Beryl and Chaya Segal, posing with a group of Emigrants at Orinin, Russia early in 1918 (Winter of 1917-1918).

A JEW IN THE RUSSIAN ARMY DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

by BERYL SEGAL

ORININ AT THE OUTBREAK OF THE WAR*

Orinin, where we were born and spent our youth, was a classical example of a small town in the Ukraine at the turn of the century. Our town was about twenty miles from the capital city Kamenets-Podolsk, in the Province of Podolia, the seat of the *Gubernator,* the Governor, and cultural and legal center of the state. It was also about ten miles from the Austrian border to the west.

Early in the morning a caravan of horse-drawn wagons, groaning under the weight of sacks of wheat, corn, barley, beans, sunflower seed, and flaxseed, and hordes of horses made their way westward toward the Austrian border. At the same time merchants in private single horse *bridgkas,*** or in sleighs during wintertime, would drive out of Orinin to the business and industrial city of Kamenets-Podolsk.

But Orinin itself was a world apart, untouched by the advances in communications and industry of the new century, still surrounded by fertile fields and green woods, and waters teeming with fish.

We had no telephones, no telegraph, no electric power, no plumbing, no railroads, no newspaper. Our clothing was fitted by tailors, our shoes made by shoemakers, the furniture in our houses was built for us by master carpenters, and the very houses in which we lived were constructed of wood, which was plentiful in the forest around us.

With all the abundance of field and stream and forest, many could still afford only a hovel made of mud bricks and thatched roofs. Houses were heated in the wintertime by straw or wood, and straw mats on the floors were used for bedding. The poor were always

---

*This series of anecdotes, suggested by a piece written by Mr. Segal for *The Rhode Island Herald* of September 20, 1970, is a continuation of his sketches titled "Orinin, My *Shtetl* in the Ukraine," which appeared in the previous issue of these *Notes* (*Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes* 6:542-577, Nov. 1974). The combined series tell the story of the life and death of a *Shtetl.* Mr. Segal may well have been the last future Rhode Islander to have lived in a *Shtetl* in czarist times.

Although many of the definitions and explanations in the footnotes have already appeared in the original installment, they are repeated here for the convenience of the reader. Ed.

***Bridgka,* a cabriolet, a one-horse, two-wheel, two-passenger vehicle. (Russian)

with us, and it was an accepted fact of life that one out of every ten households was supported by the *Shtetl.**

Yet civilization was encroaching upon us step by step.

We knew, for instance, that Kamenets-Podolsk had a railroad station from which one could travel to all parts of the great Russian empire. But for some reason that railroad never reached the *Shtetlech** around us. The universal means of transportation and travel was the horse, the Ukrainian horse, small and swift and patient.

There was a telephone in the *Shtetl.* Not far from town was the estate of Pan Rakovitch. He was a member of the Tzarist family and had a seat in the Royal Duma, or Advisory Council of the Tzar, for the State of Podolia. Pan Rakovitch was usually away from his estate. But for the few months of summer when he came back to Orinin the Government had strung a line of telephone poles from Kamenets-Podolsk along the Post Road, the Main Street of the *Shtetl,* to the estate of Pan Rakovitch. We, the children of the *Shtetl,* when we ran home from *heder*** evenings, would stop by these poles and listen to the hum of the wires, and we would say: "The Tzar is talking to Rakovitch!"

News of the world traveled slowly and unreliably. We depended on three sources:

1. Newspapers arrived from Warsaw or Vilna or Odessa, in Yiddish or Hebrew, usually two or three weeks late, but nobody cared about the dates. These newspapers came to subscribers, of whom we had four or five in the *Shtetl,* and from them we learned about all the pestilences, catastrophies, and plagues in the world, also of discoveries that seemed unbelievable to us. But mostly we read the newspapers for the literary masterpieces, old and new, translated and original, that appeared in their literary supplements. There was a local Russian newspaper published in Kamenets-Podolsk, but no one read it.

2. Merchants who ventured out into the world would come back after an absence of a few weeks and tell of the great wonders they had witnessed in the Big Cities. People listened to these tales, but they preferred to stay in the safety of Orinin.

3. Rumors that made the rounds of the *Shtetl,* highly exaggerated, passed from mouth to mouth, with everyone who told the rumor add-

---

**Shtetl*: small town or village, diminutive of the German *Stadt,* meaning "city" or "town". *Shtetlech* is the plural. (Yiddish)

***Heder*: the school or room where Hebrew is taught, literally "room". (Hebrew)

ing something of his own, while the listeners were assured that it came from a "reliable source".

In this way we learned about the beginning of the war later designated the First World War and destined to change the peace and quiet of the *Shtetl.*

One morning the caravan of grain and horses returned from the Austrian border cities bringing back the loads they were assigned to deliver. Merchants surrounded the wagons and listened to the bad news: The borders were closed; the roads were clogged with vehicles bringing men and ammunition to the front.

The causes of the war were never clearly understood in Orinin. They were too fantastic. A prince was assassinated. The Austrians rushed to avenge the death of the prince. But what did that have to do with Orinin? Why the sealing of the borders? Who was the prince that was the cause of it all? And what was that little Slavic country of whom nobody had ever heard? It was all too fantastic to comprehend. Little did they know that because of this bizarre incident a chain of events would unfold in the world whose ultimate consequences cannot yet be envisioned.

My father brought home a Hebrew newspaper "*Hazman*"*, and soon the house was filled with listeners eager to learn about the war. My younger brother was lifted atop a table, and with people standing all around he read the Hebrew at sight and translated into Yiddish the full story of the war. The listeners were more impressed by my brother's reading and translating of the Hebrew newspaper with such facility, than by the explanations of diplomacy, strategy, and international intrigue.

The only comfort the *Shtetl* had was that the Balkans were far away and the assassins and the victim were not Jews.

The War Comes to Orinin

Early one morning, as the people of the *Shtetl* emerged to greet a sunny day, they saw as they stood at their doorsteps twelve Austro-Hungarian hussars on horseback on the *Skala,*** a high stony outcropping on the western side of Orinin. They were resplendent in their high hats bedecked with feathers, in red uniforms decorated with gold braid, girded by shining swords worn on the left side, and in high black

**Hazman,* "The Times". (Hebrew)

***Skala,* a rocky hill. (Russian)

boots with spurs. The horses were restless as they stood on this high point overlooking the town. They, too, were dressed as if on parade, their bodies covered with multicolored coverlets underneath the saddles.

They remained motionless, man and beast, surveying the *Shtetl* with binoculars, and then, just as suddenly as they appeared, they turned their horses and disappeared toward the border in a cloud of dust. Then the rumors took over:

Rumor that the twelve hussars were sent by the Kaiser Franz Joseph of Austria to the Tzar of Russia offering him a peace treaty. The message was to be delivered to Pan Rakovitch, but the hussars got lost on the way.

Rumor that the twelve hussars were surveying Orinin to see whether it was big enough for the General Staff of the Austrian army.

Rumor that the hussars were Jews. A peasant who was hiding in the fields had heard them speak Yiddish.

Rumor that the hussars had come to Orinin to collect gold and silver contributed by Jews for the war, and that the gold and silver was delivered by the water carrier who was seen early in the morning at the same spot pretending to draw water from the well under the *Skala.*

The last rumor was soon repeated on many occasions. Variations of the rumor, all about gold and silver being given to the enemy, were soon told in many a town in the Ukraine. Someone in a high place saw to it that the rumor would be told and retold until it was accepted as authentic. Jews were disloyal. Jews were traitors to Mother Russia. Jews were on the side of the enemy, Austria-Hungary and Germany.

The policy of the Tzarist government towards Jews all through the war was based on this rumor. In the name of this rumor as the war progressed, Jews were evacuated from the border towns. Jews were asked to contribute their jewelry to the war chest to prove their loyalty. Jewish homes were searched, and all copper and silver utensils were confiscated and melted down into instruments of war.

But Jews were accustomed to be singled out by the authorities for persecution, for discrimination, and for blame for all failures and blunders in the land. We knew that the treatment of the Jews was a barometer of the success or failure of certain policies of the government. So the people of Orinin patiently bore the indignities, the mistrust, and the suspicions.

Then came the day of the recruits.

Every year, during the fall season all males who had reached the age of twenty-one were drafted into the army. In peaceful times the recruits from the neighboring villages would gather in Orinin, the seat of the *Volost,* the County House, and after registering would descend on the *Shtetl* itching for a fight. Jews would close their stores early, and nobody would show his face outside until the local police had seen the last recruit out of town.

