Oh! Sławatycze, my home…

A History of the Jewish Community

of

Sławatycze

by

Michał Grynberg

▪

and

The Personal Memoirs of Descendents of Sławatycze

▪

Edited by

Henry L. Gitelman

DRAFT

Rev. Sept / 04

Oh! Sławatycze, my home…

▪

A History of the Jewish Community

of

Sławatycze

▪

Its Destruction During the Holocaust

▪

An Anthology of Photographs, Historical Documents

▪

and

▪

The Personal Memoirs of Descendents of Sławatycze

▪

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Notes on Polish and Yiddish Pronunciation

Polish words and also Yiddish names of people when situated in Poland, are written with Polish orthography. Yiddish / Hebrew names such as Chaja, Chaim, Chana are written with the Polish letter "**Ch**", a double consonant combination that has a guttural sound as in "Loch Ness" and are often rendered in English as Kheder, Hallah, Haya, Haim, Hannah, etc. The sound of the Polish double consonant "**sz**", as in **Sz**epsel, Jo**sz**ke is pronounced as "**sh**" is in English, whereas the diacritical letter " **ś** " is pronounced as a rather softer "**sh**"sound. The diacritical letter "**ó**" as in Jakób is pronounced as "**oo**", like in **look.** The double consonants "**cz**" are sounded as "**tch**" would be in English whereas the diacritical "**ć**" is pronounces as a softer "**tch**" would be in English.

In Polish all the letters are sounded. The letter "**W**" is pronounced as the letter "**V**" is in English and the letter "**J**" is always pronounced as a "**Y**" is in English, like in "yield". **Chaja** is pronounced "**Haya**". The "**Bug River**", which is often mentioned in this book, or "**bud**" [the communal bath] is pronounced with a long "**u**", as in "bull" and not as in "bug", an insect.

The crossed letter "**Ł**" or " **ł** " is sounded in Polish midway between as the letters "**W**" and "**L**" are sounded in English. But, pronouncing them as the "**L**" is pronounced in English would be quite comprehensible in Polish. "**Sławatycze**" is pronounced "**Slava'tytch'eh**".

The familiar Yiddish forms and diminutives of the Hebrew names is most often used, such as, Szepsel, or Shepsel for Shab'btai, Nute [pronounced *Nooteh]* for Nathan, Awrejml for Abraham, etc. Sometimes the Polish name and its diminutive are used interchangeably; such as Jagoda or Jadzia, the diminutives of Jadwiga. ***Sztetl*** or ***Shtetl,*** from the German *Stadt,* is Yiddish for a little town [*miasteczko* in Polish] like our own Sławatycze.

The spelling of the names is varied with the locale. For example, when in Poland, Shepsel is spelled "Szepsel" and when in Canada, the USA or in Israel, the name would be spelled as Shepsel. Similarly for Dawid / David, Herszel / Hershel and Joszke/ Yoske. Wewe is the diminuative of Welwel /Velvel = Wolf /Wulf = Ze'ev in Hebrew.

The spelling of most place-names is according to the "New York Times Atlas of the World".

* * *

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Introductory Remarks

▪

In the early 1990s, one of my uncles gave me six issues of the weekly Yiddish newspaper the פֿאָלקס – שטימע [Fołks–Sztyme, Voice of the People] which was published in Warsaw, Poland. These back issues from the years 1975 to 1985 contained articles, in Yiddish, by Michał Grynberg about the life of the Jewish Community of Sławatycze before and during World War II. My father's stories, as well as Michał Grynberg's stories, were my source of information about life in my birth *shtetl*, Sławatycze, that I used as a resource for my own Memoir; "*I am Drenched in the Dew of My Childhood*", a history of my family.

In October of 1998, I had the honour of meeting Michał Grynberg in Warsaw and spending many hours with him, listening to his stories and enjoying his wise and humble demeanour. During our meetings at his office at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw and at his daughter Jagoda's home, we exchanged accounts of our family's experiences during and after the war. He was very pleased with my enthusiasm for the history of our birthplace, Sławatycze, and was flattered that I still had his articles in Yiddish on life in Sławatycze which he had written over 20 years earlier. I vividly remember his poignant comment to me:- "You come to me late..."

Michał Grynberg had a deep love for our birthplace Sławatycze, which is evident in his book, "*Sławatycze, domu mój...*" [Oh! Sławatycze, my home...] which was published posthumously in Warsaw in the year 2000.

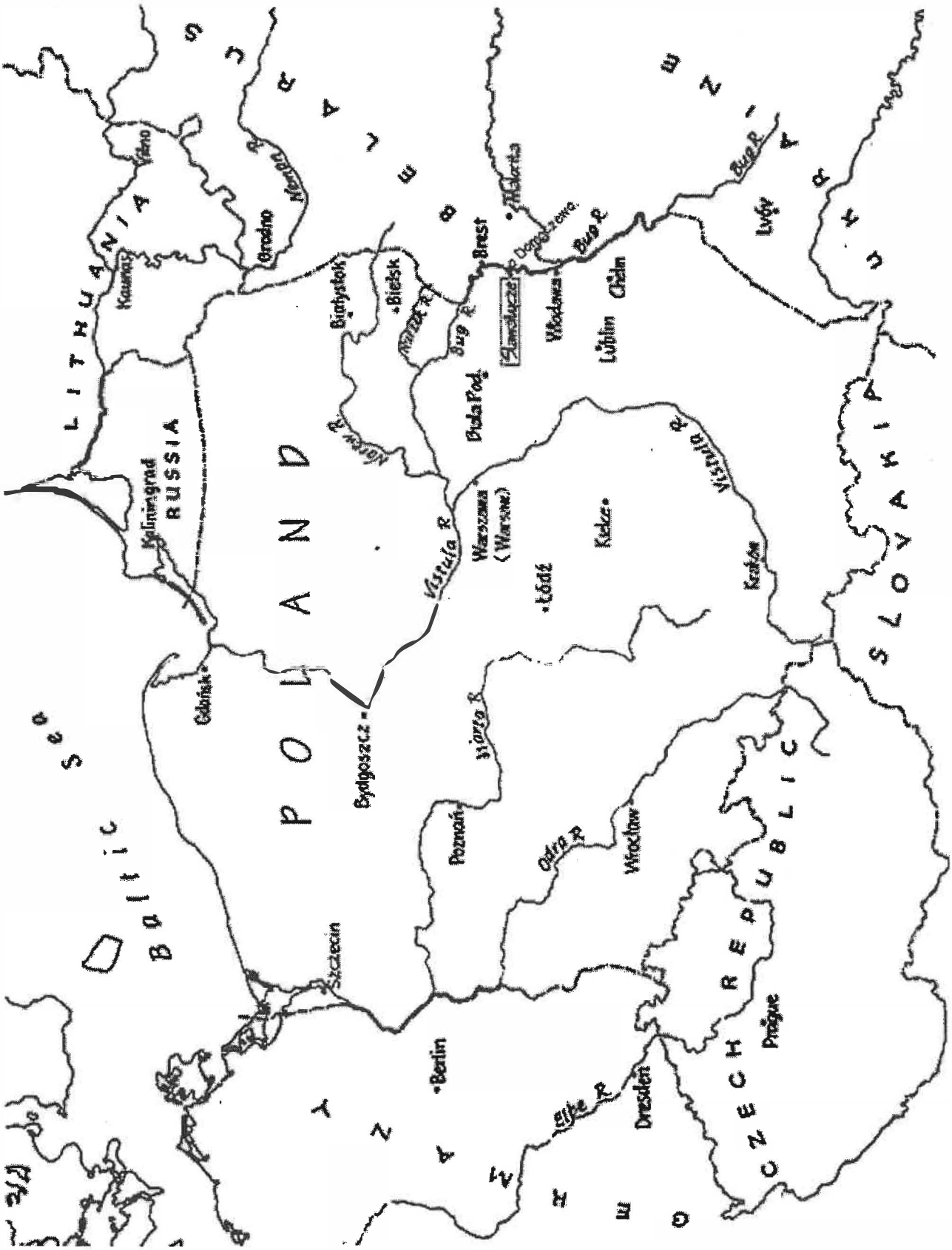
Michał Grynberg started out as a tailor's apprentice, and like many of his contemporaries he left the *shtetl* to seek work in Warsaw. He was self-taught and in 1989 was awarded a Doctorate in Historical Studies by the Polish Academy of Studies of History. Dr.Grynberg published many books about the Shoah, one of these books was translated into English and published in New York in 2002 as: **"Words to Outlive Us: Eyewitness Accounts from the Warsaw Ghetto".** On the flyleaf of this book it states that: *"The late Michał Grynberg, an associate of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw and a noted Polish scholar of the Holocaust, devoted decades of his life to compiling and publishing firsthand accounts from ghettos throughout Poland."*

In October of 2001 I returned to Poland and to my *sztetl* Sławatycze where I was able to obtain copies of many family records. When I was in Warsaw, I was the houseguest of Michał Grynberg's daughter, Jagoda Krawczyk. It was Jagoda's suggestion that parts of her father's book; *Sławatycze, domu mój...* [Oh! Sławatycze, my home...] the history of the Sławatycze Jewish Community and his published eye-witness accounts of life in Sławatycze be translated into English and be combined with the personal family histories of descendents of Sławatycze to serve as a Memoir of the Jewish Community of Sławatycze. We are indebted to Jagoda Grynberg/Krawchyk's vision and determination that conceived this Sławatycze Memorial Book.

This book is dedicated to Dr. Michał Grynberg and to all our Sławatycze ancestors.

I would like to thank my cousin Jack M. Rapkowski of Calgary for his meticulous proof-reading of this Book, including the Yiddish poetry, and in "editing the Editor".

Henry L. [Chaim-Lejb] Gitelman,
Montreal, Canada.
Editor



Map of Post World War II Poland

Chapter 1

■

The History of the Jewish Population of Sławatycze

■

By

Michał Grynberg

Translated from Polish by Maria Chmielewska-Szlajfer, Warsaw, Poland

The Main Registry of Old Documents [AGAD] in Warsaw contains a large set of documents termed the "Radziwiłł Archives [AR]". These archives contain the most complete data on Sławatycze, and thus of the town's Jewish population who had been living there since time immemorial.

The first inventory [census] of the town of Sławatycze made in 1656 indicates that out of the 30 plots located in the market square, 21 belonged to Jews. There is only one surname of a Jewish owner of these plots to be found in the inventory, that of Jankiel Potocki. The other owners are mentioned by their forenames and their trade, such as, Michał the Inn-keeper, Henoch the Stall-keeper, Hersz the Barber, Icko the Organ-grinder, Abram the Sausage-maker.[1]

Moreover, on the street "first from the Bug River," 15 plots are listed as belonging to Jews. Also, there was a Jewish school in Sławatycze as early as 1693. On the street across from the market square four plots are listed of which three belonged to Jews. On the street "second from the Bug River" there were 14 plots of which eight belonged to Jews. All in all, Jews owned 29 plots in Sławatycze and rented 23 out of the 27 found there. The inventory continues to mention forenames and nicknames of the owners of these plots, such as; Szlomo the Teacher, Lejzor the Cymbalist, Irsz the Barber, Moszko the Deaf, Icko the Tailor, Calel the Butcher, Moszko the Orphan, Aron the *Szkolnik* [Synagogue Beadle], Aron's Widow.[2]

On the other streets of the town, Jews owned only some of the plots. For example, out of the 37 owners of the plots listed on Chełmska Street [the present-day Włodawska Street], only two belonged to Jews.[3] In the year 1679, of the 34 names of Sławatycze dwellers listed as owning houses in the town market square, 23 names or, rather nicknames, were Jewish.[4]

In 1700 Sławatycze acquired it's own town rights from Prince Karol Radziwiłł, the owner of the town as well as the entire surrounding region. At that time, the total population of Sławatycze numbered 1,945, which included 1,089 Jews and 4 Germans. The town became the administrative centre of the adjacent villages and farms. Several breweries were located in the town. Along the banks of the Bug River there were a number of watermills and numerous workshops, such as tanneries, carpenter shops, tailors, shoemakers, etc. Of the 17 inns, 15 belonged to Jews with the following names: Mendel Abramowicz, Hersz Binder, Mrs. Abram Domaczewska, Zelik Fajwelowicz, Perec Frydman, Moszko Guterman, Abram Handelsman, Szachis Herszkowicz, Icek Lejbowicz, Szmul Mirer, Baruch Pogodny, Lejb Poleszuk, Ester Rozenbaum and Hersz Wircer.[5]

At that time, the trade routes from Brześć going southwards towards Lwów, led through Sławatycze. The Bug River formed a communication link with Elbląng [*Elbing*], Gdańsk [*Danzig*] and Królewiec [*Königsberg*]. It was a heavily used trade route.

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[1] Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych [henceforth AGAD), Archiwum Radziwiłłów [henceforth AR) XXV, sign. 3781.
[2] AGAD, AR XXV, sign. 3785.
[3] AGAD, AR XXV, sign. 3783/1.
[4] AGAD, AR XXV, sign. 3783/1.
[5] AGAD, AR, Akta Komisji Rządowej Spraw Wewnętrznych i Policji, sign. 4029 [tax payment), ch A, p. 5, item 4.

Regarding in-depth data concerning the Jews of Sławatycze, the archives provide unique pieces of information indicative of their role in the town. For example, on June 6, 1738 Perec Markowicz brought from abroad the following commodities:- 3 centnar-weights of lead, 4 stone-weights of ginger, 1 centnar-weight of copperas [ferrous sulphate, Fe SO4, also called green vitriol, used in dyeing, tanning, and in the making of ink.], 1 centnar-weight of scrap, 3 stone-weights of olive oil, 2 stone-weights of orange peel.[6]

The 1810 inventory mentions the following Jewish-owned buildings:- 28 first-rate buildings, 18 second-rate buildings, 4 third-rate buildings, including a Jewish school, kindergarten, hospital and a brewery belonging to Wigdor Berkowicz [old buildings] and another brewery, belonging to Szloma Mordkowicz [new buildings] and a fully equipped mill located on the banks of the Bug River.[7]

The inventory of the Sławatycze holdings made on June 24, 1815 includes the following villages and farms: [8]

Village	The number of farms
1. Dołhobrody and Pawluki	149
2. Hanna	73
3. Jabłeczno	39
4. Janówka	23
5. Kuzawka	50
6. Ladzk	40
7. Liszno	50
8. Pniski and Parośli	11
9. Sajówka	16
10. Terebiska	11
11. Zonków	11

In 1819 the cross-section of Sławatycze's Jewish population was as follows:-

1– Inn-keeper [Lejzer Szmułowicz, village of Dołhobrody], 1-barber, 3-dyers, 1-carter, 2- tanners, 9-traders, 1-bookbinder, 1-Member of the Assembly of Elders [*kahal*] [Jawel Wolfowicz], 6-tailors, 2-furriers [Herszko Lejbowicz and Szulim Lejzerowicz], 1-miller, 1-grain-dealer, 1-baker, 2-fishermen, 3-carpenters, 5-inspectors [*An inspector in the Jewish community administration*], 1-shoemaker, 1-glazier, 1-szkolnik [Judko Mejerowicz, *Synagogue beadle, Hebrew teacher*], 1-depiler [*remover of hair from hides used for the manufacture of brushes*], 8-tavern-keepers, 1-cantor [Zełko Moszkowicz], 1-moneychanger Abram Senderowicz, 1-trustee [Lejbko Berkowicz], 2-wine-dealers, 6-labourers.

In addition, there also were 6 breweries in the town which belonged to Jankiel Aronowicz, Mordka Fajwelowicz, Jankiel Ickowicz, Abram Jowelowicz, Szmul Mejerowicz and Perec Wigdorowicz. There was also there a Jewish hospital.

The official inventory lists a total of 192 farms, of which 73 were owned by Jews.[9] Moreover, Account No. 3 that was drawn up on November 15, 1819 lists 65 Jewish owners of livestock, such as, 51 cows, 12 horses, 1 heifer, 3 goats and one kid. The amount of tax paid amounted to 64 złotys and 20 grosz.[10]

After the opening of a railway line a short distance from town, it took over the transport functions of the Bug River and Sławatycze's economy began to decline. Many shops and inns closed and a considerable number of inhabitants were forced to move away in order to seek their livelihood.

Sławatycze even lost her status as a town in the second half of the 19th Century when the seat of the *gmina* [parish, the smallest administrative unit of an area] was moved to the nearby village of Hanna, some 6 km away. Sławatycze became a small town with a large, round marketplace, which was surrounded by market stalls, small wooden houses, artisan shops and very little business for the inhabitants of the town by which to eke out their living.

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[6] AGAD, AR, Percepcja ceł Komory Fordońskiej i Włocławskiej II 248/ p. 38.
[7] AGAD, AR XXV, sign. 3807, p. 4.
[8] AGAD, AR XXV, sign. 3810.
[9] AGAD, AR XXV, sign. 3810, item 283.
[10] AGAD, AR Akta Komisji Rządowej Spraw Wewnętrznych i Policji, sign. 4029.

The following information on Sławatycze dated from the late 1800s is found in the *Słownik geograficzny Królestwa Polskiego I innych krajów słowiańskich.* [11]

"Sławatycze, a private estate and an urban settlement is located on the banks of the Bug River, near a marshland, in the district of Biała. Sławatycze faces the little town of Domaczewo on the right bank of the Bug River in the county of Brześć, province of Grodno. The settlement of Sławatycze has two wooden churches, one serving the Catholic and the others serving the Russian Orthodox parishes, an elementary school, the *gmina* [administration district of a parish] court of justice, a post-office, a pharmacy, a general medical practitioner, several tanneries, an alcohol distillery, a brewery, a mill, a brickyard [the businesses, with the exception of the tanneries, was part of Prince Hohenlohe's estate] 256 houses, 2,388 residents [primarily Jews]... In about 1864 a cloth mill was started there [Torenza].

The register of births goes back to the year 1684 ... Once in the marketplace opposite the church one's attention is drawn to a hill on the bank of the Bug River. The hill was piled up into a regular square, the sides of which are more than two hundred ells long and very high. The top of the hill was made completely flat, as if it was prepared for the construction of a building. According to local legend, Prince Karol Radziwiłł had this hill piled up at a time of famine in order to let people earn their livelihood. He had envisaged this hill for the future construction of a large church ...

In 1754, while hunting in the nearby woods, Hieronim Radziwiłł, the Lithuanian Standard Keeper, killed 87 moose, 38 wild boars, 10 deer, 40 hares and 26 foxes in five days.

From the Radziwiłłs the estate passed on to the princes of Wittgenstein, and from them to the princes of Hohenlohe."

—§—

[11] *Geographic Dictionary of the Kingdom of Poland and Other Slavonic Countries [Warszawa 1889, vol. X, p. 772f]*

Chapter 2

■

The Life of the Jewish Community Of Sławatycze in the Early 1900's

■

By

Michał Grynberg

Translated from Polish by Maria Chmielewska-Szlajfer, Warsaw, Poland

*

According to the 1921 National Census, Sławatycze had 1,864 inhabitants of which 902 were Jews, i.e. 48.3 per cent of the town residents.[1]

*

Dos Shtetl

An ample literature has been devoted to *Shtetls* [*Shtelach* = little towns] in Poland that were inhabited primarily by Jews. Both Polish as well as Jewish writers have written much about them. Since Sławatycze belonged to the category of "*dos Shtetl*" before the war, a definition of such a little Jewish town, a *Shtetl* is provided by the author of classic Yiddish literature, Y. L. Peretz, in one of his poems called 'Monish':

אין קעניגרייך פוילן	In the Kingdom of Poland
האַרט ביי דער גרענעץ,	Right on the border,
שטייט זיך אַ שטעטל	Stands a *shtetl*
גרויס, ווי אַ געענעץ.	As big as a yawn.
[כ'רעד נישט פון מקום!]	[The place doesn't matter!]
הערט מען עס זעלטן,	It's rarely mentioned,
הייזלעך, ווי ניסלעך;	Houses like nutshells,
שמות – געצעלטן!	Prayers are what counts!

Before World War I in Poland a popular book by Sholem Asch was published in Warsaw in 1911, called *Miasteczko* [The Little Town] in Polish or *dos Shtetl* in Yiddish. It is about the town of Kazimierz on the Vistula River. The author described life of the Jewish population, their customs, Jewish rites, family celebrations, the way of life and customs of Hasidim, rabbis, Jewish mothers, fiancées, Jewish weddings, etc.

Many other Jewish writers wrote about the *shtetlach* [little towns], for example Anatol Sztern, *Bieg do bieguna* [Warszawa 1927], S. Pomer, *Elegie podolskie* [Warszawa 1931].

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[1] Bohdan Wasiutyński, *Ludność żydowska w Polsce w wiekach XIX i XX. Studium statystyczne*, Warszawa 1930, p. 64.

One should also mention Polish writers who wrote about the little Jewish towns. For example, on page 177 of his *Podróże po Polsce, Warszawa 1937,* [Travel Around Poland]. Ksawery Pruszyński explains the circumstances which decide the Jewish character of the Polish *Shtetls*: "There are two types of Polish towns: of the Piast era and of the Jagellonian era; the Eastern and Western types. The Eastern were built by Germans and Italians, the Western — by two elements: the landed gentry and the Jews."

In *Latarnia czarnoksięska* [Kraków 1977], [The Magic Lantern] J.I. Kraszewski writes: "Żytomierz seems to be a Polish town. And do you know what makes this town Polish? When Jews are no longer there, it means we have arrived in a totally foreign country, and, accustomed to their presence, to their services, we feel as if we are missing something."

It is also worth mentioning here that in 1889 a book was published in Warsaw by Klemens Junosz, *Nasi Żydzi w miateczkach i wsiach* [Our Jews in the *Shtetls* and Villages].

In Sławatycze, as in other little towns in Poland, the Jewish population consisted of families who in the course of time grew into large, multigenerational, extended family units. Thus there were in Sławatycze family groups such as the *Guszkes*, owners of the hardware store; the *Szamukes*, cattle traders; and the *Poliszukes*. The families of the latter did not practice just one kind of trade or one type of occupation, they traded in grain and cattle, and they worked as artisans. As a rule, members of family groups did not develop close relationships among one another. Some of them met each other only in the synagogue on Saturdays and holidays. The majority however prayed in *Stiblach* small houses of prayer where certain family groups or similar tradesmen gathered for weekly prayers. Marriages were also arranged between members of the same extended family. On Saturday afternoon women chatted with other women of their extended family while standing on the small porches in front of their cottages.

The working class youth frowned on the somewhat richer children of the shopkeepers and merchants. Boys from artisan shops would sometimes walk around the marketplace bareheaded to spite those from the richer families.

The *Poliszuk* family distinguished themselves by their more progressive youth. They were the ones who started organizing the working-class young people. They often called meetings to report what was going on in other towns where workers had won regular working hours and higher wages. Their activities bore fruit a bit later when trade unions were formed and a lending library opened in Sławatycze

.

The poet Luba Waserman belonged to the *Poliszuk* family. Luba was born in 1907 and began writing while still living in Sławatycze. Her father peddled whatever he could sell. Usually he sold basic commodities such as matches in the surrounding villages. Luba did not even finish elementary school. The local teacher, Josel Zuberman, taught her privately how to write in Yiddish and in Polish.

Women in the town often talked about her because she was always totally absorbed in reading books. "No decent Jewish woman will become of her," they said. A lit kerosene lamp was often seen through the window of her room till late in the night. Even as a young girl Luba was seeking answers to the many questions that disturbed her. However, no one in Sławatycze shared her worries of the world and no one was able to help her solve the problems that perplexed her.

In 1924 Luba moved away from Sławatycze to be with one of her brothers who lived in the town of Łuków. There she was hoping to find some sympathy and help from her brother, but her situation there was much the same as it was in Sławatycze. She then decided to take to the road.

In 1925 she left for Palestine where her other brother, Josef, was living. There she at last found independence when she began working for a Yiddish newspaper and she joined a youth organization.

The first volume of Luba's poems was published in Palestine in 1931. In the introduction, the editor Abram Bloj, wrote: "*Luba Waserman is now taking her first steps. These are the first, late afternoon songs the poetess writes at a time when the Yiddish word and the Yiddish song must hide themselves from the evil eye and even more, from the evil hand. Coming from a blue-collar working family, Luba Waserman did not come under the influence of any of the literary circles. She found her way to her own young girl's lyric poetry in Yiddish, all on her own. Can we permit sorrow and the feeling of not belonging to her environment to stifle the gentle sting of pain and longing? These first poetic attempts by Luba constitute an important fragment of the Yiddish, feminine, lyrical poetry that is not as yet very rich.*"

As a *persona non grata*, Luba was deported from Palestine in 1934. She then went to the Soviet Union and settled in Biro-Bidzhan, known as the Jewish Autonomous Soviet Republic. There she continued developing her literary talents and published her poems in Yiddish periodicals.

After World War II she published her poems and short stories in the *Folks - Sztyme*, the Yiddish weekly periodical published in Warsaw. She never forgot her native Sławatycze. It found a prominent place both in her poetry as well as in her short stories.

Luba Waserman died in December of 1975. She left a son, Sergo Bengelsdorf, a musician who resides in Kishinev, Moldova.

Luba Waserman's poem "**Sławatycze**" was first published in Tel-Aviv in 1931 [2]

Sławatycze

אויף א בערגל שטייט מיין שטעטל	On a hillock stands my *shtetl*
שלענגט זיך אַ טייכל דאָרטן	Snakes a river there
צווישן טאָל אוּן בארג,	Between valley and hill,
די שטיבער זענען הילצערנע	The houses are of wood,
מיט דעכלעך פוּן שטרוי;	With roofs made of straw;
די פענצטערלעך פירקאַנטיקע,	The square little windows
שפיגלען זיך אין בלוי.	Mirror themselves in blue.
פעלדער, גרינע וועלדער,	Fields, green forests,
אַ וואסער ווי אַ שפיגל	A river like a mirror.
שטייט דאָרט אין אַ שטיבעל	Stands there in a little hut
מיין אויסגעפלאָכטן וויגל	My woven basket cradle.
ווינטער רויך פוּן קוימענס,	Winter smoke from chimneys,
מאַמעס קאָכן, וואַשן,	Mothers cooking, washing,
יינגעלעך מיט פאהלעך	Little boys with earlocks
ווילן צוקער נאַשן,	Want to nibble sweets,
מענער לערנען יום וליל	Men studying day and night
בייַ גמרות אויסגעשפרייטע	In front of open Gomorrahs,
ווייבער האָרעוונען צוּ פארדינען	Women labour for a livelihood,
ברענגען אַלדאָס גרייטע,	To get things ready,
ווער עס האַנדעלט צוּ מיט סמאָלע,	One deals in tar,
ווער מיט זייף אוּן טראָן,	One in soap and in rags
די דריטע האַנדלט גאָר מיט אייר,	The third deals only in eggs,
די פערטע טאַפּט אַ הון...	The fourth gropes a hen ...

The majority of the Jewish population of Sławatycze lived by the sweat of their brows; they were tailors, shoemakers, tanners, saddlers, and carpenters and there were many furriers. Generally, Sławatycze was reputed to be a town of furriers. Some of them, such as the brothers Aron and Awrum-Itchak Gitelman and Ben-Zion Frydman exported their goods, primarily to Russia. Entire families worked day and night sewing by hand pieces of old fur coats and fur scraps into "*blamen*", large squares of fur which were then sold in the marketplaces to tailors who used them as linings for cloth coats. The townspeople told a story about Zelda, the wife of Szmul-Zaweł, who did not stop sewing the fur scraps even when she was going outside to relieve herself. Women who went to the Bug River to rinse their washing claimed to have seen her doing both behind the fence that surrounded her house.

The furrier shops employed mostly young girls and boys who worked 14 or more hours a day. Work in these shops began early in the morning. It was easier in the summer to bear it, but in winter one had to work by the light of a kerosene lamp. It is worth pointing out here that there was no electricity in Sławatycze. Only the house of Mosze Epelbaum, the owner of the steam driven grits mill, which was located at the end of Włodawska Street, had a steam driven generator that provided electricity for his house.

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[2] *Translation of the Poem from Yiddish by Henry L. [Chaim-Lejb) Gitelman*

Tailors were the most represented trade in Sławatycze. Local tailors comprised several groups. A large number of them manufactured clothing that was sold at the local market square. Market day in Sławatycze was once a week, on Mondays. It was held on other days of the week in the neighbouring towns.

