberg?" I asked, much happier to see him now than I had ever been at the sight of him in the ghetto a couple of years before. He must have realized how terrified I was, for his next words were of reassurance.

"Yes, it is," he replied quietly. "Listen, Sanik, you don't have to worry. You will be processed, disinfected, shaved and given prisoners' clothing, but you will not be killed."

It was a mercy to hear these words in this terrible place, for I had been sure we were about to be put to death. However, my relief was mixed with continuing terror as the SS guards drove us on from one place to the next with screams, shouts, curses and violent blows.

First, we entered a room where we were told to disrobe. In an attempt to make the best of the humiliation, I told myself that it would be a relief to get rid of the filthy clothes I had been forced to wear for nearly two months. We got undressed and proceeded to a table where other prisoners took down registration data and collected our remaining

valuables. That was how efficient the processing system was: age, size, date of birth, distinguishing marks, color of hair and of eyes, and other personal information was recorded. Even though the Germans considered us sub-humans that were only fit to be worked and starved to death, they were nevertheless meticulous in recording all data.

From the first room, the SS escorted us to another chamber. Here we saw long cords hanging from the ceiling that had scissors suspended to them. We lined up at each of these ropes, and other prisoners cut our hair. More accurately, they ripped our hair from its roots, for these "barbers" had to work against the clock. German methods of production demanded that they did their jobs quickly and processed us all with unusual efficiency.

From this process, we emerged looking like newborn infants, albeit rather gaunt ones. Our bodies bore scars from the scissors, and with our hair had disappeared part of our identity. It was difficult to recognize one another, for we all looked like strangely shaven, frightened creatures.

After this, we were taken to still another room, where small tubs of water, discolored by disinfectants, awaited us. We stepped into the water, which reeked of the chemical substances, and we felt it painfully seeping into our wounds. Our bodies burned as they pushed us into the water and out again. Then they gave each of us an injection before continuing our processing.

We were now handed pieces of soap and pushed roughly by the SS deeper and deeper into the dark building, down long stairs and into the depths of its basement.

Many of us were sure that the Germans would finish us off then and there in the inevitable gas chambers. But in my mind, I still heard the words of Mr. Gomberg and the

comments of the two SS guards who travelled with us from Czestochowa. "You won't be killed," they all said. Still, while this was consoling, the war had taught me to expect surprises, and I was not without fear.

The basement was lined with shower heads, and many of the frightened prisoners sniffed them warily. Everyone was afraid that these would emit the gasses that would surely kill us. In a matter of seconds, though, we saw that only water emerged, and I actually took the only shower I was to have until the day of liberation. I do not remember when I have enjoyed bathing nearly as much as I did then, savoring each second that the cold water poured down upon my tired body.

For clothing, they gave us each a heavy prison shirt, a striped jacket, a pair of matching pants, striped caps with brims and a pair of wooden shoes. They then gave us each a number which had to be sewn onto the sides of our prison uniforms. I was no longer a person by the name of Leibel Sanik; now I was number 12581. Even the number was not fully my own; it was simply the recycled number of an inmate who had died.

The loss of individual identity was a major factor in our dehumanization. We had been stripped of our families, our valuables, our clothing, our pride and, now, our names.

I am amazed when I remember how, even at that terrible time in the valley of death, we were able to retain a macabre sense of humor. Glancing around at one another as we emerged from the final stage of our processing, we burst into laughter. There we stood, hairless and nameless, looking as if we had been dressed by a comedian haberdasher. Tall men were wearing short pants, and smaller men dragged themselves around in oversized clothing.

"They forgot to take accurate measurements," I mused.

"Well, that'll be the last time I go to that tailor," someone responded.

After a few seconds of indulging in this merriment, however, we saw ourselves for what we had now become. As "Buchenwald Men," we were vulnerable creatures with no identity, crushed into emotional apathy.

The Germans had been careful to confiscate everything we had brought with us. For some, it meant losing a last piece of jewelry, for others, a cherished photograph of a loved one. Among the possessions taken from me were my father's *tefillin*, which I had succeeded in carrying into Buchenwald with me. Through all the tribulations since leaving Piotrkow, through nightmares of train journeys and through the cesspool of Czestochowa, my brother Shmuel and I had kept these sacred *tefillin* with us, somehow managing to put them on each day, if only for a few fleeting moments. At those times, quickly swallowing the words of *Krias Shema*, we would feel that we were still linked to our dear father and to *Yiddishkeit*. But now, even this was gone, and the loss was immeasurable.

We learned quickly that Buchenwald represented the inner core of Gehinnom, a place that could be devised only by the most diseased of German minds. This would be our home now, and none of us had any idea if we would make it out alive. There were no illusions as we went to sleep in our small space on the floor of the barracks, inhaling the sour odor of the other prisoners.

In these circumstances, there was no room for someone who was too lame or too sick to rise and follow the vile orders that were constantly shouted at us. The SS would only be too glad to dispatch any Jew to another life with a quick bullet or with cruel lashes of their whips. The processing of the Jews

was done with the same precision and famed German organization as any other industrial activity, and in this way, the whole camp was run. A German guard would shoot a Jew as quickly and with as little remorse as if he was just tightening a loose screw in a machine in order to keep it operating efficiently.

Around us, there was an emptiness and bleakness in the forests which corresponded to our inward isolation. We were surrounded by barracks, fences, vast stretches of forests and miles and miles of barrenness. The isolation and the cold made us feel terribly alone.

Buchenwald had a powerful sense of absence about it that was peculiar to all German concentration camps. Located deep in a forest near the city of Weimar, where the German Republic of 1919 was founded, it was one of the largest camps in the German framework of horror at that time.

In that place, I felt remote from my own self, and I understood what my poor father had gone through before the end. He, too, felt so very alienated from himself, and for this reason, he was able to approach his own death with something akin to serene indifference.

In addition to serving as an internment camp for thousands of Jewish inmates like myself, Buchenwald was also a penal colony, where many prisoners of numerous nationalities were incarcerated. We Jews, however, were in a sub-camp all to ourselves, and our conditions were dramatically worse than those of the other inmates.

With time, it became obvious that the emotional suffering to which we were subjected was far worse than the physical pain, the hunger, the filth and the stench that surrounded us.

The universal need to feel recognized as an individual

made it very difficult for us to simply fade into anonymity. All of a sudden, we had to accept that we were now regarded as lesser beings than the animals of the field or the birds in the skies.

I was now living in almost total isolation among strangers, with no close contact save for my brother. From time to time, I imagined that someone from among the Polish prisoners was calling my name, and my heart would skip a beat. Someone recognizes me, I thought. Perhaps it is someone from Piotrkow who was familiar with my family, or someone I dealt with since the German occupation began. However, these hopes were quickly crushed, and I was not approached by anyone.

I remained prisoner 12581, as sore-infested, miserable, filthy and hungry as the rest. And I realized that my fantasies of existing as a vital and dignified human being were slowly removing me from the reality of my world. These hopes were like the mirage that appears before the eyes of the desert traveller, luring him into a realm of fantasy.

CHAPTER 25

The Rigors of Buchenwald

MY BROTHER AND I SPENT SIX OF THE MOST MISERABLE weeks of our lives in that valley of tears known as Buchenwald. The images of horror and despair that were so plentiful in the camp remain clear in my mind until today. Often, when I look into the mirror, the horrid reflection of number 12581 which was sewn onto my jacket looks back at me with the dazed and lost look known so well to concentration camp survivors. I see a typical "Buchenwald Man," whose immobile eyes are filled with terror, and I remember the hideous appearance we all presented. We were thin and haggard, and the skin hung pitifully from our bones. There was no one in the camp who was not covered from head to toe with sores, caked blood and open wounds. The inevitable stench that came from unwashed human flesh

attacks my sensory memory. And as I recollect this picture, I stand in awe of what I had become in those weeks.

Occasionally, I try to talk about the appalling experiences that I and so many others were forced to go through. I begin to describe the scenes and outline our daily routine, but usually, I stop right away. How can anyone adequately describe the indescribable? And even if there were words that could accurately depict the events, who could possibly believe them? In moments of incredulity, I, too, ask these questions. How could it have happened? How could the *tzelem Elokim* be so lowered into the depths of degradation?

Throughout my stay at Buchenwald, we followed the same routine day after day. We awoke at about three o'clock every morning to our meal of thin soup and carefully divided bread. It was our single meal of the day, and we were always plagued with the inner conflict between eating all of it at once or putting some of it away for later. But since starvation was our constant companion, the question was usually rhetorical at best, for within minutes, we would devour the tiny ration. And, oh, how we watched as a fellow inmate would cut the bread with a sharpened spoon into equal parts. How careful would he have to be to protect himself from the jealousy and resentment of his fellow inmates.

Then, before dawn, still ravenously hungry, we were marched out into the cold morning to line up for roll call. This usually took several hours, and we shivered helplessly in our places, our skinny legs barely supporting our frail bodies.

One row of prisoners after another stood there on *Appel* in the sub-zero temperatures each morning. No underwear or overcoat kept the howling, raging winds of the German forest from our bones, making the interminable waiting seem like sheer torture.

Number after number, barrack after barrack, we were called and counted. If by chance there was an error, the process of counting started all over again, and we were made to stand in our places for another two hours. The Germans were efficient and meticulous in the matter of roll calls, and there was no room for miscalculation.

Even the labor we performed at Buchenwald was of no real value. Each day, before dawn, we trudged to our designated area of work and spent the day carrying small stones from one place to another. When night fell, we limped back to our barracks on empty stomachs to pass another night of turmoil, pain and nightmares.

The floor of the barracks was marked with chalk, appropriating a small space for each person as his sleeping and resting quarters. Thirty-five people were crammed into a space that was adequate for five. Obviously, there was not enough room for all of us, and I can still hear the cursing and yelling that went on each night.

"Get your feet away from my head!" someone would cry in exasperation.

"Don't step on me again, idiot!" another would shout.

I cannot blame the unfortunate prisoners for these displays of hostility, for how is it possible to act with civility and respect when one is in a state of starvation and deprivation? We felt scarcely human by this point, and when we looked at each other, we saw those strange creatures we beheld when we first entered Buchenwald's gates. Like them, we began to lose all traces of the self-respect that so distinguished the refined and learned Jews of Poland.

Living in such close quarters made us all irritable. We quarrelled and threatened each other because we were powerless against our German captors. We argued over each

morsel of bread that was to be divided, turning our rage on other Jews because there was nothing we could do against our tormentors.

When I was in Piotrkow, I had been able to retain a measure of hope. The future would be brighter, I always imagined, and Jewish life would return to the *Yiddengasse*. However, in Buchenwald it took a superhuman effort to retain even the faintest glimmer of optimism. So had we been reduced.

Yet, my father's entreaty that we remain hopeful despite all odds would ring in my ears frequently, lifting me up from the pit of despair. Just as Yosef saved himself from disaster in Egypt by keeping the image of his father before his eyes at all times, I, too, never let myself forget my father's plea. I felt a sacred obligation to my father to live on and to make some sense of his supreme sacrifice for me. He gave his life for mine, and I had no right to take that life lightly. I owed it to my father.

So, against all logic and contrary to the mood that permeated the surroundings so completely, I held on firmly.

The agonizing hunger and deprivations we endured often led us to acts of desperation. I clearly recall an incident that made me realize how far I had fallen.

A Polish *kapo* was in charge of our barracks, and he enjoyed special privileges that were not within our grasp. He had the luxury of a real bed in the corner of the barracks, and of course, a much larger portion of food. He obviously relished these rights, utilizing them openly at the expense of our emotional subjugation.

One day, I watched as the *kapo* cut huge slices of bread with his knife and stuffed them into his mouth. I could not take my eyes off the bread clutched greedily in his hands. In

my starvation, the finest cuisine in the world could not have competed, at that moment, with a bite of the bread the Pole was cutting.

Just then, a small piece of the bread fell on the floor. I dared not pick it up, for I knew he could kill me. But unable to resist the temptation, I pleaded with him as politely as I could to allow me to pick it up. To my surprise, he agreed, and I dove for the tiny piece like a drowning man for a rope. My gnawing hunger made me oblivious to the glaring reality that I was so willing to humiliate myself.

One night, a strange event took place. A delegation of Jewish inmates suddenly appeared in our barracks. One man introduced himself as Gustav, the chief of all the Jewish *kapos* in Buchenwald. After some brief words of introduction, Gustav made an unusual request.

"We want to know the names of those who have betrayed or mistreated their fellow Jews," he said firmly.

We were amazed at this Jew who spoke so boldly in a German place of death and at the radical words he had spoken.

"Give us the names of the Jews who betrayed their brothers," he repeated, noting our hesitation.

When the traitors among us were finally found, they were beaten before our eyes. I remember specifically two brothers from Piotrkow whom I knew as abusers of other Jews. The manner in which they were punished that night is still vivid in my mind's eye.

On the night before we eventually left Buchenwald, Gustav came in to our barracks and delivered the following speech to us. It was an ominous reminder in those desperate and seemingly hopeless times that a day of reckoning would yet come.

"Remember," he said, "many of us will die under the Germans, but not all of us. There will be many who will survive. We will take revenge. They cannot kill us all, no matter how hard they try. And remember this, too. If you betray your fellow Jews, we will find you after the war, and we will bring you right back here to punish you. You will see this place again if you forsake your people. I promise you."

It was true that each person had to do whatever was necessary to save his own life, and it was also true that many Jewish officials had no choice but to take jobs which made them dominate other Jews. In fact, many of these did all they could to help their brothers instead of abusing their power to betray them. However, as we all knew, there were men like Warshawsky, of the Piotrkow Judenrat, who were of an entirely different breed. It was of such men that Gustav was speaking.

I later learned that Gustav had been at the camp since the days when the Germans had rounded up the largely Jewish intelligentsia of Poland in 1941. Somehow, he had survived, and he used his position to help others. I discovered that this man saved the lives of several hundred Jewish children, one of whom is presently a prominent *rav* in Eretz Yisrael.

I will never forget that surprising visit and the ray of hope it signified in those terrible days.

Then, without warning, after about six weeks in Buchenwald, the unexpected happened. The Germans selected five hundred people to be transported out of the camp, and my brother and I were among them. Most of the group were Hungarian Jews who, having been exposed to the trials of the war later than their Polish brothers, were much healthier and more fit for travelling.

The ecstasy I felt at being chosen for transport was

tempered by a crushing blow that occurred at the same time. During the selection process, a cousin of mine was numbered five hundred and one, and he was taken out of the line. This cousin, who also was named Sanik, had already lost two children to the holocaust, and not long afterwards, he died in the camp. His wife, who survived him, refused to marry again in the years after the war. My father had loved this man, and I mourned for the tragic death that had occurred so unnecessarily. Just for being one place too late in line, he had lost his chance to live. That was how fate exercised its quirks in the darkness of the holocaust.