But this time, the first year of the war, the recruits were given a free hand. The police were nowhere to be found. The recruits swooped down on the *Shtetl* and in less than an hour wrought havoc in a number of stores. They beat up several people who happened to be outside, and they left a trail of blood, tears, and heartache for many in Orinin. The police then came and gathered them up and sent them off to Kamenets-Podolsk.

"Beat the Jews and save Russia" was their cry as they destroyed, tore to pieces, and vandalized everything that came under their hands. "The boys deserved their fun" was the lame excuse of the local police. The boys had their fun.

But bitterness grew in the hearts of the Jewish boys — helplessness, shame, humiliation, and hatred, and a burning desire for revenge. In the long evenings of the winter we would gather in secret places and plan how to avenge ourselves for the atrocities, and also how to defend the town from future attacks. We organized a secret militia for self-defense, and we patrolled the *Shtetl* at night.

The *Shtetl* was divided as to self-defense. The opposition argued that we would only incite the police, and the suspicion that we were helping the enemy would be given greater credence. Why do the Jews roam around at night? they would ask. Besides, they argued, what was done was done, and by next fall the war would be over, and the recruits would be kept in their place just as in previous years. We lived among the Ukrainians, and they were a peaceful people. Ignorant, but peaceful. The sooner we forgot about the "fun" their sons had had in the *Shtetl,* the better off we would be.

So the arguments ran, and also the hope that the war would soon be over. But the war was not over in a few months as the "experts" had predicted, and the self-defense was soon to prove futile in the light of what happened in Orinin.

The Don Cossacks*

The war was still far away, but the traffic of the war began to be felt by the town. Infantry and cavalry usually passed through Orinin at night. We would be awakened by the roar of the wagons and the rhythmic marching feet of soldiers. They passed by the Post Road up toward the *Skala* and to the border of Austria-Hungary.

Those of us who lived on the Post Road had a free show of the sights of war. We would stand by the windows and peep through the curtains in the darkened houses. We saw endless rows of infantry, the officers riding on horses, the sergeants by the side of the marching men, urging them on, issuing commands, while bringing up the rear were the corporals and the younger officers. In the morning we would describe the goings-on to the folks of the *Shtetl,* and we were the envy of those who lived on the other streets.

Soon the heavy artillery would come to town. It passed through during the day, and the two policemen of the *Shtetl* would go from house to house and warn us not to step out of the houses. Why the secrecy we could not understand. The artillery was pulled by horses, and the houses actually shook as the heavy armaments on wheels rumbled through Orinin, their guns pointing up toward the sky. Though warned not to show our faces on the streets, we could not resist and took a chance of standing behind closed doors and watching with bated breath as the might of Russia passed by.

Cossacks on horses marched through Orinin. They wore long black caftans, with rows of bullets sewed to the upper parts of the garments. They were armed wth swords and rifles, and looked formidable with their long mustaches. As they rode by they sang of the girls they left behind, of the fields of standing corn they had not harvested, of the war that would not end until all the enemies of Mother Russia had been vanquished forever — all of this to the clip-clop of the thousands of hooves on the pavement of the Post Road and the swinging of their tall Cossack sheep caps. It was all very exciting, and we looked forward to the next night's adventure.

But one night we were awakened by the two policemen and told to clear out of one room because the Cossacks needed the space. They also requisitioned all of the stables in Orinin for their horses. No sooner were the policemen out of the house than the Cossacks were

*The River Don flows through European Russia to the Sea of Azov. The Cossacks were an elite corps of Slavic horsemen from southern European Russia.

in and settled in the room. They ordered tea to be made and ransacked the kitchen for food. They were hungry and ate ravenously.

We found out that these were Don Cossacks, coming from the most fertile marshes and steppes of the Ukraine. They had utter disregard for private property or for other men's wives, and were contemptuous of discipline imposed by anybody but their own commanders.

At daybreak they spread out over the town and knocked on the doors of the closed stores. When they were opened, the Cossacks would pick out what they wanted and leave. Confronted by bills for the goods, they replied with laughter that shook the store: "The Father, the Tzar, will pay for everything. Send the bill to him."

In the beginning the storekeepers would go to the commander, who made his headquarters in Orinin, and present the bills for the goods. The commander would listen to them and say: "Just name those rascals and I will deal with them", and he would then laugh the same wild laugh as the Cossacks did.

The Don Cossacks went around town undisturbed. They drove their swift, small, wiry horses through crowds in the streets, and when they trampled someone to the ground they would give out with a wild shriek and continue through the streets of the *Shtetl,* their leather knouts whistling in the air. The young women and girls of Orinin disappeared into the cellars in fear of the Don Cossacks.

Sunday was a half-holiday in Orinin. Traditionally the peasants would come to town for prayers in the domed church, and at twelve noon the big bells would begin to ring and the stores would open for the peasants to buy their household needs: sugar and salt, herring and *kapchankes,** and kerosene and matches, as well as ribbons and colored beads for the young ladies.

As soon as the church opened its doors at the end of the service, the Don Cossacks mixed with the peasants and began to make sport with the merchandise as if it were their own. They especially favored the young women and pressed on them goods they did not want. "Take, my beauties. We are leaving tomorrow. Take with our compliments."

They ransacked the stores. What they could not give away they spilled on the streets and threw underfoot or tore to pieces. At the largest store in town a Cossack stood at the door and gave out

---

**Kapchankes*, a smoked dried fish with white meat. (Ukrainian)

goods until the shelves were empty. The storekeeper shouted: "Why? Why are you doing this?" He shouted and beat his head with both fists, crying like a madman.

Someone ran for the Father of the church, who came with his big crucifix dangling in front of him. At the sight of the Father the peasants slunk into the side streets and departed, and the Cossacks dispersed laughing. "Why, Father? I ask you Why?", continued the merchant, and beat his head with his two fists.

That cry still rings in my ears after all these years.

Some of the goods were later recovered. The two policemen somehow knew where to go and what to look for. But the wounds remained. Jew and peasant could no longer look each other in the eye.

In Broad Daylight

During the Passover holiday two Don Cossacks decided to conduct a house-to-house search in Orinin. They went to the house of a butcher and came out dragging two boys after them. The two brothers, sons of the butcher, were home because of the holiday. Otherwise they would have been sent to the villages to buy sheep and cattle for their father's shop.

Some say that the Don Cossacks were drunk, others that they were enraged because one of the boys was of military age and should not have been at home. Still others say that they seized the boys because they found a rifle in the house. But whatever the reason — as if the Don Cossacks needed a reason! — they tied the two boys to the saddles of their horses and tore down the Post Road, the two boys flailing their hands and feet as the horses sped on. And the Cossacks roared with joy. Outside the town the two boys were shot, and the Cossacks fled.

A pall of sadness suddenly descended upon Orinin. It was springtime; a holiday spirit had pervaded the town; the townspeople were out on the streets, enjoying the first sunny days, as well as the holiday. And then they witnessed this outrage in broad daylight. They brought the bodies of the two boys home, and the whole town cried in unison with the parents.

Again they asked the same question: Why? For what reason? And by whose authority? Are the Don Cossacks free to do as they please? Is there no one to stay their hand?

No investigation was initiated. No witnesses were summoned. No punishment was meted out. The Jews of Orinin suddenly realized that their lives were at the mercy of the Cossacks. And what was worse — every peasant, if he were so inclined, could do to Jews whatever he pleased and not fear reprisal.

The town of Orinin suddenly shrunk and shriveled. It lived in a sea of hatred, or at best indifference to the fate of the few hundred households. Jews who lived in the surrounding villages took refuge in Orinin and told stories of horror. They abandoned their homes with only the clothes on their backs, leaving all their possessions behind, lucky to escape with their lives.

Those who were able packed their necessary belongings and left Orinin for Kamenets-Podolsk or towns even further on. The young people, especially the girls, disappeared overnight, some into the big cities, some in hiding at the houses of friendly townspeople of the Christian faith.

Cellars and attics became regular living quarters. At the first sight of a Cossack in town all women and children went either down to the cellar or up to the attic. In some houses blind rooms were made. They closed up the windows and barricaded the door with a clothes chest or a bookcase. In these windowless rooms they kept their children and grown daughters. Orinin was turned into a town of old people.

In the meantime incidents multiplied, rape and murders became a daily occurrence, and Jews took their lives into their hands walking the streets.