Hersz-Lejb Sznajder was one of the richest and also one of the most frugal owners of a tailor shop. He owned a nice house in the market square and employed several workers. He wore a beard, to be sure, but he also wore a modern jacket and a peaked cap. He was socially active. He was the chairman of the Hebrew Free Loan Society and also a member of the Burial Society [*Chevra Kadisha*]. The same group of tailors included Hersz-Lejb Wechterman [who was known as "*Nin'nes*"], *Bajadera* [a nickname], Mordechaj Sura-Lea's, Pinżer *Lec* [Pinżer the Scoffer as he was called in the town] and many others.

Moreover, there were many other tailors who did not produce quality products. They produced clothes for the local populace and peasants from the nearby villages. Typically, a peasant would arrive in Sławatycze by cart to take a certain tailor and his equipment to the countryside for a few days. There, the tailor moved from one place to another, fulfilling orders from the peasants. The Jewish tailor would come home only for *Szabbes* and on Sundays.

This group of tailors included Lejzer Zajdefter, Big-Bellied Chaim-Szyja [he was referred to as such because of his obesity]. Many tailors had steady and loyal customers among the peasants. Among them was Ruwen [known as Jolke's], Joske [known as Jente's] and Chaim-Joel Fidelman.

Fidelman was originally from Włodawa, a town 20 km south of Sławatycze. He became a Sławatyczer by virtue of marriage to Tyła, Kisiel's granddaughter. When Fidelman first came to Sławatycze to see his fiancée, he brought with him his violin. The people in town found something to talk about; Tyła was getting married to a *klezmer*. But how could they be sure that Fidelman could actually play the violin? Perhaps he was carrying it just to attract attention, as boys often do in situations like this. For example, whenever Meir Szumacher [a shoemaker] of Sławatycze went to visit his family in a nearby town, he would carry a briefcase under his arm so that the young girls would think that he was a white-collar worker. That way he made himself more important.

But Fidelman did not carry a violin just to show off, indeed, he could play it beautifully. Later, after he married Tyła and he moved to Sławatycze, on a summer evening, after the day's work, you could often hear him play his violin in his house. Neighbours would gather at his fence to listen to his beautiful playing.

It is worth noting here that there were many musicians in the Fidelman family of Włodawa. His father was a well-known musician who played at Jewish weddings. His younger brother, Jankiel, also played the violin beautifully. Every time he came to visit his brother in Sławatycze, the girls surrounded him and asked him to play some melody for them. Jankiel was never reluctant to play. He played in such a way that the girls sometimes could not hold back their tears, particularly when they heard Hungarian melodies. [*Fidel* means violin in Yiddish]

* * *

The *Cherem* [3]

As I said earlier, the first people to have infused new life into Sławatycze were the Poliszuk children. Ester, the daughter of Froim Waserman, was known as the mother of the working class youth. She and her brother Jankiel always came to the defence of the young workers. That care did not always bear fruit. At the beginning of 1927, two trade unions; tailors, shoemakers and also carpenters, were organized in Sławatycze and a newly founded lending library was formed and named after J.L. Perec [Y.L.Peretz], the classic Yiddish writer.

Political parties also became active in Sławatycze such as the Zionists, the Bund and the Communists, which was later banned.

Many young men showed interest in social and political issues of the day and in the ideas of liberty, equality, etc. Early activists were Isak Lerer, a carpenter, known as "Itche der Kempfer" [Itche the Fighter]; the brothers Szaje and Awrum Repkowski; Moisze, known as "Alderman", a carpenter; Meir the son of Gita, also known as "Kaczkes"; a tailor named Gedale Edelsztejn; the carpenter brothers Aron and Anszel Rotenberg; the tailor Chaim Zajdefter; the carpenter Josel the son of Blind-Lea [of the Poliszuk family]; the shoemaker Aron-Josel Hochbaum. Many young girls and young lads who worked for furriers; such as Brajndl Gitelman, the sisters Gita and Chana, known as "Szmoch"; Alter Gitelman, and many others became

3) "The *Ban*"

activists of the leftist movement. The seat of the newly organized unions was the home of Chaja known as "*Minenzes*", on Włodawska Street.

The place was empty all week and it came alive on Friday evenings, once the Sabbath lights were lit. Then the boys and girls gathered there, put on bright kerosene lamps, held meetings, chatty lectures, etc., and before breaking up, they shut off the lamps. This very act of lighting and shutting off the lights on the Sabbath became the last straw that broke the camel's back. "Jewish children put kerosene lamps on and off on the Sabbath! Good Lord!" Jews ran to their Rabbi and demanded firm measures be taken by him unless, God forbid, some misfortune should befall the whole town. The rabbi invited representatives of the youth to come to him to discuss their desecration of the Sabbath. The rabbi did not succeed in having them promise to give up lighting and shutting off lamps on the Sabbath. As a result, there was a tragedy in town.

During the Sabbath morning prayers at the synagogue, the rabbi, wrapped in a *kittel* [white prayer attire] and *tallith*, climbed the *belemer* [dais] and in front of the congregation pronounced a *Cherem* [a ban, a prohibition] on the woman who had rented a part of her house for the union activists to hold meetings there.

Many of the union youth were in the synagogue on that occasion. When the rabbi pronounced his ban, the young people walked out of the synagogue in unison. Then, the Jews of the town started yelling at them; "We'll be all going for *Kidusz Haszem* [as a sacrifice to the Almighty] because of you."

That afternoon a big crowd of Jews gathered in the marketplace. Among them were opponents of the proclaimed *Cherem* [Ban]. The arguments and the wrangles turned into a brawl. The police had to intervene to break up the fights among the Jews.

Sometime later, some artisans gathered at the rabbi's house. They signed an agreement stating that they would not employ the workers who had organized the trade unions. As a consequence, some of the organizers, including the author, left Sławatycze to seek work elsewhere. The trade unions did pursue their activities in town. With time, working conditions and wages paid to workers employed in the artisan shops had improved. The *Cherem* too was eventually lifted and life in the town slowly returned to normal.

Soon after the imposition of the *Cherem*, the town suffered another misfortune: Tauba Binsztok converted to Christianity in order to marry her lover, the commander of the Sławatycze police force. The town roiled with indignation. Members of her family observed the formal seven days of *szywa* [the seven days of mourning observed for a deceased relative] and the family hardly ever showed their faces outside of their enclosed yard. Tauba's three sisters, Perl, Rywka and Hinda resigned themselves to their fate, that is, that they would never get married. Their brother Szlomo left Sławatycze and no one knows whatever happened to him.

From 1929 until the German attack on Poland on September 1st, 1939, I had been living in Warsaw, but I often returned to Sławatycze to visit my mother Gitl, my family, the girls and boys from my old days, those who were still living there. Many young people had left town, like I did, to seek work elsewhere, primarily in Warsaw.

I also want to mention here the relations between the Jews and the Poles in Sławatycze. Many generations of Poles and Jews had grown up, lived and worked there, gone to school together and, above all, influenced each other. To be sure, the Jewish community of the town was rather isolated, which was, after all, rather convenient for the observing the different religious rites and the different customs. The language too was different to some extent, and the different way many in the Jewish community dressed. Despite all that, relations between the Christian and Jewish population in the town were, as a rule, correct. The same can be said about the relations between the Jews and the peasants in the nearby villages. For five days of the week Jewish peddlers traded their goods among them. A considerable number of Jewish artisans, such as shoemakers, tailors worked in the countryside during the week.

Construction carpenters, such as the Epelbaum brothers and also the furrier Herszel Gitelman, worked in the countryside during the summer months building barns and houses for the peasants who were too busy farming their land. That brought the people closer to each other. There were a number of Poles, such as Franciszek Żurek, who could speak Yiddish quite well.

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Chapter 3

■

Life of the Jewish Community of Sławatycze in the 1930's [1]

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by

Henry L. [Chaim-Lejb] Gitelman

During the First World War the retreating Cossacks burned most of Sławatycze, including the old synagogue that dated from the early 1600's, and drove the Jews out of the *Sztetl [Shtetl]*. Many Jewish families went to stay with relatives in the Ukraine in predominantly Jewish towns such as Belilowka and Berditchev near Kiev. After being away close to three years most the Jewish families returned to Sławatycze after the war in 1918 – 1919 and tried to resume their lives.

It is incomprehensible how large families with many young children and babies were able to traverse 500 km under adverse wartime conditions to reach Berditchev and then, three or four years later, safely return home to Sławatycze. This 1,000-km. trek was accomplished at a time when utter chaos reigned. The Russian Revolution was in full swing. The Czarist regime in Russia collapsed in 1917, the Bolsheviks took Kiev in February 1918, and the Germans retook Kiev from the Bolsheviks two weeks later. Many *pogroms* were carried out against Jews by the Ukrainian nationalist military and also by the Bolshevik armies.

In his book, "Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics", the political scientist and author, Prof. Zvi Y. Gitelman [no relation of mine], states *that "...in the years 1917-1921 more than 2,000 pogroms took place, and half a million Jews were left homeless as a result of the burning of twenty eight percent of Jewish homes and the abandonment of others. The direct loss of Jewish life easily exceeded 30,000, and together with those who died from wounds or as a result of illnesses contracted during pogroms, the number of Jewish dead probably reached 150,000, or ten per cent of the Jewish population" [of the Ukraine].*

The Armistice that officially ended the First World War did not end hostilities in Poland or in Russia. Poland declared its independence on November 11, 1918. The Bolsheviks, having crushed all counter-revolutionary forces inside Russia, turned their attention to Poland. By early August 1920 the Red Army, led by Leon Trotsky, was at the gates of Warsaw. On August 15th the Polish Army under Marshal Józef Piłsudski and Generals Haller and Śikorski fought the "Battle of Warsaw" which is known in Poland as the "Miracle on the Wisła". There, the Polish forces routed the Red Army and pushed them back to a line some 300km east of the Bug River. It was not until March 1921 that Poland's borders with Russia were finalised by a peace treaty.

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Sławatycze nad Bugiem [Sławatycze on the Bug River] was a typical Jewish / Polish *shtetl* with a market-square, the *rynek* [*der mark,* in Yiddish] was located in the centre of the town. The market-square was really in the shape of an oval, with streets and alleys radiating from it. It was covered with cobblestones and it was the only area in Sławatycze that was paved as of the start of the war in 1939. All other streets and

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[1] *Extract from the Memoir "I Am Drenched in the Dew of My Childhood" by Henry L. Gitelman*

alleys in the *shtetl* and all the roads linking the surrounding villages were rutted dirt roads which turned muddy after a rainfall. The *plimp,* the communal water pump, was located in this *rynek.*

There was no electricity in Sławatycze in 1939 and everyone used kerosene or naphtha lamps or went to bed early.

In the back yard of each house there was an outdoor latrine and in the winter the people had to get dressed to go to the "toilet". At night, especially in the winter, both children and adults used a *nacht topf,* a chamber pot that was kept under the bed and emptied in the morning. This was the extent of the "indoor" plumbing in Sławatycze. Once a week the Jewish men would go to the communal *bud* and *schwitz* [steam bath] that was operated by the Jewish community. The ladies had a separate day of the week set aside for their exclusive use. Children were usually bathed at home in a large zinc tub placed on the kitchen table. In the summer the people went down to the Bug River to bathe.

Every Monday was market day in Sławatycze. Peasants came from the surrounding villages and hamlets to sell or trade their produce and livestock with the Jewish merchants and tradesmen for basic manufactured goods. The peasants came on foot or in their horse drawn wagons. Young colts and calves trailed behind their horse driven wagons. The peasants brought eggs, live chickens and geese, horses and cows to sell or trade for goods. In season, they brought vegetables and potatoes from their fields to sell at the market or deliver to their private customers. Haggling was part of any purchase. The Jewish merchants and tradesmen also travelled to the nearby towns to attend the markets that were held on other days of the week. After the animated market day, Sławatycze went back to its quiet pattern of activity.

Observant Jews would not buy milk or milk products directly from the *goyim* as they could not be certain that the milk container was not also used for non-kosher foods. Jewish middlemen went to the nearby farms to supervise the milking of the cows or goats into the containers provided by these Jewish dairymen who then sold door to door the milk by the glass or by the quart to their Jewish customers. Strong tasting goat's milk was considered to be a cure for digestive and many other ailments. A peasant woman led a nanny goat with huge udders through the streets of Sławatycze and sold fresh goat's milk by the glass. Women who had ailing children ran out to the street to get from the goat-woman some of the goat's curative milk which was milked directly into their own dairy jugs. Most Jews in Sławatycze kept their own cows. I can still recall the pleasant taste of the fresh milk and the white moustache I got after drinking the just-milked, warm, foamy milk.

Peasant women were dressed in long colourful homespun linen skirts and blouses and wore embroidered aprons. In the winter they wore mid-length sheepskin coats, leather-side out. The coats were embroidered with folkloric designs in red wool. The decorations were distinctive. By the patterns and colour of the decorations one could tell the area, even from which parish, the peasants came from.

Peasant men wore long sheepskin or goatskin coats and high *kutchmas* [fur hats] with the fur on the outside. Male peasants wore a primitive form of footwear called *postoly,* which consisted of wide bandages of home spun linen cloth or of woven reeds wrapped around the legs that reached from the their toes to below their knees. The shoe part of the *postoly* was made of birch bark or of a piece of rawhide, fur side out, laced to the foot with leather thongs. Generally, in the summer, peasant women and all children walked barefoot. Even Jewish children went barefoot in the summer and wore "Cossack" style, knee high boots only during the winter months.

The population of Sławatycze and the surrounding area was comprised of Jews, Catholic Poles, *Pravo-Slavny* Belorussian's and also Ukrainians. *Pravo-Slavny* means *True Believers,* that is, *Russian-Orthodox. "Belorussian",* which literally means *White Russian* and they are sometimes referred to as *Ruthenian.* In some of the old Polish legal documents Jews were identified as *Stary Zakonniy,* literally *Old believers.*

People generally identified themselves by their religion and not by their nationality. Polish was the official language spoken in the cities and towns but in the countryside the peasants spoke a dialect based on Slavonic, which they referred to as *po prostemu,* which literally means; 'plain, not fancy talk'. Jews referred to it as *po chłopsku.* A *chłop* being an adult male peasant who was generally illiterate and was also considered not to be too worldly nor overly bright.

The Synagogue, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Polish Catholic Church were all located in the same corner of the marketplace. The government school was in the south part of town on the road to

Włodawa. The *bud* and the *mikveh* [the Jewish communal bathhouse and the ritual immersion pool] were located behind the Synagogue, not far from the Bug River.

The owner of the grits mill was richest man in Sławatycze. He was called Mojsze *fun dem hojf* [Moishe of the Manor]. The mill was located at the river's edge, at the end of *ulica* [street] Włodawska. Originally the millstones were driven by water but in the late 1930s a steam driven engine provided the power. A wood-burning boiler generated the steam that also drove an electric generator. This rich miller's house had the distinction of being the only one in Sławatycze that was illuminated by electricity, the only one to be built of brick, and the only one, besides the police station, to have a telephone.

Jewish shops lined the perimeter of the marketplace. These shops sold ironware, salted herring from barrels, bicycles, leather, ready-made clothing, manufactured goods and ice cream [home-made, of course]. For their goods, the shopkeepers often took in-trade from the peasants their produce; such as potatoes, cabbages, turnips, chickens, eggs, or whatever else the peasants brought with them to trade. To the peasants whom they knew and trusted, the Jewish merchants extended credit [with interest] or they lent them money that was to be paid back, with the accrued interest, after the crops were brought in at the end of summer. Around the market-square there were a number of *szenk*[2] that were operated by Jews and often with Christian partners.

Aside from the weekly market in the main square there was also a more regular *targowica* [trading place], a sort of bazaar that was comprised of semi-permanent stands and shacks. The *targowica* was located off the main road opposite the rabbi's house. There, shopkeepers sold produce that they bought from the farmers or from the *dorfs geyers* [literally "village goers", that is, peddlers] who travelled to the outlying farms and traded with the peasants. The *dorfs geyer* sold to the peasants ironware and other prefabricated goods and took in-trade their surplus produce, chickens, a goose, or a calf, in order to save the peasant a time consuming trip into town on market day. The *dorfs geyers,* in reality a middleman, then resold this produce to the local *targowica* retailers or sold it door to door to his established customers in the *shtetl*. The *targowica* was not open on the Sabbath or on Sundays.

Around Christmas time, *Kolędowcy* [Carollers] from the surrounding villages marched through the main street of our town singing Christmas carols. They were dressed in scarecrow type costumes made of straw that was tied around their bodies, on their arms and legs, and on their head they wore conical hats also made of straw. Frightful masks covered their faces. Many of the *Kolędowcy* carried big wooden clubs decorated with whittled designs. These Christmas Carollers were continuing a ritual that dated back to their pagan past. They looked bizarre and very scary. Also, they were invariably drunk and no Jew dared to be out on the street when the carollers swaggered through town.

On Sundays and on Christian holidays, throngs of peasants from the surrounding villages paraded through the main street of Sławatycze, carrying icons and singing hymns, on their way to attend services at the Catholic or at the Russian Orthodox churches.

Sometimes in such a church parade there was a wedding party with the bridal couple, bedecked in their finery, riding in a horse drawn buggy that was decorated with multicoloured ribbons and with wild flowers.

Also, large parades of pilgrims often walked through Sławatycze singing hymns and carrying the "*Matka Boska",* the miraculous Catholic icon of the nearby town of Kodeń.

When a high Church personage came through Sławatycze, the Rabbi, accompanied by a group of prominent Jews of the town, went out to greet the churchman's entourage with the traditional loaf of bread and salt carried on a silver platter before them.

The town Rabbi prayed in his own *shtybl* and attended the town *shul* only on *Szabbes* and on holidays. He seldom delivered a sermon; this was the function of the itinerant *maggids*. The Rabbi's primary function was to *pasken shajles,* that is, to settle questions of *kaszrut* [kosher-ness] or to render judgement on disputes among the town Jews and also to supervise the flour for the Passover *matzohs*

Many itinerant Jews passed through Sławatycze, some came to collect money for various Jewish causes, and others were *maggids,* the popular begging preachers who travelled from *shtetl* to *shtetl* delivering firebrand sermons, often on contemporary topics.

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2) "*Shenk" is Yiddish for a tavern, from the German "schenke"*

Sztybl / Shtybl – Yiddish for a small house of study and prayer.
Szul / Shul – Yiddish for synagogue.
Szabbes / Shabbes - the Jewish Sabbath.
Pasken szajles - to respond to questions of a religious nature and of *kaszrut* [*kosher*-ness].
Matzoh – the unleavened "bread of affliction" that is eaten during the eight days of Passover.

The Encyclopaedia Judaica defines a *Maggid* as
"...a courageous itinerant preacher, attuned to the mood and the spiritual needs of his public but fearless in criticising them... they continued a tradition of preaching expressly intended for the masses, their sermons contained much social criticism but also provided social guidance. Their preaching was also characterised by the mournful sing-song intonation of their delivery... The Rabbis were suspicious of Maggids as they were suspected of stirring up heretical and critical ideas."

Whole families of *bejtlars*, Jewish beggars and vagabonds, often passed through Sławatycze. It was not that our *shtetl* lacked their own supply of beggars. Being poor was not a great shame as they were in good company. Some families were beggars for generations. The Jewish community fed these itinerants and gave them some money and sometimes they were lodged for a day or two in the *hekdesh* [the poor house] located in the back of the Synagogue. Some of the *ballebatym* [heads of households] took home *an ojrach ojf Shabbes* [a houseguest for the Sabbath].

On *Shabbes* and on the *Yom Tovim* when work is forbidden to Jews, a *Szabbes Goy* [a non Jew performing work for a Jew on *Shabbat*] would come to Jewish homes, especially during the winter months to stoke the fires and to add wood to the stoves and to the *kalach ojwen* [a large, ceramic heating oven]. The *Szabbes Goy* returned during the week to be paid for their work with a few *groshen* [coins] and with some bread for their stoker services.

Even though practically everyone in Sławatycze baked their own *challeh* and bread, there was also a commercial bakery in town. On Friday afternoons many brought their crocks of *tchulent* to the commercial bakery to be placed into the large oven and they picked them up the next day, after the morning prayers, to be eaten for lunch on *Szabbes*. During the week, for those who wanted it, the commercial bakery delivered fresh rolls door-to-door in time for breakfast.

Sławatycze had a communal *matzoh* bakery that was located in a closed-off room at the back of the *Mikvah* [the communal ritual bath]. This bakery was used for the sole purpose of baking *matzohs* for *Pesach* [Passover]. Just before the Passover holiday, the young adults of the town staged a "*Matzoh* Baking Bee".

There was a large wood burning oven, a long zinc-covered table and woven straw baskets for the baked *matzohs* and barrels for water. Flour that was "kosher for Passover" was obtained. The water barrels were filled with the prescribed flowing, spring water. Baking *matzohs* was a busy and frenetic assembly-line affair. Everyone had his or her assigned duties. "Water-boys" scurried around bringing pitchers of water from the water barrel to those who yelled "*Wasser!*" Water was then poured into the mounds of flour that were shaped like a small volcanoes sitting on the zinc tables. Young women mixed the water into the flour with their bare hands and quickly kneaded it into balls of dough. The dough was then quickly passed on to their neighbours who quickly rolled it out into round *matzohs*. Another person on this "*matzoh* assembly line" quickly perforated the rolled out dough with a bundle of forks that were tied together. A timekeeper, with watch in hand, shouted out the minutes that were left of the eighteen minutes that is allotted for each batch of *matzohs*.

The *Shulchan Aruch* [The Code of Jewish Law] stipulates many rules for the matzoh making process, such as:- *The water has to "rest" overnight. No direct sunlight must hit the dough. No matzoh must fold over or touch another matzoh in the oven. From the time when the water is first added to the flour, the kneading of the dough, the rolling out of the matzoh, to the time when the matzohs are taken out of the oven, must not exceed eighteen minutes.* This "18 Minute Matzoh Rule" maintains that, if flour remains wet for more than 18 minutes the natural yeast in the flour would start to ferment, thereby, rendering the *matzohs* not qualified as the "unleavened bread of the affliction", and therefore, not "*Kosher le Pesach*", that is, not fit for consumption on the Passover.

After a proper cleanup of all residue of any dough from the previous batch, the 18 minute frenetic process was started all over again. The communal *matzoh*-bake was a social event where young people met and flirted with each other and giggles and laughter filled the room.

Occasionally, bands of Gypsies passed through our town and they would encamp for a week or two in a nearby wooded area. They travelled in their colourful horse drawn caravans, veritable homes on wheels that housed their large families. The gypsies marched into town playing pipes and drums.

The Gypsy men were swarthy with big black moustaches and wore large gold earrings in their ears, baggy pants and wore embroidered vests over their bare chests. The Gypsy women were clad in long colourful skirts and embroidered blouses. Colourful embroidered shawls were draped over their shoulders. The women wore large golden earrings and many strands of jewellery around their necks and pendants of gold and silver coins hung from their jet-black hair. The Gypsies were mainly makers of jewellery, horse traders, entertainers and menders of pots and pans. They were also fortune-tellers, musicians and suspected horse-thieves.

The Gypsies brought excitement and entertainment to the *shtetl*. The townspeople felt nervous and uneasy about their presence among them. Many looked at the spectacle of these outlandish swarthy people in their colourful costumes from behind their slightly ajar doors or windows. Some more daring individuals could not resist following the Gypsy parade into the marketplace to hear their exotic music and to watch their trained bears and monkeys perform tricks. Some people would drop a few *groszen* [pennies] coins into the tambourines that were passed around the crowd by the pretty Gypsy girls. Mothers held on tightly to their children's hands and we were always admonished not to go near the Gypsies as they could steal us and we would never, ever, see our parents again.

In the summer, the people of Sławatycze went down to the Bug River to swim, to do their laundry and to entertain themselves. The shore on the Sławatycze side was sandy and had a gentle slope, an ideal beach for swimming and for recreation. There were many ox-bows and shallow and warm "pools" that were leftover from the spring floods, an ideal place for kids to splash in and pretend to swim.

The opposite shore of the Bug River had steep, perpendicular cliffs. Sparrows burrowed their nests in these high sand cliffs. The river curved sharply at Sławatycze and the water was deep and treacherous at the opposite shore. There were many whirlpools and undertows there, a grave hazard to unwary swimmers and kayakers. Also, there were large submerged trees trapped under the surface of the water.

Curiously, not too many people in Sławatycze knew how to swim well, and invariably, every summer people drowned in the river. Peasants floated lit candles on the river set onto loaves of bread in the hope that the candles would stop at the place where the drowned person was trapped under the surface of the water.

In the winter young people skated on the many frozen ponds at the river's edge. Skates were home made and consisted of a half-round piece of wood tapered at each end. A thick metal wire was embedded in a groove at the bottom of this wooden skate to act as ice runners. Two lateral holes were burned through the sides though which leather thongs were passed that attached the wooden skate to the boot of the skater. A wooden pole was imbedded in the ice and overnight it became frozen in place. A wagon wheel was put over this vertical shaft and ropes were tied to the rim of the wagon wheel. Holding onto to the other end of the knotted ropes, the young men and women skated round and round the rotating wheel in ever faster and faster circles. When the skaters let go of the rope the centrifugal force propelled them at great speed far over the river ice.

Large log booms, huge rafts of logs lashed together and steered by long oar-like rudders, were floated down the Bug River. A hut was located on top of the log raft to shelter the men operating these rafts on their journey down the river system to the Port city of Gdansk on the Baltic Sea.

Every spring the Bug River was in flood. Sometimes uprooted trees or even houses and barns with squawking chickens perched on the roof, could be seen floating downstream.

In the summer, when the water receded, fish were trapped in the many shallow ponds that formed on the river's floodplain. It was great fun trying to catch a fish with our bare hands. The town's people used pillowcases as nets to catch the trapped fish.

Peasants put out sheaves of flax to ret in the shallow pools that formed at the riverbank. After the flax was sufficiently retted it was beaten with wooden paddles to soften the stalks and separate the useful linen fibres from the woody pulp. During the "idle" winter months the peasant women carded, spun and wove on handlooms these flax fibres into coarse, homespun linen cloth.

In the summer, a Jewish family of rope makers plied their trade on the beach. At one end of the rope the master rope maker paid-out controlled amounts of hemp from a large bundle that he carried in a sack tied around his waist. At the other end of the rope, his apprentice, most often his wife or child, while walking backwards, turned a wooden crank to twist the long threads of the hemp into the first strand of a rope. Two or three of these twisted strands were then intertwined to form the finished rope. It was only in the summer, on

the beach, that the rope makers had the unobstructed room to make the long ropes that were prized by the local peasants.

Lower down from the town, towards the Bug River, a curious phenomenon existed; *ziemlianki* [sod houses] where poor Jews, and also non-Jews, lived. There, I remember seeing many kids with perennial runny noses and *parakhs*, large, infected fungus scabs on their scalps, very much like "cradle cap" on newborn babies, but they were not babies, many of them were adolescents.

The oldest man in Sławatycze, perhaps in Poland at that time, was *Awrejmele der Melamed* [Sznajder or Sznajderman?]. He was a spry old man and whenever he was asked his age he replied "I had my Bar-Mitzvah just three years ago" ; which meant that he was now 13+3 [and plus 100] years old. When Awrejmele died in 1937, or it may have been in 1938, at the patriarchal age of 116 years, many government dignitaries attended his funeral.

To obtain water in Sławatycze, people went to the well located down a steep sandy alley across from the blacksmith's shop. Around the well there was an open wooden structure with a thatch roof. A large cast iron wheel with a handle was cranked to raise the big wooden bucket full of water from the bottom of the well. Or one could go to fetch water from the recently installed *plimp,* the hand operated communal water pump that was located in the *rynek*, the marketplace. Often people hired a *wassertreiger* [a water carrier] to bring water to their house, especially on Thursdays, which was washday. The favoured *wassertreiger* in Sławatycze was *der meshugener* Duwedl [Crazy Davidl].

Meshugener Duwedl was a short, stocky, muscular man who carried water in two large wooden buckets slung from *chromosly* [a wooden yoke] that he carried across his broad shoulders. All summer long, and way into the early snows, Duwedl went barefoot, trudging through the *blotes,* the deep mud of the Sławatycze main street and alleys. *Meshugener* Duwedl may have been the town idiot, but he was also a gentleman, the town gossip, and a savant. Pretty women he charged less for his labours. By going into many homes he was in the ideal position to be the propagator of the town gossip. Duwedl knew which young lady kissed which young man behind which fence and he eagerly shared this information in exchange for other such similar juicy titbits of gossip. Duwedl had a beautiful singing voice and he sang cantoral chants and also the latest modern ballads while he worked or at any time when requested to sing a particular song or Hebrew prayer. *Meshugener* Duwedl's unmatched skill lay in his ability to make complicated calculations to determine on what day of the week anyone's birthday would fall or a particular *Yom Tov* [holy day] would fall years from now on the Hebrew calendar and also on the *goyishe* calendar.