As for us, my brother and I sat together quietly, ready to be taken to some new experience, for better or for worse.

CHAPTER 26

The Railroad Brigade

NOT LONG AFTERWARDS, WE BOARDED A FREIGHT TRAIN in which each car carried between eighty and one hundred Jews. We were not divided in any particular way; the few Polish Jews mingled with the vast majority of Hungarians who made up the transport. As I stood in the dark car, I listened to the flurry of Hungarian that was spoken all around me. I comprehended not one word of it, but nevertheless, I felt an overpowering kinship with these fellow Jews, these fellow victims of Hitler's mania.

And there was yet another distinction that had not been made by our tormentors. Among the Jews on the train there were those, like myself, who were *chassidic* or had a Torah background, and there were others who had been brought up in a totally different manner. They were the Neologues,

roughly equivalent to today's Reform Jews. However, we were now all thrown together on our journey to yet another unknown destination.

The train ride from Buchenwald lasted a long time, perhaps a few days. My sense of time became distorted by the confusion, the fear and the helplessness, and eventually, I stopped trying to keep track.

Every once in a while, the train was stopped, and we were let outside. There were no toilets in the railway cars, and we were supposed to use these few minutes to take care of our personal needs and get some air. Those who exceeded the designated time were peremptorily shot. After a while, I no longer bothered to make the effort to step outside, for I was overcome with hopelessness. Self-respect and courage could be beaten even out of the strongest person, I learned, and I had never claimed even remotely to be among the strongest.

Finally, we arrived. Locked in our freight car, we waited impatiently for the doors to open. When they did, we were greeted by an officer who informed us of our new identity. We were now the Tenth Railway Brigade, and our job would be to fix the train tracks that had been bombed by the Allies. To fill out our ranks, the SS brought in another hundred German prisoners who were ordinary criminals, perhaps, or political dissidents.

By the time we were released from the train, our roll taken and our group organized, it was night. We had not eaten since our departure from Buchenwald, but our hopes of receiving food now were quickly dashed. At once, a *kapo* stepped forward from among the German prisoners and began to address us. Although a prisoner himself, he lacked no hatred for Jews. His brief greetings are still indelibly emblazoned in my memory.

"You are here to work," he said. "You will be taken by train to the locations where the tracks need repairing, and you will do the job that is required. You will receive food only when you work. You have not done any work until now, so you will not be fed. A day of no work is a day of no eating. Only when you do work tomorrow will you receive any food."

Obviously, the agony of our trip and the suffering we had endured were not sufficient to entitle us to the food that would sustain our lives. We had not worked!

Well, I thought, if I do wake up in the morning, and I survive a whole day of work, at least I know I will be fed then. I tried to put the gnawing hunger out of my mind, but I had little success.

Then, as I debated the issue in my mind, the *kapo* suddenly fixed his gaze on my brother, who was at that time barely thirteen. With his head shaven and his prison uniform hanging from his emaciated body, he looked even younger and frailer than his years.

"How old are you?" asked the *kapo*.

"I am fourteen, sir," my brother replied, fearing the worst in a system where the smallest crust of bread had to be earned by hard, manual labor.

"Report to me tomorrow," he told my brother and walked away from him as suddenly as he had approached.

We had no time to ponder the implications of this strange summons, for we were immediately taken to our new quarters. Our "barracks" were housed in a train comprised of nearly thirty rail cars. We slept on bunk beds arranged in rows in the cars, approximately twenty-five people to each car. Of course, there were separate cars for the German prisoners who lived and ate far better than we did. Additionally, there was an infirmary car and a kitchen car to serve the needs of

the German prisoners and staff. There were several other cars, outfitted luxuriously and comfortably, and it was there that our German captors had their lodgings.

We would not be working or eating that day, so we were told to get settled in our barracks. That night, I learned that we were located near the German city of Frankfurt-an-der-Oder.

There was really only one thought which preoccupied me as I stared into the black Bavarian darkness. What did that German *kapo* want of my poor brother? Was his life in danger?

They woke us before dawn. We rose from our fitful sleep, hungry as usual and dazed and cold in the frigid January air. Still unfed, we were taken to work. Along with the others, I had to carry rail ties, fill up bomb craters and repair sections of track which had been destroyed through Allied bombing raids. One of the primary objectives of the British and American forces was to destroy as many railroad lines as possible, thus obstructing the traffic of German troops. Undaunted, however, the German military created railway brigades like ours, employing slave labor to restore their freedom of movement. Thus we moved around, travelling every few days to a new location in the German interior where our vital services were required.

It was ironic that we were forced to help our German oppressors in their efforts against the Allies, the only people capable of liberating us.

Notwithstanding the irony, however, we got right down to work, and we worked hard, all day and into the night. We were still dressed only in our thin prisoners' uniforms and without underclothing to protect us against the wind and snows of mid-winter.

That first day, all I could think about was my brother. This was the first time in months that he was not by my side, and I was terrified at the thought of what had become of him, the only remaining member of my family.

Finally, at the end of the day, I was greatly relieved to see Shmuel walking toward me. To my surprise, I noticed right away that he was washed and fed and wearing new clothing. Excitedly, he related to me that he had been chosen to work in the German officers' quarters. They put him to work in the kitchen, where he would be fed and kept clean. This was not because the Germans had taken a fancy to him or that they developed a sudden feeling of compassion. Rather, since Shmuel would be coming into close contact with the German prisoners, with the SS and with their food, they wanted to keep him clean and free of disease. In fact, they warned my brother never to enter the Jewish cars so that he would not catch the diseases of the malnourished and overworked slaves.

Despite the clear instructions, however, Shmuel regularly entered our sleeping quarters when no one was watching, at some risk to his own safety.

Now, as a result of my brother's new position, I would often find something hidden in my mattress at the end of the working day. Frequently, there would be a little piece of food; he would hide a piece of bread, a boiled potato or whatever else he managed to smuggle out.

I silently thanked the Almighty for this small measure of good fortune, the first tiny respite from anguish in what felt like an eternity.

Another benefit of his new position was his access to news of the outside world. When he snuck in to see me, he often had news to relate about the progress of the war. In addition,

he took the opportunity to quickly use the secret pair of *tefillin* we had with us. About forty or fifty of us took turns surreptitiously using these *tefillin* after work. Each person would quickly don the *tefillin* and then pass them on to the next person.

Meanwhile, the rest of us were not nearly so fortunate. To begin with, apart from our dismal conditions, our workplace consisted of the train tracks, which were totally exposed to the Allied bombings. Toward the end of the war, Germany was bombed mercilessly, and the railway lines were among the most common targets. These bombs were not prejudiced, and they fell on Jews and Germans alike.

Nearly six years before, at the outbreak of the war, I remember how I prayed for the bombing raids on Piotrkow to cease. I had thought, let the Germans come and take over, but let those infernal bombings stop. Now, our potential liberators were bombarding us, and my feelings were mixed. On the one hand, I wished they would bomb even more furiously, yet on the other hand, I feared for my life.

Then, one day, a few weeks after we had begun our assignment, our worst fears materialized before our eyes. We were working at the railroad station near the city of Offenberg, a major junction point for trains, and when the drone of the approaching airplanes was heard, we ran for cover as usual. However, in the blink of an eye, fifty Hungarian Jews were blown to bits.

When the raid was over, we set ourselves to one of the most gruesome tasks I have ever performed. Together with the others, I gathered up the mangled bodies and severed limbs that were strewn over the area and buried them.

Many of the Hungarian Jews had only the most remote connection to the Jewish people, often even thinking of

themselves as gentiles. During the German crusade against us, these assimilated Jews were even more shocked and traumatized than the others. As religious Jews, at least we knew why we were being persecuted. The assimilated Jew, or the victim who was only distantly related to a Jew, on the other hand, did not know why he deserved to suffer with the other Jews. For this reason, these wretched people were even more bewildered at their terrible treatment and less able to cope.

These assimilated Hungarian Jews felt alienated not only from their Polish brothers, but also from their fellow Hungarian Jews who were Torah-observant, many of them *chassidim* who tended toward an extreme observance of *mitzvos* even in the most difficult situations.

By that time, most of us had been forcibly removed from active observance of many of the *mitzvos* of the Torah. For the Polish Jews, in particular, who had been exposed to cruelty for the longest time, practical *Yiddishkeit* had become almost a fading memory. The sudden exposure, then, to these observant Jews from Hungary was somewhat of an inspiration in those dark days. I remember one young boy, in particular, who wrote the whole *Megillas Esther* out on small scraps of paper before *Purim* so that he would be able to perform the observances of the day. It was a powerful assertion of his faith during the last volatile months of the war. It was therefore a crushing blow to all of us when that bomb took the lives of so many of the Hungarian Jews we had come to admire.

The scene of the explosion was ghastly, and the job we were left with was even ghastlier, leaving me covered with the blood of those I was burying. I did not know all their names, but their twisted bodies will never leave my memory. I could never forget the ironic twist of Providence which ordained

that a bomb intended for our oppressors would take its ugly toll from among our own.

On another day, when Allied bombs rained down upon us, I remember taking cover underneath the trains. As I crouched down beneath the train, a missile fell but an inch away from me. Fortunately, it did not explode. As I observed so often during the war, life hung on a thread.

One day led into the next, and we got used to our routine. We were awakened early, between three and four in the morning, and by five, we were marched out to wherever our labor was needed.

The Second World War had refined the use of air power. The effect of the bombs from the early days of the war could not compare in damage to the gaping holes left by the Allied bombings later on, craters four or five stories in depth. We would dig dirt from one spot and fill in these craters in another spot. We worked for hours on end just filling those holes. Then we carried the rail ties on our shoulders with two men at the front and two others at the rear. Paired thus, two by two, my partner always got the worst of it; due to my small size and strength, he would usually have to carry most of the weight of the heavy steel ties.

When we reached our destination, we pounded the tracks into place so that the German war effort could continue. That was the sickening paradox of our slave labor.

Our condition was as alarming as our rations were small. We had no place to wash, and under my thin, grimy shirt and pants, my only covering was the lice which blanketed me from one end to the other. So thick were the vermin on my body that I could barely see my own flesh. Even worse, we were forever hungry, thinking always only of food. Even with my brother's small gifts of food, I was only barely able to get by.

As difficult as our situation was, I needed to prove to myself that the Germans had not succeeded in completely removing from me my concept of self. Once, at a roll call, I dared to step out of line and show something of my former spirit. When I spotted the SS officer in charge, I mustered up all my courage and approached him. Staring him in the eye, I asked him if I could have the "honor" of serving him as his orderly. At the surprising request, he motioned sharply with his whip.

"Stand back six steps," he ordered.

When I did as I was told, he gazed at me as if I were a turnip, or a bug that had crawled out from under a rock. It was not the look of one human being to another.

"I don't let a stinking Jew talk to me!" he barked.

I froze for an instant, and then made my way back to my position on line. Lucky to have escaped with my life, I never made that mistake again and continued to sink more deeply into melancholy.

However, just as I had reached the absolute end of my tolerance, another twist of fate presented itself to act as the harbinger of my survival, the impetus I so desperately needed to ward off death.

One day, as I dragged myself through my arduous labor, I was stopped in my tracks by a sight that arrested my attention. Not far from me I observed a German enjoying his lunch. Between his hands he held a sandwich of thick, dark slices of German pumpernickel with enormous dabs of creamy butter between them. I could barely restrain myself from jumping on him bodily, in what would have been a foolish, futile attempt to wrest the precious food from his hands. I could not avert my view, though, and the German could see me staring. Although it was not clever on my part,

I could not help myself, and I continued to gaze at him unwaveringly. Never had I seen anything more inviting; the sight practically drove me insane with longing and hunger.

Finally, the German called me over. "What are you gaping at?" he asked. "Why are you looking at me like that?" But his voice did not portray the customary German disdain.

"I am hungry," I ventured, forgetting for the moment that a Jew's declaration of "I am hungry!" is usually inaudible to the German ear. Then, to my amazement, he took a piece of the buttered bread and gave it to me nonchalantly.

"What is your name?" he asked.

I should have been frightened to have caught the singular attention of an SS guard, but I knew at that point that I had nothing to fear, as I held the precious food in my hands, relishing its feel to my touch.

"Sanik," I replied.

I could not believe I was actually encountering a sympathetic German, a sight that had become so alien to me in those bitter days. The experience was enough to trigger a bit of my former spirit and bold initiative, and I pushed my luck just a bit more.

"Perhaps you could spare some of the food that you would normally throw away," I suggested courageously.

"What is the number of your car?" he asked, referring to our sleeping quarters.

"Eighteen, sir," I told him, overcome with disbelief. It was all I could do to hold back the tears which were by now all but dried up in the wellspring of my soul.

But the Creator had now put me into a supreme dilemma. Racked with hunger and holding a soft and delectable slice of buttered bread in my hand, my first impulse was to eat it immediately. Then I thought of my bunkmates, realizing that

if I still retained some semblance of selflessness, I would share this delicacy with them. I divided the bread immediately, resisting the incredible temptation to eat it right away.

I may not have realized it then, but the satisfaction I derived from proving to myself that I still had some *mentschlichkeit* was far more intense and permanent than the momentary pleasure I would have gotten from wolfing down the food greedily and alone.

Early the next morning, long after the heavenly taste of the German's food had vanished from my mouth, we heard a sound outside the car in which we were locked up. A small porthole which served as a window, which could be opened only from the outside of the rail car, was suddenly opened, letting in the dawn's light.

"Is there a Sanik here?" a voice asked.

To my amazement, that German was actually bringing me the food he had promised. My joy was boundless. One cannot imagine what it meant. He passed through the small opening a full pail of delicious soup, full of beans. And as I gladly shared the treasure with the others in our railway barracks, I continued to be overcome with disbelief.

Although the German never actually came again, his single visit with that food was more than one could ever expect. And from time to time, he would throw me a little piece of food. The nutritional value I derived from these tidbits was not nearly as crucial as the emotional satisfaction I got from knowing that someone took some interest in me. It represented a throwback, slight though it was, to a tolerable world where goodness existed.

I thought often about that compassionate guard. He was a lower-ranking SS man who probably did not like the war or the uncomfortable and monotonous job of watching us in the

biting cold. Perhaps the enthusiasm which guided the Germans earlier in the war had finally begun to wane now that Germany was being beaten. Or maybe I had simply met a decent man who had somehow fallen in among the SS. Whatever the case was, he proved to be an exception to the general rule of German brutality and coldness.

The guard disappeared shortly before the final collapse of the Reich, and I never saw him again. But both he and what he symbolized for me are permanent memories.