There were periods of quiet. As the Don Cossacks were advancing into Austria into the District of Galicia across the border from Orinin, the Jews of the surrounding towns breathed a sigh of relief. They were saddened, however, by the news that filtered in through travelers attached to the army. The towns in Galicia were utterly destroyed. The Jews of Galicia, like all Jews living in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, lived a free life. They had never known fear of the army, and in fact many Jews had served in its armies. A fair number of them had distinguished themselves in the military and earned high honors. Only a few miles from the border of Russia, and what a difference!

The Don Cossacks were particularly ferocious in their devastation of the towns, both because they were in enemy territory and because they were settled by Jews. The Galician Jews had never seen a Cos-

sack in their lives. They were entirely unprepared for their onslaught. Prosperous thriving towns and cities of the District of Galicia were mercilously destroyed.

Other Cossacks came to Orinin. They were from the Caucasus and were mostly Moslems. They were surprised to be among people who, like themelves, did not eat pork. They were circumcised as were the Jews, and they found other similarities in their customs. They were very scrupulous in bathing their bodies, they did not steal, they honored elders, and had strong family ties. These Cossacks found the peasants in the village morally disgusting and their table manners atrocious. They therefore clung to the Jews with whom they felt a greater affinity, and punished severely anyone who attempted to vandalize Jewish property, because they reasoned that Cossacks are Cossacks and Jews are Jews, and should do as they pleased with their lives.

During the stay of these Cossacks, Tartars, Cherkessians (Circassians), and other tribes of the Caucasus, Orinin returned to normal. But the war was going badly for Austria. The Russians penetrated more and more deeply into the land, and the army quartered in Orinin received orders to advance and take up positions nearer to the front.

Jews in Russia had a peculiar resilience. As soon as a wave of pogroms and persecution had receded, they would quickly shake off its effects. When a ray of hope appeared, they would pick up their lives as their fathers had before them, bury their dead, replenish their goods, repair their workshops, and again face their neighbors.

Many Jews prospered from the war. The army needed supplies of everything. Communications with the interior of Russia were very poor. The army needed clothing and shoes, fodder for the horses, and food for the personnel. There was a brisk trade in horses and vehicles. Everybody was busy working for the army: tailors and shoemakers, wheelwrights, and smithies were particularly in demand. The merchants were given protection to go into the villages and buy grain for the men and horses. Saloons and beer houses sprang up overnight. The armies which came to Orinin after the first year of the war were of a different brand from those which had earlier passed through the town like a storm and took their toll.

Every once in a while, however, an incident occurred that reminded the Jews of Orinin that they lived on the rim of a volcano and that it could erupt at any moment.

The Day Before Yom Kippur

Yidden, Me'kapt!"* ("Jews, they are grabbing us!").

That was a signal for all young people to hide. It was a common practice, even in the best days of the war, to seize people for work. They were sent away to the border villages to dig trenches, to clean the streets, or to transport materials of war. The story was always the same. After you had done your work, they gave you a receipt for the number of hours you put in, and you were told that the Commandant would pay so much per hour.

The Commandant was never to be found. He either was too busy, or he went away to Kaments-Podolsk, or he was sent to the front. The peasants were worst off. The army would impress them, confiscate their horses and wagons, and send them away for weeks at a time. They transported the wounded soldiers from the front lines to the interior of Russia.

The soldiers were out man-snatching early in the morning. At that time the town was empty except for older men who were not fit for hard work. In the afternoon, when the "grabbing" was over, the quota of men and wagons having been filled, it was safe again to walk the streets.

But on the day before Yom Kippur, when Jews were preparing for the most awesome day of the year, soldiers entered houses and ordered all males to take shovels and picks with them and gather at the quarters of the Commandant. They seized old men on their way to the Public Bath where they were purifying themselves for the holiday. They snatched youngsters who were home from *heder,* the Jewish school, for the holiday. They seized their teachers too. They took the artisans away from their work and the storekeepers from their shops. They even entered synagogues and snatched men at worship. In addition to picks and shovels the men were told to take along food for a few days, for no one knew how long the digging would take. The cries of women, the wailing of little children, the protestations of the older men were to no avail. "Yom Kippur? What is that? Tell it to the Commandant."

And so the soldiers rounded up the entire male population of Orinin and brought them to the headquarters. Did the Commandant know what Yom Kippur was? Was it a purposeful act? He must have known that Jews would not work on this fast day. What was the purpose of bringing all these elderly men to do the digging? And

*Yiddish.

youngsters eight or ten years old who were also caught in the net of the head-hunters. What could they possibly do?

We stood quietly on the lawn of the estate of Pan Sadowsky, where headquarters were located. Our hearts were heavy. We were angry and ashamed. Angry at whom? At the soldiers who did as they were ordered to do? At the Commandant who was nowhere to be seen? Ashamed at being herded like cattle and not even being told where we were going and what we were to do? An intense hatred filled my whole being, hatred for the army, for the Tzar, for the country, and a resolve to avenge myself for this spiteful atrocity.

How and on whom to avenge myself? I knew that it was helplessness that spoke within me. Tears welled up in my eyes, and I felt a lump in my throat when I looked at the old men standing on the lawn of the estate, with Orinin visible below in the valley. So near, yet so far. And *Kol Nidrei*?* On the night of *Kol Nidrei* with picks and shovels? Isn't there anyone to tell the Commandant what sort of a day Yom Kippur is?

Just then Reb Menasha came running up the hill, and, avoiding the soldiers standing on guard, he went straight to the Commandant. Reb Menasha was a well-to-do merchant in grain and flour. He rented the flour mill standing at the far end of the town from Pan Sadowsky. In his youth he had been a soldier and was stationed in Petrograd. His unit had performed for the Tzar and his family. He knew how to stand before the Commandant.

Reb Menasha explained to the Commandant what Yom Kippur meant to Jews, what a fast day is to Jews, and what a special night *Kol Nidrei* was. "Take me as a hostage", he told the Commandant, "and let my people go home for the holiday. I guarantee that they will come to do the work you assigned to them after Yom Kippur."

The Commandant who was of the Tzar's family (every Commandant was of the Tzar's family) argued that Jews are clever, that they are good at getting out of work, that this was the only chance to get them all. But at the end he said: "I want you to know that this is the first time in my life that I ever did any favor for Jews." He ordered the soldiers to let the Jews go, and refused to take any hostages. He was sure that after Yom Kippur they would come back on their own.

On the appointed morning the young men of Orinin who were able to work presented themselves to the Commandant, and they were

**Kol Nidrei* is the plaintiff prayer that ushers in *Yom Kippur,* the Day of Atonement. (Aramaic)

sent to the Austrian border, where they dug trenches for several days. They came back bringing the news that the Russian army was deep into Galicia, but the number of killed and wounded was staggering. The Germans and the Austrians had long-range cannon, they said, and they took a heavy toll of the Russian army, which advanced on foot unprotected, and thus were perfect targets for the German-Austrian cannon.

The war had its bright side. As the armies moved deeper into Austria, life in Orinin became stabilized. The confiscation and the impressment for work had ceased. Orinin was in the hinterland. Jews became involved in supplying the army with food, clothing, and horses. The military were now of a different stamp. They were all of the reserves and milder men. Jews did business with the army. They suddenly discovered that Jews could get them what they wanted. And they paid for what they purchased. Jewish merchants were given identification cards and permits to travel wherever they needed to go. Some were even assigned soldiers to accompany them when they went out into the faraway villages.

A new type of Jew appeared in Orinin and in the surrounding towns. They were *podrachiks,* entrepreneurs, who rode around in army vehicles with soldiers at their side to buy anything and everything the peasants had to sell, and to confiscate whatever the army wanted.

In Orinin and in every town there were Jews who became rich, the new rich, as they were called. They lived dangerously. They were brash; they were daring. But they were the envy of the town.

At that time my turn came to go into the army. I was all of seventeen then.

"They are scraping the bottom of the barrel", people of Orinin said to one another. "Germany beware", the wits of the town would say with a wink. "Look who is coming to fight!"

On the River Volga

My father engaged a peasant to take us to the draft board in Kamenets-Podolsk. He wanted to have us avoid the eyes and the remarks of passengers on the public conveyances. Though we had plenty to say to one another, we nevertheless sat quietly all the way and each thought his own thoughts, although we communicated silently.

The draft board was in a government building surrounded by a high stone wall with an iron gate at the entrance. Two soldiers stood guard at the gate and separated me from my father. And that was the end of our journey together. They did not even allow me to say goodbye to father. He stood at the gate and watched me go up to the building and disappear inside.