Meshugener Duwedl was one of the best swimmers in Sławatycze. He could tread water indefinitely and he knew where the treacherous undertows in the river were, and at which point the Bug River could be forded by wagons or crossed on foot from Sławatycze to the Domaczów side of the Bug. Only one other person in Sławatycze had such skills. Mojsze *fun die bud* was an old man and, as his nickname implied, he was the attendant at the communal bathhouse, the *bud.* During the First World War the Germans used him to guide their horse-drawn artillery and their foot soldiers across the Bug River.

In the summer of 1940 the Germans asked for their former Bug River guide by name and politely asked him to again show them the location of the safe wagon fords from Sławatycze to the other side of the river, now in the Soviet occupied part of Poland. *Meshugener* Duwedl volunteered to come along too, as he also had these special skills. Duwedl and the old man both waded across the river indicating where the safe wagon fords were located and, as requested by the Germans, they easily swam out to indicate where the deepest parts of the river were located. On their return swim back to the Sławatycze shore, the German soldiers amused themselves by using the two bobbing heads for target practice. Both *der Meshugener* Duwedl and the old *bud* attendant, Mojsze *fun die bud,* died in the river that they knew so well and loved so much.

In Sławatycze homes, water was kept in wooden barrels in the kitchen and it was scooped out with large wooden dippers or ladles. A barrel was also kept outside, under the downspout from the roof gutters so as to collect rainwater which was softer than the water from the well or from the pump and was therefore favoured for doing the laundry. As part of the weekly washday process, the underwear and bed linens were boiled in large zinc basins that were set on top of the kitchen stove. After being rinsed in a barrel with rainwater, the linens were hung outside to dry. In the winter, when the frozen wash was taken off the line, the 'long johns' looked like cardboard cut-outs of headless people.

In the summer, weather permitting, the laundry was taken to the Bug River to be washed. After wetting the laundry in the river, it was laid on a smooth rock and rubbed with large, chunky, yellow soap and the wash was then twisted into a thick 'rope' and repeatedly beaten with a flat wooden paddle for the soap to penetrate deep into the fabric. After rinsing in the river, the wash was wrung out by twisting the linens by hand. Sometimes two women would help each other twist their lines; this was the "Sławatycze spin cycle". The wash was then spread on the grass or on the bushes at the river's edge to dry and to be bleached by the sun.

Shirts were ironed by hand with an iron that was heated, not with electricity, as there wasn't any, but by a charcoal fire in a compartment above the base plate of the iron. Bed sheets and pillowcases were taken to a commercial mangle which was operated by a family from their own house. The mangle [pressing] machine consisted of a long wooden frame with many rotating wooden rollers. Two young women fed the customers' bed sheets through the intake rollers while two other, husky women turned a cast iron crank that rotated in unison the interconnected rollers of the mangle. At the far end of the mangle other girls received the laundry from the rollers and folded them into neat packets. The owner of the mangle attended to the customers and collected the money.

I was always fascinated by the activity at the blacksmith's forge. The forge was located down a steep sandy alley across from the old communal well. When one of my *Zejde*'s horses needed to be shod I often accompanied him to Awrejmele *dem Kowal*'s [Awraham the Smith's, indicating that his father had also been a blacksmith]. The two master blacksmiths were tall, muscular men with long black beards. They wore large leather aprons, no shirts, and the sides of their *tallit kattan* [small prayer shawls worn by men and boys under their shirts] were peppered with irregular brown holes, burned out by flying sparks.

To keep the horse calm while it was being shod, a sack was placed over the horse's head and the animal's neck was gently stroked, all the while my *Zejde* murmured soothing words to the animal in *goyish*. [One never spoke or gave commands to a horse, a dog or to any other such animal in Yiddish, except, perhaps when speaking to a kitten. "*Mein shejn ketzele",* "my beautiful kitten", was also used as an endearment to a favourite grandchild.].

I once accompanied my *Zejde* to the *kowal* [blacksmith] to have holes drilled in the handles of our new, all-metal set of cutlery that my father brought back from Warsaw. The holes were to identify them as being for *milchig,* that is, for "dairy use only". The muscular blacksmith's apprentice turned the large flywheel of the drill press while the master smith pulled down on the handle of the rotating drill.

Aside from shoeing horses the blacksmith also made ploughshares, sickles and scythes, steel rims for wagon wheels and wrought-iron hinges and bolts.

A story was told in Slawatycze that during a busy market day in the marketplace there occurred an unfortunate incident. While trying to break up a fight between a rowdy, drunken group of peasants, the town policeman fired his pistol "in the air" and accidentally killed Symche *der Kowal* [Awrejmele dem Kowal's brother-in-law and also his partner] who was working nearby repairing a peasant's wagon wheel. Symche Edelsztejn left a wife and five young daughters.

Potential buyers of horses used the sandy hill in front of the smithy as a testing ground to determine the strength of the horses they intended to buy. Wooden poles were put through the front and rear wheels of a wagon to prevent them from turning. Sacks filled with sand were added to the wagon as ballast to simulate an actual freight load. The speed with which the horse pulled the jammed and loaded wagon up the sandy hill was an indication of its strength and therefore, its market value. Also, potential buyers always looked inside the horse's mouth. I am not quite sure why they did this; perhaps it was to tell age or the health of the animal.

Across the Bug River from Sławatycze was the larger town of Domaczów [sometimes referred to as Domaczewo]. It was part of Poland between the two World Wars. Domaczów was a resort town where pungent pines grew that smelled of turpentine. In Domaczów there were many *pensjonats*, [boarding houses, B&Bs]. Movies were shown there on weekends. My mother's youngest uncle Herszel Rypkowski owned such a *pensjonat* and our family often visited him. It was a vacation place and many city folk came out by train to spend the weekend to walk in the curative, pungent pine groves of Domaczów.

The shore on the Domaczów side of the Bug River consisted of steep sandy cliffs, so to go from Sławatycze to Domaczów, which was right across the Bug River, one had to go North for about four or five kilometres, cross the Bug River over a wooden bridge and then go back south for another four kilometres.

Further north of the bridge there was a *prom* [a ferryboat]. Before the bridge was built in the mid 1930's the ferryboat was the only means for wagons to safely cross the river in order to travel to Domaczów or to go to the small hamlet of Dubica where the nearest train station was located. This manual ferryboat was still in use in 1939.

The *prom* consisted of a large floating platform that was made of logs lashed together with thick rope. The ferryboat was long enough to hold a wagon with its horse still in the span. It had high side rails and on one side there was a long bench for passengers to sit. A thick rope cable was strung between the two shores, high enough to let the log-booms and boats pass underneath it. Two short anchor ropes were attached to each end of the ferryboat and the other end of these anchor ropes was looped over the overhead cable in order to prevent the ferryboat from drifting downstream.

Opposite the passengers' bench there was a high catwalk that consisted of a couple of split logs with rough steps hewn into them. The ferryman used a large wooden club, very much like an oversized baseball bat, to propel the ferry across the river. The club had a slot at its thick end and by placing the slot onto the overhead cable and then pulling hard on the club the ferryman tightened his grip onto the overhead cable and by walking backwards, with his heels dug into the grooves of the catwalk, his body leaning backwards and straining under the heavy burden, the ferryman pulled the *prom* across the river with his sheer, brute force.

Not far from my *Cheder,* [Elementary Hebrew School] and right across the street from the Rabbi's house, there lived a family whose particular tragic story I heard retold many times. It seems that in the late 1920s one of their four daughters, a Jewish beauty by the name of Tajbele Mojsze-Bereche's, fell in love with a young gentile policeman. Tajbele decided to convert to the Catholic faith in order to be able to marry her Polish beau. On the Sunday of her *shmad* [conversion] and marriage, Catholics from Sławatycze and from the surrounding areas paraded in a long procession down the main street of Sławatycze to the Catholic Church carrying icons before them and singing hymns. The young bride, dressed in the best of Polish peasant woman's finery, was driven in an open carriage that was pulled by a white horse handsomely caparisoned with bright ribbons. The young girl sat erect, and with a defiant smirk waved from her carriage to the townspeople. Her poor, distraught parents followed the carriage, crying and screaming and beating their heads to a bloody pulp on the sides of the wagon, pleading with their daughter not to go through with this woeful deed. They could not dissuade their daughter from her defiant intentions of conversion and marriage to the young Polish policeman.

After this shameful tragedy, the girl's family secluded themselves and never went out of their house. Her three sisters never married, neither did their cousins in the nearby town; as no one would marry them. Her only brother left town, no one knew to where. I remember my friends and I peered through the cracks in their very high plank fence to try to catch a glimpse of this reclusive family.

The *Shtetl* Rabbi, *Reb*' Szyja Karpel, and his wife did not have any children. The Torah counsels us to "be fruitful and multiply" and after ten years of childless marriage it is obligatory of all good Jews to divorce their barren wives and to remarry. The Rabbi and the *rebbetzin* [Rabbi's wife] amicably drove together in the same wagon to the nearby town of Kodeń for an audience with the saintly *Kodner Rebbe.* As it is prescribed, in front of the Rebbe's *Beth Din,* [a Rabbinical court of three rabbis] the *Sławatyczer* Rabbi handed his wife a *get,* a Bill of Divorcement.

Soon after the divorce the Rabbi married his former wife's younger sister. After another eight or so years into his second marriage, the second *rebbetzin* was also not conceiving. By now the Rabbi had become fond of his young second wife and not wanting to have to "set her aside" too, he decided that they adopt a child. So, they adopted the youngest of the three daughters of the Rabbi's second wife's older sister.

A story was often told of a poor *Sławatyczer* tailor, who had a wife and many children. One evening he went out to close the window shutters of his house, as was his usual habit, *und er is nelem gevoren* [he mysteriously disappeared]. It was thought that he might have been killed by the *Endekes* [a Polish Nationalist Party know as the *Endecija*] and thrown into the Bug River. Two years later the poor woman received a letter from *Amerikeh.* Inside the envelope was her *"get"* sent to her from New York by her missing husband. This woman was lucky. Had her missing husband not sent her a *get,* [a Bill of Divorcement], which is the

unilateral prerogative of the Jewish husband, the poor woman would have remained an *agunah*[3] and not be able to remarry for the rest of her life.

In the early 1930's the Sławatycze Jewish community decided that the town should have a Jewish doctor. At that time, the only doctor in Sławatycze was an elderly Pole. So they advertised in a Jewish newspaper in Warsaw for a young, [Jewish] doctor to open a practice in Sławatycze. A young, single, Jewish doctor by the name of Dr.Wortman, did respond and he set up his medical practice in Sławatycze. To the great disappointment of many of the local belles, the young doctor married a girl from Warsaw and brought her to Sławatycze. The doctor's house became the focus of a new circle of Sławatycze *inteligencija* and many literary soirées were held at his house. Soon afterwards a lending library-for-pay was established. More and more people were now able to read and had became more and more secularized.

There was no dentist in Sławatycze. The two barbers, including anyone with a pair of pliers, pulled teeth. Those who could afford the expense, travelled to Warsaw for dentures.

The Sławatycze policeman, Stanisław Funk, was a friendly giant of a man; he seemed to be two metres tall. To the Jewish kids he spoke Yiddish. He patrolled Sławatycze on a bicycle that looked rather puny when compared to his physical size. On the weekly market day Constable Funk was in his glory, he was the 'cock of the walk'. Should a peasant have one drink too many or get rowdy, Funk used what was known locally as "Funk's *sposób"*, that is, "Funk's Method". The "Method" consisted of Constable Funk grabbing the rowdy peasant by the back of the neck and with the other hand he grabbed the poor fellow by the back of his pants and squeezed tight. Whatever the peasant had in the front of his pants hurt like hell. Practically lifting the rowdy's feet off the ground, Funk marched him off to the Sławatycze *koza*, the "goat", as the local "lock-up" was called. Stanisław Funk was very friendly to the Jewish population and the Jewish merchants generously reciprocated his kindness, especially when he caught them selling on Sundays through the back door of their store. The Sunday-closing-laws were a great hardship to Jewish merchants as they were closed for two days of the week, on *Shabbat* and on Sundays, whereas Polish merchants kept closed on Sunday only.

Der shuster [the cobbler] Srul Kapitańczyk was always referred to by his nickname of *Bortnik*. He had spent a couple of years in the U.S.A. and then came back to Sławatycze with enough money to marry off his daughters and also to lend money *ojf protsent* [on percentage, i.e., interest]. Srul *Bortnik* would amuse his few customers with his 'magic' matches that he brought back from *Amerikeh*. He could light these magic matches by just waving his thumb over them or by wiping his hand on the back of his *Amerikaner* pants that he always wore; those blue ones, the ones with the copper rivets.

Srul *Bortnik* was a skilled cobbler but his real talent lay in that he could give any person or animal '*a gut ojg'* with his large, popping eyes. [It literally means "a good eye" in Yiddish but, actually, the opposite is meant, that is, *"the evil eye"*", a curse or a hex.] Pregnant women and mothers with pretty children avoided going past his house lest he gives them *a gut ojg*.

Even the *goyim* knew and feared his powers. When a peasant bought a calf or a colt in the Sławatycze market he would go roundabout to get out of town in order to avoid passing in front of Srul *Bortnik*'s house. Sometimes the peasant threw a blanket over the calf or the horse's head so that Srul *Bortnik* could not make direct eye contact with the animal and jinx it.

For an antidote for *a gut ojg* one went to the *machashejfa* [the witch], an old woman who, for a fee, would remove the effects of a *"a gut ojg"* or place her own hex or curse on a client's rival. She also sold magic charms and amulets to be worn around the neck for long lasting effects of warding off the evil eye. Such were their magic powers.

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3) *Agunah; a married woman who is separated from her husband and who cannot remarry because she cannot obtain a divorce from her husband due to his wilful refusal to deliver a get, or because it is unknown whether the husband is still alive. – [Source: Encyclopaedia Judaica)*

Life in Sławatycze was defined by the *Yom Tovim* [Jewish Holidays]:

Purim was a fun holiday, celebrated in February or March as a festival and carnival.*Purim* commemorates the rescue of the Jews of Persia from Haman's plot to exterminate them. The beautiful Queen Esther, who was Jewish, and her uncle Mordechai miraculously saved their co-religionists and the wicked Haman and his sons were hanged from the gallows that Haman had erected to dispatch Mordechai and the other Jews.

One of the customs of *Purim* is the exchanging of gifts of food, referred to as *Shallach Ha'Manot,* with relatives and friends. The gifts are usually *Haman Tashen* [Haman's pockets] the three-cornered sweet pastry filled with prunes or poppy seeds. Children were dispatched to deliver family's gifts that were wrapped in linen napkins or in small straw baskets. The recipients of these gifts rewarded us with candies or some *groszen* [pennies].

On the eve and on the day of *Purim,* the *Megillah,* [the scroll of The Book Esther] is read in the synagogues. During the reading whenever the name of Haman was uttered, the people would boo and the children would spin ratchety noisemakers called *gregars*.

There was always a *Purim* masquerade and a *Purim shpiel* [allegorical play] put on by the Sławatycze amateur theatre group. During the *Purim* carnival children and adults dressed up in colourful costumes representing characters from the story of *Purim* such as Esther, Mordechai, King Ahasuerus, and of course Haman with his three-cornered pockets and paraded down Włodawska Street, the main street of Sławatycze. The Jewish members of the Sławatycze volunteer fire brigade actively participated in this festival and marched down the main street in colourful costumes. Many dressed up to represent various biblical and also contemporary characters. [*Purim* is the only time when an observant Jew can get drunk without any recriminations from his peers or his Rabbi. As a matter of fact, *Hasidim* consider it an obligation to drink on *Purim* "until one cannot tell Mordecai from Haman"]. So my father and his buddies happily indulged in this old *Purim* custom and they all got high on *schnapps.*

Peisach [Passover] followed Purim. *Peisach,* which is celebrated for eight days, was always the happiest time for us kids. It was spring, the end of the fur season, and many Sławatyczers came home from Warsaw to be with their families *oif Peisach.*

Tisha B'Av [the ninth day of the month of Av] is celebrated in the middle of the summer. It is a solemn holiday commemorating the siege and the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians in 586 b.c.e and also the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 c.e. [The expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290 and from Spain in 1492 and many other calamities that befell the Jewish People is said to have occurred on *Tisha B'Av.*] *Tisha B'Av* follows nine days of mourning during which no meat is to be eaten, only dairy. Many of the elders wore old clothes and sat on low mourner's wooden boxes and not on regular chairs.

As solemn as this holiday may have been, boys found merriment by throwing thorny thistles, called *bern* [burrs], at the girls or onto the beards of older men on their way to the synagogue for prayers. The thorns were difficult to remove from the hair and at times whole locks of hair had to be cut off.

Rosh Hashanah and ***Yom Kippur*** are the most solemn holidays on the Jewish calendar. On the eve of *Yom Kippur,* the 'Day of Atonement', young people came to their parents' house to *beiten mechilla* [to ask for forgiveness] for real or imagined transgressions that they may have committed against their parents or their elders during the past year. Friends who had quarrelled reconciled so as not to carry their *broigez* [quarrel] into the New-Year. All outstanding loans were repaid before each *Yom Kippur.*

A more extreme and bizarre form of repentance was carried out when a repentant prostrated himself at the entrance to the *shul* [synagogue] and people stepped on him 'in punishment' as they entered the *shul* for the *Kol Nidre* prayers.

Sukkot, also known as the Festival of Tabernacles or the Feast of Booths, is a thanksgiving holiday that comes less than a week after *Yom Kippur*. During the entire week of *Sukkot meals were eaten in a sukkah* [a primitive, temporary structure or booth roofed with branches].

Simchat Torah, the festival celebrating the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai comes right after *Sukkot*. At the synagogue adults carried Torah scrolls in a procession around the central *Bimah* [stage] while children

carried their home made Torah flags that had an apple stuck on top of the flagstick and a lit candle was stuck in a hole on top of the apple.

Chanukah, the eight-day festival of lights that usually falls in December, commemorates the victory of the Maccabees over the Assyrians in 167 b.c.e. and the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem. Chanukah, a happy holiday, is observed with games and gifts to the children. It is customary for parents and grandparents to give the children Chanukah *gelt,* small gifts of cash in the form of new shiny coins. For eight days we lit the Chanukah candles and played spin-the-*dreydl* [a four sided spindle-top] and gambled for pennies or for buttons. We ate delicious, potato *latkes* [potato pancakes fried in oil] and *hillnikhes* [the same as potato pancakes, but thicker and the size of the entire frying pan] that were permeated with oil. The eating of oily foods on Chanukah is in commemoration of the one-day's supply of holy oil that was found in the cleansed Temple and which burned for eight days.

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Before *die Yomim Noruim*, that is, before *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, the people started fattening geese for *Chanukah* by force-feeding them *kliskelach*, dumplings made from a thick, coarse gruel which was a mixture of hand-milled rye, potato peels and any other available food scraps. The geese were held between the legs, their beaks were pried open wide and a dumpling was put into their mouths. Their beaks were then held shut so that the geese were forced to swallow the *kliskele.* If the geese were sated and would not swallow, the outside of their long necks was massaged to guide the dumpling down their throats, thus forcing them to swallow.

The soft, fluffy down was plucked from the underbelly of the live geese. The down re-grew within a month or two and it was plucked for a second time after the geese were slaughtered.

The geese soon got so fat that they could hardly walk. The *shohet* [ritual slaughterer] came to my grandfather's back yard and slaughtered his geese. The goose fat was removed and rendered with onions into delicious *genzene schmaltz* and *grivennes* [rendered goose fat and cracklings]. Large crocks of this much prized goose schmaltz and also chicken schmaltz were kept in the cellar for year-round use. A piece of rye bread *schmiered* with rendered *schmaltz* was a snack that was handed to a kid who was then sent outside to play. The enlarged livers from these force-fed geese made delicious chopped liver.

Sixty five years after eating my *Bubbe's genzene grivennes* with shredded black radish is still a vivid taste memory of mine.

I have very warm memories of my great-grandmother, *die elter Bubbe Chana.* All winter long she sat in front of the *kallach oyven* [a large oven covered with ceramic tiles to better radiate the heat] with large zinc basins filled with goose feathers placed before her. She plucked the soft fluffy down from the base of the feathers which she placed in a large basin and discarded the tough pen into a smaller pan. The goose down was used to stuff pillows, and of course, to stuff those large, comfortable *pierzyny* or *perrinnes* [feather beds, duvets].

For those who suffered from headaches *piaſkes* [leeches] were applied to each of their temples and, after having gorged themselves full of blood, the leeches dropped off the temples under their own bloated weight. It was a form of 'blood-letting', commonly used as a relief of headaches and to counter the effects of high blood pressure.

During the winter months children often suffered from loss of appetite and anaemia caused by tapeworms. To drive out the tapeworm from their guts mothers fed the children cubes of sugar soaked in awful tasting turpentine. I remember sitting on a *nacht top* [chamber pot] and feeling the long flat tape-like worm come out of my *tush.* The worm must have been getting out of me to escape that foul smelling turpentine. We were not allowed to touch the worm as it was coming out of us lest we tear it. Should the tapeworm's head be left inside, it would re-grow its body inside our gut and we would have to start all over again with this unpleasant remedy.

A sure cure for a sore throat or a hacking cough was to drink a *gogel mogel,* a thick, overly sweet concoction of raw egg yolks, sugar, honey and hot milk.

The cure for a cold or an achy back was the application of *bankes* [cupping]. This consisted of six or eight small "shot size" glasses usually in the shape of tiny chamber pots that were applied to the achy back. Before applying the *bankes,* the back was first lightly greased with chicken schmaltz. A twig, with a bit of cotton on one end was dipped in Vodka and lit. For a brief second or two the flame was put inside of the

cupping glass that was held upside down with the other hand. The *banke* was then quickly applied to the patient's back and its beneficial effects became immediately evident. The skin of the back puckered up into the vacuum of the *banke* and formed a round, purple hickey. After ten or fifteen minutes the *bankes* were removed and the patient felt infinitely better.

Jewish weddings in Sławatycze were a community affair. They were generally held outdoors under the *chuppah* [the wedding canopy] and anyone could attend the wedding ceremony. Cake and wine, and also herring was provided for the town 'guests'. There were beggars and *shnorrers* [bums and freeloaders] galore, from our own town and also from the surrounding area. How they knew about the upcoming weddings is a mystery, as the *shtetl* weddings were not announced in the social columns; as there weren't any social columns.

The bride's parents would send out the *Shammes* [the synagogue beadle and caretaker] to invite *die chusheve gest* [the worthy guests] to attend the wedding feast that was generally held inside the house. In the last few years, before the outbreak of the war, some *moderneh* people in Sławatycze had the *Shammes* deliver to the worthy guests fancy wedding invitations that were printed in the big city, generally in Warsaw.

A horse drawn wagon full of *klezmer* would drive into town playing popular wedding tunes in order to announce their arrival. The whole town ran out into the street to hear the music.

A *badchan*, sometimes part of the *klezmer* group, was engaged to enliven the festivity and entertain the wedding guests. The *badchan* must have been the progenitor of our modern day stand-up comics. With funny verse and in comic singsong he would lampoon everybody and heap comic 'praise' on the bride and on the *machuteynim*, [in-laws], recite their many 'attributes' and bemoan the bride's upcoming loss of her youth and her 'innocence', that is, her virginity. He also listed the wedding gifts, lampooning the donors, stopping just short of insult.

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> *The dramatic increase in the Jewish population in the Pale of Settlement since the late 1700s was due to a lower infantile mortality rate than that of their rural Christian neighbours. This was primarily due to better sanitation and easier access to medical help. From 1800 to 1900, the Jewish population in the Pale of Settlement increased six-fold. This overcrowding and lack of work was the driving force for the emigration out of the Pale in the late 1880s and early 1900s. The displacement of the Jewish population during World War I, the Depression years, the infamous "Numerus Clausus" and the boycott of Jewish shops further devastated the economy of the Jews of Poland. Large families, poverty and economic marginalization of the Jews was the major impetus for their emigration out of Poland.* [4]

The Province of Lublin, in which Sławatycze was located, was one of the most economically backward areas in Poland. Life in Sławatycze was rather harsh and many people were destitute. Most people in the *shtetl* led a hand-to-mouth existence. Spring was the cruellest time of all. The food that they may have laid-in in their cellars during the autumn, such as potatoes, cabbages, sour pickles and turnips, was getting scarce or was rotten by now and nothing had as yet come out of the fields or the backyard gardens. The next potato crop would not be harvested until the middle of August. Any spare food would be given to poor relatives.

There was little work in our *shtetl* and many of the young people left our *shtetl* to seek work in the larger cities, especially in the capital city of Warsaw. People from the provinces were not allowed to live in Warsaw without residence permits, but many did live and work there illegally. They would rent a room from a *Warszawer* family and worked and slept in the same room. There was an oft told story that lodging space in Warsaw was so scarce that people from the provinces often rented a kitchen table as a place to sleep. The table was available to them only after evening tea was finished until just before breakfast.

Many Polish Jews went to England, to the USA, Canada, Argentina and to Australia. A substantial number of Jews went to Palestine and many went to the new "Promised Land" of Biro-Bidzhan in Soviet Russia. Some, even after having emigrated to the USA, Argentina and Palestine went from there to Biro-Bidzhan.

At the turn of the century some members of the Gochbaum family, [later Hochbaum and Orbaum] the Frydmans [later Freedman] and Szuchmachers [who later became Shulman and also Cohen], went to

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[4] *From a lecture by Prof. Gershon David Hundert of the Judaic Studies Department McGill University given at the International Jewish Genealogy Conference in New York City, 1998*

England. In the 1920s the Epelbaum brothers [later Applebaum] and their sister Chaja Bakalinsky and her family emigrated to Winnipeg, Canada. Dobe Repkowska left Sławatycze in 1929 to join her two uncles; Meir and Aron Światlość [later Sweet] in Montreal. In the 1930s emigration of Jews to the United States and Canada became restricted and some of the Sławatycze youth, such as the brothers Berl & Isak Lerer and the poet and writer Luba Waserman went to the new 'Promised Land' of Biro-Bidzhan which was located in the Eastern extremity of the Soviet Union; near Mongolia. Of those who stayed behind, many lived in penury with no prospect to improve their lives.

After the death in 1935 of the benevolent dictator, Marshal Jósef Piłsudski, Poland was turning more and more into a semi-fascist state. Anti-Semitism had an official stamp of approval from the Polish Catholic Church, whose head, Cardinal Chłond, once pronounced that "We have three and a half million Jews in Poland, three million too many." The Prime Minister of Poland, General Składkowski, stated: "I will not allow people to beat-up or kill Jews, but economic boycott, *"owszem"* [certainly, why not?]. Jews who had assumed Polish first names, that is, Polish 'Christian' names, had to revert to their official 'Jewish' names, such as; Jakób had to revert to Jankiel and Michał back to Meir.

The Communist Party, to which many Jews belonged primarily because of its promise of freedom and equality to all, was declared illegal in Poland and their political activities were severely restricted and offenders punished with torture and long prison terms. The *Narodowa Demokracia* [NDK], the ultra nationalist party of Poland, known as *Endecija* [*Endekes* in Yiddish], mimicked the activities of the other National Socialist Party, the Nazi Party of Germany, and marched through the streets of our town with their walking sticks that they often used to club Jews while shouting *"Żydy do Palestyny"* ["Kikes to Palestine", equivalent to "*Jüden Raus*" or "Jews Get Out"]

Polish Peasant organisations set up buying co-operatives to squeeze out the traditional Jewish middleman. Demonstrations and street fights became common. Jewish militant rightist organisations, such as the '*Betar*', of which the late Israeli Prime Minister Menahem Begin was a leader, often marched through the streets of Sławatycze in their brown shirts and their 'Sam Brown' leather belts with cross-shoulder straps, looking to avenge the beating of their members by the NDK [Endekes].

The *Numerus Clausus* [Closed Numbers], originally instituted under the Tsars, was reinstated by the Polish Universities as a quasi-legal means of limiting the number of Jewish students in the institutions of higher learning. In the late 1930s separate benches were set aside for Jewish students in the back of the classrooms. This policy drastically reduced the number of Jewish students in the secondary schools and universities from 24.6% of the population in 1922 to 13.2% in 1936. Technically, the Jews in Poland were equal citizens but they were not employed in the civil service, few Jews were teachers in the state schools except in the Galicia area of Poland. They were not employed in state owned banks, nor in the state monopolies such as the manufacturing and distribution of tobacco and salt.