We went thus from one place to another, always remaining on the outskirts of the cities where the rail lines were located. Once, I was taken into the city of Nuremberg. I had been a mere child when the infamous Nuremberg Laws were passed by the German government in 1935, so the name was as yet meaningless to me. And little did I know that two years later the trials in that town would represent a tiny speck of justice meted out for the war crimes of the Third Reich. Another prisoner and I were chosen to enter a busy railroad station to carry some tools. Two guards flanked us as we walked, watching us carefully for the slightest sign of rebellion or attempt to escape. It was rather unnecessary. We were two skinny Jews, barely able to carry our own weight, dressed in prison uniforms and surrounded by a hostile population. The thought of rebellion could never have occurred to us.

The railway station was full of people. I did not look around, and I would not remember anyone's face, but I could feel a great many people watching our starving, lice-ridden bodies at work. These Germans definitely knew what was being done to Jews during the war. Not that I expected any civilian German to come to our aid, but I must note that they were well aware of the atrocities occurring all around them.

One day, I got very sick. It began with a bad cold, but after

a while, I could hardly move my body. It was difficult to lift my own head, and hard physical labor seemed impossible. Each morning, I just hoped I would be able to make it through the day. Shaking with fever, all I wanted to do was lie down again on the bunk in my railcar and go to sleep, but I knew I had no choice but to drag myself to work. Admitting that I was sick would be placing myself in great risk of getting killed.

And somehow, I managed to drag my sick body to work on those days, when just rising from my bed seemed impossible. The urge to continue living despite all odds drove me on.

During this time, there was heavy bombardment. From the edges of the cities where we were stationed, we observed the devastation of Germany. They were slowly losing the war.

German civilians and soldiers were forced to run to their bomb shelters regularly because of the frequent bombings. Afraid to leave us alone at these times, the guards forced us to run with them as they fled to the shelters. And while they went inside for protection, we were made to wait, in terror, outside.

Meanwhile, the Tenth Railway Brigade of the Third Reich continued to make its way from one city to another in the last days of the evil empire. Around us, Germany was crumbling into dust, and we began to feel the tingle of exhilaration. Yet, we were overcome with the pressing question: would that evil empire take us down with it in its last days?

CHAPTER 27

The Bread of Affliction

ALMOST TO THE VERY END, THE NAZI DEATH MACHINE kept working, obsessively processing its victims. Even as the Reich was on the verge of complete collapse, while Allied troops were moving in on all sides, Jews continued to be deported to Auschwitz and other death camps. The Germans' hatred for a living Jew was more pressing a concern than was their instinct for self-preservation. Not until the absolute end did the SS blow up the crematoria of Treblinka, Chelmno and Auschwitz, destroying the camp records and setting fire to most of the huge storehouses which contained the personal effects of those who had been gassed. But even then, the Germans would not let the Jews go free, remaining loyal to their insane cause.

In the east, precious trucks needed for the German war

effort against the advancing Soviet army were employed instead to bring Jewish prisoners, more dead than alive, into the German heartland. And the trains, which were so vital to the Reich's last military stands, were filled with their beleaguered Jewish cargo and transported from one camp to another.

The Germans' refusal to concede defeat was astonishing. In the midst of the chaos, with the roads clogged with refugees and bombs raining down all around them, the soldiers continued to fight. With the end so near and so obvious, the Nazi war apparatus went on functioning.

However, our SS masters were now beginning to show signs of being nervous. They knew that the war would soon be over, and that it would end with their defeat. Still, they continued to exercise their power as long as they could.

There is no doubt that the fundamental tenets of morality, long since buried in their memories, suddenly began to come to the surface of their consciousness once again. At the imminent threat of defeat, they commenced the evaluation of their own atrocious conduct and speculated on the retribution they would certainly be made to suffer. They knew full well that their past deeds would soon begin to encroach on their future, haunting and hounding them.

What they did not know, however, was what to do immediately with the starving, maltreated Jews of the Tenth Railway Brigade.

March of 1945 was drawing to a close, but as we had no detailed information on the progress of the war, we did not know how close we were to the conclusion of our ordeal.

We did have some idea, though, that the end was inevitable. The bombs were exploding endlessly around us, and there was a marked change of mood in our guards. We could

see now how nervous they had become.

The Allied offensive intensified. The immense bomber fleets of the United States were flying hourly sorties over the dying Third Reich, flattening the cities of the Rhineland, the Ruhr and other famous industrial zones. And now, even our German masters began to feel the deprivations of war. They, too, began to suffer fear and scarcity.

As I look back to those unnerving and unsettling days prior to the liberation, I never fail to be amazed at the enormity of our fortitude and at the reservoir of Jewish commitment which still played a role in our lives. One would have expected that in our dire circumstances, when each day was a struggle for basic survival, the last issue that would concern us would be the observance of *Pesach*. But when a Jew sniffs the arrival of spring in the air, he intuitively thinks of the festival.

The year 1945 was no exception. Some of us even fantasized that we would actually be liberated in time to celebrate the holiday of liberation, the *zeman cheiruseinu*. I do not think I was quite that optimistic, but the imminence of the war's end gave us a heightened appreciation of our final *Pesach* under Satan's dominion.

I thought back, with a heavy heart, to the earlier celebrations of *Pesach* during the war years. I remembered the Pesach of 1942, when we had all sat around the *seder* table, fearful and apprehensive, but with our whole family intact. I recalled that *Pesach* painfully, as it was the last one spent with my dear sister. And I thought back to 1943, which was the last *Pesach* I spent with my father, the crown of our family. And finally, I recalled the strained *Pesach* of 1944, my last ever in Piotrkow, and possibly the final one in which I was able to bask in the warmth of my mother's presence.

Trying to shake the agonizing memories from my burdened mind, I now thought ahead to the upcoming *Yom Tov*. How would we celebrate our redemption this year? Could we really celebrate any redemption?

Our drive to remain Jews was still intense, and my brother and I, as well as numerous other Brigade Jews, resolved that we would do everything possible in order to observe *Pesach* properly. Over the course of the next few weeks, we stashed away the tiniest portions of flour, a few potatoes and some other foodstuffs, most of which my brother succeeded in bringing out of the kitchen car. We were determined to have ourselves a grand *Pesach*.

Our boldness approached its peak several days before *Pesach*. By that time, we had gathered a modest amount of flour, and we calculated that we would have enough to bake a number of small *matzos* so that each of us would have a *kezayis* for the *mitzvah* on the first night of the holiday. We took inventory of our cache. In addition to the small portion of flour, we also had a very small pile of vegetables which we figured would see us through the eight days of *Yom Tov*. Now we just had to determine the right time and place for our baking.

One young man who worked near me in the Railway Brigade was a close friend of mine from the good days in Piotrkow. A Gerrer *chassid*, Elazar Scheinfeld was the son of a prominent banker back home. Although he was already married before the war began and was much older than I, the two of us became very close during these trying days. It was with this man that I made the plans for the celebration of this final wartime *Pesach*.

As the night of *bedikas chametz* arrived, we decided that we would do our forbidden baking early the next morning, right

there in the railcar. Each of the train's wagons had been outfitted with a small wood-burning oven, ostensibly to heat the railcar during the frozen winter nights. Although the tiny oven had been all but worthless in serving its main purpose, we knew that it would suffice for the baking of our forbidden *matzos*.

The next morning before dawn, Scheinfeld and I excitedly rose from our bunks and prepared to carry out the tradition of baking *matzah* on *Erev Pesach*. Suddenly, though, just as we were about to remove our stash from its hiding place, we saw the glaring beams of floodlights illuminate the darkness. Just then, we heard SS guards shouting in the much-hated but familiar manner.

"*Raus! Alles, raus von die Wagonnen!*" they cried. "Everyone out of the cars!"

We never had *Appel* so early, and I wondered what this was about. It did not even dawn on me that there might be a different meaning to this special gathering of prisoners.

It turned out that the order was not for roll call at all, but to give the SS the opportunity to conduct a thorough search. They had been tipped off to the fact that a small group of Jews was going to be baking a few of their unleavened breads for Passover in one of the cars, and they were not about to let them get away with it.

For two hours, we stood at attention in the crisp dawn air, as scores of SS guards went through all of the railcars searching thoroughly for the evidence. Sure enough, our "bakery" was discovered, along with the other meager provisions we had set aside for the *Yom Tov*.

Everything was confiscated and, even worse, cruelly destroyed before our very eyes. The Nazis were determined that the filthy Jews would not succeed in enjoying the smallest

religious observance. We were crushed by this blow, but we also feared that in order to discover the identity of the culprits an investigation would ensue. A quick death would surely be the punishment for this deed.

However, our fears did not materialize, and much to our relief, the Germans decided to forego the inquest.

We could not forget, though, that in a few hours, *Pesach* would commence. We resolved that despite the lack of *matzos*, we would not eat any *chametz* for the next eight days. Indeed, we clung to our decision and subsisted on small pieces of boiled potato.

I took my daily portion of bread during those eight days and hid it underneath the flimsy blanket which lay at the foot of my bunk. In my weakened state, I chose to ignore the fact that even the possession of *chametz* contravened the Torah. And as the *Yom Tov* passed, I looked forward to the hour when *Pesach* would be over, and I would enjoy the eight portions of bread I had put away. Imagine my utter devastation when, after all those days of waiting, I discovered that someone had taken the whole reserve. It seems that a bunkmate had witnessed my hoarding over the days of *Yom Tov* and helped himself to the bread. I was not terribly surprised to note that someone had been driven by his hunger to stoop to this type of theft, for I knew that these circumstances often forced people to fall to even lower depths.

Despite my disappointment, I managed to observe that perhaps the incident had been an act of Hashem's grace, preventing me from eating the forbidden *chametz she'avar alav haPesach*.

April arrived, and with it came the worst torrential winds and rain that I can remember. Compounded by the incessant

Allied bombings, the elements were unbearable. It struck me that it was as though the whole world seemed to be coming to an ignominious end, something akin to the way in which Sodom and Amorah had been destroyed.

Then, one day, with no warning or discussion, our SS taskmasters gathered us outside our railcars. An officer stepped forward to explain what was going on.

"The entire railroad system of the Reich is now wiped out," he told us. "Thus, there is no further work for you. We will very soon, once again, be going on a long trip."

I was wondering how we would take a trip if there was no railroad, when the officer continued, as if he was reading my mind.

"The trip will be different this time, however. You will be marching on foot."

CHAPTER 28

Death March

WE TRAVELLED AS FAR AS WE COULD BY TRAIN, UNTIL suddenly, our trip came to an abrupt halt. We thought for a moment that another Allied bombing raid was about to strike our area, and that we would have to leave the train, as we had done so many times in those last few weeks, and run for cover. But when the whirring noises of falling bombs and the loud cracks of their explosions failed to ensue, we understood that this was not the case.

A number of minutes passed before we were ordered to leave the train. We could go no further. Before us lay the bombed and ruined bridge which spanned the Danube into Regensburg. With this final departure from the train, we were informed that our brigade was now, for all intents and purposes, a thing of the past.

Our guards, numbering about one hundred SS soldiers, gathered the four hundred and fifty remaining Jewish prisoners into an open space and instructed us to sit in our places under the empty and temporarily calm skies.

A few of the guards, allowing their traditionally harsh demeanor to relax a bit, sat down amongst us, as if to indicate that the gap dividing us was narrowing increasingly.

One of them, a blond young man who couldn't have been more than twenty, took a cigarette out of his pocket and lit up. With blue smoke curling from his nostrils, he gazed off into space and said, "I wonder what is going to happen next."

"You mean you don't know either?" I asked him.

"I know about as much as you do," he confessed with a sheepish grin.

I am certain that I was not the only one who felt a melancholic satisfaction in the knowledge that the SS guards were now learning a lesson about their own mortality and powerlessness.

We sat outside with no shelter from the bitter cold, very little water and no food. The SS troops, too, had precious little for themselves. In the best of times, we would hardly have expected them to share their own provisions with us, and now that their situation was nearly as grim as our own, it was absolutely inconceivable. So that left us with only our customary hunger for company while we waited.

Then, someone found some grain in a bombed-out railway car that was sitting in the train station where we were situated. It was not an abundance of grain, but there was enough to be passed around to all of us. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, several Jews were overly zealous in their attempts at stilling their gnawing hunger, and they quickly devoured the coarse, hard grain without chewing or crushing

it. Within hours, their thin stomachs bloated from the grain, and more than a few people died. Others were overcome by uncontrollable pain. I had also picked up a few grains, but I took care to hold onto them, eating only several at a time. This proved to be my only nourishment for many days, and I carried them with me, every so often sucking the nearly tasteless kernels.

The Germans finally decided to spare our lives, and they ordered us to line up several abreast in marching formation. We were about to begin the long march through the blasted landscape of a country in ever-increasing ruin.

We started off from the railway station of the little town which I later learned was Undorf, across the Danube from Regensburg. It was 9:25 p.m. on Thursday when our guard told us to start marching. I chanced to notice the time on the clock at the station as we set off, and to this day, the time is emblazoned on my memory.

Since Buchenwald, I had been wearing a pair of wooden shoes, which had proved to be very practical. But shortly before we set out on our march, the Germans discovered an abandoned train car full of new shoes, and they distributed them among us. We all scrambled among the piles of shoes, and I exchanged my comfortable, if somewhat rustic, wooden shoes for a pair of leather ones. Oh, how excited I was with this rare treasure of new footwear! I immediately put them on, discarding the old wooden shoes with disdain.

I soon realized how mistaken I was. In my miserable state, I had been sure that any change would be an improvement, and I had seized the new shoes without doubting their superior comfort for a minute. As it turned out, this new possession nearly destroyed me.

From the moment I put them on, the shoes, which were

too small for my feet, began to pinch and ache. At first, I reasoned that any new pair of shoes needed some getting used to, and I tried to be patient. However, not only did the discomfort remain, but the situation got so bad, my whole body began to shake with the pain each step brought. Soon my feet were swollen and had turned black and blue. The throbbing pain, added to my weakened condition, made me wonder if I would really be able to survive. Until now, my powerful will to live despite any hardships had kept me going, but now I began to think of just giving up.

Deprived of all strength and the will to live, I stumbled along the German highway. What would become of me? Of all of us? I knew I could not endure much longer.

I have often contemplated the dual meaning of the words "death march." Was it merely a march towards death, or was it actually a march of those Jews who were already nearer to death than life? In my mind there is little question that on the ladder of suffering to which we had been exposed, the march occupied the highest rung. And as I later learned, our ordeal was rather brief in comparison to other, much longer, death marches that other concentration camp inmates had to endure.