I met some boys from Orinin and some from other towns who were *yeshivah** boys with me in Kamenets-Podolsk. But we didn't have much time to talk to one another. The army doctors worked like machines. We entered through one door, were asked a few questions, undressed, were given a physical examination, and were then sent out through another door. After a regulation haircut and a shower we were given uniforms and sent out to the drill field where we paired off according to height.

Towards evening we were taken to the railroad station and put in windowless wagons,** counted, and locked in. That was my first glimpse of a railroad and my first ride in a train.

We traveled three days and nights. In the middle of the night we stopped at a station, were told to get hot water from the boiling kettle that brewed at every station, and drove on. We sat on the floor of the wagon, some singing, some sleeping, and some brooding. It did not occur to us to ask where we were being taken, and anyway there was nobody to ask. The officers and soldiers who were sent with us recruits were riding in the front wagons, and we saw them only in the morning when they counted us and gave us food for the day and locked the doors.

We finally arrived at a town in the middle of the night and were glad to stretch our legs. We were taken to our barracks and were assigned bunks. We fell asleep immediately and were awakened by soldiers going from bunk to bunk and yelling and pulling us out of bed.

It was the first time in three days that we saw daylight. The sun was shining, and a breeze came up from somewhere. It was a steady breeze, and it cooled us off. Later we found out that the breeze came from the Volga River nearby. The famous Volga. There the river lay, wide and shimmering in the sun, down the hill from where our barracks were situated.

**Yeshivah* was a Hebrew academy. (Hebrew)

**Continental usage for railroad freight cars.

We did not have time to feast our eyes on the legendary river of which we had heard so much in story and song. The drills began. Endless drills and marches and exercises and training. And inspections. Yes, and singing. An army marches on songs, we were told. And also running. Running and singing.

We were hustled out of the barracks early in the morning. We were lined up in front of an array of officers, and after an inspection we were taken to a field where corporals and sergeants ruled over us with an iron hand.

Face right. Face left. Present arms. Stop. Go. Stop. About face. Run. At ease. On the double. Stop. All morning long. Then there was lunch served from kitchens on wheels. We were lined up for this too. No pushing. No rushing. Everyone presented his mess utensils for inspection. These were part of the pack which we always carried. If a dish or utensil was found to be unclean, we would be taken out of the line and ordered to shine the offending soup bowl or spoon. If we were late for formation we went without lunch that day. A soldier must be punctual. After lunch we rested for a half hour and again to the marching and training.

In three months they were going to prepare us for the front. The wits of Orinin were right. Germans beware!

On Sundays we were allowed to go to the river. The Volga revealed itself in all its glory. At this point the river was so wide that we could not see the other side. The Volga constantly changed images as its waves splashed by. Patches of white and patches of brown and patches of gold as the sun was caught on the crest of a wave.

I cannot remember a single incident of race discrimination in the barracks. Neither the soldiers nor the officers ever made an anti-Jewish remark. The period of training passed by without any unpleasantness. On the other hand, the few Jews who were in our company were chosen for office duty, hospital duty, or services in the officers' mess hall. I was not so lucky. It was my duty to stand guard at the officers' club every other night. The officers of the regiment gathered every night in a big mansion with spacious gardens, located near the edge of the barracks. At nightfall we were stationed around the officers' club and kept saluting every officer who passed through the gates.

We saluted and kept up our vigil. We did not talk to one another, although we were only a few paces apart. Nor were we to react to what was going on inside the gardens. The women had been there

before our arrival. After they ate and drank, the officers made merry with the women. Cries and laughter reached our ears through the fence around the gardens, and shouts of conquest punctuated by screams of delight made our spines tingle. But soon the lights in the club went out, and we were returned to the barracks, and not a word was said by us. Speak only when you are spoken to, was the rule.

The worst part of training was stabbing the belly of a straw-stuffed effigy with our bayonets. In turn each of us faced the effigy and with a scream of triumph rushed toward it and pierced the "Germanetz", the German.

All this time we practiced with unloaded weapons. We had our bayonets mounted on empty rifles and pretended they were real arms. We learned to "load" and "unload" the rifles when the order was given to "present arms". But on the last week we were given ammunition and were taken for rifle practice. We passed by the hanging effigies and down an incline in the field. There we came upon a rifle range with its target boards painted with concentric circles, each with a bullseye in the center.

We knew that the time had come when we were considered to be soldiers, not just the recruits we really were. Now we marched, singing, heads up, with bodies straight, not slouching as we had done only three short months ago.

We boarded railroad wagons with long benches instead of separate seats. We needed space, since each of us carried the regulation knapsack and the rifle which we were to keep near us for the duration of the war.

"You are married to your rifles", we were admonished by our mentor. "This is your best friend!" And, believe it or not, we came to look upon the rifle as part of us, never to be separated from us.

We traveled again for three days, and when we alighted and marched through a town, one much like Orinin, we were a sight to see. People stood on both sides of the streets as we passed by singing, our rifles slung on our left shoulders, our right hands swinging back and forth, our uniforms of light green color, heads held high and our eyes looking straight ahead. The wits of Orinin should have seen us.

From this point we marched to the front lines. Wagons carried our rifles and sacks, since the front lines were still quite a distance. After a day's march we caught up with our equipment and made ready for the night. There were few houses in sight. We were now in hilly country.

Where we were and where we were going nobody knew. We were admonished not to ask questions. A good soldier, we were told, attends to his own business. He leaves the why, when, and wherefore to others. There is a higher-up who knows all the answers.

But rumors still circulated. On the other side of the mountains, one rumor went, was the city of Lemberg, the capital of Galicia, and we were headed for that city. Lemberg was well known to me. When someone went abroad from Orinin to Lemberg, he came back speaking German, dressed in European clothes, and forever yearning to return again to Lemberg. It was the seat of learning, the symbol of European culture, also the city of great contrasts — great rabbis and Hasidic *rebbes,* and also great *apikorsim,* unbelievers and devotees of enlightenment. But others claimed that we were not going to Lemberg at all. We were on the way to Czernowitz, a renowned big city in Bucovina and that the city was just across the hills.

It turned out that we were in the Carpathian Mountains, in a Slav country under Austrian rule. As everywhere in that empire the official tongue was German. The people, however, spoke Slovakian, while the Jews were adept in three languages and spoke Hungarian in addition.

We had not yet tasted the fear of battle, of defeat, or victory. We did not even hear the thunder of the big guns. Nor had we had a glimpse of an enemy soldier. We were stationed on one of the hills of the Carpathian mountain chain. Below us was a small swift stream, and on the other shore of the stream was enemy country. Up on the hill opposite us, they said, were trenches of the Austrian army. But we did not bother them, and they ignored us. Each morning we were sent out on patrol along the stream, and, when we were relieved by another detail of soldiers, we went back to our trenches prepared by a company of soldiers who had occupied them earlier. We were kept busy cleaning our rifles, scouring our bayonets, and mending our clothes. We were bored and craved for action. The evenings were magnificent in the Carpathian Mountains. We would leave our trenches and make fires on the protected sides of the hills. We would stretch out on the ground and sing songs of Mother Russia, of the girls we left at home, of the birch tree that grew in the field and the girl who pined away near it, and of the great prowess of the men in wars of old.

The officers, it seems, did not deem it necessary to be among us. They came only in the morning for the roll call, and then departed

to a village a mile or so away from the front line. The corporals and the sergeants, on the other hand, became closer to us, mingled with us, ate with us, and slept with us in the trenches, which, it must be said, were furnished by those who had preceded us with all the "conveniences" of home.

So we sat in our trenches, and to this day I don't know why this front was neglected or forgotten or ignored for weeks on end, and why neither the Russian nor the Austrian army tried to cross this narrow, shallow, playful little mountain stream.

Yom Kippur in a Cave

Naked children would come out of a cave and hold out their hands for a penny or two. Their mother would hide in the doorway of the cave and beckon to us with one finger. She was young, and her husband had gone to war. She lived by begging or by reading palms. We later learned that the Carpathian Mountains were full of such caves.

Some soldiers took off for the night to one of the caves and came back at the crack of dawn, telling us of the wonders of the gypsy cave villages in the mountains. The caves were cool in the summer and were well protected from the cold in the winter. The gypsies survived by making little trinkets, which they sold to Jews in the town near the bend of the river. This was the only time we had heard mention of Jews.