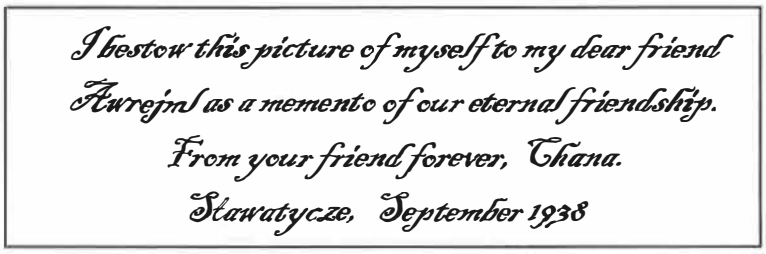
Biro-Bidzhan, which was officially known as the *Yevreyskaya Avtonomnaya Oblast* [The Jewish Autonomous Region] of the Soviet Union, is located in the Soviet Far East, near the city of Khabarovsk and borders the Amur River and Manchuria. It was the furthest that Stalin could get the Jewish *Cosmopolitans* away from the major cities of the Soviet Union. For those Jews active in the *Yevsektsiya*, the Jewish Section of the Communist Party, Biro-Bidzhan seemed to be an ideological alternative to Zionism. There, Yiddish was spoken and was taught in the schools alongside with Russian and where the street signs and railway signs were in Yiddish. Jewish immigration to this Yiddish "Promised Land" began in the late 1920s, not only from within the Soviet Union but also from other countries. [Resource: Encyclopaedia Judaica]

As a *"farbrente Komunistkeh"* [a firebrand Communist], Breindl Gitelman went to Biro-Bidzhan in 1932 to join her beau, Isak Lerer, known as *Itche der Kempfer* [Isaac the Fighter], who had previously emigrated from Poland to Argentina and then to Biro-Bidzhan. The Sławatycze native, the poet Luba Waserman, went to Palestine in the late 1920s and then, in 1934 she emigrated from the "Ancient Promised Land" to the "New Promised Land" of Biro-Bidzhan. The harsh climate, swamps, insects and insufficient housing plus Stalin's purges of 1936-38 drastically reduced the Jewish population of Biro-Bidzhan.

When people left Sławatycze to go to America, England, Canada, South America or to other remote parts of the world, they had themselves photographed together with their friends. There was no photographer

in Sławatycze and one had to be brought in from Włodawa for such assignments. Everyone dressed up in his or her holiday clothes, or in borrowed clothes, for the photo session.

Friends presented their pictures to each other and inscribed on the back of the photographs with flowery messages in Yiddish or in Polish, such as;



Contrary to what is portrayed in many photo exhibitions of Polish Jews in the 1920s and 1930s such as those taken by Roman Wiszniak who photographed only 'photogenic' Jews in beards carrying baskets or sacks on their shoulders, from these old family pictures from the 1920s and 1930s taken in Sławatycze one can see that our grandmothers did wear *shaytels,* the traditional wigs that were worn by older, orthodox women, but the younger, single and also married women wore their hair long or in the then fashionable 'page-boy' style. The young men posed in bare heads, wore shirts and ties and had no *payes* [side curls] nor beards.

* * *

In the mid 1930s Nazi Germany began expelling all Jews who were born in Poland back to Poland and, before long, Poland closed their borders to these Jews from Germany. Jewish refugees from Germany began streaming through Sławatycze. Jews in Poland, especially Shtetl Jews, who never bothered to register their births now rushed to prove their Polish birth in order to obtain their *Dowód Osobisty* [Identity Cards] as proof of their Polish citizenship.

During my return visit to Sławatycze in October, 2001 I was able to obtain from the registry office copies of the birth certificates of many members of my family. My mother's 'Akt Urodzienia' [Act of Birth, birth certificate] was registered in 1937 even though she was born on March 8, 1903. Her personal Dowód Osobisty, which she kept on her throughout her wanderings in life, is also dated as having been registered in 1937. My grandfather's birth certificate, dated November 10, 1937, states that he was born on February 10, 1880. Curiously, this document also states that "... the 77 year old widow Chana Repkowska, née Światłość, in front of witnesses presented her 57 years old son who was born to her and her late husband Szepsel Repkowski at the hour of five in the morning on February 10, 1880 and that due to her late husband's negligence their son was not registered at the time when he was born". [5]

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[5] Editor's Notes: -

According to Prof. Jerzy Tomaszewski of the University of Warsaw who specializes in the history of the Jews of Poland, it was common practice among Jews in Tsarist Russia and in Poland to delay the registration of the birth of their second and subsequent sons so as to avoid them being drafted into the Tsarist army for 10, 15 and even 25 years. Firstborn sons were exempt form serving in the Tsarist Army.

Professor Tomaszewski gives another reason for "...the late looking for personal documents in a Jewish family at the end of 1930's is that the documents were needed when the family wanted to emigrate and it seems that nobody was interested to have them earlier. I suppose that the average dweller in a village, particularly in the Eastern provinces, or in a small town [shtetl), did not travel, had no conflict with the law and was well known to local people [and civil servants) did not need to bother with such trifles."

During the summer of 1939 there seemed to be a lot of nervous activity going on in Sławatycze. Groups of people were milling about in the market place and in the streets exchanging rumours about the unreasonable ultimatums that Nazi Germany was issuing to Poland and of the imminence of war.

People gathered around the only radio in Sławatycze. The owner of the radio listened on his earphones [there were no loudspeakers on the battery-operated radio] to foreign news broadcasts and repeated out loud the essence of the broadcast to the crowd around him.

For the past year there were a number of Jewish refugees from Germany that passed through our town. Of course, few could comprehend what was happening to Jews in Nazi Germany or what was about to happen to us too.

On September 1st, 1939 the Germans launched their "*Blitz Krieg*" [Lightening Attack] on Poland without any declaration of war. World War II had broken out.

On September 3rd Britain and France declared war on Germany in response to the attack on Poland. The Polish Army was outnumbered, outgunned and outmanoeuvred. The Polish Airforce, no match for the Luftwaffe, ordered its planes flown out of the country to England, France and to Hungary in order to save the planes from certain destruction and to be able to fight another day. There was little resistance to the German attack except around the capital city Warsaw, near the city of Lwów. The vaunted Polish Cavalry was no match against the German Panzers. Within one week the Germans took most of western Poland.

On September 17th the Soviets attacked Poland from the east. The Polish army did not put up any opposition to the Soviet invasion. By the end of the month the Polish capital, Warsaw, fell to the German invaders.

On September 28th, in accordance with their secret "Non-Aggression Pact", also known as the "Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact", Germany and Soviet Russia partitioned Poland between them. Under this Pact, the Germans occupied the western part of Poland and Soviets annexed the eastern part of Poland, that which primarily lies east of the Bug River. To this day it still forms part of Russia, or what are now the independent republics of the Ukraine and Belarus. [Belorussia].

By October 5th, 1939 sovereign Poland was, once again, no more.

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Chapter 4

■

The Annihilation of the Jewish Community of Slawatycze During the Shoah

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by

Michał Grynberg

Translated from Polish by Maria Chmielewska-Szlajfer, Warsaw, Poland.

The history of the destruction of the Jewish community of Sławatycze during the German occupation of Poland [1939 – 1945] is described below on the basis of the archives of the District Commission for the Study of Nazi Crimes kept in Lublin.

In the years 1967-1972 the Commission heard 25 residents of Sławatycze, among them were Stefan Osipowicz [OKL, file no. DS47/70], Stefan Panek [OKL, file no. DS20/67], Konstanty Proniewicz [OKL, file nos. DS42/70 and DS45/70] who had provided valuable information to which reference is made in this text. In addition, in the 1970s the author visited Sławatycze several times. During his talks with town residents he was able to obtain much additional information. Valuable information was obtained from Jan Hałas, a pre-war teacher in the local primary school. The author also went to Biała Podlaska to visit Jan Samulak the onetime priest of the Sławatycze parish, and the Krzymowski family who lived in Sławatycze and hid the Jewess Chaja Szuchmacher during the war.

Chaja was a daughter of Mendel Szuchmacher, a private teacher. The last deportation of the Sławatycze Jews was carried out in September 1942, they were brought to the ghetto in Międzyrzec Podlaski [*Mezrytsh*] and included the Szuchmacher family. Before the Jews were brought to Międzyrzec Podlaski from several surrounding villages and then taken to the extermination camp in Treblinka, Chaja, at the urging of her mother, disguised herself as a peasant woman, with a hoe in hand, returned to Sławatycze on foot. There, she went to the Krzymowskis, with whom her family was on friendly terms, to ask for help.

In 1975 the author visited the Krzymowski family who at that time lived in Biała Podlaska. Mrs. Krzymowska told him about the meeting with Chaja. "Well, one afternoon Chaja turned up in our place. We were quite taken aback as everybody knew there were no more Jews in Sławatycze. Chaja sat down and said, "Mrs. Krzymowska, you now have three options; you can kill me, deliver me to the Germans or you can hide me. I will not move away from here." We were rather perturbed. Everybody in town knew that hiding Jews was punishable by death of the entire family. Even in church, during the service, a gendarme standing by the pulpit, compelled Father Samulak to tell the faithful about such orders of the occupation authorities. In spite of this, on reflection, our family decided that we will hide Chaja. And so it was."

The Krzymowski household, which was located in the Liszna settlement, was a bit distant from the town. Chaja's hiding-place was cleverly arranged. The place where the oven stood was made wider, but one entered that hiding-place from the attic. During the inevitable searches, fortunately, Chaja was not found. Thus, thanks to the Krzymowski family, Chaja lived to see the liberation.

After the war, together with the others who had survived in Sławatycze, Chaja emigrated to the United States. Reportedly, she became very ill after her tragic experience during the war in Poland.

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Chapter 5

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The First Victims in the Town

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by

Michał Grynberg

Translated from Polish by Maria Chmielewska-Szlajfer, Warsaw, Poland

The burning of the synagogue in Sławatycze was one of the first acts of German terror against the Jewish population. According to the eyewitness accounts it took place in January of 1940. Several days after they burnt down the synagogue, the Nazis launched their sinister plan of the annihilation of the entire Jewish population of Sławatycze, which was part of their vast programme of the so-called Final Solution.

[After the attack on Poland by Nazi Germany on September 1st and the withdrawal of the Polish military and civil authorities from Sławatycze, a number of leftist Jews formed a self defence group known as "The Workers' Guard" who patrolled the streets of Slawatycze wearing red armbands and carrying weapons that they obtained by disarming the local policemen. On September 17th Poland was invaded from the east by Soviet Russia and they entered Sławatycze ahead of their German allies. The Soviets stayed in Sławatycze for about two weeks before withdrawing east across the Bug River which then became the dividing line between the Soviet and the German parts of occupied Poland. The Workers' Guard welcomed the Soviets with a defilade carrying red banners. After the withdrawal of the Soviets from Sławatycze the Germans entered the town.] The Germans then arrested a group of Jews who were pointed out by the locals as having been part of the Workers' Guard. All of them were murdered there and then. Mosze Guszkes [Engelman], in whose place the guard had its headquarters, was also killed. It is impossible to establish the names of the other victims. The execution was carried out by a special SS group. Jankiel Repkowski was made to cart their bodies to the Jewish cemetery where they were buried.

It wasn't long before the German and Ukrainian policemen selected their next victims. Once a month, on Mondays, a market fair was usually held in Sławatycze. That tradition lingered on at the beginning of the Nazi occupation. On market day, several gendarmes came to the *Judenrat* demanding that on the next day, 20 Jews should come to do certain work. Needless to say, they didn't say what kind of work it was to be. A tumult arose in town. People felt that something horrible was bound to happen but no one could imagine what was actually about to occur. At 8 o'clock the next morning, when in the *Judenrat* office there were already 20 Jews gathered, the German gendarmes, Ukrainian and Polish policemen began, according to a list they made in advance, taking out other Jews from their homes and to hold them in the German headquarters. Also, at that time, the 20 Jews gathered by the *Judenrat* were, under the eye of Ukrainian policemen, digging a large pit in the Jewish cemetery — which was to become a common grave.

There are two versions of the death of the first group of the Sławatycze Jews. One version was by the children who survived and has been confirmed by the town dwellers who were in Domaczów [on the Soviet side] at the time. According to them, once the market fair ended, the Germans gathered a large group of Jews and escorted them to the police headquarters on Kodeńska St. Next, they began rounding up Jews wherever they could in order to have the planned number of 50 individuals. Rochel-Lea, the milkmaid, who had just come to the police headquarters to pay a fine, also fell victim to the Nazis. When the Germans, who are famous for their scrupulousness, saw that they were one person short, they added Rachel-Lea to the group of the condemned. This way the milkmaid attained the honour to depart this life in the company of the town Rabbi and other Jews of Sławatycze to whom she delivered milk every morning.

The execution of the Jews was carried out at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, in February 1940 on the premises of Konstanty Proniewicz on Kodeńska St. The District Commission for the Studies of the Nazi

Crimes in Lublin comes up with another version. It corroborates the time and place of the execution, and argues that the murder of the Jews had a character of a "provocation", and that more than 50 people were killed. The witnesses to the execution were Sławatycze dwellers, including Konstanty Proniewicz and a neighbour of his, Zdzisław Dojczman. Proniewicz's account reads, in part: "I watched the Nazis take the people out of the police headquarters [the building of the pre-war primary school] and line them up, seven persons in each of the 12 rows. Among those rounded up was also a woman. All of them were taken to the field a certain distance away from the buildings, where they were all shot." A few days later, the press informed that in Sławatycze a large number of Jews froze to death during a work assignment.

Sławatycze was not an exception. At the same time the Nazis committed similar and even bigger mass murders in other towns and villages of the Lublin region and elsewhere in Poland.

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A List of Some of the Surnames or Forenames of Jews Murdered in Sławatycze in February of 1940 [1]

Domaczewski, [no forename given]
Engelman, Szyja plus three of his sons
Engelman, Załmen plus three of his sons
Erlich, [no forename given]
Feldman, [no forename given]
Fiszman, [no forename given]
Flaksbard, Abram
Flaksbard, son of Abram
Flaksbard, Uszer
Frydman, [no forename given]
Gitelman, Mosze and a son
Gitelman, Srul and a son
Goldewajg, Mosze
Karpel, Jeshua Menachem, the town Rabbi
Kofman, [no forename given] the *mohel* [circumciser]
Lederman, Meir
Moncarz, [no forename given]
Rochel-Lea, [the milkmaid, no surname given] [2]
Rozenblum, [no forename given]
Repkowski, Jankiel
Repkowski, Szaja, [son of Jankiel]
Soroka, [no forename given]
Zynger, Szlomo

The only one who was able to save himself from that massacre was Szymon Pachter who, during the executions, hid himself under the corpses.

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1) AŻIH, set of files AJDC, No. 245, card 25.
2) Editor's Note: *According to Zvi [Herszel) Sztyrmer now living in Israel, Rochel-Lea's family name was "Sztyrmer" and her married name was "Solnyk".*

Chapter 6

■

A Series of Individual Murders

■

by

Michał Grynberg

Translated from Polish by Maria Chmielewska-Szlajfer, Warsaw, Poland

One has to take note of the unprovoked homicides committed in broad daylight by the Nazis, the Ukrainian Fascists and the Polish policemen. After the slaughter of about a hundred Jews in Sławatycze in early 1940 a relative, short-lived, moratorium set in. On the basis of eye witness accounts submitted to the District Commission for the Studies of the Nazi Crimes in Lublin, and of the author's conversations with Sławatycze residents, it was possible to establish the course of individual murders committed between February 1940 and May 1942, and of the second mass murder during which the Nazis brutally slaughtered about 600 Jews in the town within three days. There were many more individual executions than those which we shall discuss below. Witnesses gave their accounts many years after these dramatic events, and it is no wonder then that they simply forgot many of the tragedies.

In the winter of 1940 [the exact date has not been established] and in broad daylight Jurkiw, the commanding officer of the Fascist Ukrainian police, shot the Jewish tailor Partszewiak, his wife, two of his sons, his daughter and also his son-in-law. They were murdered in front of their own house.

Before the war, *der meszugener* Duwedl [Crazy Duwedl] was the town attraction. As a matter of fact, one can hardly imagine Sławatycze without Duwedl. He was the town water carrier. When *der meszugener* Duwedl carried his two wooden buckets of water from the well to his clients in the mornings, his beautiful singing woke up the local late sleepers. He was sort of part of the town panorama. Sometimes even the Germans were amused when, drawing water from the water pump in the market place, he was singing religious or lay songs in his magnificent baritone voice. According to witness accounts, before the Nazi invasion of Soviet Russia in 1941, the Germans were measuring the depth of the Bug River at different places in order to find a shallow ford across the river. At the beginning of May 1941, they took *meszugener* Duwedl to the river near Awrum *dem Kowal*'s [Awrum the Smith's] smithy and told him to try to cross the river singing. Duwedl presumably realized that this was to be his last song. In a quavering voice he intoned the beautiful song of the *Kol Nidre*. Germans and other people gathered on the bank to listen to his singing. When Duwedl was close to the opposite shore, the German, after making bets whose shot would be more accurate, began shooting at him. They did not aim at his head. They probably thought that such death would be too easy, and their fun would not last long enough, so, shrieking and cheering, they aimed at his body. Duwedl stopped singing and began crying out, "Help! Jews, help me!" After a number of the shots hit him and with a heartrending cry of "*Shma Israel*" [Hear O Israel], Duwedl disappeared under the water.

Lajbele *Masze's* [I do not remember his surname], who had an inn in the market place before the war, died in a similar way. He was a traditionally clad Jew, with a beautiful, black beard. There were always a lot of patrons in his inn. On market day his place was packed. Lajbele was the innkeeper, the waiter and when necessary, he was also the bouncer. Tall and broad-shouldered, he observed the behaviour of his customers carefully, and when one of them became excessively sprightly and seeking to pick a quarrel, Lajbele in no

time chucked him out of his place. One day in May of 1941, two gendarmes rode up to his house on a motorcycle. They took him; he was clad only in his underwear, and made him get into the sidecar. They then quickly set out across the market place to where the local ritual bath [*mikveh*] was located near the Bug River. There they ordered him to "walk across the river". Lajbele, like many other Sławatycze dwellers, knew where the water was deep and where one could ford the river safely.

When Lajbele was close to the opposite bank, and the water reached up to his neck, those standing on the river bank about 200 metres away could see the black hair on his head shining in the morning sun. Just then the gendarmes used his head as their target and shot Lajbele. Lajbele disappeared under the water and he was not seen again.

Efraim *Poleszuk* [Waserman] was a decent, modest Jew. The town regarded him as a taciturn person. The Poleszuk family had been living at Sławatycze for several hundred years. Efraim was living in the Polish neighbourhood on Włodawska St., away from his kinsmen. His old, dilapidated house stood right beside the road and there was a canal over which there was a wooden bridge. When looking at Efraim's hut, one had the impression that before long it would slide down into the water. Fortunately, at the bank of the canal there grew a big old willow tree, which seemed to be preventing his hut from sliding down into the canal.

The *Poleszukes* engaged primarily in trade and Efraim was also an artisan. Their small house, occupied by six people, also accommodated a carding shop. Local peasants brought raw sheep's wool to Efraim who carded it in preparation for further processing. His wife and children helped him with that work. It is worth noting here that Efraim's children were the founders of the youth movement in Sławatycze.

Thirty-one years later, Jan Mironowicz testified before the District Commission for the Studies of the Nazi Crimes in Lublin, what he saw happen one April day in 1942. He recalled a German gendarme bringing to the market place a frightened old Jew who had been living on Włodawska St. where he had a carding shop. In the market place, the gendarme freed Efraim and told him to go back home. The surprised Jew, prepared for death rather than for the recovery of his freedom, looked back at the German and then he received a hard blow from a hobnailed boot. Then, crying with pain, Efraim managed to run about 20 paces when one heard a gunshot. Efraim fell and lay there, dead.

Ester, Henia, where are you now? If you ever have the chance to read these words, light a Yarzeit candle in memory of your father Efraim who died at the hands of a Nazi butcher at the intersection of the Market Place and Włodawska St., in front of Abram Domaczewski's house, between the 15th and 20th of April, 1942, as witnessed by dozens of people.

At the same time Mendel *der Kacew* [the butcher] and his son Bucze died an awful death. German gendarmes, assisted by Ukrainian policemen, hung them in their butcher shop on the same hooks on which Mendel and Bucze had hung slabs of meat.

Not far from Mendel's house, the policeman Józef Cychoracki killed Jankiel Paluch, Mendel's son-in-law. The witness, Stanisław Osipowicz, said that more or less at the same time Icchak Waserman and a Jewish doctor from Vienna were killed in the presence of several dozen town's people.

Chaim-Joel Fidelman survived several operations involving the murder of the Jews in Sławatycze. Each time he managed to escape uninjured. From the accounts of Sławatycze dwellers and Jewish children saved from the Holocaust, it seems that Chaim-Joel made clothes for the Germans and therefore he was rather useful to them. When the Germans were planning an operation, they took him to their headquarters, and then let him out when it was over.

However, on a particular day in June of 1942, several Ukrainian policemen, led by their commanding officer Jurkiw, broke into Chaim-Joel's house and ordered him to get out. In front of the same fence where, before the war, people would gather to listen to him play his violin, the Ukrainian thugs shot Chaim-Joel. At the sound of the shots his wife Tyla with their two-year-old baby in her arms, darted out from their house. When she saw what had happened, she started wailing with grief. Jurkiw laughed and said, "Why are you crying, Jewess, I only frightened him, he's alive, touch him, you'll see!" When Tyla bent over her husband who was lying prostated on the ground, the Ukrainian policeman Jurkiw shot her and the baby too. All three of them, Chaim-Joel, his wife and their two-years-old daughter were now lying in the street beside their fence. Two other children of the Fidelmans' were at home then. They sensed that they should not go out into

the street to see what had happened to their parents, so they ran out of the back door and from there to the nearby rye fields. Town residents said that at that time the rye stalks were tall enough to hide them. The two girls survived and left Poland at the end of the war.

The records of the District Commission for the Studies of the Nazi Crimes in Lublin also contain an account by Stefan Osipowicz, a Sławatycze resident, who witnessed that tragedy. He knew that the saved children of the Fidelmans had then been six and eight years old, and that they had been hidden by local Poles.

—§—

Chapter 7

■

The Last Stages of the Annihilation of the Jews of Sławatycze

■

by

Michał Grynberg

Translated from Polish by Maria Chmielewska-Szlajfer, Warsaw, Poland

By May 1942 there were 1,502 Jews in Sławatycze [1] including local Jews as well as resettled Jews from nearby villages and other localities. People in Sławatycze heard the news of the annihilation of the Jews in Biała Podlaska and in the Lublin area. The extermination camps in Bełżec, in the Majdanek district of Lublin, in Treblinka and in Sobibór were already in operation.

The removal of the Jews from Sławatycze to Międzyrzec Podlaski took place at the end of June of 1942. The Sławatycze Jews were realizing that they were nearing the end of their lives. One day, at the end of June 1942, to the Sławatycze *Judenrat* came gendarmes from Wisznice [a town about 20 km away from Sławatycze], the seat of the branch of the District Gendarmerie of Biała Podlaska. They had orders to transport the Jews to the Międzyrzec Podlaski ghetto. They instructed the *Judenrat* to gather on the following day all the Jews of Sławatycze into the market place. The majority adhered to the instructions; some ran away to the nearby fields. They probably wanted to run farther, to the Parczew woods, where it was easier to hide. However, they did not succeed because the Nazi gendarmes, the Ukrainian and Polish police were quick to block their escape routes.

The murder campaign lasted three days. Both the Jews who had remained in the town as well as those hiding in the fields were all murdered. Then, suddenly, the murder campaign came to a halt as if they feared damaging the rye crops.

According to the town dwellers Stanisław Panek, Mikołaj Sobczak and others who gave their testimony to the District Commission for the Studies of the Nazi Crimes in Lublin, about 1,000 people perished during those three bloody days. Jan Hałas with whom this author talked with in Sławatycze in 1975 and who corroborated the story of this *Aktion* by the Nazis, reckoned the number of those murdered to be about 600.

Sławatycze residents such as Antoni Hryciuk, Alfons Parczewski, Władysław Parczewski and the others whom the town administrator [*sołtys*] had selected to do the job, carted the corpses of the murdered Jews to the Jewish cemetery. The victims were buried in a mass grave, about 100 m long, that had been prepared in advance.

Following that campaign of genocide, the Nazis burnt down all the houses around the town market place [which mostly belonged to Jews]. About another 1,000 Jews who had survived this last *Aktion* were moved to one street [called Pielwaki] which was turned into a ghetto.

In his testimony to the OKL District Commission for Lublin, Stanisław Panek who had lived nearby [before the war] said that from the side of the market place, the street had not been fenced off but guards had kept a 24-hour constant watch there, whereas on the southern side, where the street had abutted onto fields, a barbed wire fence separated the houses that were inhabited by Poles [Stanisław Panek among them]. Further on, about 700 m – 800 m away, was the highway to Wisznice. The interlude between the campaign of murdering about 600 Jews and the ultimate elimination of the survivors was short.

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[1] *Voivodship State Archives in Lublin. Governor's Office, sign. 893, item 18, p. 134.*

At the end of September 1942, the Nazis brought 100 horse-drawn wagons from the nearby villages to the Sławatycze market place. German gendarmes and Ukrainian and Polish policemen went around to the houses in the so-called ghetto and ordered the residents to take with them their hand luggage and to immediately report to the market place. The Nazis instructed women and children to mount the wagons while the men were to take off their shoes, put them in the wagons and walk behind the wagons in groups of four wide. Armed gendarmes and police closed in on the procession.

In this manner the last of the Sławatycze Jews started out on their journey to their death. According to one version, they were taken to Międzyrzec Podlaski, according to another – to a concentration camp located in Wisznice, from where they were soon to be taken to Międzyrzec, and then, together with other Jews from the local ghetto, they were taken to the Tremblinka extermination camp.

At this point we must recall one more tragic occurrence which took place during that sad passage to the extermination camps. Well before the war there were plans to repair several kilometres of the road from Sławatycze to Wisznice and to Międzyrzec Podlaski. On both sides of the road gravel had been unloaded in preparation of the repairs to the road. The Nazis ordered gravel to be strewn onto the road and to be walked on by the barefoot Jews. The end of that march was catastrophic. The several-kilometre long stretch of the road was stained with the blood of the last of the Sławatycze Jews marching to their death. Those who were weakened and could not walk further were shot on the spot.

From information available at the OKL archives it appears that the Nazis were anxious to bring the smallest possible number of Jews to the Wisznice camp which had an inadequate capacity. Those who did reach Wisznice at the time were soon transported to the Międzyrzec Podlaski ghetto.

Such was the tragic end of the several-centuries-long history of the Jewish population of our *Shtetl* Sławatycze nad Bugiem.

—§—

Miejscowość Sławatycze Powiat Biała Podlaska Okręg Lubelski
Stacja kol. Chołyczów Poczta przez Mosdawę Adres ul Rynek

Wpłynęło dnia 29 LIP 1941
L 8395
Załącz...

SPRAWOZDANIE

za czas od 1. IX. 1939 do 31.V.1941

1) Ilość Żydów: przed wojną	1600	obecnie 1329	wg spisu urzędowego
kupców i handlarzy	82	2	z danych szacunkowych
rzemieśln.	110	39	
robotników	65	215	
wolne zawody	5	14	
bez zajęcia	15	22	

2) Liczba ubiegających się o pomoc 670 korzystających z pomocy 445.

3) Jaka instytucja (instytucje) zajmują się opieką społeczną? do 15.XI.40 zajmowała się opieką Rada Żydowska wpm, a od 15.XI.40 specjalnie ustanowiona Delegatura Ż.S.S.

4) Kto udzielił subwencji pieniężnej i w jakiej wysokości? Rada Żydowska dysponowała sumą zł 20.500 pol. Jan 1.500 zł Czuba i 900 zł od JOK-Żeń Delegatura Ż.S.S. od 15.XI.40 otrzymała 2000 zł od Prezydium Ż.S.

Jakie otrzymano dary, od kogo i ile? Od Joint. i Prezydium ŻSS. otrzymano: odzież bieliznę, obuwie, oraz produkty jak słodycze, mąkę, tłuszcz, mięso, soczewicę, mąkę i inne

5) W jakiej formie udzielono pomocy podopiecznym? a) Kuchnia ludowa wydająca obiady 1445 b) Rozdział produktów suchych. c) zapomogi pieniężne d) Pomoc lekarska.

6) Czy istnieje szpital, ambulatorium? Nie kto zarządza? — ilość przyjęt. chorych —

7) Kto zajmuje się opieką n/dzieckiem? Delegatura ŻSS n/emerytami — n/inwalid. —

8) Ilość Żydów zatrudn. w obozach pracy 85 a) w gminie — b) poza gminą 85 do maja 941

9) Jakie kwoty wydatkowano na ten cel? 1220 zł.