Whatever food and water there was to be had was reserved for our SS masters, and my entire store of food for this long, horrible journey consisted of the small pieces of hard grain in my pocket. I also managed to obtain some tobacco leaves, but they were of little help. It was obvious that the Germans did not really care at this point whether we lived or died; now that their own lives were in danger, we were even less important to them than before.

So we stumbled along the desolate countryside throughout the days and nights, often trying to find our way in the

dark. And as an added burden, we were forced to push an enormous cart that carried the vital supplies of our tormentors.

Many of us were very close to death. I was merely a shadow of my former self, but I tried desperately to place one foot in front of the other, one step after another, just to keep going, to that next bend in the road, or just until that next town. And as I goaded myself on, a persistent thought at the back of my consciousness reminded me that death would probably be the greatest deliverance.

Soon after we set out, we were told that our destination was Dachau, the site of the first prison camp created by the Third Reich about a decade earlier. Under normal circumstances, this distance of some two hundred miles from where we began near Regensburg, would have been a short trip, but for us, the starving derelicts of the holocaust, it was an eternity.

On we walked, trudging through the German countryside with only brief rest, perhaps on some wet straw in a barn somewhere. We were not provided with any regular supply of water, and our thirst reached extreme proportions. Ignoring the obvious risks, some of my fellow prisoners resorted to drinking from the disease-ridden sewer water in a desperate attempt to slake their thirst.

People were dying every day, but despite our rapidly decreasing numbers, we walked on. We were numb physically and emotionally, and we could do nothing save for the mechanical steps of moving and following basic orders. For me, the march was a source of the most intense agony, causing me pain at every step. A huge blister soon formed on the sole of my foot, making it throb excruciatingly each time I placed my foot on the road. Then the blister broke, and the

wound grew infected. My foot swelled up until the shoe was so tight, it would have been impossible to remove.

However, even in my agony, I tried to give encouragement to the others. My friend Elazar Scheinfeld came alongside me once, walking with heavy and labored steps.

"Leibel, I cannot go on," he said, the pain visible on his brow.

"Just a bit further; we're almost there," I replied optimistically. "Don't give up, Luzer, it's just a bit further."

The next day, I saw him from afar, bent over and writhing in agony. Apparently, he had hurt his leg, but he was still walking. Good, I thought to myself, he is still forging ahead.

Then, without warning, my friend disappeared. I looked for him again the following morning, but he was gone, like so many other innocent Jews had gone before him and would go after him. And there was nothing for us to do but continue our march without him.

Many aspects of that death march have vanished into the past, consigned to that eerie archive of personal memories from the war. The hunger, the thirst and the agony of walking are all things of the past. However, one image comes back often to haunt me, over and over again. It is the recollection of the bystanders that watched as we marched by. They were relatively comfortable German civilians who stood gaping at us, not with shock and horror, but with amused curiosity, as if we were freaks from the sideshow of a travelling circus.

The death marches became commonplace events in the German countryside, on the main highways as well as on the rural routes. Streams of ragged, starving Jews filled the roadways, many falling along the way, their lives terminated mercilessly by German bullets.

In one small town through which we passed, the good

German citizens observed our desperate hunger, and mostly to amuse themselves, they threw bits of bread at us. Many of my companions threw themselves on these scraps, as the refined ladies, gentlemen, children and elders of the Fatherland watched and laughed, pointing at the humorous antics of the famished Jews that stumbled over one another in their desperate bid to get a piece of bread. These scenes of derision and apathy shall stay clear in my mind as long as I live.

After marching in this manner for what seemed like an eternity, I felt like I could not endure it any longer. It was Thursday, April 26.

"Shmuel, I cannot go on," I cried to my brother.

In truth, this was not the first time that I thought survival was no longer possible, that it would be better for me to give up and accept a soldier's bullet, but it was the most intense feeling of defeat to date. I could no longer feel even a trace of that determination that had sustained me and helped me give strength and courage to others.

I had marched alongside my brother during the whole ordeal since Undorf. Possibly because he had enjoyed better conditions than the rest of us during the ten weeks that we worked on the railroad, Shmuel was much more fit than I, and he managed to maintain a higher level of stamina as we marched.

"Leibel," he answered encouragingly, "just hold on; we're almost there."

"I can't," I said defeatedly. "Go on by yourself, Shmuel. I just can't continue." And I vaguely recalled those crucial words which my father had uttered, entreating us to save ourselves individually, if necessary.

"You must!" he persisted repeatedly, not allowing me to give up.

Ultimately, it was my brother who saved my life. It was he who somehow aroused my will to live, a survival instinct which had been drained out of me by the hunger and the pains of the arduous march.

My brother held me up, practically dragging me on his shoulders for miles. Without him, I am sure that my life would have ended on the wretched, bloody German soil that served as a burial ground for so many of our brothers. I needed someone near me, and I was fortunate to have him there. Somehow, he restored the strength in me to stumble on, walking hour after hour.

At around five o'clock the next morning, Friday, April 27, our guards brought us to a field, where we were told to sit and wait. Curiously, we looked about and realized that we had reached our destination. We had arrived in Dachau.

CHAPTER 29

Beginning of the End

AS THE REALIZATION SANK IN, WE FELT INCREASINGLY despondent. Fighting sickness, hunger, exhaustion and unbearable pain, we had marched through a frightful German landscape, only to arrive at a notorious death camp.

Originally, Dachau had been hailed as a model camp, which, like Buchenwald, housed German criminals and dissenters and prisoners from a variety of nationalities in addition to the Jewish inmates. However, at some point, the architecture of the camp was revised to include gas chambers and crematoria, making Dachau one of the most infamous death camps in the Nazi domain.

When we got there, the camp had already become overcrowded, with trainloads of Jews arriving daily in addition to

the thousands who marched there from all ends of the German empire. The extermination factory was operating at its fullest capacity; we could see the crematoria at work nearby, with the tall smokestacks billowing out ceaseless jets of black smoke.

By this time, however, I had reached the point of pronounced apathy. Our brigade had left the Regensburg area with four hundred and fifty Jews; the survivors of that week's march through Gehinnom now numbered between one hundred and fifty and two hundred. As we sat in the empty field adjacent to the camp, my only consolation was that Shmuel was still by my side.

The hours went by. It was cold and rainy, just as it had been throughout the days of our march. The extremely dismal weather conditions that April accurately reflected the gloomy events that transpired around us.

Finally, towards afternoon, the SS came to receive us officially into Dachau. They marched our group to a damp and dirty barracks and allowed us to rest for a short while. It was the first time in about eight days that we had some sort of roof over our heads, and on that dreary, rainy day it was doubly appreciated.

As we sat there, we exchanged the information we each knew, slowly realizing what lay in store for us. We learned that our rest would actually be only a brief respite from horror, for it was their intention to march us to still another destination where the German death apparatus would perform our extermination.

For my part, I was at first too overcome with exhaustion and pain to be concerned about death. Before long, though, fear once again set in as we contemplated the gruesome fate that awaited us.

They came for us later that afternoon and marched us, together with a large group of Jews from the other barracks, to the camp gates, where we stood in long lines awaiting "processing."

At this point, I began to overhear curious debates among many of the Jews standing in line.

"Let's get to the head of the line," I heard one person say.

"What do you think they'll be handing out," another retorted, "hot *lockshen*?"

"Yeah, what's the rush?" a third person chimed in.

Everyone had his own theory. Some thought it was better to stand at the head of the line. They reasoned that the first ones to be counted would perhaps be spared and sent to work. Others maintained that it was safer at the back of the line, claiming that the first to be processed would be the first to get killed. Many calculated the risks at both ends and concluded that the safest place would be at the middle.

Confused, I asked my brother what he thought, but he left the decision to me. I decided to wait at the end of the line in the hope that somehow, by the time it was our turn, things would turn out as well as they could. Deep down, I was certain that the only thing awaiting us was our death, so we had no reason to rush to the front. It was Friday afternoon, April 27, shortly before *Shabbos*, as we waited to be sent away from Dachau.

Actually, the Jews on our line would be marched to Mittenwald, a smaller camp where the gas chambers also functioned. Mittenwald was only one and a half hours away from Dachau by train, but the prisoners were going to be marched out on foot. Whoever was to make the trip received a piece of bread for his final march to the gas chambers. Since we were at the back, our fate was not decided yet.

"Well, Shmuel," I remarked, "we are pretty lucky that we stayed behind."

In the end, I discovered that we were not so lucky after all. The first of the groups to set off on their march was forced to return at once to Dachau, because heavy Allied bombing made the march impossible. As a result, the whole plan was called off; we would all be staying in Dachau. And while the ones who were at the front of the line at least received some bread, we had nothing. However, considering that we would survive, at least for now, that minor setback was taken in stride, despite our hunger.

We were now taken to another barracks, where I fell into a deep sleep. It was a relief to be able to alleviate my overwhelming fatigue. Perhaps there was a little renewed optimism lurking in the back of my mind as well.

For weeks, we were certain that the war's end was indeed close at hand, but our joy was mixed, at best, for we were certain that Germany would see its war against the Jewish people through to its bitter end. And even when we allowed ourselves the luxury of fantasizing about survival and liberation, we still had no way of guessing how much suffering we would undergo before that point. Nor were we able to dream that life would one day return to a level of normality.

Meanwhile, with the advance of the Allies into the German empire, the full horror of what had taken place under the Nazi occupation began to be revealed to the world. In truth, information about the concentration camps was generally known, for it was well recognized, at least from 1943, that Hitler had set up such camps, especially for Jews. And it was also known that the Reich had created concentration camps even in the Thirties, although these were not exclusively for Jews. However, with all the information and statistics,

no one realized the mind-numbing horror of what had actually taken place. The world could not have fathomed what had been done by the nation which was considered the most civilized and the most cultured on earth. The Germans were cunning in their mass murders, as they were in other matters, and they took care to keep the extent of their evil actions as secret as possible.

For one thing, the first concentration camps, such as Dachau and Buchenwald, were originally operated in a reasonably humane way, since the prisoners were Germans whose only crime was opposing the ideology of the German state.

By the time the Germans had embarked on their comprehensive plan to exterminate Jews, and the stench of poison gas, the gunshots and the screams of the poor Jewish victims rose to the heavens, there would be no press corps or objective observers to report to the world. Only the silence of the forests heard and saw our unspeakable agony. To aid in the conspiracy of deceit, the Germans called their actions by specially-devised code names. The extermination of Jews was merely a "final solution," and our "processing" was just part of it. As far as the transports were concerned, we were simply being "resettled."

Years after the war, it became public knowledge that the upper political echelons in the west were actually fully aware of the events taking place behind the closed borders of the Reich. However, the masses of the common people beyond Germany and Poland were probably largely ignorant of the full extent to which the butchery of Hitler was being carried out.

Now, the doors of the camps were being opened, and the full gallery of bloodcurdling horror was there for all the

world to see, first in Poland, then in Germany itself. The soldiers of the British and American armies were totally unprepared for the German concentration camps or for the indescribable evil they contained. Now, one after the other, Buchenwald, Belsen and Dachau would soon be overrun, and these unsuspecting soldiers would see sights that they could not have imagined in their worst nightmares.

Soon, the intricate workings of the German death machine would be visible. The gallows and the whipping blocks, the ruins of the blown-up crematoria, the storehouses of shoes, clothes, eyeglasses and human hair and the boxes full of gold teeth and wedding rings that had been plucked from their helpless victims. The entire nightmare would be exposed for the first time.

The world would soon experience an eye-opening encounter with the German rampage of cruelty. As the Allied forces advanced, there was great culture shock as the young American soldiers from a country famed for harboring refugees of all nations would meet their German counterparts. With tears in their eyes, the Americans would enter the camps where the broken remnants of our people were gathered, now clinging to life by the thinnest of threads.

And all of a sudden, as the liberating armies of the Allied powers advanced, the German people assumed an uncanny and flimsy facade of innocence.

I had witnessed the shocking indifference of the German citizenry to the horrors that were occurring around them. If a prisoner collapsed on a main thoroughfare, he was finished with a bullet and left there for all to see, as testimony to the civilization of Germany. And the curious German farmers, craftsmen, intellectuals, fine ladies and children with ruddy cheeks looked on nonchalantly.

But now, these people quickly changed their attitudes and their dispositions. Where once they idolized their Fuhrer and gave their wholehearted support to the monster, now they greeted the Western forces with warm welcomes, as if they had never overwhelmingly accepted the Nazis. People change quickly when they are afraid, and finally, it was Germany who knew fear.

Now, though we were so much nearer to the end, our questions increased and our doubts mounted. What would the next day bring?

After living with this uncertainty for several weeks, things finally began to happen. It was now *Shabbos* morning, April 28. We were awakened after dawn and ordered to leave the barracks and head for the *Appelplatz* for roll call. Despite all the havoc, the Germans still managed to keep accurate records of each of our whereabouts.

As everyone rushed outside, I nudged the young man who had been sleeping next to me, trying to wake him from his deep sleep. I knew it would be dangerous to remain in the barracks while roll call was taking place. He was a non-Jew, an Italian soldier, who had been a prisoner of war since Mussolini's surrender. When he did not budge, I realized that the danger of staying behind would now be meaningless to him, for he was dead.

We stood for hours on end until we were once again allowed to return to the barracks. Again, there was no food and precious little clean water. No activity could be detected, and there were no obvious developments. The waiting was maddening. Alternatively, there definitely was some excitement in the air, and we felt sure that the end was drawing near. But that day ended as it came, and we contented ourselves with a bit of hope and the fleeting daydream.

The next morning, April 29, we gathered as usual for the *Appel*, waiting lethargically in our places. *Appel* was undoubtedly one of the most gruelling features of concentration camp life, but we had no choice, and each day we would stand listlessly while we were counted over and over again.

This time, however, no one appeared to count us, and no one came forward to give us orders. Amazed, we decided that it was safe to go back inside the barracks to wait for whatever would happen.

Speculation and debate ensued in the barracks. Many of us believed that there were no SS guards to call the roll because they had all fled.

"The liberation has come," many insisted, too weak to show real excitement. "We're free!"

But we scarcely dared assume that this was the case. We had been disappointed so many times before that we all knew it was unwise to raise our hopes again. At two o'clock in the afternoon, an order came through on the loudspeakers. No one was to leave the barracks all day.

So we sat in our barracks, swaying between lifelessness and hope, waiting to see how matters would unfold. Free of the immediate rule of the criminal SS, we were like birds whose cage door was left open, puzzled, uncertain and indescribably weak.

Finally, towards evening, perhaps between five and six o'clock, I could sit still no longer. I just had to see what was going on. I went outside to take a look around. I was greeted by the most amazing sight.