Only a week before I had received a letter from home in which my father told me that the Days of Awe, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, were approaching, and that he had checked the dates for me. At the campfire one evening we asked our sergeant for passes to go across the river for the holidays. He thought we were crazy. "Are you out of your minds?" cried the sergeant. "Across the river? You want to go into enemy territory?" "But the gypsy woman told us that she goes there to buy and sell," we replied. "Impossible," said the sergeant.

But we inquired again, and sure enough many gypsy women crossed the stream to work and to trade in the little town. We went up to the bend one day and saw the streets of the town across the stream. We also spied a *shul** in the midst of the houses. It was a big wooden building with a *Mogen David*** on top of the roof.

**Shul,* synagogue, from the German *Schule,* "school". (Yiddish)

***Mogen David,* literally "Shield of David", refers to the six-pointed Star of David. (Hebrew)

There were five Jews in our platoon, and one of the five served in the office. He was a corporal, though he did not have any soldiers under him. For a long time we did not know he was a Jew. He did not fraternize with us, and we did not seek his companionship. One evening he came to us and asked: "Do you boys know that our Days of Awe are coming?" "Yes, we know. We also know that Jews live on the other side of the stream. But how can we go across?" "Leave that to me", said the corporal.

He then told us that the Austrians had retreated, but that we still awaited orders to occupy the village. He also told us that there was a wooden bridge across the stream and that we, the Russians, had a guard standing there day and night, but that there was no one on the other end of the bridge.

We went to the bridge and were stopped by a sentry. We spoke the secret code word, and he allowed us to stay at the bridge and observe. The streets of the town came down to the very shores of the stream. The stream curved at that place and became a river. We saw Jews coming and going on the streets. We could almost hear their voices wafted across the water by a breeze. We asked the sentry whether people from the town ever came across the bridge. He told us that the gypsies from the caves crossed the stream daily. He knew them and didn't interfere with them. "This is no war", explained the sentry. "We waste our time here."

On the eve of Rosh Hashanah the corporal came carrying a permit from his staff officer, and we started out toward the bridge and crossed it. To our disappointment we found the town deserted. We were puzzled, but not seeing anyone of whom to ask questions we returned to our side of the bridge.

The next night I went out on patrol. I climbed a high peak of a mountain, and from there I had a full view of the bridge and the town. All the houses were dark. I could make out the synagogue among the houses, and there too not a light was burning.

But on the eve of Yom Kippur I noticed a startling movement of people toward a mountainside near which the town was spread out. From a distance it seemed that the houses were overshadowed by the mountain. The people, especially women and young children, carried bundles and disappeared inside the mountain.

I alerted my friends in the platoon. We crossed the bridge and wandered in the deserted little town. This time we knocked on doors, but there was no answer. We went to the synagogue, and there we

found an older man and his young son carrying something in their hands. From the way the old man hugged his burden I knew what it was. He was carrying a *Torah** covered with a linen sheet. He was startled. His son began to run. We spoke to them in Yiddish. The boy came back to listen to Russian soldiers speaking Yiddish. We told them why we had come over from the other side, and asked them to let us be with them for the Day of Atonement.

On the way out of the synagogue the old man told us to follow him quietly. He led us to a cave in the side of the mountain. When we reached the entrance of the cave, he told us to stay outside and he went in alone. We looked around us at the silent town, at the brooding mountain, and the gurgling stream that meandered through the mountains. A feeling of deep awe and fear came over us. Awe and loneliness. I thought of the *Kol Nidrei* nights at home when I was a child. The corporal whispered as if talking to himself: "This is the first Yom Kippur I ever spent away from home."

He had told us before that his father was a cantor, and that he himself was to be a singer. He was about to go to a cantorial school when he was called up to service. He would continue singing if ever he returned.

The old man came out and beckoned to us. We stood speechless at the entrance. The cave was quite spacious. Long benches were lined against the walls of the cave. At the eastern wall stood a makeshift Holy Ark covered with white linen curtains. Candles were burning on the ground in a corner of the cave. They were protected from sight by a low wall of rocks. There were about twenty men and women in the cave, men and women separated, each holding a prayerbook close to his eyes. There were two lights only at the reader's desk. We were told later that lights were forbidden by the authorities lest they direct the enemy, meaning the Russian army, to the town. Now that the Austrian army had abandoned the town, they still obeyed that law out of force of habit. The rich inhabitants had left town, and those who remained were the poor and the old. They would not talk of their experiences with the Russian army.

A man dressed in a white *kittel*** came forward to a platform in front of the improvised Holy Ark and spoke in hushed tones to the

---

**Torah*, literally "teaching", "guidance", or "doctrine". It has come to mean The Law, i.e., the Pentateuch, the Five Books of Moses, or in turn the Scroll containing the Five Books of Moses. (Hebrew)

***Kittel* is the white garment traditionally worn by members of the congregation during prayer on the High Holidays. (Hebrew)

assembled people. He told them that we were Jewish soldiers stationed across the river, that we came to pray with them on Yom Kippur, and that one of us was a *hazan's*** son and would chant *Kol Nidrei.*

The corporal chanted, and everyone, including ourselves, wept. Some women cried out aloud, no doubt remembering their sons who were in the battlefields at that very moment. The *hazan's* son chanted the ancient melody with such sweetness and so much feeling in that *shul* in a cave in the Carpathian Mountains that it brought tears to the eyes of every man and woman.

After the service the people surrounded us, and besieged us with questions, such as: When will the war end? How far will the Russ go? Is it true that Jews are suffering in Russia? An old man sidled up to the Corporal and asked: "When will the Messiah come?"

We went back silently to the Russian side, each with his own thoughts, each with his own memories of a childhood that would never come back.

At the Front Lines

The order to move on finally came to our division. One morning we were lined up as usual for the roll call, and the officer in charge of the regiment announced that we would move to occupy the next mountain ridge at night. The announcement was received with relief, anxiety, and fear. Relief because we were tired of languishing there in one place, doing nothing but eating, drinking, and attending to our rifles. Anxiety because we still did not know where we were or what our task was to be after we crossed the next mountain. Fear because once we were on the front line we could expect anything to happen to us.

But there was also curiosity. What did the beyond look like? What new vistas would be revealed when we crossed the mountain? Our imaginations ran wild. Soon the fears, anxieties, and curiosity were all abated.

The regiment crossed the river without incident. We rounded the mountain and came to a pass and still another stream. Then toward evening we arrived at another town, also nestling in still another mountain and also on the shore of a stream.

We were tired from the long hike on narrow paths, strewn with rocks and boulders. We were immediately installed in the houses

****Hazan** means cantor. He sings long passages of the liturgy. (Hebrew)

of the townspeople. Some of the houses were deserted; in these cases we occupied the whole house. Others were inhabited; there the commander would assign two or three soldiers to each house, leaving one room for the owner.

We fell asleep as soon as our heads touched the pillows. We did not see the owners of the house we were in, but we knew that they were somewhere nearby. We could tell by the neatness of the house and by the smell in the room, the smell of food that had recently been cooked in the kitchen. I could also tell that this house belonged to a Jew. I saw a *mezuza** on the doorframe, books in a bookcase by the wall, and candle holders on top of the mantle.

In the darkness that came over the house at dusk, I could hear someone moving in the kitchen. I held my breath when I saw an elderly man taking the candle holders from the mantle and tucking them into a sack filled with things he took from the kitchen.

I greeted him, and he scurried into the adjoining room. Then I spoke to him in Yiddish so as not to frighten him. I am a Jew, I said. He didn't have to be afraid in his own house. He could take anything he wanted.

Upon hearing Yiddish spoken the elderly man brightened, and he explained to me that it was Friday evening. He had come to take his wife's candle holders to bless the light for *Shabos*** and also to pick up a few things for the Sabbath meal. We came unexpectedly, and he did not have time to set the table for the meal.

I helped him carry the bundle of food, and he led the way to a back room which was completely windowless and dark. He called out to some one: "We have a guest for *Shabos,* Hannah. A Russian soldier who speaks Yiddish."

Hannah immediately blessed the candles, and the room was lit. She greeted me with " Good *Shabos",* and we sat down on the sofa, the only piece of furniture in the room. I left the room and came back carrying two chairs and a round table. The housewife covered the table with a white tablecloth. I placed the *halë*† and the candles on it, and we were ready for the *Shabos.*

**Mezuza,* literally "doorpost": small parchments on which are inscribed the first two paragraphs of the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4-9; 11:13-21). Rolled tightly, it is placed in a small case or capsule and attached to the doorpost. *Shema* means "Hear", from "Hear, O Israel".