10) Ilość rzemieślników prowadzących swoje warsztaty pracy 24 jakie zawody przeważają? Zawód szewski, krawiecki i kuśnierski

11) Ile jest czynnych przedsiębiorstw żydowskich? 2 wart. 5 000 zł

12) Wpływy na opiekę społeczną zł 30155 gr 50 Wydatki zł 29757 gr 60

z jakich źródeł pokrywano wydatki z subwencji Joint. Prezydium ŻSS. dotacji Rady Żydowskiej wpm, z dochodów na miejscu, opłat podopiecznych. —

Czy istnieją nadzwyczajne dochody na opiekę społeczną i jakie? Nie

13) Jakie środki żywn. otrzymują Żydzi w mniejszych ilościach i o ile? cebulę, mydło, cukier od 100-200 % mniej

Jakich wogóle nie otrzymują? Wszystkie inne, prócz wyżej wymienionych

ŻYDOWSKI INSTYTUT HISTORYCZNY
Instytut Naukowo-Badawczy
ARCHIWUM
al. Tomackie 3/5, 00-090 Warszawa
tel. 827-92-21, telefax 827-83-72

ZGODNE Z ORYGINAŁEM
Sygn. akt Jus/ŻSS 776/90
Warszawa, dnia 14.2.1996

English translation of this document is on following page

[Town] Miejscowosc Sławatycze [district] Powiat Biała Podlaska [Area] Okręg Lubelski
Stacja kol. Chołyłów Poczta przez Włodawę Adres ul. Rynek
[Railway Station] [Post] through Włodawa

Wpłynęło dnia 29 LIP 1941
L 8395
Załatwiono

[REPORT] SPRAWOZDANIE
[From the time of] za czas od 1. IX. 1939 do 31.7.1941

1] Number of Jews: before the war 1600 presently 1329 acc. to the official census

merchants & shopkeepers	"	82	"	2	" to estimated data
tradesmen	"	110	"	39	
workmen	"	65	"	215	
free professions	"	5	"	14	
without occupation	"	15	"	22	

2] Number who are seeking help 670 number receiving help 445

3] Which institution[s] provide social assistance? Until 15. IX. 40 special assistance was provided by the Jewish Council and from 15.XI.40 by a specially constituted Prezydium of the Z.S.S.

4] Who gave monetary subventions and how much? The Jewish Council had at its disposal the sum of 20.500 zl. from the "JOINT", 1.500 zl. from the "Centos", 900 zl. from the "JOZ" - however, the Prezydium of the Z.S.S. since 15. XI. 40 received 2000 zl. from the Jewish Council Z.S.S.

Which donations had been received from whom and for how much? From the "JOINT" and the Prezydium Z.SS. were received: clothing, bed linens, shoes and products such as herring, fat, meat, flour, matzah and other such products.

5] In what way was help given to the needy? A] Soup kitchen B] distribution of dry products C] grants of money for immediate needs D] medical aid

6] Does a hospital or an infirmary exist? NO Who is in charge? — Number of admissions —

7] Who is responsible for the care of children? Council Z.SS Retired people — Invalids —

8] How many Jews work in Labor Camps? 85. a] in the district? —
b] outside of the district 85 in 1941

9] How much money was spent for this purpose? 1200 zl. in 1941.

10] How many tradesmen operate their own workshops? 24 Which trades are predominant? Shoemakers, tailors and furriers.

11] How many Jewish businesses are in operation? 2 employing 5 people

12] Income for social assistance? zl 30155 gr 50. Expenses zl 29757 gr. 60

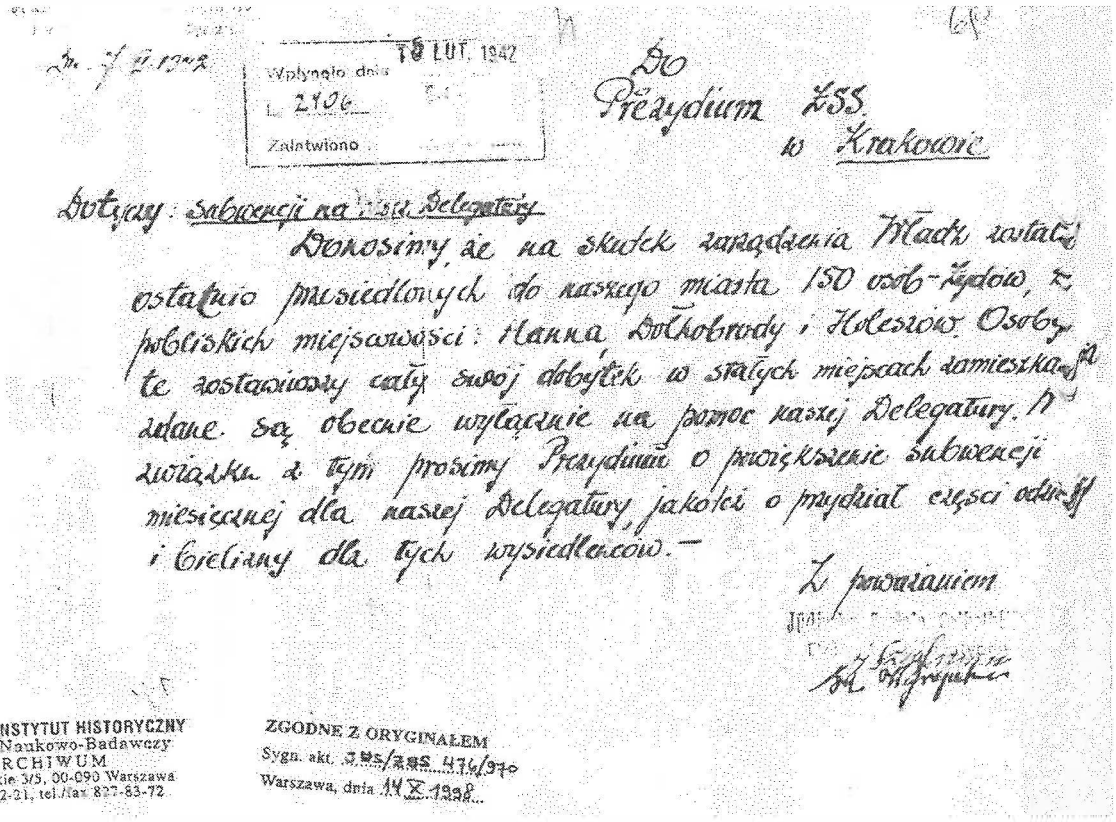
From which resources are the expenses covered? from subventions, from the "JOINT", Prezydium Z.SS, donations from the Jewish Council, local collections and payment by the recipients of assistance.

Does any extraordinary income exist for social assistance and what kind? NO.

13] Which produce do Jews receive in smaller quantity and by how much? Bread, soap, sugar from 100% - 200% less.

Which produce do they not get at all? Everything else except those mentioned above.

The English translation of the two Polish documents appearing on the previous and on the following pages is by Ruta Westreich, Montreal, Canada



Dn. 7. II. 1942

Wpłynęło dnia 10 LUT. 1942
L. 2406
Załatwiono

Do
Prezydium ŻSS.
w Krakowie

Dotyczy: zabezpieczenia na miejsc. Delegatury

Donosimy, że na skutek zarządzenia Władz zostało ostatnio miejscowych do naszego miasta 150 osób-Żydów, z pobliskich miejscowości: Hanna, Dołhobrody i Holeszów. Osoby te zostawiwszy cały swój dobytek w stałych miejscach zamieszkania zdane są obecnie wyłącznie na pomoc naszej Delegatury. W związku z tym prosimy Prezydium o przyznanie zabezpieczenia miesięcznej dla naszej Delegatury, jakoteż o przydział części odzieży i bielizny dla tych wysiedleńców.-

Z poważaniem

WSKI INSTYTUT HISTORYCZNY
Instytut Naukowo-Badawczy
ARCHIWUM
Tłomackie 3/5, 00-090 Warszawa
tel. 827-92-21, tel./fax 827-83-72

ZGODNE Z ORYGINAŁEM
Sygn. akt. 295/288 476/970
Warszawa, dnia 14 X 1998

The above document [1], dated February 7, 1942 issued by the Sławatycze Jüdenrat is addressed to the Jewish Presidium of Krakow. It reads as follows :-

Arrived the day of **10 Feb. 1942**
L. **2406**
Responded: .....

Day 7. II. 1942

To the Presidium ZSS
of Krakow

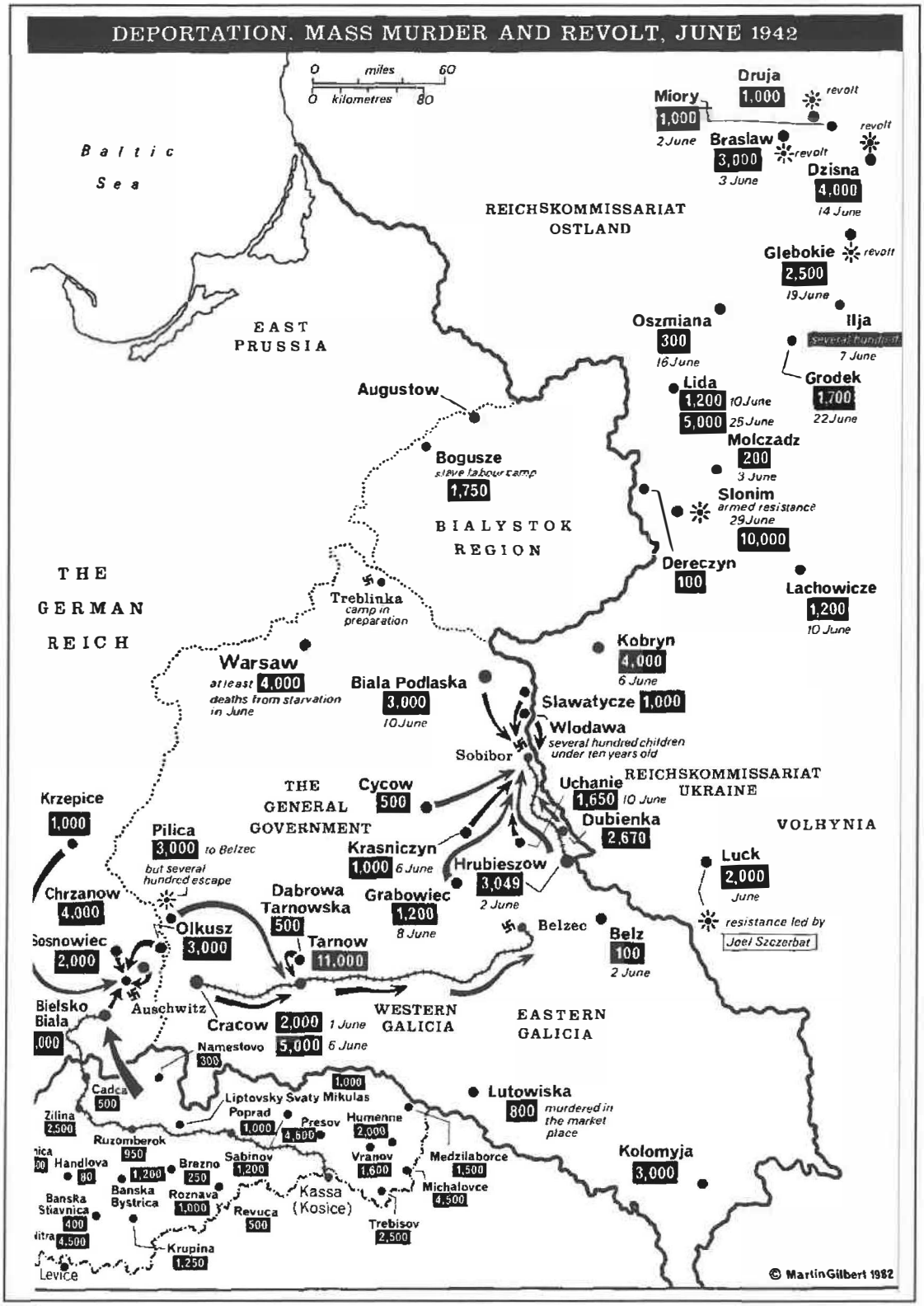
Subject: Subsidies for our Committee

We are hereby confirming that on the orders of the Authorities, recently, there have been resettled to our town 150 person-Jews, from the nearby communities of: Hanna, Dolhobrod and Holeszow. These people, after having left all their belongings in their domiciles, are presently totally dependent on the help from our Committee. We are, therefore, requesting the Presidium to increase the monthly subvention for our Committee and also for an allotment of clothing and bed linen for these displaced [persons].

With respect
Jüdisches [???]
[???] Sławatycze
[Signed] ? Szyfman ? Wejngarten

---

[1] Editor's Note: *Copies of these two documents issued by the Sławatycze Jüdenrat in July of 1941 and in February of 1942 were obtained at the* **ŻYDOWSKI INSTYTUT HISTORYCZNY** *[The Jewish Historical Institute of Warsaw) during my meetings at the Institute with Dr. Michał Grynberg in October of 1998.*



MAP OF DEPORTATION, MASS MURDER AND REVOLT IN EASTERN POLAND, JUNE, 1942.
Page 105 of the "Atlas of the Holocaust" by Martin Gilbert

PART II

■

Old Photographs and Historical Documents

■



The Sławatycze *Rynek* [Market Square], circa 1900.
Note the *blote* [mud] and the two Churches in the background



v

The Sławatycze *Mikvah* [ritual bath]. The Bug River can be seen in the background.
Photo taken by Michał Grynberg, August 1972.



The old Sławatycze *studnia, die brineh* [the well] located opposite the old smithy on the way to the Bug River. This picture was taken in October of 1998. We were told at the Sławatycze library that this well is over 200 years old and that it is now a Protected National Monument.



The Sławatycze flour and grits mill. It is now a protected national monument



The Bug River is in the background as viewed from the Sławatycze shore. In the forefront are the famous *"sadzawki"*, the shallow water pools left by the Bug during flood time and where we children would splash around and learned to swim and where the women washed their laundry.
This picture was taken in October 1998.





The two Sławatycze churches. On the left is the *Prawosławny Cerkiew* [Russian Orthodox Church] and on the right is the Polish Catholic *Kościoł* [church]. These photos were taken in October, 1998.



A typical old Sławatycze house made of squared logs, except that it is now provided with electricity. The bathroom is still the outhouse in the back yard.



A house on the outskirts of Sławatycze that still has a thatched [straw] roof. This house is now a "protected national monument".

These two photos were taken in October 1998



The Lerer family of Sławatycze in in about 1904.
L-R Chawele [b.1900) is standing next to her Bube *die fiszerke* [the fishmonger) and Zayde Lerer. Standing are: Lybe Frydman / Lerer and her husband Joszua Lerer. Their son Berl [b 902) is on horseback. Lybe's and Joszua's other children are: Isak [b. 1906), Esther [b.1909), Chaim-Szulem [b.1913) and Fryma [b.1917)



On the right is Me'er Światlość of Hanna. On the left is probably his older brother Zalman. This photo was taken in the early 1900's before Me'er [later Myer Sweet) emigrated to Canada. Note the suave attire, the dress-up suits, the walking canes and the gold chains.



Symcha Edelsztejn served five years in the Czarist Army. In June of 1924, Symcha *der Kowal* [Symcha the Smith), then only 36 years old, was accidentally killed in the Sławatycze *rynek* [the marketplace) by a stray bullet fired by the town policeman attempting to stop a brawl by a group of drunken peasants. Symcha left a widow and 5 young daughters.



Joe Cohen [formerly Yosef ben Yosef Szuchmacher) was born in Sławatycze in 1895 and emigrated to England in the early 1900s to join his Sławatycze uncle and cousins who preceded him to Leeds, England. During the First World War, Joe was inducted into the British Army and served with the Jewish Legion in Palestine under General Allenby. He was wounded in battle and His Majesty's Government awarded Joe Cohen the British War Medal and the Victory Medal, each inscribed with his name.

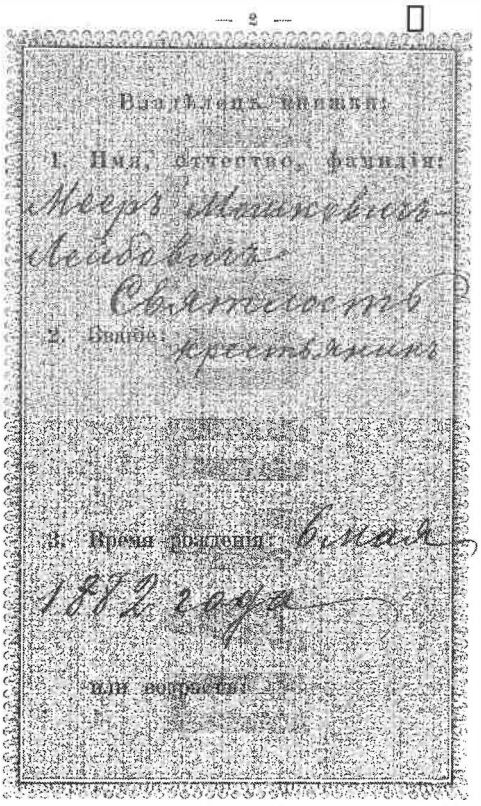


ПАСПОРТНАЯ КНИЖКА.

Безсрочная

Выдана Сидлецкою Губернскою Управою

Цѣна книжки 15 копѣекъ.



— 2 —

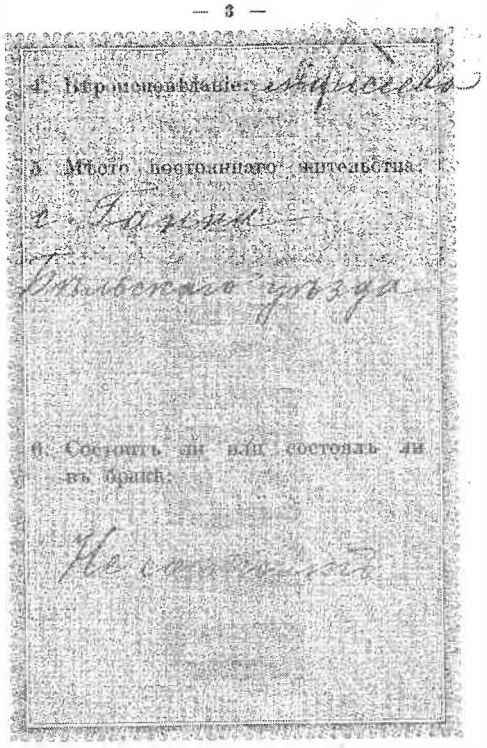
1. Имя, отчество, фамилія:

Меер Мошкович Лейбович Свѣтлость

2. Званіе: крестьянинъ

3. Время рожденія: 6 мая 1882 года

или возрастъ:



— 3 —

4. Вѣроисповѣданіе: іудейское

5. Мѣсто постояннаго жительства:

г. Гдѣ уѣздъ

Гродненская губ.

6. Состоитъ ли или состоялъ ли въ браке:

Не состоялъ

This "non return" [exit] passport, dated January 24, 1906, was issued in Sławatycze to "Me'er Moshkowitch Leibowitch Światlość " which Me'er used to emigrate to Canada as a "single" laborer. This passport, written in Russian, states that it is issued to :

1. *Me'er Moshkowitch Leibowitch Światlość*
2. Occupation – *Krestianin* [farm laborer]
3. Born – *6 May, 1882*
4. Faith – *Moise'eva* [Jewish]
5. Born – *v. of Ganna* [village of Hanna], *Brest district*
6. Signature – *illiterate*

On Page 4 [not shown] states that "*Me'er Światlość is single*". At that time Me'er already had a wife and two daughters residing in Domaczewo, across the Bug River from Sławatycze. His wife and his two daughters joined him in Canada a few years later, probably accompanied by his brother Aron.
In Canada, Me'er Światlość became "Myer Sweet".

Myer was the pioneer who helped other members of his family, such as his brother Aron and his wife's family, the Borochows of Domaczewo, to emigrate to Canada. In 1929, his sister Sura-Toba's daughter, Doba Repkowska, joined him in Canada. In 1938 Awrum Repkowski [later Abe Reback], joined his two uncles and his sister Dora [Doba] in Canada. After WW-II, Dora's and Abe's three surviving brothers; Nute, Riwen and Mojsze and their sister Chaja Gitelman and their families were able to join their relatives in Canada.

PERMIT TO LEAVE CANADA

(Schedule B. to Order in Council of May 24, 1917.)

I, Myer Sweet of the Village of Winchester, in the County of Dundas (If town or city give street address) in the Provice of Ontario, Speculator, make oath and do say that I was born at Russia on the day of January, 1880, that I am a (an) Russian (subject) (citizen) by (birth) (naturalization); that I have resided at the above address for four (Length of residence) years, that I am personally known to and refer for indentification to:—

J. W. Flett of Winchester Bank Manager
T. A. Scott of Winchester, Post Master
Geo. C. Hart of Winchester, Police Magistrate
Wm. H. Steinburg of Winchester Chief of Police

that I desire permission to leave Canada to go to Syracuse, N.Y.
for the purpose of visiting friends

that I expect to be absent from Canada for 5 or 6 days (Length of absence)

My height is 5-9¼; my weight is 170
My eyes are Brown; my hair is Black
My occupation is Speculator

The attached photograph is a good likeness of me taken 8 ~~(months)~~ (days) ago.

And I make this solemn declaration conscientiously believing it to be true and correct and knowing that it is of the same force and effect as if made under oath and by virtue of the Canada Evidence Act.



Declared before me at Winchester in the province of Ontario
this 29th day of December 1917.

Meyer Sweet
Signature of Applicant.

Geo. C. Hart
Notary Public, J.P., Commissioner

Canada on or before the 31st day of January, 1918, is granted to Myer Sweet
Canadian Immigration Inspector.

Above is Meer Światłość, now Myer Sweet of Winchester, Ontario,Canada. His "PERMIT TO LEAVE Canada for 5-6 days to travel to Syracuse N.Y to visit friends" was issued in December of 1917. It is certified by four guarantors, including the Bank Manager, the Winchester Post Master, the Winchester Police Magistrate and the Chief of Police who stated that they have known Myer Sweet for "period of about 4 years".

Permit to leave

I have been personally acquainted with the above mentioned applicant for a period of about 4 (years) ~~(months)~~. I recognize the above attached photo as a true likeness of him. I believe the statements which he makes above to be correct and have seen him in my presence attach his signature on the same line on which my own appears.

Meyer Sweet
Signature of Applicant.

T. A. Scott
Signature of Bank Manager, Chief of Police, Clergyman or Dominion Government Officer.

Page 2 Note Myer Sweet's elegant signature indicating that his literacy now differs from that stated in his Russian "Non Return" [exit] passport of 1907 which is shown on the previous page. Also, note Myer's month and year of birth have changed.



Sławatycze 2nd grade 1926? Gitl Edelsztejn [Tova Kaufman] is in the 2nd row, third from right.



n

The entire school of the village of Hanna [8 km from Sławatycze] taken in the mid 1930s.
Chaja Paluch [Haja Rapkowski] in the page-boy haircut, is 3rd from left in 2nd row from the top,.



A group of young Sławatycze labour activists. Photo taken in 1927
1st row L-R: Chaim Zajdefter [survived the war in France], Chana Rotenberg and Josef Erlich.
2nd row L-R: Ester ?, Chana Ginsburg, Aron-Josef Hochbaum, Lea Izak [survived the war in France] and Gitl Ginsburg.
3rd row L-R: Awrum Repkowski, Ester Waserman and Michał Grynberg.



A group of Sławatycze young men belonging to the Betar Zionist Organization, mid 1930s
Mojsze Repkowski is on the right, front row.



Mara-Ruchl Blusztejn / Epelbaum, the widow of Icko-Mejer Epelbaum and her sister Chana-Pesia Blusztejn / Repkowska, the widow of Szepsel Repkowski. Standing in the center is Chana-Pesia's granddaughter Suraleh, [her daughter Tema's daughter].

In 1930 Mara-Ruchl, together with her sons Lejzer and Herszel emigrated to Winnipeg, Canada, there to join her daughter Chaja-Blima [Clara] Bakalinsky and Chaja's family. Her older son Mordechai and her two orphaned granddaughters, Pesl and Bejla Sztejnwercel, also emigrated to Winnipeg.

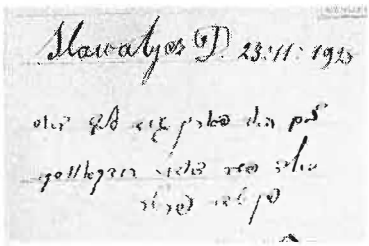
Mara-Ruth Blusztejn / Applebaum died in Winnipeg in 1943.
Chana-Pesia Blusztejn / Repkowska perished in the Shoah.





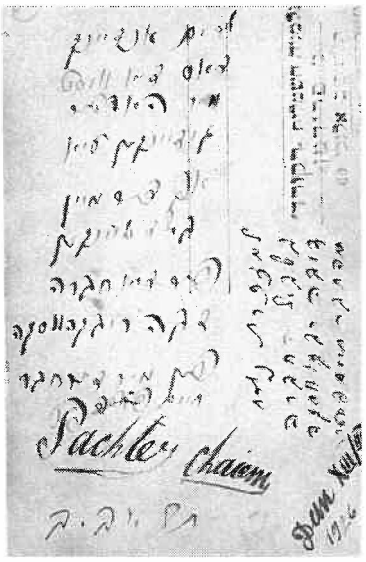
Berta Pachter dedicated her photo in Russian "*For the good and long remembrance I give my photograph to my relative, Chaja Repkowska. From Berta Pachter 19 VI 1924*"





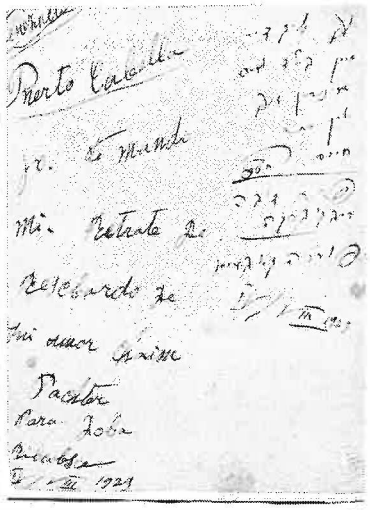
Szewa Pachter dedicated her photo to Dobe Repkowska in Sławatycze on 23:11:1928 before Dobe's departure for Canada





In 1926 Chaim Pachter sent the above photo of himself from Tel-Aviv to Dobe Repkowska in Sławatycze. On the back of this photo Chaim wrote his dedication in Yiddish and in Hebrew.





In 1929 Chaim Pachter sent this photo of himself [on the left] from Venezuela to Dobe Repkowska, who was now in Canada. On the back of the photo Chaim wrote his dedication in Yiddish and in Spanish.



Three Sławatycze young men in a *Purim Szpiel* [a Purim spectacle] in the late 1920's.
On the left is Lazer Epelbaum dressed as a *kolbojnik* [a cowboy] and his younger brother Herszel is on the right, in the sailor's outfit. The man in the center dressed as a Cossack is unidentified.



A group of young men of the Sławatycze soccer teamn in the 1920's. They are obviously dressed in their *Shabbes best* for this photograph. Nute Repkowski is in the top row, second from the left. Aron-Josef Hochbaum is on the right in the top row. The others are unidentified



A group of Sławatycze young men & women during an outing in the countryside, mid 1930s
Breindl Gitelman is 3rd from left, back row. Note the thatched roof in the background.



A group of Sławatyczers and their friends in Warsaw, 1934.
Front row: In the center is Awrum Repkowski [Abe Reback, d. December 1985, Montreal, Canada]
Back row: On the left is Nute Repkowski [Nathan Rapkowski, d. September 1982, Montreal, Canada].
On the right is Michał Grynberg [d. January 2000, Warsaw, Poland].
2nd from right is Michał Fleising from Radzin, Poland, presently residing in Montreal, Canada.
The others are unidentified.



A group of young Sławatyczers, late 1920s Front Row: [Unidentified]
2nd Row: Mordche Epelbaum [Applebaum] [d. 1990, Winnipeg, Canada]
Breindl Gitelman /Lerer [d. 1984, Warsaw, Poland]
Anszel Rotenberg [d. Montreal, Canada]
3rd Row: [centre] Pesl Sztajnwercel / Medved [d. Winnipeg, Canada], niece of Mordche Epelbaum



Starosta Powiatowy Kłodawa
dn. 13. VII. 1934 r.