BOOK FIVE

Liberation at Last

CHAPTER 30

The Taste of Freedom

A SHORT DISTANCE AWAY, I SAW A GROUP OF SOLDIERS wearing uniforms I had never seen before. Excitedly, I realized that they were cutting the rows of barbed wire fence which encircled the camp. I quickly called to the others that something was happening, but most of the broken Jews were simply too weak to get up or too dazed to show any degree of exuberance.

Before long, jeeps with machine guns attached to their hoods were driving through the openings made by the wire cutters. The Germans, though, refused to surrender without a struggle, and in the minutes that followed, we could hear the firing of the submachine guns. That rat-tat-tat, that until now had aroused in us the deepest fear, sounded like music to our ears. Before very long, about one hundred of the

German SS guards lay dead in the open plaza before the barracks. They were finally getting the punishment they deserved, I told myself, and the tears I no longer thought I could shed began to roll down my cheeks.

Within minutes, the shooting stopped, and the remaining Germans, who had rushed to hide, were ordered to come out with their hands in the air. They soon emerged with their hands raised in complete submission. Suddenly, they were the ones who were meekly following orders, and their lives were the ones that were at stake. They were lined up against the wall with their shoes removed; our slave masters had now become mere prisoners.

These sadists would soon state that they committed all the atrocities merely because they were "following orders." Many would even brazenly claim that they had been friends of the Jews and that they had secretly helped the suffering inmates. And of course, the senior officers would later be incarcerated, tried and punished, amidst their indignant cries of innocence.

It was April 29 when American troops liberated Dachau. British troops were doing the same in Belsen, Mathausen, Buchenwald and elsewhere. These troops and the Allied journalists who accompanied them were totally unprepared for the sights they encountered. Heaped in train boxcars and piled near the crematorium were stacks of dead bodies that resembled little more than loads of dried branches, ready to be burned in the infernal fires that were suddenly extinguished.

And around the camp, over three thousand emaciated, half-dead Jews stared at their liberators, too weak even to rejoice in the freedom that was now being given to them.

The putrid stench of death and of decomposing bodies

greeted the bewildered American soldiers, odors which we hardly even noticed any more.

What were for us everyday sights came as horrifying revelations to them. Unlike us, these innocent soldiers had never seen human bodies stacked like piles of logs. In America, people were punished for treating even the lowest form of animal life the way we had been treated for years.

Many of the concentration camp photographs later published in American and international news magazines were actually shot at Dachau. Still other post-liberation pictures were so terrifying that they could not even be reproduced in books that were exclusively dedicated to the task of documenting Nazi atrocities. In the last year of the war alone, in addition to the countless victims of the gas chambers, over forty thousand prisoners, most of them Jews, had died at Dachau as a result of starvation, disease and the deliberate sadism of the guards.

Immediately our liberators set themselves to the task of arresting the German administrators of the camp, although many of them had managed to disappear into the forests. But the sight of our former captors walking, with heads bowed and hands raised, in the custody of American troops brought us little satisfaction. It would not undo anything. The devastation would not be blotted out. Not then and not ever.

The anger and frustration that had been pent up for so long now rose to the surface as many prisoners tried to attack their former tormentors. However, since the hated SS guards were under arrest now, they could vent their rage only on the worst of the *kapos*, the ones who had harmed their fellow inmates, abusing the authority given to them in order to receive a few extra privileges or a little more food.

I thought then of Gustav, who had predicted back in

Buchenwald that one day it would all be over and that the Jews who had betrayed or mistreated their fellow Jews would live to see their punishment and regret their selfish cruelty.

Now, these men, along with the sadistic non-Jewish *kapos*, were receiving a portion of the grief and the anguish that was stored in Jewish hearts for years. Many of these wretches were beaten severely within the first few minutes of liberation, and some were killed outright, although not very many. Personally, I was startled to behold that some of my fellow Jewish inmates still had the strength to administer this short-term justice.

When I think back to those eventful hours, though, I am astonished to observe that most of us did not vent the rage that we all certainly felt. Not only did we hold back because we were so weak, but because we could not bring ourselves to enact the violence to which we had been subjected. We realized subconsciously that perhaps this would have reduced us to the abysmal moral level of our German tormentors. And although no blame can be placed on those who did take revenge that day, it is obvious that it was just not the Jewish way, despite all we had gone through.

In the midst of the chaos, the American commander of the liberating forces appealed to the prisoners of Dachau over the camp loudspeaker, the same instrument over which the bark of the German commandant had been heard only hours before.

"Friends," the American said, "please remember that the war is not yet over." He pleaded with us to refrain from taking the law into our own hands and to wait until a proper court could be established to designate punishment for the Germans in an orderly and lawful way.

And despite the cynicism we ought to have developed for

anything that sounded like courts and laws after all we had suffered through the judicial system of the Gestapo, the impassioned plea of the American officer did not go unheeded.

Although we were overjoyed at the Allied presence in the camp, the harsh realities of the situation could not be ignored. We could not bear to go on without food any longer; many inmates were still dying all about us because of the lack of nutrition. Some soldiers, seeing our desperation, tried to give us what they could, throwing army rations, candy bars and even cigarettes to the faceless arms stretched out at them. But the kindness of the troops outweighed their understanding of the situation. Physically, we were not able to digest the sweet foods they were distributing. In addition, the famished inmates could not exert any self-control at this point, and maddened by the sight of the small amount of food available, violent fights broke out among them over the precious, life-sustaining morsels.

I remember seeing a young American soldier weeping bitterly at the sight of this mass of human suffering before him, these people made depraved by extraordinary oppression. Perhaps he was crying for the miserable state to which human beings had been reduced. Or maybe, I thought to myself, he was one of the many Jewish servicemen who served in the American forces, and the pain of seeing his brothers and sisters so diminished had moved him to tears.

Suddenly, just as we were despairing of ever relieving our hunger pangs, the American commander's voice came over the loudspeaker once again.

"My friends," he announced in broken German, "you will have to go one more night without food, but we will have food here by tomorrow."

We had no choice but to wait, and we tried to retire. I was filled now with a curious and unfamiliar emotion, and I trembled all night with excitement. Now that I actually had some peace of mind and I knew I was free, I was unable to sleep.

It must have been just before dawn when I managed to doze off, unable to fight off the fatigue that descended on me like a blanket. And it was a restful sleep, even if it was laced with nervous anxiety. What would happen now, I wondered, as I slid into soft slumber.

Several hours later, I awoke to my first day as a free man. My brother and I made our way outside of the barrack, and I looked around to see if the U.S. forces had indeed arrived with the shipments of food as they had promised the evening before.

Suddenly, we heard a loud commotion coming from the direction of the storehouses in the camp. The prisoners had discovered the rooms full of food and could not restrain themselves from breaking in.

I was amazed that within yards of a mass of famished human beings there were plentiful quantities of food just lying in a storehouse.

The inmates ate what they could find, tearing at the food with trembling hands and stuffing it into their mouths until they could eat no more. Tragically, their actions turned out to be foolish and dangerous. Starved as they were, their shrunken stomachs could not endure the stress caused by a massive intake of unexpected food. And to make matters worse, we soon discovered that the Germans had poisoned most of Dachau's remaining food supply at the last moment, in order to prevent it from falling into the hands of the victorious Allies. Now, more than a hundred prisoners lay

dead on that first day following their liberation. This was painfully ironic: our emaciated, pitifully shrunken bodies were destroyed by the very food that we had craved for so long.

Fortunately, I had desisted, and I waited until later, when I would be fed small amounts of food that would allow me to slowly regain my strength. The U.S. convoy with food staples arrived early in the day, bringing rice, powdered milk, cornmeal, sugar and salt. There were also tins of meat, but I did not partake of them. I still remembered who I was. I had succeeded in refraining from eating any *treife* until my resistance had completely dissolved a few months earlier in Buchenwald, as a result of my extremely weakened physical condition. But now it seemed as if there was once again an invisible hand holding me back from the non-kosher meat. I was greatly fortified by this first tinge of spiritual rehabilitation I experienced, and I contented myself with the other foods I was given.

We were free, but we did not really believe it. For we had been in the hands of the Germans one second and surrounded by the liberating American forces the next. We had been engulfed by beastly cruelty, and then suddenly, our chains were broken. Such emotional gulfs were not easily traversed.

The Americans accurately sized up our pitiful emotional state during those first days as free men, concluding that we had to be rebuilt psychologically as well as nutritionally. To accomplish this, they came up with an interesting idea.

Before we knew it, flags appeared from somewhere, representing all the nationalities of the prisoners that were incarcerated in Dachau. We were then asked to line up behind the flag of our respective nations to sing our national anthems. This process was supposed to be a bold assertion of

the identity which the Germans had ultimately failed to destroy.

There were many non-Jews among the Dachau survivors, and for them this must have been a deeply moving ceremony. For us, though, matters were different. There was no Jewish flag, and we Jews had to line up behind the flag of the country from which we had come. There was no distinction between the non-Jews and us, at least in the eyes of the American troops. We were all desperately hungry, oppressed, beaten and degraded, and we were all headed towards hopelessness and despair. We were all like fragile sticks, barely able to support the weight we carried, dragging ourselves aimlessly around the camp, sitting against the barracks walls and staring out at the world with vacant eyes. Thus, we were Jews and non-Jews together, behind national flags of the oppressed.

But I am certain that I was not the only one there who thought otherwise. As I stood there with hundreds of other Polish Jews rallying behind the Polish banner, I felt only painful irony and bitterness. My mind was filled with memories of a Polish people, indifferent to our destruction, gazing apathetically as we were transported out of their midst. Was that the nation whose flag was now supposed to inspire us?

By this time, our bodies' last layers of fat had long since vanished, and our organisms were beginning to eat away at themselves. The human body in this condition had no power of resistance left. Many died in the days after the liberation, and still others, myself among them, fell sick. Our liberators, on the other hand, were well-fed and bursting with health, and they moved with energy and life among the prisoners, who were walking skeletons. Our staggering gait and our feeble movements were proof that the robust appearances of

free men would take some time to develop.

When I remember those first days of liberation, nothing stands out more prominently than the feeling of finally being freed of the lice that so infested our bodies. Apart from the brief shower at Buchenwald, I had not bathed properly since the day I was deported from Piotrkow. By this time, lice and other vermin were on every square inch of my flesh, making themselves felt all night and day.

Thus, nothing typified my new freedom more than the delousing process that was performed by the Americans. One day, a whole convoy of vans pulled up in front of our barracks, and we were asked to go outside and remove our clothing. They sprayed us all with a powdered disinfectant, as the motors of the vans pumped the DDT into and around the barracks. The lice were dead in minutes.

What relief! There was no pleasure so great as simply walking around without disease-ridden organisms devouring me constantly. The night after the delousing was the first night I slept without scratching in futility until morning. These were the first real fruits of our freedom.

Generally, we began to adjust to our new identities. With the vermin all but removed, with a bit of food in our stomachs and surrounded with people who actually cared for us, we gradually started to view ourselves as free men.

However, now an old torment came back to haunt us all, and anxious doubts filled our minds. Who had survived? What threads had been left hanging from the old fabric of life? Had my mother lived through the dark night? Reinforced now with the faith that she, too, had experienced the blessings of a liberation somewhere, my brother and I were determined to set out as soon as possible to find her.

CHAPTER 31

Another Brush With Death

WE FELT CHARGED WITH THE MISSION IN FRONT OF US, with the fires of hope burning strongly. Something told us that our mother had indeed survived, and we were determined to find her.

However, before we could undertake any duty of this magnitude, we had to get our own lives reassembled on the most fundamental levels. The holocaust showed us that it was possible, somehow, to live through the most impossible conditions. Our liberation had given us a new chance for life after our old lives were completely destroyed by the Nazi terror, and we would have to do our best to utilize this opportunity.

Time and again, we saw the hand of Providence assisting us in open and obvious ways. That is really the only explanation that I can offer for the sudden appearance of Reb

Avraham Handel at this time.

It was Monday, April 30, the day after liberation, when we came across him. My brother and I were standing together, when an older man suddenly detached himself from a group of Poles and came over to talk to us. My first reaction was one of fear; what did this *goy* want from me? Hadn't we been through enough? Then the man began to speak.

"I am Handel," he said, introducing himself.

"Handel who?" I asked.

"Avraham Handel," he replied.

Suddenly, the significance of that name started to penetrate. It was Reb Avraham Handel, the noted Torah scholar and *chassid*! He had been the owner of that Warsaw Ghetto shoe factory where our Rebbe had been employed until his deportation to Treblinka. From looking at him then, we could never have guessed that this man was who he claimed to be. He looked so different from what I had always imagined him to be like.

Slowly, he began to speak, riveting our attention. He told us of his role in trying to save some of the most eminent rabbis of Poland, and he described the dark details of his failed attempt to save the life of the Aleksanderer Rebbe. It was then that we found out the events of those last hours of the Rebbe's life until his entry into the gas chambers.

With tears in his eyes, Reb Avraham told us what happened in the Warsaw Ghetto when he returned from the *Umschlagplatz* with the sad news that the Rebbe had been deported.

The small group of Aleksanderer *chassidim* who had been caring for the Rebbe reacted in a special way when they learned what had happened. As one, they began to *daven*, and then they broke out into an inspiring *niggun*, dancing with

feeling and expressing their grief and sorrow in holy prayer. As they raised their voices in *tefillah*, their tears fell upon the floor, forming puddles at their feet.

Reb Avraham concluded his account, bemoaning the loss of a generation that so personified the Jewish culture and elevation of the human spirit.

This Handel, too, was a shining example of that generation. One of the most unusual men I have ever met, his persistence and talent for survival were incredible. In the dark days of the Gestapo rule in Warsaw, his skills enabled him to maintain the shop outside the area designated for Jewish residence. As a deeply religious Jew, he used this factory, at an enormous risk to himself and his family, to protect the great *rebbes* and *rabbanim* who were trapped in the ghetto.

Still more amazing, Handel synthesized advanced cultural gifts, good education, an ability to speak Polish eloquently, a sense of daring and the ability to respond quickly to any given situation. These were great survival gifts.

It was this combination of talents that gave him the daring to enter Dachau disguised as nothing less than a Polish Catholic priest. It was in this guise that my brother and I first met him after the liberation.

It must be remembered that clergymen from both Catholic and Protestant denominations were also incarcerated at Dachau, almost from its first days. Among these, were several courageous German clergymen who challenged the activities and the ideologies of the Nazis. But the likelihood of a Jew successfully disguising himself as a Catholic priest in the conditions of the camps was not very great. Catholic clergymen in the camps had to live communally with other priests and move among the other Poles as members of the clergy.