***Shabos,* the Sabbath (Yiddish) from the Hebrew *Shabbat.*

†*Halë,* a braided loaf of white bread, usually prepared for the Sabbath or Holy Days. (Hebrew)

The two elderly folk asked me about my home and about the war, and told me that so far no one had touched them. The rich people, of course, left the town when the Austrian soldiers retreated. But they were not rich, so they remained.

It was late when I returned to my bed. We could not break away. I told them what my father did for a living, what I did before the war, and how the Jews lived in Russia.

It was quite a while since I had heard the *kiddush** being chanted, the blessing over *halë* being said, and the *zmiroth,*** the Songs of *Shabos,* being sung at the table. What surprised me was the similarity of the *Shabos* customs and traditions in my home and here. I was struck by the change that came over the elderly pair as soon as the candles were lit and the blessing pronounced over them. Just as at home, I thought. It seemed as if I had known them before. The food had the same flavor as the dishes which my mother had served. Poor as they were, they were transformed into different people, he with his black *Shabos* kaftan and round *Kopelush,*† and she with a calico dress and silk kerchief.

I was just as anxious to talk with them as they were with me. Tired as I was, I asked them about their family. They told me that they had two sons. One was at the Russian front, and one was somewhere in Germany. They did not know the name of the city because he was on some secret army project. Now they were cut off from them, because the town and indeed the entire district had been abandoned, though they could not understand the reasons why.

In the days before the war people would come to the town from far and wide for summer vacation. Half of the townspeople were employed in providing for the summer guests. Every house rented a room or two to the city folks.

There was also a *rebbe* who resided in town. His *Hasidim*‡ would come to be with him on *Shabos* and for holidays. The old man was a *gabbai,* a traveling collector for the *rebbe* in the towns scattered in the Carpathian Mountains.

Early in the morning we started on our march to another town, across another mountain, searching for the Austrian army. When my platoon passed by the home of my hosts, I saw them standing by the

---

**Kiddush,* the prayer and ceremony that sanctifies the Sabbath and Jewish holy days. (Hebrew)

***Zmiroth,* hymns. (Hebrew)

†*Kopelush,* a broad-brimmed hat. (Yiddish)

‡*Hasidim,* members of a pious Orthodox sect originating in Eastern Europe in the Eighteenth Century. (Hebrew)

window waving at me and Hannah wiping a tear from her eyes. Before we separated the night before the old Jew took me to a cupboard and told me to take a *kameia,* a coin, from a drawer. "It is not money," the Jew explained to me. "These are *kameias* that the *rebbe** gave to the young men who went to war. They were all blessed by the *tzaddik** himself. The *kameia* will guard you all through the war, and you will come back in good health to your father and mother."

I picked a coin the size of an American nickel with a hole punched at the outer rim and put it in my pocket. It was supposed to be a charm to be worn on a string around one's neck or in a hidden place in one's uniform. I felt for the *kameia* in my pocket and felt reassured. I knew I had the best wishes of the two charming old people.

We soon came to the next town, and everywhere we heard the same story. The Austrian army had retreated, and half the town had left with them for fear of the Russians. We were still to see a single enemy soldier.

Then it suddenly became clear. The Austrians wanted to straighten out their lines. They couldn't do it in the mountains, so they abandoned them. It was not long before we heard the boom of heavy cannon. The front line was now not far from us.

The Austrians made their last stand on one hill of the mountain range. We dug in on the opposite hill. This was the last mountain in the Carpathians. After this the ground leveled out, and the roads were wide and straight. We were instructed to look out for camouflaged soldiers crawling up the mountain where we were located. Every night we sent men out on patrol. We stalked between the trees, stopped, looked around, and continued on, keeping the appointed distance between patrols. At night we rested, and in the morning we were awakened by the boom of the enemy cannon and the answer of our big guns. We were terrified, but the boom of the cannon was better than the silence between rounds. Each side tried to soften up the other, so we were told. Until the enemy ceased sending his cannon messages to us, we would not move from our dugouts. The

---

**Rebbe* (rabbi) was the term used by the Hasidic Jews for their spiritual leader. *Rav* or *Rov* was used by the non-Hasidic community. Rabbi is Hebrew for "my master", *rav* means "great". *Rebbe* is a corruption of the Hebrew *rabi* (pronounced rah-bee), angelicized to rabbi. The Hasidic *rebbe,* though well-grounded in learning, did not necessarily have formal ordination from an academy or *Yeshivah. Reb* was also used as a title — a shortened form of *rebbe.* The subtle differences and apparent interchangeability of these terms is confusing, but probably not too important. *Tzaddik* means "a righteous man". He embodied the ideals of moral and religious perfection. Among the Hasidim, as compared to the non-Hasidic Jews, he went to more extreme lengths of piety and devotion. (All of the above Hebrew)

enemy wanted us to come out and fight, but we would weaken him by holding on to our positions. In the meantime between cannon shots we could count the minutes it took to answer the big guns from our side. We ducked and then raised our heads. Sometimes when we saw or thought we saw something moving between the trees we aimed our rifles at the spot. We were shooting blindly. No one was allowed to stand up and take aim.

Who knows what I was shooting at? Were they enemy soldiers? Women scraping together a meal? Woodsmen returning home? Or just figments of our imagination? Our rifles cracked at no one in particular. I hoped there was no one there.

The cannon fire grew in intensity and accuracy. The trench in which we were crouching came under increasingly accurate fire. Since we had only one line of trenches, we could not run for cover to another trench. Nor could we retreat to the rear, because we were threatened either with court-marshal, which meant being shot to death, or with being shot immediately by any officer who caught us running away from the firing. But staying in the trenches was certain death sooner or later.

We counted the dead and carted away the wounded in confiscated wagons, sending them to the rear. The heavily wounded wailed as the wagons bumped over ruts. Surrounding the wagons were the bandaged who could walk. They held on to the wagons with one hand and trudged along. We were envious of the lightly wounded. They would go for a while to a hospital which was a long way from the front lines. Maybe they would never return to the front.

People are never content. Before, we were complaining of the boredom. We wanted action. Well, we had action. We cursed the rising sun, for with the rising of the sun the cannons began their bombardment. The nights at least were quiet. We slept standing up, leaning against the wall of the dugout fully dressed, our rifles at the alert. We warned one another of the coming of the sergeant. Woe to him who did not wake up in time.

Some nights when it was quiet the sergeant allowed us to sprawl out on the ground and assigned watches while the rest of us slept. But even then we could not put away our guns. We were married to the guns.

We now knew what life in the front line was like.

For several days we were spared the boom of the big guns. We were puzzled, but we had no one of whom we could ask questions.

Rumors took over. One rumor had it that the enemy had retreated and that we would soon pursue him. Another rumor was to the effect that we were surrounded and that one day soon we would all be taken prisoner. Peasants who were taken prisoner by our troops and brought to our headquarters, however, told of regrouping of forces on the mountain facing us, and reported that the Austrians had been sent to fight on another front while German regiments would occupy their positions.

On one such night I was sent out to patrol a stretch of mountain in front of our platoon. Patrols were not burdened with knapsacks and ammunition and carried only a rifle and one round of ammunition. They were to report anything suspicious to the corporal. The patrol never ventured more than fifteen or twenty feet away from the trenches. He was to be the eyes and ears of the platoon.

I crawled out of the trench on my belly, looked around, perked up my ears, and made it to a nearby tree. I looked about again, listened once more, and then, to the next tree. The night was dark, and the stillness was pregnant with rustles and murmurs and fear. I was on the ground for a while, and then again stood near a tree. I did not know when and why, but I found myself crawling down the crest of the mountain. My heart began to beat fast. Perspiration covered my body. I got up and wanted to run back to my platoon. Then it happened. A shout to stop. The rifle snatched from my hands. And a face and a voice from nowhere ordering me to go with him quietly.

It was all so orderly and gentlemanly. We were told that the Germans tortured their prisoners. They gored them with their bayonets and left them to rot in the forest. My first impulse was to run and yell. But the Germans held my arms, and running was out of the question. They warned me not to raise my voice or I would be silenced forever.

That was the only harsh word I heard, but even that was said gently. No pushing, no shoving, no cursing, no beating as I had expected.

I was led down the mountain, along a narrow path, during which time the two German soldiers walked one in front and one in back of me. The stillness was terrifying. No one spoke a word. I observed the man ahead of me. He was dressed in a long coat of green color. He was not encumbered by a rifle and bayonet, only a short knife in a leather sheath hung at his side and a revolver which he was carrying

on the ready. The man in back of me carried my rifle and ammunition.