Karta rzemieślnicza Nr. rej. 19/43/476

wydana na podstawie art. 147 Rozporządzenia Prezydenta Rzplitej z dnia 7.VI.1927 r. (Dz. U. R. P. Nr. 53, poz. 468)
na skutek zgłoszenia
z dnia 26. III. 1934 r.

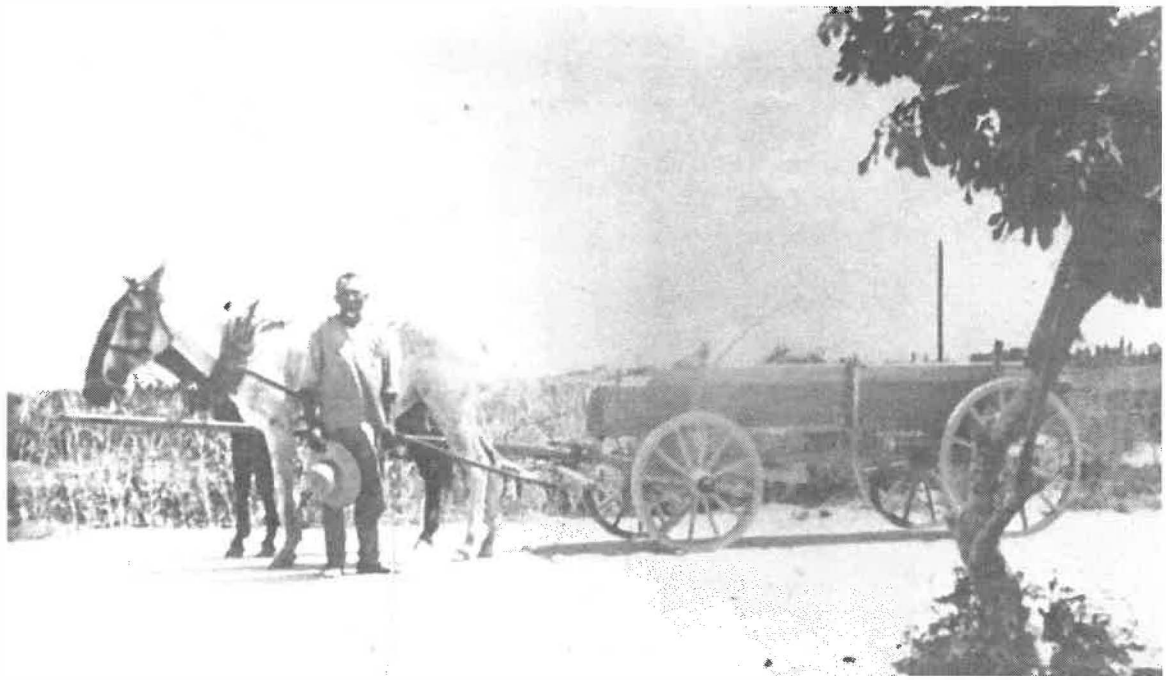
Panu Gitelmanowi Dawidowi Hersz
Obywatelowi polskiemu
urodzonemu dn. 1911 w Sławatyczach
na prowadzenie rzemiosła kuśnierskiego
w (adres) Sławatyczach
przez zastępcę samoistnie
pod firmą jako zwykle

Z Starostwa
Gutkowski

STAROSTWO POWIATOWE WŁODAWSKI

Przemysłowe — Wzór Nr. 61.
Woj. lubelskie — Starostwa.

Trade Permit issued in 1934 to Dawid - Hersz Gitelman qualifying him as a furrier since 1928.



Abraham Ribkovsky is seen carrying on his father's trade in Eretz Israel. He made Aliah in 1922 or 1923. On the back of the photo that he sent to his mother Chana-Pesia in Sławatycze he inscribed: פאלעסטינע [*Palestine*] 1928-7-27. Abraham Ribkovsky died in 1985 in Montreal, Canada.



Dawid–Hersz [Herszel] Gitelman
1st Piłsudski Cavalry Div. 1926



Herszel Epelbaum [Applebaum]
Artillery, 1929



Hershel Applebaum at age 98-1/2
Winnipeg, Canada, August 2004



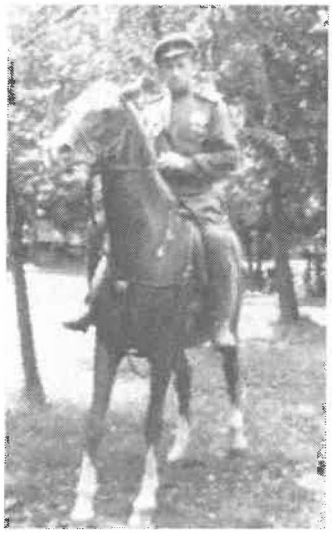
Szaja Repkowski 1930



Akiwa Gitelman 1930



Nute Repkowski [Rapkowski]

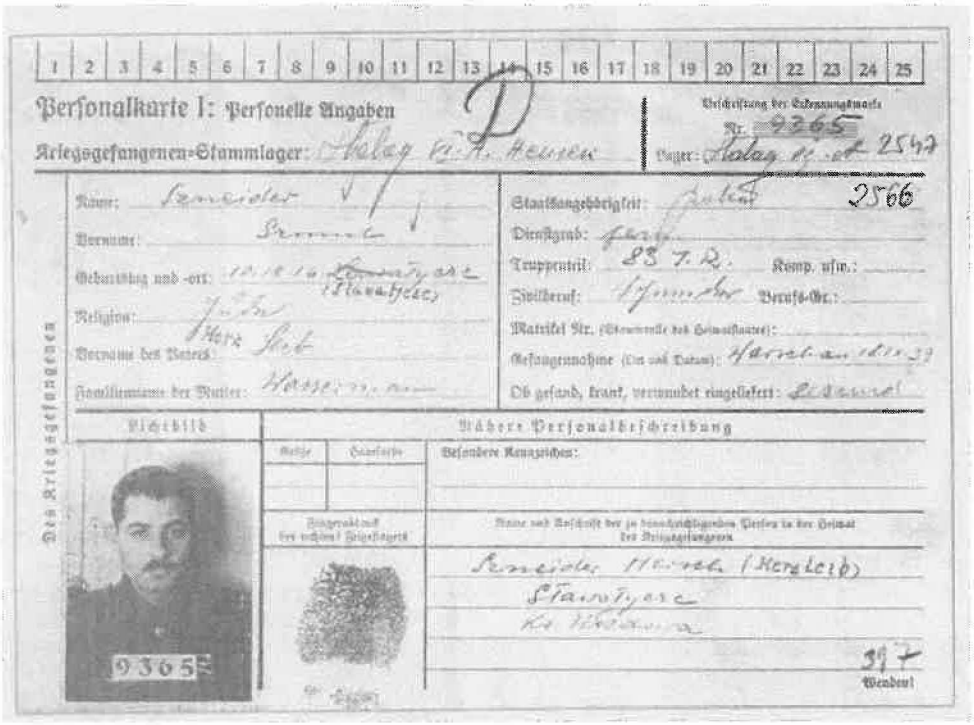




Michał Grynberg served in the Soviet Army during WW II



Abe Reback [Abram Repkowski]
Canadian Army 1944?



Personalkarte I: Personelle Angaben

Kriegsgefangenen-Stammlager: Stalag II A. Hammerstein

Nr. 9365

Lager: Stalag II A 2547

Name: Szmuelder

Vorname: Szmuel

Geburtstag und -ort: 10.10.1[illegible] Sławatycze

Religion: Jüdisch

Vorname des Vaters: Hersz Lejb

Familienname der Mutter: Wasserman

Staatsangehörigkeit: Polen 2566

Dienstgrad: Gefr.

Truppenteil: 83 I.R. Komp. usw.:

Zivilberuf: Schneider Berufs-Gr.:

Stammrolle des Heimatstammes:

Gefangennahme (Ort und Datum): Harsewinkel 39

Ob gesund, krank, verwundet eingeliefert: Gesund

Lichtbild

Frühere Personalbeschreibung

Besondere Kennzeichen:

Name und Anschrift der zu benachrichtigenden Person in der Heimat des Kriegsgefangenen

Szmuelder Wasserb. (Herszleib)

Sławatycze

Kr. Włodawa

9365

Wenden!

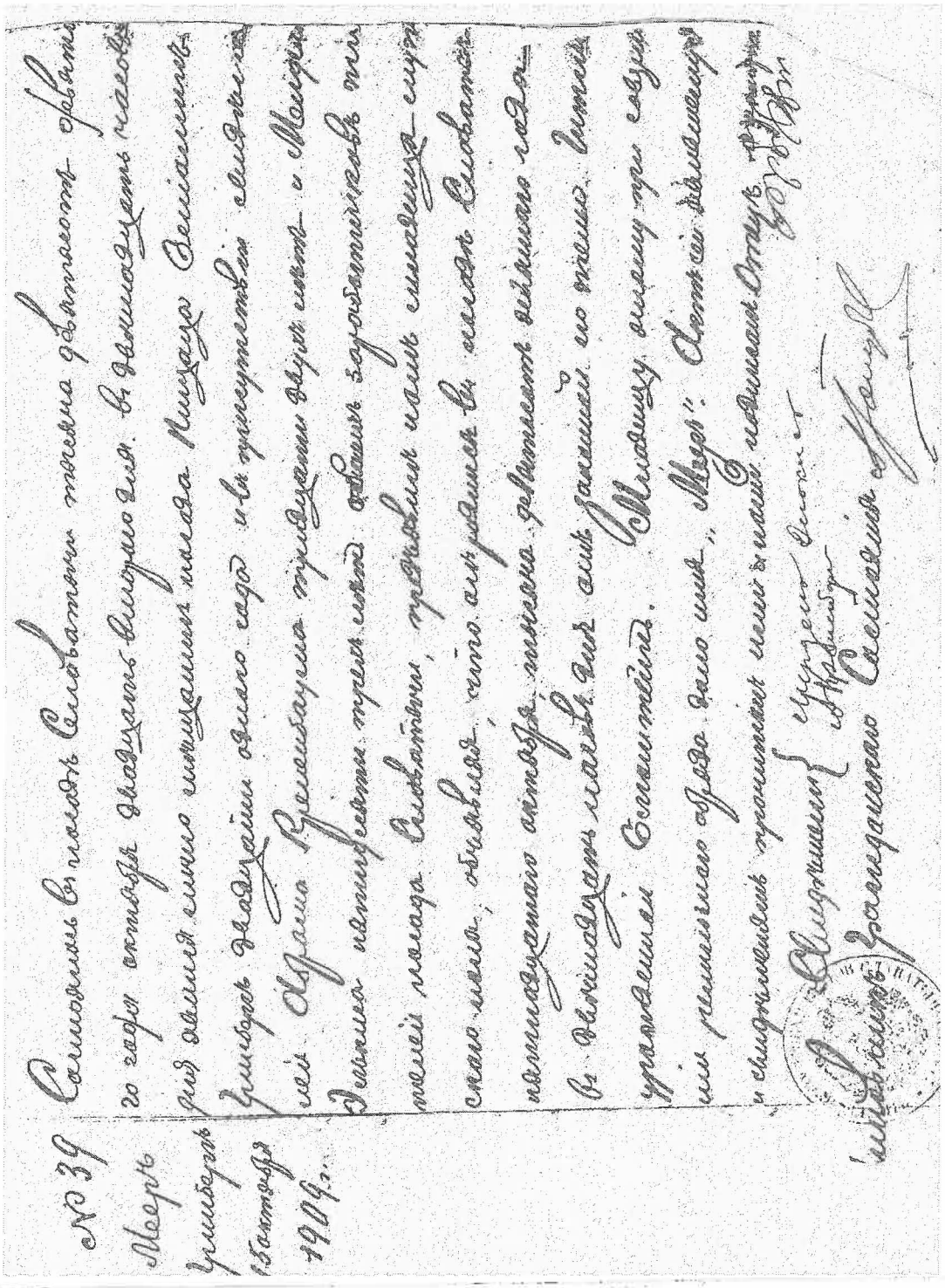
Szmuel Sznajder as a *Kriegsgefangener* [a prisoner of war of the Nazi Germans in World War II) His parents are listed as *Hersz-Leib* and his mother's name as *Wasserman.*



Jankiel Waserman emigrated to Eretz Israel in 1935. In 1948, now Ya'akov Wasserman, [shown above) served in the Israeli Army.



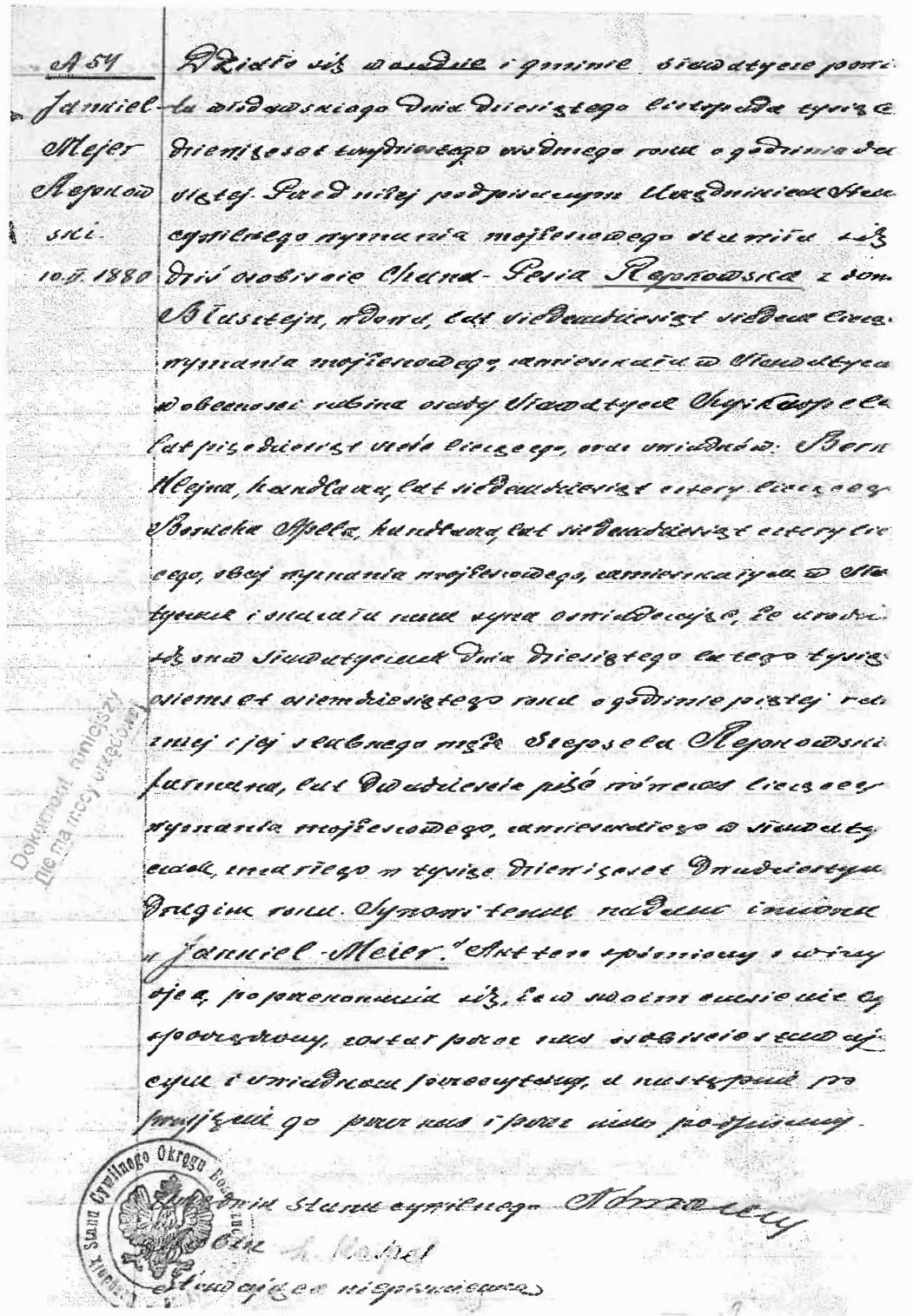
A young Jewish man from Sławatycze in the uniform of a Polish soldier. Name unknown. [Foto from Michał Grynberg's files.)



The above Civil record, written in Russian, of the birth of Meer [Michał] Grynberg states, that:-

It happened in the hamlet of Slawatycze. On October 22, 1909 at 12 o'clock there appeared before us Benjamin Grynberg, 21 years old, a dweller of the hamlet of Piszczac in the presence of the witnesses Awram Krelenbaum (32) and Mendel Elkis (53) and he declared that on October 15, 1909 at 12 o'clock was born a male child to him and his legally married wife Gitl, née Blusztejn....After the ritual circumcision the child was given the name "Meer"....
The birth certificate was then read and it was signed by the child's father, the witnesses and the civil registrar.

From the early 1800s, Polish Civil Records were written. in the Napoleonic narrative form in the Polish language.
Shortly after the Polish uprising of 1863 against the Tsarist occupation, it was decreed by the Tsar that all Civil Records in Russian Occupied Poland be written in the Russian language in the Cyrillic script.
After independence in 1918, Poland reverted to keeping their Civil Records in the Polish language.



A 54
Jankiel Mejer Repkowski
10.II.1880

Dziś dwudziestego piątego stycznia tysiąc osiemset trzydziestego ósmego roku o godzinie dwudziestej. Przed mną podpisanym Urzędnikiem Stanu Cywilnego stawił się Mojżesz Chaim-Berek Repkowski z domu Blusztejn, rolnik, lat siedemdziesiąt siedem, zamieszkały w Sławatyczach w obecności rabina gminy Sławatyckiej Chyrkasa Eli lat pięćdziesiąt osób liczących, oraz świadków: Berka Mejna, handlarza, lat siedemdziesiąt cztery liczącego i Borucha Oppelza, handlarza, lat siedemdziesiąt cztery liczącego, obcych stawiającemu, zamieszkałych w Sławatyczach i okazał nam dziecię płci męskiej, które urodziło się mu dnia dziesiątego tego tysiąc osiemset osiemdziesiątego roku o godzinie piątej rano z niej i jej prawego męża Mojżesza Repkowskiego, lat dwadzieścia pięć mającej, zamieszkałego w Sławatyczach, urodzonego w tysiąc osiemset dziewięćdziesiątym drugim roku. Oświadczył nadanie imienia dziecięciu Jankiel-Meier. Akt ten spisano i dziecię to, pokazane nam, w obecności wyżej wymienionych świadków podpisano.

Za Burmistrza Sławatyckiego Obwodowy
Ekr. A. Kostel
Sławatycze, niepiśmienny

Dokument pomocniczy nie ma mocy urzędowej

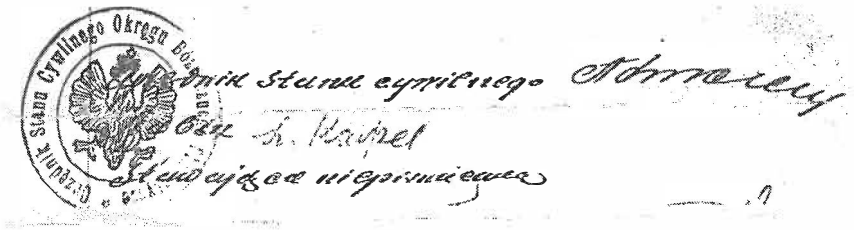
Urząd Stanu Cywilnego Okręgu Bialskiego

This "late registration" of the *Akt Urodzenia* [birth certificate] of Jankiel-Meir Repkowski dated November 10, 1937, states that: *Jankiel-Mejer Repkowski was born in Sławatycze at the hour of 5 in the morning on February 10, 1880.* See the next page for the English translation of this document. Also, refer to the footnote on page 28 of Chapter 3, for an explanation of the possible reasons for the late registration of births in the small *shtetlach* in Poland and in Russia.

Jankiel- Mejer Repkowski.
10.II.1880

Nr. 54

It came to pass in the settlement and parish of Sławatycze, district of Włodawa on the tenth day of November, one thousand nine hundred thirty seventh year at the hour of ten. Before the undersigned Clerk of the Civil Status of the Jewish faith presented herself today in person, Chana - Pesia Repkowska , maiden name Blusztejn, widow, having the age of seventy seven years, of the Jewish faith, living in Sławatycze, in the presence of the Rabbi of the settlement of Sławatycze, Szya Karpel, having fifty five years of age, together with the witnesses: Berko Klejn, merchant, having seventy four years of age and Boruch Apel, merchant, having seventy four years of age, both of the Jewish faith, living in Sławatycze and she showed us a son and declared, that he was born in Sławatycze on the day of the tenth of February, one thousand eight hundred eightieth year, at the hour of five in the morning, of her and her legally married husband Szepsel Repkowski, carter, having twenty five years of age at that time, of the Jewish faith, living in Sławatycze, who died in one thousand nine hundred twenty second year. Their son has been given the name : "Jankiel - Mejer". This late Akt is the fault of the father, and after realizing that in her time it was not carried out, appeared before us the person presenting herself and before the witnesses it was read, and then, after acceptance by us and by them, it was signed. -



(Stamp) "Clerk of the Civil Staus of the Area of the Synagogue of Sławatycze"
Clerk of the Civil Status (name *??*)
Rabbi *Sz. Karpel*
Appearing *illiterate*
Witnesses *B. Klejn, B. Apel*

English translation of Jankiel-Mejer Repkowski's *Akt Urodzienia* [birth certificate] shown on the previous page



The Repkowski brothers with three unidentified friends in a Soviet *Gulag*, 1940.
L-R: [1st] Nute, [3rd] Riwen and [6th] Mojsze



A group of mainly Polish Jews, all ex-prisoners of the Soviet *Gulags*, now members of the newly formed "Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee" set up by the Soviet government during World War II. Szmuel Grynblat [Sam Greene of Charleston, SC, USA] is sitting upfront, 5th from the left. Photo was taken in Uzbekistan in 1942 or 1943.



Before his departure to Argentina in 1928, Isak Lerer wrote on the back of this photograph a dedication, in Yiddish, to Dobe Repkowska:

צים מיין האברייזן קיין ארגענטינע שיינקן
איך דאס בילד אלעס אויסדריק פין די
האוועדשאפט אלעס איך דיינק וועז מיר
צוּ שיידן זיך אויף בייטע זייטן
האקעאן אלעס האנדיינקיק פער די
ח' בטע דאבע ריבקאָווסקע פין ח' איטשע
לערער

Before my departure to Argentina I bestow this photograph as an expression of our friendship as I think of us when we part on both sides of the ocean. As a remembrance for my friend Dobe Ribkowske from her friend Itshe Lerer.



Isak Lerer in Biro-Bidzhan, Soviet Russia



Repatriation Certificate dated the 29th of April, 1957 permitting Isak Lerer to return to Poland after having spent over 30 years in the "Promised Land" of Soviet Russia.

HENRY GREENSPAN
2835 37TH AVENUE
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA 94116
(415) 566 5775

April 9, 2000

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Henry Greenspan, residing in San Francisco, California since July of 1951.

I was born in Slawatycze, Poland in January 1925 and was living there when the war broke out in September of 1939. In 1942 the Nazis entered the ghetto where the Jews lived and rounded us up, not allowing us to take any of our personal possessions. With me were my mother, sister and a younger brother. My father and older brother had been taken by the Nazis before that day. During the march my mother and sister were killed. My younger brother and I ran when the shooting began, but by younger brother Nathan did not survive the escape. I never saw him again. I ran to the farm of the Parczeswki family and they took me in. In a few days they reunited me with my father.

From that day on the Parczewski family took care of my father and I. They sheltered us in their barn. Their kindness and actions were done at great risk to the entire family, for the Nazis were killing those that gave shelter to Jews. The entire Parczewski family helped us. I remember the younger children Romuald, Tadeusz and Zenobia taking food to us. I remember the mother holding Zenobia with one hand and food in the other (hidden) in front of Nazis to feed us.

One winter night Mr. Parczewski asked us to leave because it was dangerous for his family, however, I started crying, so he said wait a minute. He went back into his house and within minutes the whole family came out and said we could stay. They told us what happens to us will happen to them.

Without the help of the entire Parczewski family my father and I would not have survived. Unfortunately my father was killed by Polish bandits after the war, however, he would not have survived the war (as well as myself) without the Parczewski.

This is why I want to see that Romuald, Tadeusz and Zenobia (whose married name is Wasilewsk) receive all the recognition that they are entitled to. They were and are truly "righteous gentiles."

Thank you very much.

SUBSCRIBED AND SWORN TO BEFORE ME
THIS 10 DAY OF APRIL, 2000
BY HENRY GREENSPAN

NOTARY PUBLIC

CHRISTIAN FERNANDEZ
Commission # 1119035
Notary Public - California
San Francisco County
My Comm. Expires Dec 6, 2000

Henry Greenspan

Henry Greenspan



בזכירה טוב הגאולה
(ובכפ"ח)
W wiecznej pamięci leży
tajemnica odkupienia
(Baal Szem-Tow)

תעודת כבוד
Dyplom Honorowy

NINIEJSZYM ZAŚWIADCZA SIĘ, ŻE RADA
D/S SPRAWIEDLIWYCH WŚRÓD NARODÓW
ŚWIATA PRZY INSTYTUCIE PAMIĘCI
NARODOWEJ YAD VASHEM PO ZAPOZNANIU
SIĘ ZE ZŁOŻONĄ DOKUMENTACJĄ
POSTANOWIŁA NA POSIEDZENIU W
DNIU 28 · XI · 1994 r.
ODZNACZYĆ

Annę i Dominika Parczewskich

MEDALEM SPRAWIEDLIWYCH WŚRÓD
NARODÓW ŚWIATA, W DOWÓD UZNANIA,
ŻE Z NARAŻENIEM WŁASNEGO ŻYCIA
RATOWALI ŻYDÓW PRZEŚLADOWANYCH
W LATACH OKUPACJI HITLEROWSKIEJ.
IMIONA ICH UWIECZNIONE BĘDĄ NA
HONOROWEJ TABLICY W PARKU SPRA-
WIEDLIWYCH WŚRÓD NARODÓW ŚWIATA
NA WZGÓRZU PAMIĘCI W JEROZOLIMIE.

Jerozolima, Izrael, dnia
19 · III · 1995 r.

וזאת לתעודה שבישיבתה
ביום כה כסלו תשנ"ה
החליטה הוועדה לציון
חסידי אומות העולם
שליד רשות הזיכרון יד ושם
על יסוד עדויות
שהובאו לפניה, לותת כבוד
ויקר ל

אנה ודומיניק
פרצבסקי

על אשר בשנות השואה
באירופה שמו נפשם בכפם
להצלת יהודים נרדפים
מידי רודפיהם ולהעניק להם
את העזרה לחסידי אומות
העולם.
שמם יונצח לעד על לוח-
כבוד בחורשת חסידי אומות
העולם ביד ושם.

ניתן היום בירושלים
יז אדר ב תשנ"ה

Arnee Shalev
בשם ראשות הזכרון יד-ושם
W IMIENIU "YAD VASHEM"

M. Paldi
בשם הועדה לציון חסידי אומות העולם
W IMIENIU RADY D/S SPRAWIEDLIWYCH

KTO RATUJE JEDNO ŻYCIE, JAKBY ŚWIAT CAŁY RATOWAŁ

Certificate issued by Yad Vashem honouring Anne and Dominik Parczewski as "Righteous Among the Nations"

Remnants
The Last Jews of Poland



by Malgorzata Niezabitowska • Photographed by Tomasz Tomaszewski

On the front cover of this pictorial book; "Remnants, Last Jews of Poland" are shown Sara [Sura] Frydman-Adar and her husband Rafael Adar in Włodawa. Sara was born in the small village of Hanna, 7 km from Sławatycze. With the publication of this pictorial book in English in October of 1986 Sara and Rafael became famous throughout the world. Rafael Adar died a few weeks later. The then Prime Minister of Poland, Hanna Suchocka, came to Włodawa in her chauffeur driven limousine, took Sura to Warsaw and placed her in a Jewish home for the aged. Sara Frydman-Adar died in Warsaw on October 6, 1992. They had no children.

In his review of this book for the Montreal Gazette, Professor Gershon David Hundert, Chairman of the Department of Judaic Studies at McGill University states, in part:-

One of the most touching interviews in ``Remnants`` is with an elderly couple in a small town near the Soviet border. They are the last Jews in town. The husband, Rafael, has had a stroke and he isn't the same anymore. His wife coaxes him to sing something for their visitor. He sings a prayer called El male rachamin [God, full of compassion]. The authors do not say so, but that particular prayer, with its haunting melody, was probably composed in Poland about 300 years ago. It is a prayer for the dead."