Yet Handel acted his role so expertly, that, upon their liberation, his fellow Poles refused to believe he was Jewish. They suspected, in a comical twist, that he was feigning Jewishness in order to take advantage of the sudden show of pity towards the people who had suffered the worst at the hands of the Nazis.

When the initial shock of our meeting wore off slightly, we began to reminisce about the good days before the war, a time when the name Reb Avraham Handel was a household expression among *chassidic* Jews across all of Poland. To be sure, he was not only a very successful businessman, but also a *talmid chacham* of note.

I have never figured out how Reb Avraham knew who we were in those first moments he approached us, but for some reason, he took a sincere interest in our well-being. At that time, Handel was sure that he had lost his whole family, and when he found us, two pathetic, confused young boys, he decided to help. We must have touched his heart deeply, for he offered us some solace and a bit of the food which he managed to save from the Red Cross package he received at Dachau as a "priest." Suddenly and unexpectedly, he poured out all the love he had for his lost family upon my brother and me.

We were with him for a week, and during that time, he took care of us as a parent would do for his own children. He saw to it that we had rations of food, and he promised to look after us as long as he could. Reb Avraham told us that he had money and properties in different countries, and he would use his resources to protect us.

Then one day, perhaps a week later, he received the news that his daughter had been found and was still alive. Not one to waste time, Reb Avraham left immediately to find his

surviving daughter, and we never saw him again.

But the gift Reb Avraham Handel had given us was a priceless one, a gift of love and kindness, commodities for which we were starved in the same way that our bodies craved nutrients. For that brief period of time we spent together, I remember him with fondness and admiration to this day. He represented the embodiment of the spirit which lies in all of us, and without which we could not have survived as a people through all the years of our persecution.

Despite our slow but steady revitalization, I was not yet out of danger. I was sitting outside one day, not really doing much, when I suddenly felt an insect bite my neck. Instinctively, I struck the parasite and saw a thick bloody louse fall to the ground. I shrank back in horror, for I suspected immediately that it was carrying the dreaded typhus germ.

Sure enough, within twenty-four hours, I came down with the fearsome disease, joining the thousands who were falling sick and dying from it. Tragically, there were no facilities to take care of all the sick; we were simply taken to a makeshift hospital that had functioned earlier on as a camp hospital at Dachau. The war was now strangely renewed, as the aftermath of hostilities led to new battles for survival. This Dachau hospital had no drugs and no means of helping its patients; people were simply brought there to let nature take its course. And unfortunately, most of them died. This was a massive epidemic of typhus, and those who had succumbed were carried out daily.

I was unceremoniously dumped in bed with another man, an Italian, because there were not enough beds for each of the sick to obtain his own.

There is no way to describe specifically the pain of a typhus victim; it is simply the worst suffering imaginable. The

body temperature rises until the organs burn inside the body, making the mind feel like it is on fire. All of the body's fluids are secreted in large quantities, leaving the victim perpetually thirsty, drained of liquid. There is no rest, in wakefulness or even unconsciousness. And while most die, the survivors suffer permanent effects such as deafness or blindness.

The morning after I arrived, my large, well-built bedmate was carried out, dead. Horrified, I looked on as they bore his corpse away. If he perished from the disease, I thought miserably, what possible chance would I have?

I'm really dying, I thought over and over. This time, I will not be able to escape death. Every day, through my feverish delirium, I could see the dead being carried out.

But deep down, I knew that I had to survive this just as I had survived until then. I concentrated all my will power and inner strength on the seemingly impossible goal of getting through this misery.

One day, when the doctors were walking through the wards, I managed to rise and approach one of the Jewish doctors from Poland, more than likely a survivor himself. I must have been a most pitiful sight. Reduced to less than eighty pounds even before the disease, the typhus had by now eaten even further into my flesh. My eyes were raging with the fever, and water was running down my body. My skeleton-like ribs were protruding, and my legs were like sticks, barely able to support the light weight they had to carry. I was near my end, and I knew it.

It was in that condition that I stopped the doctor who was making the rounds.

"Please save me," I pleaded, trying very hard not to sound pathetic. "Some day I will be a very rich man, and I will give you a million dollars if you will only save my life." Ready to

faint, I even offered to sign a contract to support my pledge.

The doctor merely laughed at my plea. Perhaps he laughed only to conceal the piteous desperation he was overcome with in that terrible place. For he knew there was nothing they could do to help me; they simply did not have the drugs. Besides, with typhus, one could do nothing other than wait for the temperature to go down. But often, death struck first.

In retrospect, I realize that only my tremendous urge to survive could have induced me to create my fanciful offer. I would live; I had to live. The spark of determination that had disappeared during the final days in Dachau now reemerged with new force.

Gradually, the fever went down, and I began to recover. I started to make out shapes and people's faces, an ability I had already lost in my delirium. The world was real once again; I was able to talk, to walk, to act. I could resume thinking about myself as a real person, something more than a dying cause or a prisoner of the Nazis. Only weeks before, I had been one of the walking dead, but now I could live again. I had plans now to leave the hospital and find my dear mother. Together with my brother, we would settle down somewhere and live as a family once more.

One day, my brother came to visit. I was not yet completely healed, but it was already plain that I would recover. He had to stand outside the hospital barracks, since the entire structure, which was taken over by typhus victims, was in absolute quarantine. I spoke to him through a window, and it felt good to see him before me, to remember that we had come through the inferno together.

"Leibel, you look like you are among the living again," he began with a warm smile.

"Well, you didn't think that a little bit of typhus was enough to get rid of Leibel Sanik, did you?" I replied, using humor to conceal what I was really feeling.

"I suppose not," he said cheerfully. "Listen, I have some news. I'm going to be leaving Dachau in a day or two."

"Where to?" I asked, fearing his impending departure.

"There is a refugee service based in Munich, and they announced that a group of us can move to another place which has been set up for our needs. It is supposed to be a good place."

"All right, I guess it sounds fine." After a brief pause, I asked tentatively, "When will I see you, Shmuel?"

"What are you so worried about, Leibel?" he asked, revealing a keen understanding of my fears and hesitations. "As soon as you're all better, you will join me."

"And what about Mammeh?" I probed, touching the nerve that we shared profoundly.

"Meanwhile, I am going to see what I can come up with," he said encouragingly. "Later, the two of us will find her together. Just get healed quickly."

"Be well, Shmuel. I'll catch up with you soon."

He was about to walk away when I remembered an important question. "By the way, what's the name of that place you are going to?"

"It's called Garmisch. Garmisch Partenkirchen."

CHAPTER 32

Fateful News

BY JULY OF 1945, I WAS AT LAST READY TO MOVE ON, having recovered from my very close brush with death. Now I would try and lead my life as a new person, with normal rights and a bright future. Yet the effects of those dreadful years of German terror were not so easily left behind.

Just as I was preparing to leave the hospital which had been my home for the previous few months, I realized that I had absolutely no clothes. After searching about, I finally found some rags to wear for my new journey to freedom. I found an ill-fitting pair of pants, a German military jacket and a military cap to wear on my head. Unfortunately, I could not find shoes. It would still be a while before I was the stylish businessman I had promised my doctor I would become.

Still lost, empty and confused, I took a train to Munich, only a few miles away from Dachau. My ultimate destination was Garmisch Partenkirchen, where my brother was residing, but before I could make my way there, I had to readjust to life as a free citizen of the world. Aware of my strange appearance, I asked several people to direct me to a place where I could receive a decent set of clothes. Other refugees like myself sent me to the local offices of the UNWRA, the United Nations World Relief Association, where I was able to receive clothing and some food.

I spent a few weeks in Munich, roaming the streets aimlessly, as if hoping to rediscover the wonderful life I had known before the war. Living off the donated food from the Joint distribution facility in Munich, I could not yet concern myself with large scale goals; I needed simply to feel like a human being once again, and that would take time.

Everywhere I went, I encountered survivors like myself, each with his or her own personal narrative of horrors. Here and there, I met people I had known in the beloved Piotrkow of old. We would pause to reminisce briefly and then part company, as if to acknowledge the end of that *kehillah* forever. Such encounters would become forms of ritual for the thousands of survivors for many years to come.

Somehow, during those weeks in the Bavarian capital, I managed to receive a pair of *tefillin*. To suggest that we were able to rediscover the beauty and the imperative of a Torah life immediately after the war would be deceitful. Through all our suffering, most of us had been made to feel quite distanced from any spirituality. The rate at which we were able to reaffirm our devotion was something personal, varying greatly from one individual to the next.

However, unlike our bodies, which had to be retrained

for digestion of rich foods in a slow and gradual fashion, our souls were able to undergo a much speedier process of readjustment. I can recall the rapid escalation of observance and spirituality as the forgotten routines began to take shape once again. Finding the *tefillin* in that town, the same city where Nazism had sprouted two decades earlier, was a sure sign of things to come. I kept those *tefillin* near me always, as a drowning man would grasp a life preserver, for they represented the beginning of a process, which at the time, I was not sure would be completed.

At last, I was ready to travel to Garmisch. I boarded the train which would take me the fifty miles through scenic countryside, and after a few hours, I reached the place which would be my home for the next five years. It was a beautiful, picturesque area, situated in the middle of the Bavarian Alps, about five miles from the Austrian border. A charming town, Garmisch had been a favorite vacation resort for the upper echelon of Nazi officers. Even during the Allied bombings, the town went unmolested, and it soon became the location of choice for Allied officers.

Garmisch was the site of one of the towering structures built for the 1936 Munich Olympic Games. But it also had the ominous distinction of proximity to the very last gas chamber and crematorium which operated under the Nazi authorities. It was to that spot, Mittenwald, that we would have marched from Dachau on that *Shabbos* prior to liberation.

Given these factors, the resort town was an unlikely place for a Jewish victim of the Germans to ultimately reside. But it was there that my brother and hundreds of other Jewish refugees were staying, and that was where I went. The Sanik brothers were together again. Now we would find our dear mother and start our new lives together.

I was sure she was alive, for I remembered her so clearly beside me, young and healthy, the last time I saw her. I now concentrated all my energies on finding her.

I was certainly not alone in my search. All across Europe, Jews travelled from place to place, following the vaguest rumors or leads in the hope that one or more of their loved ones was still alive. I asked everyone I met for information that might lead to my mother's whereabouts. Some knew nothing, and several rumors turned out to be false. But Shmuel and I were undaunted, and we did not lack determination or hope. We would find her soon, we were sure of it.

Then, one day, I received a definite lead. My mother had been taken to Ravensbruk, a women's concentration camp, on that eventful day when the Piotrkow labor camp was liquidated. She was alive until the late days of the war, and people remembered seeing her, still healthy, still full of her warmth and good spirits, until the month of April of 1945. It was then that she suddenly disappeared.

As I probed more and more, I heard eyewitness reports. She had always been seen at the *Appel*, but one day, she was no longer standing there among the rest. She was never seen again. There one day and gone the next. She was murdered, with no trace and with no explanation.

I felt like the sky had fallen on me. After surviving the Gehinnom of the war, my greatest wish had been to be with her, and now I would never see her again. My grief was beyond measure, and I could not be consoled. At the time, the blow seemed too much for a human being to bear, and I could not help thinking of the last time my brother and I sat in her cherished company. I recalled that last meal she had prepared for us and the look that passed over her when she said, "My children, this could be our last meal together." She

realized that she would not be able to comfort and care for her two sons for much longer.

After making some calculations, my brother and I figured out that our mother was probably killed on the ninth day of *Nissan*, and that is the day we annually observe her *yahrzeit*.

The pain of her loss was great then and has hardly diminished over the years. My mother's image is forever ingrained in my heart, relentlessly weighing upon it and preventing a full emotional recovery.

It would be many years before I could even partially come to terms with her death. To make matters worse, I had no access to the place where she died. Whereas in 1975 I was already able to travel to Poland to visit the Jewish cemetery of Piotrkow, doing what I could to honor my father, may Hashem avenge his blood, it would take a lot longer for me to pay similar tribute to my mother's memory. I would have to wait until August of 1992, several months after the fall of the Communist regime of East Germany.

At that time, I flew to Berlin and took a taxi to the site of the Ravensbruk concentration camp, where there is a museum memorial housing the archives of the camp. I approached the woman in charge and asked to see the file which documented my mother's death. I was horrified when she replied that there were over sixty thousand files, and that it would be impossible to track down any single one. I stared at the woman for many seconds, trying to come to terms with the enormity of what she had just told me and with the fact that my trauma was but a tiny piece of a mammoth puzzle which would never be solved.

Instructing my driver to wait for me, I went to the spot where she was likely killed. There is a hall of photographs there now, adorned with the images of scores of Jewish

women whose lives were savagely taken by the Nazis. As I started to peruse the pictures in the hope that I would find a photo of my mother, my head started to spin, and I felt everything crumble beneath me. Despite the various names that were printed beneath the pictures, I thought I saw my mother in every photo I looked at. Delirious with grief, my body was racked with sudden and uncontrollable sobbing, as if I had just learned the tragic news of her death. I suddenly could not bear to stand there a second longer. Shaken, I dashed outside and entered the cab that was waiting for me, rushing away from that spot, never to return. For some reason, I can handle the yearly visits to my father's grave, but I would not be able to deal with a second visit to Ravensbruk.

At the news of my mother's death, my brother and I were truly all alone in the world. All of our immediate and extended family members were gone; my aunts, uncles and all my cousins were dead. The world of Jewish Poland, the pure life that I had loved so dearly, was gone for good. Had the saintliness and piety of that lost generation presented such dangers to the maniacal Hitler that they had to be exterminated so thoroughly? Were our *kapotes*, our beards, the covered heads of our women and our *Shabbos* candles so offensive to Germany that we all had to be wiped out? These questions, and so many others like them, will remain unanswered, testimony to the senseless destruction that was wrought by the German beasts.

In the deepest of grief, we took solace from one thing alone. The greatest wish of both of our parents had been realized. My brother and I had survived.

CHAPTER 33

Bringing the Pieces Together

IT IS RELATIVELY EASY TO GET RID OF BODY LICE AND TO shed the rags that served as concentration camp clothing. However, it is far more difficult to cleanse the dirt that the Germans had heaped upon the human spirit and, more specifically, the Jewish spirit, the Torah spirit.

A short time after my arrival at Garmisch, even as I was laboring to assimilate the heartbreaking news of my mother's demise, I tried to revitalize my spirit and my ambition. But despite my zeal in securing a pair of *tefillin* and even locating a *Gemara Kiddushin* from which I learned sporadically, realigning myself with the life of Torah and *chassidus* was easier said than done.

However, one seemingly inconsequential incident served to rejuvenate my flagging spirits, enabling me to once again

rediscover the sensibilities of old.