Many thoughts crowded my mind, and trivial they were. Things I did in my childhood, stories I had heard at the campfire came racing one after another. These thoughts were without any logic, without reason. I should have been thinking of my platoon, of the reaction of my buddies to my absence, of the search party they must have sent out to find me. None of these things entered my mind as we walked silently along the path and came to a village. The crowing of a rooster and the barking of dogs sharpened my senses. The little houses were silhouetted on the horizon.

We stopped at a newly erected wooden office building.

In Enemy Country

With the coming of daybreak we looked around us. Frightened and disheartened we were huddled in a large waiting room. I say "we" because the room was full of Russian soldiers, the crop of only one night. We heard voices coming from the rooms nearby. Voices and laughter. I was amazed at the degree of my understanding of what was spoken in the closed rooms. They were talking in German, a language similar to my own tongue.

One by one we were taken into the rooms which opened into the waiting room. I was asked to identify my regiment, my division, and my commanding officer. The interpreter standing in the room whispered something to the inquiring officer. He brightened up and spoke directly to me. He asked in German, and I answered in Yiddish. He asked where I came from, and he informed me that he had once been in Kaments-Podolsk, but would not go into detail. He asked for my occupation, and I was at a loss to say what it was. I did nothing. Was I a student? It did occur to me that the *yeshivah* was a school and I a student. No, I couldn't qualify for a government school. Why? Because I was Jewish. What does this have to do with being a student? In Russia, Jews are excluded from government schools, except in very small numbers, and for that you need money. Why money? Because you have to go to Kamenets-Podolsk. In my town we had no *gymnasium* to prepare me for college.

That was a revelation to the officer and to the interpreter. They began to talk to one another excitedly. What would I do when I returned from the war? I hesitated, because I had really never thought about it.

The officer gave me a number in a sealed envelope and dismissed me. He put his arm around my shoulder and said: "When we come to your country we will send you to school." I came out into the yard and found a whole Russian army assembled there. Toward noon we were fed and sent off to a waiting train.

The rumble of the train, the experiences of the previous night, the sun shining in our eyes, and the rolling fields that flashed by through the windows left me feeling at once depressed and exhilarated. We still did not know where we were, whither we were being taken, or what was to become of us.

The train rolled into a city, and we saw a sign on the roof of the station with the words: MARMORESH-SEGET.

We alighted from the train and were assembled at the railroad tracks. The people spoke in a tongue I could not understand. The officers in charge at the station collected our envelopes and separated us into small groups. I repeatedly heard the word Hust. After an hour or so we arrived at a city named Hust in Hungary. All the prisoners in our coach were taken out, and the train rolled on.

We were put in charge of elderly soldiers, aged forty-five and over. To our eyes they looked ancient. One of them was the spokesman. He addressed us in Ukrainian. It was Ukrainian with a Yiddish accent. It turned out that he was from Tarnopol, a town not far from my *Shtetl,* where the people spoke German, Yiddish, and Ukrainian. He also spoke Hungarian very poorly, as I later discovered. He was quite clearly a Jew.

A group of ten from among twenty-five men were taken to a brick building that looked tremendous in my eyes. It was a marvel of construction to the mind of a boy from a *Shtetl* where all the houses were one story abodes, built of lumber or clay. The red three-story building had windows glistening in the sun and was surrounded by a wrought iron fence. It was a school building, we were told, now converted to a hospital. We were assigned to work in the hospital, some to help as orderlies, others to work in the kitchen. I was a cook's assistant. My job consisted of peeling potatoes and standing over the big kettle and mixing the contents with a wooden ladle.

I didn't stay at this work assignment very long. An officer, also middle aged, came to the kitchen and asked me to follow him. I was to be a storekeeper for the food and utensils requisitioned by the hospital. The store, or warehouse, was outside the hospital compound,

a few houses away, and I was entirely on my own all day long. The officer came in for a few minutes, asked me how I was doing, and, smiling at me, left. He insisted on calling me Albert, and this was my name all through my captivity. Evenings he called upon me to come to the officers' mess and help in serving supper to the officers. It was there that I learned the news of the war. I heard that the Russian army had suffered great losses, that the armies were in retreat, and for the first time in my life I heard the word Revolution! My officer was from the Tyrolian Mountains and knew no Hungarian. It so happened that I had picked up enough of the language to serve as an "interpreter" between the kitchen help and the officer. He often stayed late in the mess room and debated with another officer, who was Jewish, the subtleties of Theses and Antitheses, which I did not understand but listened to with great avidity. It sounded to me like the discussions in the Talmud in which my mind had been well trained.

The Hust days were the happiest of my captivity. No letters reached me from home, nor had I received any mail since I had left for the front lines. I was free to go to private homes in the evening. A family that lived next door to the hospital was particularly hospitable. They were, in fact, Jews. The man was a shoemaker, and his daughter, about my age, worked somewhere in the city. The demand for help was great everywhere. It was strange to speak in Yiddish to the family and to the neighbors who came to look at me. That never ceased to astonish me. The prayers on Yom Kippur in the cave had been the same as in my home town. The *kiddush* and candle lighting and the dishes were also the same as in my parents' home. And now I sat and talked to Hungarian Jews in my native language. They understood me and I understood them. A young woman who lived in the neighborhood came to tell me her husband had been taken prisoner by the Russians and was now in Kiev. She thought that I would know of Kiev since it was the capital of the Ukraine, and was surprised when she heard that I had never left my *Shtetl* until I was taken into the army. The freedom of travel and the ease of travel were things I could not cease to marvel at in this land of my captivity.

One day I was called back to the hospital and found the Jew from Galicia standing, wrapped in his *tallis** and *tefillin***, and praying. He motioned to me to sit down and when he was through *davnen*†

**Tallis,* prayer shawl. (Hebrew)

***Tefillin,* phylacteries. (Hebrew)

†*Daven,* to pray. (Yiddish, possibly from the French "*office divin*". *Davnen* is the participle.

informed me that we were being sent to a camp near the Russian border. If I had *sechel,** "sense enough," I would slip out of camp and go home. He also told me that the Russian army was in disarray, and thousands of soldiers were giving themselves up to the German army.

We parted and promised to write to each other, which we never did. But I still remember the Jew with the red trimmed beard as he stood straight as a rod with only his head swaying back and forth as he prayed, with his *tallis* covering his whole body.

We were brought to a barracks in the middle of a field and assigned bunks. And that was all we saw of our captors. We were not supervised. We were not given any duties to perform. We were left to our own resources.

Every morning somebody was missing. It was whispered around that prisoners were going home. We were near the Bessarabian border, and I knew that Bessarabia was the state next to Podolia, my own state.

One morning when I stepped out of the barracks, I saw a lorry bringing meat for our kitchen, which was in a lean-to shack. It was horse meat and was thrown up onto the roof of the lean-to where flies immediately attacked the red, lean sides of the animals. My stomach turned, and I went to the common out-house and vomited.

That night three of us agreed to leave the camp. Two took provisions, and I was to carry the spoons and forks and plates. We agreed to meet at a clump of trees that could be seen on the horizon. There was no need for all our caution. No one pursued us. No one was standing guard at the barracks. I made my way to the trees, but found not a trace of my companions. I waited under the tree for a while and was elated when I heard a noise, but disappointed when it was only the wind in the trees. I waited impatiently, but no one showed up. I continued toward the sun, which began to come up on the horizon. Not a soul came my way. At a distance I saw what looked like a village. I thought I heard the crow of a rooster. The terrain was flat, and there were patches of plowed fields. Suddenly the village was before me. I was at the edge of the village, and a man came out of his house on his way to the barn. I greeted him in Ukrainian, and he answered, "God be with you". I asked him where I was. He looked me over and beckoned me to come into the house and said

---

**Sechel,* native good sense, common sense, or judgment. (Hebrew: understanding").

he would take me to the *starosta,* the elder of the village. He would send me to the proper authority. On the way he told me that the country was in turmoil. The army and navy and the workers had taken over the government, and the Tzar was in exile. Hundreds of soldiers came from captivity every day and passed through the same village. The Austrian border was only a few miles away, and nobody was guarding it, neither the Austrians nor the Russians.

I registered at the *starosta,* and a motley bunch of us was packed into a train that was to take us to Kiev. At one of the stations where we stopped I asked a conductor where I could take a train to Kamenets-Podolsk, and he pointed to a waiting train on a nearby track. I jumped on the train, holding on to a railing at the door because there was no room inside. But as the train stopped at various stations some soldiers hopped out, and we who were crowded onto the steps of the coach went inside with much relief. My fingers were numb from holding onto the railing.