The way they were...Sara and Rafael Adler 40 years ago, in this picture kept by Montreal cousin Haja Rapkowski.

CJN book review puts relatives back in touch

JAN 22/87

MONTREAL — A Montreal woman who has not seen a cousin in Poland since the beginning of World War II has been put in touch with her relative after recognizing her in a photograph on a book cover.

Haja Rapkowski, 67, recognized her now aged cousin, Sara Ader, and her husband Rafael on the jacket of the recently published Remnants: The Last Jews of Poland which was reproduced with a review in The Canadian Jewish News, according to the book's publisher Friendly Press of New York.

Rapkowski compared that recent photo to one she keeps on her bedroom dresser which was taken at the couple's wedding some 40 years ago. Rapkowski, who is spending the winter in Florida, fled Poland for Russia at the start of the war in 1939, while her cousin, now in her 70s, remained in Poland, said Rapkowski's son, Jack.

All of Rapkowski's immediate family perished in the Holocaust, except her father who died a couple of years ago.

Rapkowski immediately contacted Jewish Immigrant Aid Services to obtain her cousin's address. Her son said his mother had been sending parcels to her cousin until five or six years ago and then suddenly they stopped getting through. "The cousin just seemed to disappear."

JIAS in turn contacted the publishers who found out from the book's Polish author, journalist Malgorzata Niezabitowska, that Sara Ader now lives in Włodwa, Poland. There was some bad news as well: Rafael Ader had died a few weeks earlier, leaving Sara, who is not in robust health, alone.

Rapkowski, who worked as a fur finisher in Montreal for many years, has been a widow herself for 16 years. Her son said Friendly Press offered to send his mother to Poland to be reunited with her cousin, but she does not want to return to that country. Now that she has her cousin's address, his mother may invite Sara to Montreal, he said.

Sara Ader should be equally elated by the resumed contact with her cousin in Montreal. She is quoted in the book as saying of her life in the small Polish town: "We live here entirely alone. For whole months, nobody comes to see us except the lady from public welfare."

Remnants: The Last Jews of Poland, published in October, is an illustrated book about the few remaining Jews in that country. In 1939, there were 3.5 million Jews in Poland; today, there are less than 5,000, and most of them are elderly.

The above article appeared in the Canadian Jewish News of January 22, 1987.



Michal Grynberg and Isak Lerer at the Sławatycze–~~Włodawa~~ Memorial in Israel, 1985



The ~~Włodawa~~ – Sławatycze – Kodeń Memorial in Israel

WOJEWÓDZTWO LUBELSKIE

SŁAWATYCZE.

Osada miejs., pow. Włodawa, sąd pok. Włodawa, sąd okr. Biała Podl., 1868 mieszk. ✉ (8 km) Dubica ✆ & Sławatycze ☆ Domaczów. Zw. kupców. Targi: co poniedziałek. Jarmarki: co miesiąc. Browar.

Bourg, distr. de Włodawa, just. de paix Włodawa, trib. d'arr-t Biała Podl., 1868 habit. ✉ (8 km) Dubica ✆ & Sławatycze ☆ Domaczów. Soc. des commerçants. Marchés: le lundi. Foires: 1 fois par mois. Brasserie.

Lekarze (médecins): Kaczanowski Jan dr.
Właściciele ziemscy (propriétaire. fonciers): Ryl Mich. (Kuzawka 139).
Agentury (commissionnaires en marchandises): Herbst D.
Apteki (pharmacie): Staszewski Kaz.
Banki (banques): ×Spółdzielczy Bank Ludowy.
Blacharze (ferblantiers): Blechman A.
Bławaty (lizus): Ajnszpan G. — Domaczewski J. — Lederman A. — Melamed Sz. — ×Szajnberg H.
Browary (brasseries): ×Apelberg i Kowartowski.
Bydło — handel (march. de bestiaux): Fagiel M. — Feldman M. — Feldman Sz. i B.
Cegielnie (briqueteries): Osypniuk G.
Czapnicy (fabr. de casquettes): Gitelman E. — Zingier I. Finkielsztajn M. — Frydlender A. — Gitelman M. — Saferman J.
Farbiarnie (teinturiers): Lin J.
Felczerzy weterynarji (aides-vétérinaires): Dejczman Leon.
Fryzjerzy (coiffeurs): Jaroszewicz M. — Saper Sz.
Herbaciarnie (débits de thé): Adler M. — Bekerman A. — Ejdelsztajn Ch. — Szapirsztejn R. — Zilbersztejn S.
Kamasznicy (tiges p. chaussures): Najmark J. — Winterman H.
Kaszarnie (fabr. de gruaux): Zalcman R. — Żołądź T.
Kooperatywy (coopératives): ×„Społem". Spółdz. Stow. Spoż., Sp. z o. o.
Kowale (forgerons): Dudkiewicz J. — Iszak A. — Sławiński J.
Krawcy (tailleurs): Grynszpan L. Pocztar R. — Sznajder H. — Wajngarten Sz. — Zajdeffer Ch.
Kuchenne naczynia (articles de cuisine): Domaczewska Ch. Waserman F.
Kuśnierze (pelletiers): Długi Ch. — Długi Sz. — Długi Z. — Frydman B. — Gitelman M. — Mincmacher N. — Saferman S. Cukier H. — Kirszenbaum J.
Młyny (moulins): ×Adelberg M. i Kuwartowski Ch.
Murarze (maçons): Sołoduszkiewicz S. — Trzeciak J.
Nasiona (graines): Bitkiewicz J.
Nasiona — nawozy — chemikalja f. C. Ulrich — Warszawa.
Olejarnie (huileries): Flukshard M. — Sobelman Sz. — Szyfman U. — Żołądź F.
Piekarze (boulangers): Ajzenberg M. — Gejerman Sz. — Guterman Sz.
Piwiarnie (brasseries-débit): ×Goldcwajg M. — Spokojny M. — Szynkarczuk B. Fiszman T.
Rolnicze narzędzia (instruments agricoles): Engielman Z.
Rymarze (bourreliers): Biderman B.
Rzeźnicy (bouchers): Fogiel M. Rutki M. — Sznajderman Z. Śpiewak S. — Zuberman Ch. Zuberman G. — Zuberman H.
Skóry (cuirs): Kawa I. — Winterman H.
Spożywcze artykuły (comestibles): Akselbruch Ch. — Bilkiewicz J. — ×Domaczewski A. — Domaczewski P. — ×Feldman M. — ×Feldman P. — Feldman S. — Golowner M. — Golowner R. — Korenblum S. — Kotlarski S. — Krelenbaum J. — Krelenbaum M. — ×Libman Ch. — Libman E. — Szwarcberg R. — ×Szyfman J. — Tennenbaum M. — ×Wajntraub A. — ×Waserman A. — Zylberstein Sz. Ajzenberg S. — Apel B. — ×Erlich S. — Helfgot M. — Krongold C. — Langman Sz. — Szpektor Sz. — Wajngolc P.
Stolarze (menuisiers): Pryniewicz K.
Szewcy (cordonniers): Gerszberg Sz. — Kuniewicz K. — Pachter W. — Sztyrmer J. — Szumacher B. — Wasserman H. — Zinger J. Ipszensznajder Sz. — Kapitańczyk S. — Pachter Sz. — Sztyrmer W.
Tytoniowe wyroby (tabacs): Krongold S. — Runiewicz J.
Wódki (eaux-de-vie): Chyt A. Mierzejewski A.
Zegarmistrze (horlogers): Wolk H.
Żelazo (fers): Engelman Sz. Engelman Z. Erlich S. Finkielsztejn T.

SŁAWATYCZE.

Gmina wiejska (siedziba urzędu gminnego w os. Sławatycze) z przynal.: Janówka. Kuzawka. Cegielnie.

Commune (siège de l'office communal dans la bourg de Sławatycze) y comprís: Janówka. Kuzawka. Briqueteries.

Cegielnie (briqueteries): Berger Jan (J.).
Kowale (forgerons): Łukaszewicz J. (K.).
Wiatraki (moulins à vent): Połjowski K. (Dańce) — Radkiewicz J. (K.) — Szulc A. (Dańce) — Wołczko P. (Lack).

HANNA.

Wieś, gmina Sławatycze, powiat Włodawa, sąd pok. Włodawa, sąd okr. Biała Podl., 547 mieszk. ✉ (8 km) Domaczewo ✆ Hanna ☆ Włodawa & Sławatycze, 1 ⛪ kat.

V-ge, commune de Sławatycze, district de Włodawa, just. de paix Włodawa, trib. d'arr-t Biała Podl., 547 habit. ✉ (8 km) Domaczewo ✆ Hanna ☆ Włodawa & Sławatycze, 1 ⛪ cath.

Kooperatywy (coopératives): ×Stowarzyszenie Spożywców.
Olejarnie (huileries): Frydman I.
Kowale (forgerons): Hasiewicz F. —
Piwiarnie (brasseries-débit): Libman Ch. — Feldman F.
Spożywcze artykuły (comestibles): × Stowarz. Spoż. — Światłość R.
Wiatraki (moulins à vent): Kwietniewski K. — Matuszyk A.

Listings for Sławatycze and Hanna in the 1929 *Księga Adresowa Polski [Wraz. z w.m. Gdanskiem] dla Handlu, Premisłu, Rzemiosł I Rolnictwa.* [Directory of Poland, [incl.Gdansk] for Trade, Industry, Handicraft and Agriculture]

Part III

▪

The Personal Memoirs

of

Descendants of Sławatycze

▪

Chapter 9.1

▪

A Word About my Mother, Luba Waserman



by

Sergo Bengelsdorf
Kishenev, Moldavia

[Translated from Yiddish by Henry L [Chaim-Lejb] Gitelman]

In a quiet corner of the Kishenev Jewish cemetery there is a unique tombstone that consists of a small marble head stone in the form of an open book that covers her grave. And whoever reads Yiddish can read the poetry that is engraved on this tombstone:

מיין היים	My Home
איך מאך צו די אויגן און ווּיל זיך דערמאָנען	I close my eyes and I want to recall,
איז וואָס-זשע חאָב איך דאָ ביים קומען געטראָפן ?	What is it that I got by coming here?
א קליינינקע סטאנציע, צעוואָקסענע קליאָנען	A tiny station, overgrown maple trees,
פאַרחולמט אין בלויקייט די טייגע געשלאָפן.	Dreaming in blueness, the Taiga sleeps.
קליינינקע היידלעך באגאָסן מיט שיין	Tiny homes covered in sunlight
ווייסינקע ביידלעך געהילטע אין טויען.	Little white shacks clad in dew
די ברויזיקע בירע, וואָס גיסט זיך אַריין	The turbulent Biro, that flows into
אין בריטן אמור, אין ריזיקן, בלויען.	The wide Amur, the vast and blue.

Yes, "My Home"" — meaning Biro-Bidzhan, which for Luba Waserman was bound to her life. In her songs and in her poet's house she recorded the Biro-Bidzhan streets and parks, the alleys with the poplar trees and the banks of the easily accessible Biro River. In her later years, finding herself in Kishenev to where I brought her after my father's death, and now in failing health, she still longed for Biro-Bidzhan. All her thoughts, expressions, letters to friends, her songs – were all filled with Biro-Bidzhan. This is why, in order to perpetuate Mother's memory, I had engraved on her tombstone one of her songs about Biro-Bidzhan.

Mother did not live long – only 67 years – hers was a very difficult life. I bear in mind not only her poor orphaned childhood in the Polish shtetl of Sławatycze nad Bugiem, and the hard work as a house servant and as a nanny during her youth when she was in Palestine, but Mother's most difficult ordeal befell her in her destiny, in Biro-Bidzhan. In the second half of her life, during Stalin's ruthless regime, this elegant woman, mother and poetess in the bloom of her productive years, with force they tore out of her life seven long years. With force they took her away from her creativity, from her home, her husband and from her son. She was deported to the Siberian *Lagers* [1].

It was a miracle that she survived, but after this tragedy she could never return to her former self. Mother came back from the Siberian *Lagers* in terrible health. At 49 years she looked like a shrivelled, ancient

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[1] The Soviet *'Lagers'* ran by the NKVD as "Corrective-Labour Camps" were in fact Forced-Labour Camps.

person. From then on she never worked with any energy. She received a pitiful pension as an invalid. But she kept up her literary undertakings. Words came to her with difficulty, every new song, every new story brought on for her a trip to the hospital by ambulance, injections and pills…

This is how she lived until her death. Stalin's "Terror" she considered as Stalin's tragic failure. In the name of the Victory of Socialism they killed their very own. I believe that now, after we had become aware of "Our Great Friend and Leader" Mother would have looked differently on the "errors" of this murderous people-hater. Mother never revealed to us that she wrote songs in the *Lager*. Not very long ago, going though her papers I found an old notebook full with scribbles that were written in pencil. It became evident that they were songs which I am sending to the "לעבנס-פראגן" [Lebens-Fragn = Questions of Life] for publication.

אין תּפיסה

איך ווייס, אין דרויסן איז שוין פרילינג,
און דאָ איז שטיינערדיק און קאלט.
איך ווייס, אין דרויסן ביימער בליען,
נאָר אויף מיין קאָפּ א שניי איצט פאלט.

איך בין גרוי געוואָרן פאר דער צייט.
מיין פּנים געל, מיין אויג פארטרערט,
דורך דער קליינער טפיסה-שויב
קוקט אריין א שטראל אהער.

ער זאָגט מיר אָן: אויף יענער זייט
עס בלאָזט א צארטער פרילינג-ווינט .
ער זאָגט מיר אָן, אז דאָ ניטווייט
עס וואַרט מיין היים , מיין מאן און קינד

און איך א פויגל אין א שטייג
מיט פארשניטן, קראנקע פליגל
גיי אויס פון בענקשאפט שטיל צו אייך
און זע אין טרוים מיין קינדער-וויגל.

מיין איינזל-קאמער איז הושך שטיל,
אויף מיין טיר א שווערער שלאָס.
מע האָט געטראָטן מיין געפיל –
איך פרעג: פארוואָס. איך פרעג: פארוואָס?

כאבאראָווסקער תּפיסה, 1949

* * *

In Prison

I know, outside it is already spring,
And here it is bare and cold.
I know, outside the trees are blooming,
But now, snow falls on my head.

I turned grey before my time.
My face is yellow, my eye teary,
Through the tiny prison-window
Peeks in a ray of light.

He informs me: on the other side
Blows a gentle spring wind.
He informs me, that not far from here
Awaits my home, my husband and my child.

And I, a bird in a cage
With clipped and ailing wings
I'm quietly expiring longing for you.
And in my dream I see my cradle.

My solitary cell is terribly quiet,
On my door a heavy lock.
They have trampled my feelings –
I ask: why. I ask: Why ?

Habarovsk Prison, 1949

* * *

מיין מוזע **My Muse**

מיין מוזע, ווי א טויב פארלאָזטע,
מיט פארבלוטיקטע, פארשניטענע פליגל,
מיינע לידער די הארציקע, פראָסטע,
אויף אייביק פארחתמעט, פארזיגלט.

My Muse, like an abandoned dove,
With bloody, clipped wings,
My songs the heartfelt, simple,
Are sealed forever, packed away.

מיין הארץ – א בלאט א פארגעלטע,
אין פארוואָלקנטע טעג אין די טריבע,
מיין נשמה – א פארפיניקט פארברענטע –
גייט אויס נאָך מענטשלעכער ליבע.

My heart – a faded leaf,
In those cloudy days in prison,
My soul – tortured, burned –
Expires for human love.

טיישעט-לאגער, 1952 **Taishet – Lager,** 1952

* * * * * *

מיין זיין דאָ, א קייט פון וואנדער און וואָגל
און פול איז מיט פיין מיין ביטערער לאגל,
פון מענטשלעכע טרערן גייט אזש אריבער
וווּ ביסטו, מיין זון, מיין הארציקער, ליעבער ?
דיין קינדהייט געוויבט, דיין מאמען פארטריבן
אויף פרעמדן בארָאָט ביסטו, קינד מיינס פארבליבן
אין טייגע סיבירער, אין שטילן געוויין
גייט אויס דיין מאמע פון בענקשאפט, אליין.

My being here, a chain of wandering and of wonder
My urn is full with bitter anguish,
Of human tears that turn to ash.
Where are you, my son, my dearest, my love?
Robbed of your childhood, your mother chased away.
You are in the care of strangers, my abandoned child.
In the Siberian Taiga, in silent tears,
Expires your mother from longing, alone.

טיישעט – לאגער 1951 **Taishet – Lager**, 1951.

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Chapter 9.2

■

A Eulogy

for

Breindl Gitelman / Bronia Lerer



by

Michał Grynberg

[Translated from Yiddish by Henry L. [Chaim-Lejb] Gitelman]

In Warsaw, on January 20th, 1984, after a lengthy illness, Breindl Gitelman passed away.

Breindl's life story can serve as a superb novel. Breindl was born in 1910 to a workers' family in the small town of Sławatycze on the Bug River. Her father Itzke [Itzchak] Gitelman was a furrier.

After all, Sławatycze was a town of furrier tradesmen and the Gitelmans were well represented in this trade. After World War I, Breindl's father settled in Malorita [the town is now on the borders with the Soviet Union] but after living there for a few years, Breindl returned to Sławatycze because this was the place of the furrier trade. Also, from a very young age, Breindl had experienced hard work. At that time she was already an orphan[1] and a big part of the housework "fell" on her head.

Unfortunately, their parting came soon. Itsche had to get away. He had to get out of the country as he was about to be arrested. At the end of the 1920s, in this small *shtetele*, the thought started to develop for different conditions for the workers. At that time a professional organization of workers in the tailor and furrier trades was started. Also, a library in the name of Y. L. Peretz was founded in Sławatycze. Breindl was one of the activists in the social and in the workers' life of the Sławatycze youth. At this point it is to be noted that she was one of the most beautiful and a most intelligent young women in the town. Her feelings and her young girl's love she entrusted to Itsche [Isak] Lerer who was among the first in the *shtetl* to organize the youth.

Unfortunately, their parting came soon. Isak had to get away. He had to get out of the country for political [anti-government] activities. He spent two years in Argentina and then he, together with a group of young men, went to Biro-Bidzhan. And at this point Breindl's also starts a new and dramatic stage of her life. In the year of 1932 Breindl travelled to the man of her dreams now in Biro-Bidzhan. But, in 1934 they had to get away from there as the climate was very harmful to Breindl's health. They then settled in Yevpatoria [a city in the Crimea]. There, their daughter Ghitele was born.

In Yevpatoria, Itsche was working at his carpentry trade. Breidl was employed in a State institute and their life had started to stabilize a bit. But, in 1937, during the era of the [Stalin] Personality Cult, Isak was arrested and sentenced to 10 years in prison.[2] Breindl then lived through many dramatic moments of her life.

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1) *Breindl's mother, Chaja-Gitl, died in about 1917, shortly after giving birth to her 4th child, Chana-Marjam. Breindl's father Icke[Itzke) then married the widow Szeindl Gutmacher and moved to Malorita [now in Belarus) where his brother Aron lived. Icke and Szeindl then had two daughters and twin sons.*

2) *In 1949, shortly after completing his first 10 years in prison, Itsche [Isak) was sentenced to another 10 year prison term. After Stalin's death in March of 1953, Isak was released from prison during an amnesty of political prisoners but he was confined to the village of Ożernoje, "across the road" from his former forced labour camp.*

In 1955 Itsche was rehabilitated [pardoned] and in 1957 they both were able to return to Poland [3].

The exile in the Siberian lager of "Oźernoje" left a permanent mark on Breindl's memory. She often recalled those years and the conditions of her life then. But her charming smile never left her. Her principal motto in life, which she often repeated, was: "If you know someone who needs your help do not wait for him or her to come to you, you go to them!" Her home was always open to her dear ones and to her acquaintances.

As it is stated in the Haggadah: כל דכפין ייתי ויכל "let all those who are hungry enter and eat" … She was true to this principle to the last days of her life.

She lived a quiet and unassuming life and quietly she died. And this is how she will remain in the hearts and memories of all her dear ones.

Appropriate to Breindl's life are the words of the poet:

וען די גאנצע וועלט זאָל ליידן,	When the whole World suffers,
מיר אליין זאָל גוט זיין בלויז,	And I alone should be well,
וואָלט איך דאן די וועלט די גאנצע	I would then invite
איינגעלאדן אין מיין הויז.	The whole world to my home.
איך וואָלט טרייסטן זי און צערטלען	I would comfort and caress her
און געזאָגט: נישט זאָרג זיך וועלט,	And say: do not worry, World,
ביז זי וואָלט צו זיך געקומען	Until she would recover
אין זיך אויף די פיס געשטעלט.	And stand on her own feet.
וען די וועלט געווען וואָלט גליקלעך,	If the World were lucky,
איך אליין בלויז פול מיט לייד,	And I alone be full with pain
וואָלט איך דאן צו איר געקומען	I would then come to her
און געפאָדערט: גיב מיר פרייד	And demanded: "Give me happiness".
אָבער, אָז מיר ביידע ליידן,	But, if we both are suffering,
סיי די וועלט, סיי איך אליין,	The World and also I myself
האָט די וועלט נישט ווו צו קומען	The World has no where to turn to
און איך האָב נישט ווו צו גיין.	And I have nowhere to go.
[אברהם רייזען "איך און די וועלט"]	[Abraham Reisen "I and the World"]
כבוד איר ליכטיקן אָנדענק	**Honour to her enlightened memory!**
אין נאָמען פון א גרופע פריינד	In the name of a group of her friends;
מ. גרינבערג	M. Grynberg

—§—

[3] *Bronia[Breindl) and Isak's daughter Ghita married Erik Pevzner and stayed in the Soviet Union. Ghita, her husband Erik, their daughter Lena and their son Vadim and his family live in Israel.*

Chapter 9.3



Isak Lerer

Testimony Given to the Spielberg Foundation
Warsaw, Poland, July 12, 1995.

Transcribed from the Video tape and translated from Polish by Maria Strońska.
Montreal, March, 2003.

My name is Isak Lerer. I was born on June 11th in the year 1906 in a small *shtetl* called Sławatycze nad Bugiem. I lived there until I left Poland.

In such a small place the work was mostly done at home. It was cottage-work. My father used to go to Warsaw to work there and he sent us money, a few *rubles*, for the family to live on. Our family was big; six persons and father was the only breadwinner. Life was very difficult. When I ate a piece of bread after my meal, my father would ask me how come I was hungry so soon. Since then I realized how valuable a piece of bread was.

I went to *cheder* [a religious Hebrew school] there were a lot of children from poor families there. In *cheder* we learned to read the prayers and to pray and as a reward the *melamed* [Jewish religious teacher] used to pay the boys to encourage them to come to *cheder*. We got some meals there and of course some education too. These four years of *cheder* was my only formal education. The families who owned stores or sold their products on the market were better off. Most of the families at that time were big ones, with five or more children each. My father had a trade, he was a carpenter and still it was hard for him to find work, especially in winter. That is why he used to go to Warsaw to work there and we stayed with mother in Sławatycze.

When the First World War broke out I was 8 years old. At that time my father did not go to Warsaw because the roads were closed, and he had to look for work locally. It was easier to live in towns than in villages. Our life became even harder and as a result I and my bothers did not receive any further education. About 80% of people worked in the villages. The farmers picked up the workers, or the workers walked the five or more kilometres to their jobs. The work was available mostly during the summer months. My family were carpenters and we did the windows, doors, ceilings, to finish the buildings started by others. We had work for a few weeks, months only. My father, my older brother and myself, three of us worked and we still were poor, never having enough to eat.

In 1915, during the First World War, we left Sławatycze as most of the homes were burned by the retreating Russian soldiers. I was about 9 years old so I cannot give you a very good opinion of the situation. At that time my mother was pregnant and as soon as she gave birth to a child who now lives in Israel, my parents decided to leave Sławatycze and we went to a town called Różany. A lot of peasants were also escaping to Russia, leaving their crops in the fields, so we collected some of the corps and also dug out some leftover potatoes. It did not last long as the Germans took away everything. During our further travels our luggage went to a different train station, so father took a cart with a horse and went for it, unfortunately the horse jumped and father's leg was crushed by the cart. My mother had a baby to look after, so my brother and I had to take care of the family and prepare for the coming winter. We stayed on a farm outside the town as it was much cheaper than to rent a place in the town. My older brother had to find something to do and to

earn some money. I attended a [Jewish] Community charity centre where I could get to eat breakfast and some soup for lunch and where we could also learn reading. My brother was too proud to go to the Community for help, my sisters were too small, and so I was the only one to attend the school at the charity centre. I went there for 9 months.

In 1916 it got much better for the Jews. The Germans were good to us and gave us permission to return to our own home. We came back to Sławatycze but everything was completely burned there. When the Germans came close and the Russians soldiers were retreating they burnt everything, leaving behind only ashes and ruins. By a miracle three houses remained standing there. We moved into one of them. Our whole family of eight lived in only one room. There was nowhere to live and there was no work. Shortly after we arrived back to Sławatycze our father started to look for work. The Germans gave us permission to demolish the burnt houses and to remove the debris placing them outside the town. We had to clean and then shave the burnt wood. I was eleven at that time and there was nothing for us to do except work with father and my older brother. Soon afterwards my father started to work for farmers in the villages who gave him some food and potatoes for his work. That way we had some food and we could live.

My whole education was only four years in the *cheder*. I can now read in Polish, Russian, Yiddish, but to write it is very difficult for me. I learned to read by myself for I wanted to communicate better with other people. I was interested in everything around me. I was always looking for something new, to get ahead. I started to read more and more, I wanted to know what is happening around me. When I was sixteen I joined the Communist Party.

I became more cultured and I became a Communist. There were only three of us in the Communist Party in the whole town. At the age of eighteen years I was very active. There was no Worker's Union in Sławatycze. In our town there were carpenters, tailors, furriers and shoe-makers, all working in their houses and selling their products on the local market. We were the first ones to organize a union. There was famine, people used to work 14 hours or more a day. The others joined us, but then we were called Communists and it was not a good feeing what was happening, I did not feel right about it.

My older brother had gone to Buenos Aires, Argentina, so in 1928 he asked me to join him there. At that time my brother already had a girl-friend. I decided to go to Buenos Aires where I worked as a carpenter. In Argentina there were specialists, the furniture factories were in Jewish hands, construction business was in Italian hands. My brother worked for a construction company, so I joined him there. That was in 1928. In 1930 there was a deep recession in the construction industry. Normally the carpenters making furniture could earn more money than in the construction business because the work lasted longer and farmers used to feed workers and pay more for a furniture carpenter. Small houses were built in 3 to 4 weeks.

It was hard times then and it was very difficult to find work. Unemployment was very high, we were short of food. I started to think about going to the USSR. Even if there was no work there the workers could have food in Russia we were told. I was the first one to join that group. We were 43 persons of various trades and professions in our group. There were builders, some educated people, but there were only a few carpenters in my group. We were all sure that hunger did not exist in Russia even if there was no work. And so our group went to USSR, to Biro-Bidzhan.

Our leader, who was from the USA, found a place which he liked very much and made a plan to build a small town that would be called *Soltoz Gorodok*. He presented the plan and talked to us about it. We liked the idea and we started to work. It was May of 1931. Our place was near the Manchurian border, close to the Amur River. There was nothing there but some small trees, a few swamps and some Ukrainians who had been deported from the Ukraine. They were farmers who refused to give up their land and join a *kolkhoz* [collective farm] organized by the State. Their land was therefore confiscated by the State and they were deported to the Northern and Eastern parts of the USSR.

We organized a community, chose the leader, a secretary, a chairman and we started to cut down the trees. Everything was done by hand, luckily the trees were small, so the job was not too hard. Having the confidence of my bosses I became a leader of the group responsible for the work and the people. I did various jobs, that what was necessary and where it was needed. My brother worked in his trade all the time. After one and an half months I was sent with a few others to cut hay, there were 15 of us, 10 used a machine and the rest of us had to use scythes. It was at banks of the Amur River. It was raining hard, and we had to cross the river and work on the other side. I stayed with the Ukrainian community. On the other side of the river there was a Jewish community. That community was well developed, there were houses already built, they had cows and other domestic animals that needed hay. One of the Ukrainians taught me how to cut hay with a

scythe. There was a group of five men who knew how to scythe and they took the responsibility of the ones who did not know. I was very quick to learn, so after only one day I did not need any help. Of course, on the first day of work I was the last one in the line of the haymakers. But, the next day I was one space closer, on the third day I was the fourth and a few days later I was equal to the others in production of hay. Some could not learn at all to use a scythe, but we all worked very hard. At the end of June we had three days of rain, it was pouring heavily, non stop. We could not go outside. When the rain stopped we went out to continue our hay cutting, but it was possible to cut hay only on the hill, the rest of the vicinity was completely covered by water, well over one meter deep. We waited for the hay to dry, but that did not happen, so we had nothing to do. We wanted to save our crop as the hay was badly needed for the domestic animals during the winter. There were many young people from the USA some were from Poland and all of them came to search for work. Our secretary who was from the USA and his friend who was from Poland came to collect our inventory. Both of them got into a boat and sailed down the river to inspect the neighbourhood. Unfortunately, the boat struck a tree stump and overturned. The secretary being old and heavily dressed drowned, the other one survived. We lost the hay and we lost one man. I was a group leader then and my duty was to organize the work, we tried to save as much hay as was possible. In winter I went back to a carpenter's job.