It was a little while before *Rosh Hashanah* of 1945, almost six years to the day from the beginning of night's descent upon Polish Jewry, and I decided to pay a visit to the Displaced Persons camp in Feldaffing. Not far from Munich, it was the largest such facility in the American sector of post-war Germany. From the thousands of Jewish survivors there, I hoped to secure some important financial connections for starting a new life.

I was walking by a large room in one of the camp's communal buildings, and I suddenly saw something which made me stop dead in my tracks. Inside, I could see about twenty or thirty Jews standing and *davening Minchah*. That, in itself, was a novel enough experience in those days, but that was not what caught my eye. As my gaze fell upon the man who was leading the *davening*, I was overcome with the type of awe felt only in the presence of someone very special. The fervor on his brow and the sanctity of his visage awoke in me a feeling more powerful than any I had felt in years.

"Who is that man?" I asked the first person I saw, as soon as it was permissible to talk.

"Don't you know?" he replied. "That's the Klausenberger Rebbe."

The Klausenberger Rebbe. A *rebbe* who was a survivor like myself. His reply presented me with an incredible new reality, although I could not yet fathom its dimensions. Until then, I had assumed that the *rebbes* and the *rabbanim* of old had gone the same way as the Aleksanderer Rebbe.

I turned to look at the Rebbe again. He wore a short jacket and a small cap upon his head. His beard and *peyos* had just begun to sprout again after the war, so there was not much there to speak of. Still, despite his unassuming appearance,

I have no words to describe the way that man electrified me. A rush of memories began to surge through my head as I looked at this man whom I had never seen before and whose name I had only heard in passing. These were memories not of Klausenberg, but of Piotrkow, of Aleksander and of my whole family. These were memories of a life that was once led in complete devotion to the Master of the Universe.

Much later on, I discovered that this same Klausenberger Rebbe brought back so many of the burnt embers of Jewish refugees to the four hallowed walls of the *beis midrash*. In America, as well as in Eretz Yisrael, it was his devotion and selflessness that inspired hundreds of deadened spirits.

For me, it was just over a month since I had left the depressing halls of the Dachau hospital with no clothes, no food, no money, no family and little feeling of self-worth. That eventful afternoon in Feldaffing turned out to be the catalyst for my desire to recapture the heritage I had lost.

Nothing else came of my trip to Feldaffing, and I returned to Garmisch the next day. However, the blessed *Minchah* turned out to have been more important than any connection I could have hoped to establish.

With *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* coming up, a group of us decided to organize a *minyan* for the Days of Awe. The American authorities granted us the use of an old German theater which had long since lain empty. As the days approached, we informed as many people as we could about our planned *tefillos*.

We prepared the hall with the makeshift trappings of a *shul*, including seats for the small crowd we expected. Nevertheless, we were totally unprepared for the hundreds of men and women who attended our services. Survivors stood next to the scores of American Jewish soldiers, forming a unified

congregation, as the old strains of *Unesaneh Tokef* and *Lakeil Orech Din* were once again heard. Choked sobs and torrents of tears filled the auditorium, transporting us back to Piotrkow and to the hundreds of other places the various survivors had lived before the war.

When I look back on incidents such as those, I view them as the genuine proofs of the liberation of our people. With the public reaffirmation of our faith, the Nazi effort at destroying us was now openly declared defunct.

Certainly, there were joys and thrills in the first few months following the war. As we dreamed about what the future held, we shared our fantastic hopes with one another. But unfortunately, they were short-lived. News constantly poured in about relatives and family members who had not survived, and reality presented its updated concerns to each and every one of us.

Jews suddenly were faced with overwhelming questions. What now? Where was there to go? We were different from the other survivors; we were genuinely "displaced persons." The others had nations to which they could return, countries where they belonged demographically and geographically. Eretz Yisrael had not yet come to be politically independent, and for us, there was no place we could truly call home.

I knew that I could have gone back to Poland, as others did, to find the streets empty of Jews, our *shuls* destroyed and our libraries burnt. I would find Poles living in our apartments and gentile neighbors who would be annoyed at our reappearance in the city. I heard of three Jews who had returned to Piotrkow to attempt to reclaim some of the family's possessions. They were brutally murdered, and two other young boys just narrowly escaped with their lives after being chased by none other than the local police. Dozens of

similar incidents occurred in many Polish towns, and many of the returning Jews who had miraculously survived the brutality of Germany now met their deaths at the hands of the Poles.

I soon learned that almost everyone from my city had been murdered, and the gentiles had simply moved into the empty Jewish houses. I realized that the Jewish life we had known and loved in Piotrkow would exist only in photographs and in the imaginations and memories of those who had partaken of that world before it vanished forever. It was not, for most of us, a place to which to return.

Returning to Piotrkow was out of the question. So, as ambitious and eager as I was, I quietly resolved that Garmisch Partenkirchen would become my new home. At the time, I could not understand that this could never be a long-term solution, and I prepared to stay there for an unlimited period of time.

On the twentieth of *Kislev*, 1947, I married Faiga Zemel, a survivor of the ordeals of the holocaust, like myself. My wife came from a small town in Poland called Pazanov, from a family background and Torah heritage similar to my own. She lost almost her whole family as well, surviving with but one sister. Together, we set up our new home in the beauty of the Bavarian Alps.

Those few years are hard to remember in detail. Time passes quickly, and I vaguely recall the days I spent travelling among the cities of Germany for business, as I once had done in and around Piotrkow. I traded and made many deals, dreaming of wealth, but always taking too many risks until I had nothing left and had to start all over again. It was my own version of the confused life that survivors often led after the war. For after the ordeals we had endured, freedom was a

strong and heady wine indeed, causing many a person to lose all control.

Although we were free, the sudden relaxation of tension, when it finally came, was too much to restrain. Survivors acted in unusual and unexpected ways, and for many years, it was difficult for them to get control over the lives so brutally disrupted by the Nazis.

The manner in which we had been forced to live during the horror-filled war years is best described, using the words of a secular thinker, as "survival of the fittest." We had been morally crushed, forced to let go of all sense of ethical standards. It therefore took a while before sanity and a sense of proportion could return. Our egos could not reassert themselves instantly, and it took some time before spirituality and emotional stability could be exercised in everyday life once again. I had to find my way back again to a little bit of that pure life towards which I had always been taught to strive.

In retrospect, I see that there is another, simpler reason for why we often resorted to some sort of mad activity after the war. We had just spent years in confinement and captivity. By destroying our ability to plan, to act on our own and to predict the outcome of our actions, the Germans destroyed in us the feeling that our actions had any purpose. Toward the end, they nearly managed to snuff out that spark of life which kept us going as human beings.

Consequently, now that we were free, we tended to lash out in different ways, seemingly without reason, just to give ourselves a sense of viability and mobility.

Some turned this passionate embrace of freedom to finding a spouse and starting a family. Effective functioning in the world requires the ability to give meaning to life and to

perpetuate it. Meaningful relationships allowed some survivors to recover the sense that the future was not hopeless and empty. A new generation of Jewish children would have to make up somehow for a portion of the million and a half Jewish children who were butchered by the satanic hands of the Third Reich.

One *rav* I know, an ex-minister in the Latvian government, lost his wife and children in the holocaust. He told me that at the time of his liberation, he was on the verge of insanity, feeling a terrible urge to destroy everything around him. Nevertheless, this man turned his passions instead to the building of *yeshivos*, dedicating his life to their creation and the continuation of Torah learning in the post-holocaust age. That is how he kept himself whole when madness and self-destruction beckoned to him after the war. His was the highest order of spiritual heroism at a time when it became so necessary.

My own personal goal was far more mundane. As I had uttered deliriously to the doctor in that Dachau hospital, I tried, almost completely without success, to grow financially during those years in Garmisch.

Still, those years of futile effort were crucial for me, as they allowed me the time I needed to blot some of the sorrow and pain from my bleeding heart.

Of course, I had learned the art of survival in Piotrkow in the shadow of the SS finishing school. I now used my business trips to help support my family in an environment that seemed overwhelming and total. Survival in post-war Germany was not a problem for someone who had gone through what I had, nor was it difficult for the remnants of a once great community to resume the mercantile practices which our people were known to have mastered.

Once again, Jewish people were rewarded for their financial and administrative skills, their business experience, their craftsmanship and their industriousness. The fundamental feeling that filled the hearts of thousands of refugees, though, was one of doubt. How long of a respite would we have before the next disaster struck?

CHAPTER 34

The Hatred Lives On

IT WAS THE END OF 1946, AND I WAS TRAVELLING BY TRAIN, as usual, for my business. I spoke German fluently, having lived with Germans in Garmisch and travelled among them often. This particular time, I was journeying from Munich to Frankfurt.

I was travelling among fine German citizens and speaking to them in their own tongue about various matters. Therefore, it was not surprising that they had no inkling I was Jewish.

While we stood in the station in Munich, we saw a second train, from which a large group of Jews from Lansberg disembarked. Unlike me, their dress and spoken Yiddish made their Jewishness obvious to all.

At this sight, a German lady who was sitting right behind

me suddenly mused out loud. "Look, they probably forgot to gas those Jews."

I was shaken to my roots, but I did not know what to do. Although I displayed no outward signs of Jewishness, my pain was that of a wound that had not closed. Her words reopened all the agony and the loss of the so recent past. I did not react at once, but I was traumatized and boiling inside. I could hardly keep still, so great was my anger, but I knew it would be best, at least for the meantime, to maintain my composure.

By the time we reached the next stop, Augsburg, I could hold in my rage no longer. The wasted blood of my loved ones demanded that I do something, if only to ease my own tormented mind.

I turned to the man sitting in the seat next to mine and said, "Please keep my place. I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

I got up to go, leaving my briefcase on the seat to indicate that I would be right back.

The train was stopped for a while at the Augsburg station, so I got off and found a German policeman who was charged with guarding the trains. As calmly and as eloquently as I could, I proceeded to tell him what had taken place, insisting that he file a report of the event and record the names of witnesses.

I am sure that it was not sympathy that caused this policeman to follow up the incident, but most probably, the widely-publicized War Crimes Trials that were proceeding then in Nuremburg. In any case, whatever he truly felt, the guard followed me back to the rail car immediately.

Together, we approached the woman who had expressed the desire to put me and all my people to death. At that

moment, I did not see a solitary evil woman but all the people who had been responsible for the millions of dead Jewish bodies. In that one person, I saw the wish that had brought so much death and misery upon us. I was still shaking with anger.

"That is the woman," I said, pointing her out to the policeman.

"What harm have I done?" she protested, not knowing with what she was being charged.

"Don't you remember what you said a bit earlier?"

I reminded her of the cruel statement she had uttered, repeating her words verbatim.

Her response was no different than the attempted defense of the war criminals at the time. She cried out that it had been a mistake. She didn't mean it, she didn't say it, she was so sorry. Her sickening pretense and lies were too much for me to bear, and I left her car after the policeman took down the particulars of the incident.

I joined some of my fellow Jews in another car and tried to forget this terrible woman who, it must be noted, was really no different from so many of her countrymen at the time. She would not leave me, however, and she followed me to my new seat, all sweetness and affability. Pleading for forgiveness, she went so far as to offer me money, but sickened to my stomach, I rejected her offers.

That is how it was in Germany. During the war, we were fit only for death. Now, afraid of the Nazi trials, the same people who formerly craved Jewish blood suddenly turned into models of good will to the Jews. It was a nauseating spectacle, and I tried to avoid it at all costs.

This incident was not a major one, and in the context of war crimes, the lady was but an insignificant Nazi. She never

soiled her hands by shooting Jewish children in the arms of their own mothers, nor did she crush Jewish skulls or make lampshades out of their skin. Nevertheless, as an ordinary German citizen of her time, her mentality was identical to that of the murderous Nazis.

Faced with openly hostile sentiments such as these, the enormity of my rage is understandable. And from this indignation comes the desire to punish all those responsible for the holocaust, be they important Nazis or only ordinary Germans who would be delighted if the Jewish people would simply disappear.

On another occasion, I was in Europe, travelling among Germans aboard a train in Switzerland. One lady noticed my excellent German and asked how I had learned to speak it so well.

"I have stayed in some of the best hotels in Germany," I told her. "Buchenwald and Dachau."

Now my fellow travellers knew that I was Jewish. Another young woman turned to me. "Do you hate all Germans?" she asked curiously.

For a moment, I did not reply. Then I said to her, "Put yourself in my shoes. What if it was your father who was forced to make a choice between his own life and yours? If your sister was tortured and driven to an untimely end by Gestapo thugs? If you had lost your mother, grandmother, uncles, aunts and cousins? Picture yourself driven and chased in conditions of untold misery. If your whole world was wiped out for no good reason besides the mad whims of a dictator, would you be able to forgive the horrendous crimes? Would you be able to forgive the people who had done all that to you?"

Faced with the justice of my anger and the horror of the

crimes that were committed, she could not say a word and remained silent.

And I, who continue to live with the nightmare of the holocaust, turned away from this woman who could never even remotely understand the experiences we went through and the pain in our hearts.

CHAPTER 35

Inevitable Return

I TRAVEL OFTEN TO POLAND TO VISIT MY FATHER'S GRAVE, bitterly cherishing the small plot of Polish soil. Sadly, I am considered fortunate for I have an actual grave to visit in the blood-soaked land we once called home.

I recall the first time I stood before the earth where my father lies buried. With a trembling heart and eyes filled with tears, I stood and said my prayers. My Polish cab driver looked on with growing impatience, but feeling mesmerized, I could not leave. I talked to my father as if he were alive, as if we were still beside one another, he not yet forty, I scarcely sixteen.

I remember not being able to tear myself away from his grave. Even as I tried, I turned back again and again as my driver watched me in alarm. As I spoke to my father, I

conjured up his image before my damp eyes: a pious young man with a full and beautiful beard.

"I must leave now; I cannot stay here," I said finally. Yet it would have been easier to break out of actual fetters than it was to draw loose from those bonds of the mind and heart.

Somehow, I felt that my father needed to be protected and cared for even in death. I could not protect him when the accursed Germans beat the strength from his body and the hope from his eyes, nor could I defend him on the day he walked to his death. Now I had to accept that there was nothing more I could do, and with great resolve, I turned to leave the gravesite.

Several years ago, on one of my annual *Pesach* visits to the Aleksanderer Rebbe in New York, I encountered an old acquaintance, a *landsman* from Piotrkow. When I told him I was planning a visit to the old country, he suddenly turned red. Laboring to control his rage, he cried, "Leibel, you must be crazy! How can you go back to Poland?"

In truth, it is always hard to return to Poland, simply because there is so little of it left. However, while there are many people who cannot face the pain of going back, I feel differently. I visit now each year, instinctively feeling it is something I must do.