The disorder was so great that in all this journey nobody asked where we were going and why. We arrived at the Kamenets-Podolsk station toward evening. I spent my last pennies on some food and started out on foot to Orinin and home.

A footnote to my adventures or misadventures after my escape from the prison camp: The other two soldiers, one from Kiev and the other from Kharkov, whom I hastily accused of deserting me, were caught by the guard and kept in camp for two more months. They never tried to escape again.

One day when I was in Kamenets-Podolsk I saw my two friends walking in the downtown area. I recognized them immediately, but they hesitated for a while when I approached them, because I looked so different in my civilian clothing. We exchanged experiences, and I directed them to the *Kehillah,* the Federation of Jewish Charities. They were sent on their way to their homes.

Revolution and Pogrom*

Russia was elated. The Ukraine was jubilant. Kamenets-Podolsk and the surrounding towns and villages were exhilarated. There was dancing in the streets. Soldiers and civilians kissed one another and sang the "Internationale". A holiday spirit pervaded the streets and the squares of the cities and towns. Red flags hung from every

**Pogrom,* an organized massacre of Jews. (Russian)

rooftop. Red flags draped every vehicle. A huge red flag waved on the tower of the city clock in Kamenets-Podolsk.

For Jews the Revolution was a second deliverance, equal to deliverance from Egypt. Only this time it was not God who wrought the deliverance, or Moses the intermediary. It was "We the people," "We the workers," "We the army, and the farmer, and all who were oppressed".

It was springtime in Orinin. Nature had awakened, and so were the Jews of the town. Young people returned from the army. Suddenly they were transformed into orators. They spoke in the market place to the peasants: A new day had come for Russia. A new sun and new heavens. All over the land people were rising up. They were taking what was coming to them by virtue of their labors. Those who didn't work, didn't eat. Down with the Pan who owned the fields, and the forests, and the waters, and the very air you breathed. Arise and divide the land, free the forest, take what belonged to the Pan: cattle, sheep, implements, and his very furniture.

Organizers came from Kiev, from Odessa, and from nearby Kamenets-Podolsk. They all spoke the same language. They had the same slogans plastered on walls and on trees. The organizers wore uniforms of soldiers of the Red Army. The Red Star fluttered from every house, from every public place.

The rich were not forgotten. They must work. Those who are not willing to work have no place in the new social order.

During that honeymoon of the Revolution all traces of the Tzar's orders were rescinded. Equality for all. Justice for all. All national partitions that divided Jews, and farmers, and workers were erased. It was not uncommon to find Jewish young men at the dances arranged by the villagers and Ukrainian girls fraternizing with Jewish boys.

A commissar was appointed over Orinin and the environs. A workers' and farmers' governing committee issued new laws and new regulations.

The older folks of Orinin looked with jaundiced eye at what was happening. The Jewish boys were too prominent on these committees. They were the ones who led a crowd to the estate of the Pan and left nothing standing but empty rooms and barns. They were the ones who arrested the people who managed the estate in the absence of the Pan. They also arrested the *kulaks,* the rich landowners and the Jews who were suspected of hiding grain and produce from the open market and asking exorbitant prices from the poor.

The order of things was reversed. The poorer a man was the higher he stood in the eyes of the commissar. The man who lived by the sweat of his brow was the man of the hour. The businessmen, the storekeepers, the men who had no definite profession had no standing in the community.

The time of the young had come. Fathers and mothers, and in fact anyone who was over forty, were reduced to silence. This new order would come into being by the will of the young. Anything that was created, believed in, and treasured by the people before the Revolution was old and had to be destroyed!

Needless to say, the churches and synagogues were nests of counter-revolution. No self-respecting son of the revolution would step inside them. New places of assembly grew up. New holidays were instituted. New values were introduced. Sons and daughters were estranged from their parents and, if they were not actually denouncing them, were indifferent to their plight.

In Orinin there was continual dancing and singing, and perpetual lectures on the new canons of the Revolution. There were exuberance and abandon in some quarters of the village and sadness and foreboding in others.

From Kiev came news of an uprising by the Ukrainians against the Red Army. The leader of that uprising was Hetman Petlura. Around Petlura gathered all the Ukrainian nationalists who wanted a separate Ukraine, governed by its own Rada, or Assembly, and independent of the Russian Republic. Petlura himself was a socialist, so his Jewish followers said. But the people around him were the riff-raff of the Revolution. Petlura installed himself in Kiev, called for a Peoples' Congress, divided up the work of government among ministers, and even had a Minister of Jewish Affairs. The army, however, had all the power. They called themselves Haidamaks and committed unbelievably bloodthirsty, barbaric atrocities. The historian of that period, Ismar Elbogen, writes:

> Each of the parties (in the Ukraine) attacked Jews; the one side, because they were allegedly Bolsheviks; the other, because they were anti-Bolsheviks; all sides because they were unarmed and easy plunder. It was as if Hell had spewed forth all its fire and from all sides the flames were hurled upon the Jews.

Finally the Bolshevik armies defeated the Haidamaks, and Petlura and his bands were chased out of the Ukraine. But in the small towns, on the border of Austria, local peasants led by remnants of the

Haidamaks* still roamed the towns and villages and pillaged and burned as if nothing had happened.

Orinin was one of those towns.

Night March to Orinin

Kamenets-Podolsk was in the hands of the Bolsheviks, but the small towns which were scattered about for some ten or fifteen miles around the capital city were left to the mercy of bands of Haidamaks. Every day the population of Kamenets was swelled by people who had escaped from these towns. They told stories that were all too familiar: robbing, rape, killing, and burning of Jews and their property. The Bolshevik army that was stationed in Kamenets could not undertake a campaign against these marauders. They were not organized into one army; they were elusive, attacking a town here, a village there. They consisted mainly of local peasants coveting Jewish property.

The Red Army had good advice for the towns. Defend yourselves. They are after your lives, and you can rise up and pay them measure for measure. A life for a life. But that was easy to say. Jews had no weapons. The roving bands of Haidamaks were armed.

One morning word reached Kamenets-Podolsk that Orinin had been pillaged and a demand made on the townspeople to supply a certain amount of money for the Petlura forces or they would pay with their lives.

A group of us from Orinin who were living in Kamenets-Podolsk at the time gathered at the headquarters of the Bolshevik government and demanded arms and ammunition to go out to Orinin and save the lives of the people. A certain Captain Ivanov volunteered to go with us. He assembled us, about twenty young men from Orinin and other towns, all army men in the past, at the former Governor of Podolia House and instructed us in the use of arms. The instruction gave us confidence to go out and take vengeance on the Haidamaks for their deeds of the past and for what they demanded now.

We set out from Kamenets in the dark and reached the forest at daybreak. Beyond the forest were the Haidamaks. Ivanov told us to disperse and to enter the town from all sides. We were instructed not to shoot unless attacked, not to engage anyone in conversation except to answer greetings if anyone greeted us.

*Named after an Eighteenth Century armed band of serfs who revolted against the feudal Polish landowners, and also tortured and slaughtered Jews.

The town was asleep when we arrived. We alerted the Jews to pack up and to leave the town. We could not stay in Orinin, we explained, but we came to save them from the hands of the Haidamaks. The Haidamaks, when they learned of a "great Red Army" coming to Orinin, rushed out of their beds and fled as fast as their horses could carry them.

A caravan of horses and wagons traveled from Orinin to Kamenets-Podolsk, and we, the frightened ex-soldiers, brought up the rear in case of an attack. The Haidamaks returned to Orinin in the afternoon as we were entering Kamenets-Podolsk and found the town empty. It was not long afterward that the Red Army did come to the villages and routed the bandits.

Who was Comrade Ivanov? He disappeared after the march on Orinin. He didn't wait to be thanked for leading us into battle. But I will remember him to the last day of my life. He was a stocky middle-aged man with a ruddy face and mild piercing eyes. He did not carry a rifle, but continually kept his hand on his revolver, and God help the man who stood in his path. Comrade Ivanov, our inspiration, our pillar of strength for one night. May your memory be blessed!

And Petlura? A captive of roving bands of Haidamaks who had committed inhuman atrocities in his name, he was assassinated by one of his victims. He was shot in Paris on May 26, 1926 by Shalom Schwartzbard, a watchmaker from the Ukraine, who had witnessed the murder of his parents in a pogrom.

He avenged for all the thousands of men and women, old and young, who had perished in the Ukraine at the hands of Haidamaks.