There is a silence now in Piotrkow and in the hundreds of towns where the Angel of Death has left his brutal mark. And at Treblinka, where so many of those Jews perished behind iron oven doors, there is silence also. I travelled to Treblinka and bowed my head there in prayer, remembering the countless Jews that were beaten with whips and driven by hunger in that fateful place. The bodies of those Jews who perished were unceremoniously piled high, one corpse upon the other, and then set on fire until the gut-wrenching smell

of burning flesh reached the nostrils of those still alive. I could feel the silence of the thousands of Jews who waited helplessly for their eventual death, a death without any of the honor that is due every human being. In this way, millions of our people became no more than billows of blackened smoke going up the chimneys of the gas ovens on their final journey back to the Creator. Countless numbers died within the silence of the forests and the damp concrete edifices where the Germans conducted their heinous work.

Piotrkow, for me, is an obligation, a return to my beloved father, whose death gave me my life. Indeed, my father and my past will always beckon, reaching out to me across the barrier of time. And with them, the memory of all that had been taken away from me forever will never be forgotten.

Since that first visit to Piotrkow, I have been consumed by an irrevocable obsession to recover as many articles from our home in prewar Poland as I possibly can.

Years ago, I managed to obtain a photograph of my father. Although in those days *chassidic* Jews did not, as a custom, have their pictures taken, photographs were required by the government for all Polish internal passports. Firmly believing that I would be able to locate this document, I spent a few days searching fruitlessly. Finally, it was found by a friend of mine, Gershon Strykovsky, in the depository where the Germans had dumped all Jewish documents.

On another occasion, I miraculously located a *sefer*, the *Noda Biyehudah*, which my father had dedicated as a *bar-mitzvah* gift for his nephew. A friend of mine was in the home of a man who had come to America from Warsaw, and he noticed the unusual volume. The *sefer*, which my friend picked off the shelf by chance, was a valuable one because the print was in a style not used since the beginning of the

century. What made this book so special for me, however, was that it contained my father's signature, in addition to a four-line poem inscribed as a dedication to his nephew.

It turned out that before coming to America, the man from Warsaw had collected many *sefarim* to bring with him to the New World. Among the volumes he amassed was a large collection of *sefarim* that he had found lying in disuse in Piotrkow. The sacred books were shipped to New York, where they eventually came to line the shelves of the man's private library.

When I learned of the *sefer's* existence, I knew that I had to have it. However, this wasn't easily accomplished, and it took me two years to own the volume. Because of its unique typeface, the owner would not give it up, nor would he exchange it for a new copy. I combed bookshops from New York to Jerusalem in search of another copy of the same edition, but to no avail. I had almost given up hope when my eyes fell, quite unexpectedly, on the exact same volume in my very own *shul* in Toronto. My *rav* readily agreed to let me exchange the ancient *sefer* for a new one. Finally, after having the replacement properly bound, the exchange was conducted, and I held the precious signature in my hand.

I cannot stay the night in Piotrkow when I visit. The beautiful old train station, like the city itself, is decrepit, and the buildings are gray and dilapidated. The town is a sad place, not at all like the community of my childhood. I return to where we used to live on Stara Warszawska, Old Warsaw Street. I walk past our old apartment building, past what was once my father's shop. I stand and I stare through the windows and through the walls, straight into an era long gone.

After the war, I did not return to Piotrkow until 1975. I went to our old apartment with the slim hope of retrieving the *tefillin* we had hidden in the attic. Though I had heard tales from other survivors of having doors rudely slammed in their faces, the people who now occupied our flat did not slam the door in my face, but I wasn't invited in either. As I stood in the doorway surveying what I could, the woman crudely and bluntly asked me if we had left anything valuable behind. It seems her thorough search had turned up nothing. Nothing valuable? How ironic, I thought as memories flooded my mind of all I had left behind in this place. I turned and walked away.

Some years later, I arranged with an official from the Housing Department to search the old hiding place for the *tefillin*. She found nothing but dust. Still drawn to the past, in May of 1994 I returned to the old apartment and was invited inside by the family's son. Almost fifty years after having left, I once again crossed the threshold of my childhood home.

Not surprisingly, there was nothing to indicate that we had ever lived in this place. I spent about fifteen minutes looking around the beautiful and elegantly furnished apartment and then turned and walked away, my spirits somehow buoyed by this momentary connection to the past.

Only traces of the old Piotrkow remain. Many of the old buildings are still standing, as is the edifice which once housed the main *shul* of the community. There is the old cemetery, of course, where my father's remains lie interred. But Piotrkow is desolate, its vitality gone. It is only our memories that preserve the old images of a vanished world whose special loveliness the Germans destroyed so quickly and so decidedly.

EPILOGUE

EVERY NIGHT WHEN I GO TO SLEEP, I AM HAUNTED BY THE bitter personal memories from the holocaust years. Some nights I wake up in mortal terror from a dream that I am back under the rule of the SS, and I feel the old fear that has never left the recesses of my mind.

Sometimes I am back in Piotrkow, and other times, I am in Buchenwald, stumbling along hopelessly. The images and the associations follow me everywhere; they are as much a part of me as any limb of my body.

Hundreds of nights have ended abruptly, with a shout or a sob unstifled in my semi-consciousness. For me, there has never really been a full liberation, for the mentality of the oppressed still overtakes me in my unguarded moments.

And always, my family members come back into my

consciousness. I think of them and of their last dreadful moments every day and night. And as I hold the few photographs of them which I succeeded in salvaging, I shudder to think that these pictures are all that remain. I think of how it would have been if the Nazis had not brutally destroyed these tender and beautiful souls and if my dear parents had lived to see their future generations maintaining their values and ideals.

It is little wonder that I have taken upon myself the vital, personal objective of recovering the few remnants that might exist from that vanished world—a *siddur,* a *sefer,* a few photos. These are all I have left of the life I so cherished.

It is also little wonder that I decided to return to Piotrkow and to visit Treblinka and Ravensbruk. It was important to me to *daven* at my father's burial place and at the ominous site of Treblinka, where so many, including our saintly and illustrious Aleksanderer Rebbe, were taken to a miserable death.

I realize that many survivors cannot bring themselves to return to these places, and it is neither my role nor my nature to reproach them for this attitude. For me, somehow, these trips are emotional imperatives.

By returning to the sites where our people suffered so much, I maintain the ties which even the Germans could not sever. With these visits, I enact the words of the *pasuk*, *"She'al avicha veyagedcha*. Ask your father and he shall tell you." We are charged with the responsibility of holding on to our past and never forgetting our heritage.

Occasionally, I am asked to describe the tumultuous emotions I was besieged with at the conclusion of my horror-filled ordeals.

My initial feelings were relief and joy at simply having

survived the terrible experiences. Soon, though, more complicated emotions set in, for I could not feel true happiness in the face of so much death and loss. For people who had lost their loved ones, genuine joy was not really possible. On the contrary, many survivors who were unable to bear the pain they were left with secretly wished for death.

There are other survivors who experience a kind of emptiness, a numbness. They shut out their own feelings and memories, trying to forget the nightmares that are indelibly printed in their memories.

There are some who turned their rage against *Yiddishkeit*, while there are others who maintained their faith even more strongly. For each, it is his or her way of coping, not the product of rational thought and philosophical analysis.

For me, *Yiddishkeit* served to brighten my life, even during the worst days of the holocaust. I held my father's *tefillin* close to me until they were forcibly taken. And subsequently, the chapter of *Tehillim, l'David Mizmor*, which I repeated endlessly, was the straw of inspiration to which I clung in my seemingly hopeless situations. At the end of the war, my faith was as strong as ever. It was a source of strength in my worst days and the foundation of my life today.

During the first years after my liberation, even while still living in Garmisch, I was filled with the powerful desire to bear testimony to the cruelty to which we had been subjected. I longed to shake away the complacency of the Germans around me and cry out in public the details of the horror-filled years that had elapsed.

"Do you not know what happened?" I longed to shout. "Do you not remember how synagogues were burned and desecrated in your own neighborhoods?"

Much later, when I commenced to travel to Poland

annually, I was again obsessed with the need to testify and speak out loud of the atrocities. I imagined myself confronting the Poles with the shameful acts they had committed. Had they forgotten the long lines of innocent Jews marching in horror to their dreadful suffering and death in the concentration camps? Were the *mezuzos* on their doors not obvious signs that Jewish people had lived in the houses where they now lived? Where were all those people who once prayed, studied, conducted their business and celebrated their holidays?

This desire to show the world in an honest, non-literary fashion what I had seen and lived through loomed larger with every passing year. I felt the deepest need to be another voice for my father, my mother, my sister and all the people who had suffered so much.

And at the same time, I shall always be plagued by my utter ineptitude, for the descriptions of our experiences can never be adequate. How is it possible to find words to explain what it once meant to treasure a tiny piece of bread or a piece of boiled potato? How it is possible to describe the smoke that rose from the crematoria, knowing that the sickly smell wafting over the camp came from the burning flesh of fellow Jews? What words can depict the pain of the mother whose child was shot in her arms? This gross inadequacy of words is the reason that so many of us have fallen silent.

However, for me, silence is impossible. Perhaps the only real obligation we have now is to make people remember what happened.

If these images and events are not shared with children and recorded by those who personally witnessed their full horror, then they will disappear from history and be lost to the present and the future. Only those who experienced the

full horror of the holocaust can transmit it to the next generation and thus ensure that the world does not forget.

I look at my father's photograph, and I ponder the gift of life he granted me. I will never forget that *Shabbos* in the spring of 1943, when our family was anxiously awaiting the return of Gittel Feiga from Skarzysk. We sat together, my father and I, peering into the words of *Parshas Zachor*. And I shall always remember his penetrating gaze as he said, *"Zachor . . . Lo tishkach.* Remember . . . Never forget."

And so, the memories of those years remain constant companions, and the need to tell the world a continuing obsession. Nonetheless, life eventualy resumed a semblance of normalcy. While there can be no replacement for what we lost, we were fortunate enough to be able to build new lives.

Hashem had been good to us. We left Germany in 1950 and settled in Toronto, Canada, where my wife had family who had left Europe long before the war. We were blessed with children, and they have helped us rekindle some of the sparks of that world we once knew. They cherish the ways of our fathers and strive to emulate them. Our grandchildren, who carry the names of several generations of their illustrious ancestors, the very ones I have described in these pages, are the surest proof that the diabolical plans of our tormentors were foiled. Though the physical reality of the world that was Piotrkow is gone, the spiritual world it embodied flourishes once again.



Reb Lipa Sanik, the father of the author



Rav Meir Shapiro, Rav of Piotrkow, who eventually founded the Yeshivah of Lublin and established the Daf Yomi program.



left: Gittel Faiga Sanik, the sister of the author

below:
November 25, 1944. The long column of Jews from the Bugi factory in Piotrkow on their way to the train station from where they were sent to various concentration camps. The author, his mother and brother were present in this column.





Cheder Yesodei Hatorah of Piotrkow, 1934
Leibel Sanik–second row from top, fifth from left



Tzeiros Bnos of Piotrkow, 1933
Gittel Faiga Sanik–bottom right



Leibel Sanik and his fiancee after the war

GLOSSARY

Aktion: round-up
Appel: roll-call
baal korei: official reader of the Torah scrolls
bachur: youth
bar-mitzvah: *halachic* adulthood
baruch Hashem: Blessed is the Name; thank Heaven
beis din: rabbinical court
beis midrash: study hall
bentch: to bless
b'ezras Hashem: with Hashem's help
bitachon: trust
brachah: blessing
challah: *Shabbos* loaves
chametz: leaven
chassan: groom
chassid: adherents to *chassidus*
chassidus: Jewish pietist movement
chessed: kindness
chevrah kaddisha: burial society
cholent: special *Shabbos* stew
Chumash: Book of the Pentateuch
daven: to pray
dayan: rabbinical judge
emunah: faith
erev: day before
gabbai: synagogue president
galus: exile
gedolim: great ones
Gemara: part of the Talmud
geulah: redemption
gezeiros: decrees
goy: gentile
Haggadah: liturgy for *Pesach seder*
halachah: Jewish law
Havdalah: concluding ritual of *Shabbos*
illuy: prodigy
kabbalah: mystical teachings
Kaddish: mourner's prayer
kapote: frock
kashrus: state of being kosher
Kedushah: holiness

kehillah: community
Kiddush: sanctification of *Shabbos* or festivals
Kiddush Hashem: sanctification of the Name
Kiddush Levanah: prayer sanctifying the moon
Kol Nidrei: opening *Yom Kippur* prayer
Maariv: evening prayers
maasim tovim: good deeds
matzah: unleavened bread
mechalel Shabbos: desecration of *Shabbos*
mechutanim: connections by marriage
Megillah: scroll
mesiras nefesh: complete dedication
mezuzos: scrolls affixed to doorpost
mikveh: ritual bath
Minchah: afternoon service
minyan: quorom of ten
mitzvah: Torah commandment
Neelah: concluding prayer of *Yom Kippur*
negel vasser: morning ablution
niftar: deceased
niggun: tune
Omer: forty-nine day period from *Pesach* to *Shavuos*
pasuk: verse
Pesach: Passover
peyos: earlocks
psak: ruling
Purim: Festival of Lots
rav: rabbi
rebbe: *chassidic* rabbi
rebbetzin: rabbi's wife
reshaim: villians
Ribono Shel Olam: Master of the Universe
Rosh Hashanah: New Year
seder: Passover feast
sefer: book
Selichos: penitential prayers
semichah: ordination
shailah: inquiry
shalosh seudos: third *Shabbos* meal
shammash: beadle
Shavuos: Pentecost, late spring festival
shechitah: ritual slaughter
shiur: lecture
shlita: may he live a long time
shochet: ritual slaughterer
shofar: ram's horn
shtiebel: *chassidic* synagogue
Shulchan Aruch: Code of Jewish law
siddur: prayer book
Simchas Beis Hashoevah: Festival of the Drawing of the Water
sukkah: *Sukkos* booth
Sukkos: Festival of the Tabernacles
tachrichim: burial garments
tallis: prayer shawl
tallis kattan: fringed garment
talmid chacham: Torah scholar
tefillah: prayer
tefillin: phylacteries

Tehillim: Book of Psalms
teshuvah: repentance
tisch: table; *chassidic* gathering
treife: unkosher
tzaddik: righteous person
tzeddakah: charity
Vidui: declaration of transgressions
yahrtzeit: commemorative day
Yamim Noraim: Days of Awe
Yamim Tovim: festivals
yeshivah: Torah school
Yetzias Mitzrayim: Exodus from Egypt
Yidden: Jews
Yiddishkeit: Jewishness
Yom Kippur: Day of Atonement
zechus: merit
zeide: grandfather
zemiros: songs