In 1932 my girlfriend came from Poland to join me in Biro-Bidzhan. I was in love with her before I left the country. I tried to bring her to Argentina but she was underage and her father would not give his permission for her departure. She was always missing some documents, but eventually she came to join me in Biro-Bidzhan in August, or September of 1932.

From 1931 to 1934 there was an enormous famine in the USSR. People were dying in the streets, where we were it was not as bad as in other places, we had some help from charitable organizations in the USA, we could survive, but in other parts of the USSR there was unimaginable hunger. In the Ukraine alone seven million people died of starvation. If one does not experience hunger, one can never know what it is.

In Biro-Bidzhan the snow comes twice or three times a year at most, but nights are frosty for three to four months, and the terrain is swampy and there are plenty of mosquitoes and other insects. People coming to our place did not stay long, they preferred to go and work in factories where they could get 800 grams of bread per day. Of course it was not much, one could not die, but one could hardly live on it.

I stayed with my wife in Biro-Bidzhan. Her family was mad at me that I took her to such a faraway place and to such conditions, but man is selfish and he thinks about himself. One is more selfish than the other, it depends how much selfishness exists in us. I needed somebody. We both worked, so we managed somehow. At first there we were in communes, later on came *kolkhozes*, where we could have a piece of land, one cow, not everything was under the control of the *kolkhoz*. There was a lake, so I used to fish, it was difficult, but we managed to live.

My wife became ill. The climate and the hard life damaged her health and she developed diabetes. The doctor told us that my wife has to go to the South. My brother had already left Biro-Bidzhan and worked in Moscow. It was much easier to get bread in the towns. The famine was heavier in the remote regions, so I decided to join my brother, who worked as a carpenter. I felt well and I could work in Moscow with my brother, but my wife being pregnant at that time did not feel well. I always remembered the doctor's advice to take her to the South, so I and my brother decided to go to the Crimea to check the conditions of life there. My wife stayed in Moscow and awaited my call. In Moscow there was an organization, I think it was named "COMVET" that helped Jews. This organization gave us some money, papers and directions where to go and apply for help.

In the Crimea there were a few German *kolkhozi* and two very good Jewish ones. We could stay there, but we wanted to get closer to the Black Sea, so we went to the small town called Patowo. The town was not big, but clean and very nice, there was plenty of food, the market full of fruits and vegetables and various other goods. Only money was needed. We found an organization that ran a sanatorium and a rest-home. There was also another organization which helped people find jobs. We soon learned that there was a great demand for carpenters, there were two of us and one brick-layer, the three of us worked in one organization.

I was a member of the Communist Party when I came from Argentina to the USSR. My membership card was signed by my *Kommandant* but in 1932 the Party in the USSR did not accept foreigners, we were not allowed to join. Before that time it was possible to join and we could even attain a high position, but all that changed after 1932.

In 1934 our daughter was born and we had to live on one salary. But in 1936 when the baby was old enough my wife put her in a nursery and she went to work. It was much easier to live then and we could manage quite well.

This lasted till 1937. Then, suddenly, during our absence from home, people from the "Party" came and took away everything that we possessed. The reason for that search-warrant could have been the fact that we were foreigners, or we had said something, or wrote a letter, or anything else. Actually they actually needed "Red Slaves" to be send to Siberia where there is plenty of ore to be dug out. They took away the ones who came from abroad, the ones who were rich in their past, those who had belonged to another Party, any excuse was good enough to send people to prisons. They knew at that time that the war was coming. They needed people with knowledge and trade skills to work and develop regions in the far North and the East of USSR. Thousands and thousands of the best people were taken for the deportation to the *GULAGS,* the forced labour camps. Nobody could pass their examination in those times.

All prisoners were divided into groups; one group consisted of foreigners, their crime was mostly "contra revolutionary informers", others were "spies". The authorities were called *troikis* represented by three men; one from the Army, one from the Party, and one from the NKVD. They had the power over the prisoners; they could tell us what to do and where to go.

People were tortured in many different ways, they were questioned and interrogated over and over, non-stop, without sleep, without rest, brain washed until they signed whatever their oppressors wanted them to sign. I met one doctor whom I have known before, and who, after all those tortures became half-mad, he was from Greece, his wife from Poland, he was in our garrison. Most of us received 10 years of imprisonment, but for serious offences such as espionage they were sent to a very strict prison.

We were put into locked cattle-cars and shipped to the North, to *Komskaya Oblast.* In those wagons there were wooden bunks for us to sleep on, a small stove in the middle and a large hole in the floor for sanitary purposes. For food we got small, salty herrings, called *Karnsi*, 800 grams of bread and very little water to drink per day. The place of our destination was the vast tundra with small trees and nothing else. We had to build everything from scratch. As prisoners we worked without pay.

The train took us to the end of the rail line in the North and from there we had to march on foot in very cold weather for about 600 kilometres further North. Our feet were swollen, we received warm boots, but after a day of walking they tore and did not fit. We managed to cover 20 to 25 kilometres per day. I wrapped my feet with warm cloths and put them into holders [*łufki*] to keep them from freezing. When we reached the camp we met some people, who I thought that they were crazy, or idiots. They stood round the stove and cooked something that looked like dirty water. It consisted of a little bit of flour in the water that I am sure pigs would not eat. They stirred that water and it was their meal. Those people were building canals. In that place I don't think more than 10 percent of the prisoners survived.

I had an easier life. I lived in a better barrack with only one row of sleeping benches. I could always do my *norm* [quota], or more, in order to get the 800 grams of bread and a small meal. If one could not make the assigned *norm*, you would get less bread and no meal. People were getting weaker and weaker and slowly dying of starvation.

I worked as a carpenter. In my barrack there were only 70 of us. In our camp there were about a few thousand prisoners. In about three months time about 1,200 died. At the beginning, the dead were buried during the day, but later, when there was such a great number of them, they were buried at night in a common ditch. There was one maternity hospital in *Sangorodok* where sometimes they put very sick people. Coming back from work, prisoners were wet and frozen. Only the ones who worked physically all their lives could bear such conditions, whereas engineers and other white-collar workers did not survive. As soon as a prisoner died, his place was taken by another prisoner.

There was a young fellow sleeping next to me, he was from Arkhangelsk, and he told me an interesting story. In 1937 he received a secret order to gather [arrest] in his region 1,000 persons, guilty, or not guilty. For three days he did not know what to do, so he decided to write on the reverse side of the order:- "'Please tell me what kind of people I should I gather?". A few weeks later he got a message on the same piece of paper: "Collect a 1,000 person contingent". That situation was repeated three times and then he was arrested, put in prison and after that he was put in a mental hospital where he really became crazy. He stayed there 7 years, working as a carpenter in a closed place. If there was a necessity of forced labour the authorities organized a meeting in a *kolkhoz* taking young men to prison for no reason whatsoever. All those young men perished in the *Tayga*, as I had said before, only 10 percent survived.

We knew the first day when the war broke out. Molotov spoke on the radio but soon after they took away the radio and newspapers from us. All political prisoners were also taken away. After 3 or 4 months everything was returned and we could listen to the radio, it was almost back to normal.

After ten years I was released from prison and I went to join my wife.

When I was released they gave me back my tools. While I was in prison the first time my wife had somebody from Poland with her, that person was also arrested, luckily my wife and our daughter survived. My wife and I met up again and we stayed together for only one year and six months and then I was arrested again.

At the time when I was arrested for the second time they took in foreigners regardless of their nationality. Jewish people were especially collected [arrested] in 1949 and kept in prisons. I was interrogated day and night for 30 days. I must have had nerves of steel to be able to go through such torture.

In that prison there were some Volga Germans, mostly women and children. German soldiers [prisoners of war] were in different prisons. There was one German who told us Jews to run away and even promised to help us. I must tell you the story of one prisoner, a teacher in the Tsar's time and who was a very old Communist. He got 10 years and was sent to *Altajski Kraj*. He told me that the happiest day for him was when he learned why he is in prison. It was because of a woman's gossip and just for that he got 10 years. We were in a prison built by Catherine the Great. I told my fellow prisoners that we will be released when Stalin dies and it did happen like that.

When Stalin died there was an amnesty. I was freed and I decided to go back to Poland. My wife did not want to go, but I had enough [of Soviet Russia] and we returned to Poland. It took us a year to get permission to return to Poland. Our daughter stayed in Russia. In Poland in 1968 when Gomulka made trouble for the Jewish people in Poland we were not affected as I did not work at that time. Of course there were not many Jews in Poland then, but there was a lot of anti-Semitism. Gomulka only followed orders from Moscow; he was told what to do.

Many members of my family went to Israel but I did not want to go to Israel. I was well off in Poland and I had enough of wandering and changing places. I wanted a steady life.

My wife died 11 years ago. I am lonely. I would like to have a woman with me to share my life. The most important thing is health and to have somebody to share life with. My value is a close family and to have somebody in the same room and to enjoy life.

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Editor's Notes

1] *In the above testimony which Isak Lerer gave to the Spielberg Foundation in 1995 in Warsaw, more than 38 years after his repatriation to Poland from the Soviet Union, it is to be noted that Isak Lerer never mentions the names of his siblings [two brothers and three sisters], he does not divulge the names of his friends, nor does he mention the name of his wife Bronia Gitelman/Lerer nor the name of their daughter Dr.Ghita Lerer/Pevzner. Having been subjected to dehumanizing torture and after having spent a lifetime in prisons and in gulags, has certainly shaped Isak Lerer's cautious demeanor and his entrenched fear and instinct not to reveal any names.*

2] Bronia [Breindl] Gitelman /Lerer died on January 20, 1984, in Warsaw, Poland, at the age of 74.

3] Isak Lerer died on October 7, 2000 in Warsaw, Poland, at the age of 94.

4] Isak and Bronia Lerer's daughter Dr.Ghita Lerer / Pevzner and her husband Erik Pevzner together with their daughter Lena and their son Vadim and his wife Katya and their two sons, Leonid and Tal, live in Israel.

Chapter 9.4

▪

Gerszberg / Lerner

▪

By Rachel Lerner / Kulik

My mother Golda was born in Sławatycze and my father Meir Lerner was born in Hanna, a village some 6 or 7 km from Sławatycze. My mother's parents were Moishe and Chaja Gerszberg. My father's father was named Menachem-Mendel, a name that keeps reoccurring in our family. After my parents were married they lived with my maternal grandparents in Sławatycze for five years until they left for Eretz-Israel in 1935. At that time my parents already had one daughter [Leah] and a son whose name is Menachem-Mendel. My mother was then 8 months pregnant with my brother Yitzchak. Five of my siblings and I were born in Israel.

At that time there was no Office of Absorption in Eretz-Israel and the British Mandate could not care less. My uncle, my mother's brother, was learning in a Yeshiva in Bnei-Brak. When my parents arrived to Israel they had nowhere to stay. It was before Pessach and it was getting warmer, so my uncle and his roommate went to sleep on the roof of the Yeshiva and my parents and the children used my uncle's room. My uncle then helped my parents find their own apartment and he also helped my father find work.

Within a year my uncle brought out of Poland my aunt Sarah and her family of five. They settled in Tel-Aviv. A year later my uncle Noach helped my grandparents leave Sławatycze and come to Eretz-Israel. They lived out their lives in Tel-Aviv and in Bnei-Brak and we know where they are buried. Unfortunately my paternal grandmother Rajzl Lerner/Katz and many other members of our family did not make it out of Poland like my maternal grandparents did and, unfortunately, they all perished in the Shoah with the exception of my first cousin Haya Paluch from Hanna. Haya survived the war in Siberia and in Kazakhstan and there she met up with her future husband, our second cousin Rubin Rapkowski, also of Sławatycze. During the war they were together with two of Rubin's brothers, Nathan and Moshe and also with their sister, Chaja Rapkowski/ Gitelman and her family. My cousin Haya Paluch/Rapkowski and her family and also her husband's three brothers and two sisters settled in Montreal, Canada.

My mother Golda remembers the tragic event when her mother Chaja's brother, Symcha Edelsztejn, was accidentally shot and killed in the *rynek* [the Sławatycze Market Place] by the town policeman when he supposedly fired his revolver in the air when trying to break up a drunken brawl of peasants. My mother recalls that her uncle was carried home on a table as there were no stretchers in Sławatycze. My mother also remembers that the policeman declared in court: "This is not the first Jew that I killed, and he will not be the last one."

After my father's mother, Rajzl Lerner, was widowed she remarried to a man named Katz. They had a son and my grandmother named him "Menachem-Mendel", that is, he was named after her first husband Menachem-Mendel Lerner. This was not too well received by her daughters.

I was told that my uncle Menachem-Mendel Katz had been with the Partisans during the War and that after Sławatycze was liberated he returned there to search for any surviving relatives. Rogue elements of the Polish underground known as the N.S.Z. murdered him and then threw his body into the Bug River. It seems that during the war these Polish anti-Semites killed many Jews who were trying to evade the Nazis killers and then they also killed many survivors of the Shoah after the War ended, such as the Kielce Pogrom of 1946.

My mother Golda lives in Bnei-Brak. My sisters and two of my brothers also live in Israel. I and one of my brothers and our families live in the United States.

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Chapter 9.5

Condensed from the

טובה ומרדכי קויפמן - זכרונות

A Memoir by Gitl Edelsztejn/Tova Kaufman and Simcha Kaufman

[Translated from Hebrew by Akiva Gitelman, Montreal, Canada]

The Years of My Childhood and My Youth [Tova]

My family was from a small town in Poland called Sławatycze. I was born on August 1, 1916. The First World War was on and my parents and my two older sisters, Alta and Sarah, had escaped from their *Shtetl* and were on their way to Berdichev, Ukraine. Many people, especially Jews, fled East to Russia to get away from the front lines.

After the start of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the refugees from Poland began to return to their homes and my family returned to their town of Sławatycze. The people started to rebuild their lives from scratch. [The retreating Russian Tsarist Army had burned all the houses in Sławatycze.] In 1918 another sister, Batya, was born. Two more children were born to my parents, a son named Abraham and a daughter named Slava. Our family now consisted of my parents, five girls and one boy.

Sławatycze nad Bugiem was a small *Shtetl* surrounded by many small farms which were owned by Christians and some were also owned by Jews. The agricultural products were sold at the market place [bazaar] in Sławatycze held on the first day of the week. Sławatycze borders on the Bug River and forests, wrapped in greenery and beautiful views, surrounded it. From an economic point of view compared to that of the Christian peasants, the Jews in our *Shtetl* were better off. The Jewish merchants and craftsman made an honest living and with respect. Also, the relations between the Jews and the Poles were reasonable. We were very happy in our childhood and in our youth. We all loved our beautiful town, especially the young people who knew how to enjoy its special characteristics. In the summer we enjoyed every free moment and went swimming or boating on the Bug River, we went for walks and made excursions into the countryside. During the winter we skated on the frozen river.

My father served for five years in the Russian Tsarist Army. His work as a smith earned him the respect of the Jews and of the Gentiles. He was at the top of his trade and everything that came out of his hands was well done. Our family lived at an economic level, which was befitting his earnings. Holidays and Shabbat were important to us. Mother was a good housewife and without financial worries. The good thing was that Father was known as an honest man and as a skilled worker.

One can say that we were a happy family but our happiness did not last long. One day, just before Shavuoth, two disasters struck us. My younger brother died and shortly afterwards my father was accidentally killed by a stray bullet.[1] This happened during a market-day when many peasants from the area came to the market to make their purchases for their Easter Holidays. A few peasants got drunk and a fight broke out. The town policeman wanted to break up the rowdy crowd but he couldn't calm them with words so he shot his gun into the air. At that same time my father was nearby with one of my sisters and the stray bullet hit him in his heart and he was killed instantly. Immediately all the stores closed and everyone scattered from the market place. A heavy grief befell the town, especially on our house and on our wounded family. The policeman was investigated but his testimony was received in a positive light. A Jew was killed. The whole story finally was quieted down. The policeman was subsequently transferred to a different district. We did not receive any compensation and we became a family without any income.

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[1] Editor's notes: *A death certificate obtained from the Sławatycze records office in November of 2002 states that Symcha Edelsztejn died on June 2, 1924 at the age of 36. No cause of death is indicated in the document.*

Mother ז"ל was an enterprising and skilled woman. She understood very well that she had to fulfill the role of our departed father and to provide for our family. She started going to the nearby villages to buy agricultural goods and then sell it in Sławatycze door to door. The burden fell on us, her daughters, to run the house. We were a very close-knit family. When my father was killed my older sister Alta was 14 years old, Sarah was 12 and I was about 10 years old. Mother was concerned that there be a good atmosphere at home but every moment we felt father's absence.

We went to the regular Polish school. Elementary education was compulsory according to the law at that time. We also learned religious studies with the Rabbi's wife and we were taught Yiddish by the teacher, Mendl Szuchman.

The memories of my childhood are generally good. Mother was devoted to us in heart and soul and my older sister, Alta filled the role of Mother when our mother was out busy buying and selling. Alta was a beautiful girl, very talented, she was smart, had read many books and she was a good student at school. She dressed the younger sisters and worried that everything in the house should be in good order. She tried her best to make it easier for Mother and to bring her pleasure.

When I finished elementary school I started to think about acquiring a trade. In our town there was no high school and we didn't have the means to go to a bigger city to continue our studies. So I stayed at home and helped Mother earn our living. Mother would go to Warsaw, the capital of Poland, to buy merchandise such as cloth and she would sell the cloth at our house or door-to-door.

Even from a social point of view I can say that I had a pleasant and a good life. We would meet with our friends, both boys and girls, a few times a week. We organized different social activities, put on plays in Yiddish and which gave us great satisfaction when the public enjoyed our performances. I remember the good and the unforgettable days.

In Warsaw

In 1933, when I turned 17, I decided to leave Sławatycze and move to Warsaw. I was very attached to Sławatycze where I had spent my childhood and my youth but I realized that there was no future for me in this small town. Despite the fact that I found myself in a pleasant group of people of my age I was beginning to get bored. Since I'm always forceful in my decisions, I informed Mother and my younger sisters about my plans. Considering their reaction I was surprised that my decision to leave home and Sławatycze was received with great understanding. I wrote a letter to our relatives in Warsaw and when I received their positive answer I packed my stuff and I left for Warsaw.

In Warsaw I started to learn to be a seamstress. To my great joy I adjusted quite easily to the big city. I made friends and acquaintances and on holidays and on Shabbat we would meet and go on outings. In the year of 1934 there occurred an important change in my life.

A year after I left for Warsaw my sister Sarah came to join me there. She knew a boy by the name of Szulik Szprachman. We would meet and go out on outings together in the area and we went sailing on the Wisła River. On one of these outings I met my future husband, Mordechai. He was then called Moniek. From the first moment of our meeting we knew our destiny and that we'd be together for the rest of our lives. Mordechai was a serious and nice young man and the more we met the more our love grew. Before long we started talking about building our future together.

Mordechai wanted to speed up the process of us getting married but I felt that there was time, after all, both of us were orphans and we were both struggling to make a living. We could not depend on any help from our families. Like I, Mordechai was new to Warsaw and found work as a hat-maker. The work was seasonal and it did not promise a steady income. "First let us save a little and then we will take the decisive step", I said. Our love was strong and it was hard for us to be apart, even for a few hours. We started arranging for our wedding. We decided on a convenient date of February 19, 1938. The wedding took place at 10 Pawia Street. Few people were invited to the wedding – just family and a select number of friends. But many whom we invited couldn't come because they were too far from Warsaw. We hoped that with time we would get to see those who could not attend our wedding.

We were happy with our apartment that we rented on Smocna Street. After the wedding we arranged a small party in our apartment. Our financial situation did not permit us to go on a honeymoon to an expensive hotel or to a resort and the day after our wedding we both went back to work as if nothing had happened. We furnished our apartment in a modest way and we considered ourselves as being a happy couple. We even managed to save some money.

I became pregnant and I went to my mother in Sławatycze for a rest and to indulge myself a bit. I returned to Warsaw before the outbreak of the war.

Although we felt happy and work was pleasant, we started to feel that a threatening storm was soon to break out. In 1933 Hitler came to power in Germany. Germany then started expelling Jews back to Poland who were born in Poland. We were witness to this misery when they arrived in Warsaw without a roof over their head and without any means of existence. The "chutzpah " of Hitler got stronger. His demands against Poland worried us a lot.

That moment arrived on September 1, 1939 when Nazi Germany attacked Poland and Warsaw was bombed. Powerful explosions awoke us. The radio brought terrifying news. As the days passed everyone knew that the much-praised Polish army was lacking in weapons and that the Polish soldiers were indeed making war with just plain courage. A great number of people were killed and many Polish soldiers were also killed, wounded or taken prisoner and yet in the radio broadcasts the Polish Government was bragging that they were repulsing the German aggressors.

We felt like orphans on a ship tossed on a stormy sea and the captains and the sailors had lost their minds.

The situation in Warsaw was getting more difficult every day. The city was filling up with tens of thousands of refugees from areas close to the Polish-German border, which were conquered at the start of the war. Everyone was full of hope and faith that in the big city we'd find shelter and salvation. The radio announcers comforted us that Poland's allies, England and France, had declared war on Nazi Germany and we hoped that salvation would come soon and that Hitler would be beaten.

In the meantime, the price of food was soaring from day to day and our situation became more and more serious. Actually, one could still obtain everything but only on the black market. Our money was very limited. The city of Warsaw, which remained the only one on the battlefield, was besieged during the day by German airplanes and at night by the German guns. The city burned. The number of houses destroyed rose. The firemen were unable to control the burning houses. Also, the water supply was hit and we had to stand in line near a pump at certain places in order to get water. The murderers were shooting from machine guns and from planes on those people standing in line. Murder in the name of murder.

I was pregnant with our first child and Mordechai couldn't go to work as he had to stand in line to get bread and water for us. In the area where we lived, on Okopany Street, there was a big canning factory. A bomb hit the factory and it started to burn. People risked their lives and broke into the burning warehouse and grabbed anything they could carry.

In these difficult times we couldn't think of the future. We lived each moment at a time trying to get over the crisis. Deep in our hearts we hoped that England and France, these two powerful nations, would bring Hitler to a stalemate. But slowly we realized that life was an illusion; the enemy was succeeding and these nations were in distress.

It was a bitter day for all of us when Warsaw surrendered. For two days the city was without rule. We became aware that there were no more attempts at resistance and the Germans entered the city. We waited for them with the hope that by entering Warsaw they would stop the hunger and our lives would somehow or other improve. The Jews, with all their knowledge of the Nazi atrocities, still found it hard to imagine that we would be obliged to do forced labor and to suffer such humilities. We, Jews, had overcome difficult decrees for hundreds of years in the Diaspora and we thought that we'd overcome these difficult times also.

At the end of September, beginning of October, we were witness to the entrance of the winning German Army. Cars and trucks accompanied by the celebrating soldiers. Before us we saw a strong and powerful enemy and the city accepted them in silence.

In the first days we tried to live a routine life. Muniek went to work for his old employer. We decided that I should go to be with Mother in Slawatycze. In the small towns life was not any more pleasant. We learned that the Soviets occupied the Eastern part of Poland and Jews started to run in different directions; mainly to the East and from there they tried to cross the new border into Russian occupied Poland. We then decided that I should travel to Sławatycze to be with my mother. We sent word to Mother to send a peasant with a wagon to take us out of Warsaw and bring us to Sławatycze.

Muniek couldn't join us then as he was afraid that the Germans would arrest him on the way and he decided to wait for the opportune time to leave Warsaw and join us in Sławatycze.

I did not want to leave Muniek but I understood that in my situation there was no alternative. Mother paid a Goy to fetch us in Warsaw and to bring us to Sławatycze. We traveled day and night for two weeks

before we arrived in Sławatycze. We were stopped a few times. Later, Muniek was able to join us in Sławatycze.

Mordechai:

Tova's mother and her sisters received her with joy. But the situation didn't permit us to be happy. Time was short and much work had to be done. The Germans occupied Sławatycze and in a certain sense, the situation of the Jews there was more dangerous than in Warsaw. In Warsaw it was easier to evade work and other pressures. Here, in the small town, we felt that the earth was on fire under our feet. Tova's sisters Sarah and Slova had already crossed the Bug River which was the border between German Occupied Poland and Soviet Occupied Poland and traveled to Soviet Russia. Batya, Tova's third sister, who was married to Avraham, went to Russia before the war and the connection between her and Tova was broken.

The important thing was that we knew that every moment counted. Tova's mother found a peasant who was ready to smuggle us across the Bug River to the Soviet side, a distance of about a half of a kilometer. The Goy promised to bring two boats and we paid him in advance. Late one night we left the house and we waited for the right moment to cross the Bug River. We took with us the bare essentials that we needed. The night was quiet. We heard the steps of the two people who carried the boat and loaded it onto the cart. One boat was for Tova and her mother; the second was for our packages and me.

The signal was given and we went down to the boats. We were already in the middle of the river when we heard shouts of STOP! in Russian. There was power in these shouted orders and shots were fired in the air. They then shone their flashlights on us. The Goy advised us not to risk our lives and to turn back. With heavy hearts we returned to the German side of the border. After a few days in the Goy's house we left to cross the border on our own and we crossed the Bug River at night without any trouble. We arrived to the Russian side of the Bug River under cover of darkness. We were very tired and we fell asleep lying on the ground like happy kids sleeping in their parents' laps. We were awakened by Russian border guards aiming their rifles at us. We explained to them that we were Jews and that we had escaped from the Germans and that it was our wish to live in the free land of the Soviets. They then led us to the nearest border patrol station in Domaczewo. As a child I had learned to speak Ukrainian quite well and I also I knew a bit of Russian. I explained to the interrogators that we had escaped from Warsaw and that my wife is from Sławatycze and that we are turning to the Soviet Union to grant us our wish to go to Vladimirec [1], the city of my birth. I took out my identification papers to prove that I was born in the town of Vladimirec, which was now part of the Soviet Union. My words must have been well received and we obtained the required approval to continue on our way to Vladimirec.

We were permitted to go on our way and we decided to go to the city of Sarni where my mother lived. Our son Symchaleh was born there in the winter of 1939. He was named for Tova's father. It's hard to describe our happiness. But, my mother had married for a second time and it wasn't pleasant for us to stay with them in their house. We felt like strangers and refugees. The Soviet regulations were that refugees not concentrate in one area and they spread the propaganda that there is the possibility to travel to different places in the Soviet Union, such as in the Caucasus where we could live peacefully as farmers. We were fascinated with the idea to live in a rural area, in a house with a garden and to be able to earn a living working the land. After a short time our wish came true and we traveled to the region of Stalingrad [today it is called Volgograd]. It was in the winter of 1939. We were assigned an apartment in a small house that was built out of straw. We worked like animals. The heating of the house was by dry sheep dung. We hoped that life here would be good, but we were disappointed. We suffered from the cold and from malnutrition. We couldn't maintain a minimal life style with a small child and we escaped to return to the city of my birth, Vladimirec. This was in the beginning of 1940. Tova's mother was with us all this time.

In Vladimirec our family was received with warmth and happiness. We all hoped that the hard days were behind us. We rented an apartment and I opened a small store to sell the hats that I sewed myself. The store was in the center of the city. We earned a modest living and weren't in need of help from any relatives. We received Russian passports that were valid for five years.

The days of our joy didn't last long. In the summer of 1941 rumors started spreading of a potential war between Russia and Nazi Germany. In April I was drafted into the Russian Trud [Work] Army. I was sent to Bessarabia to install Russian size railway tracks because the gauge of the Russian railway was wider than that of the European railways. From a logistic point of view this was a preparation for war.

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[1] Editor's note: *Vladimerec was known as Wlodzimierzec when it was part of Poland before 1939.*

Tova had an aunt and uncle who were old Russian citizens who were sent to Kamenka near Lvov in 1939. Tova communicated with them and requested that they take her and the child to them for 2 months, that is, until I return from the Work Army in Bessarabia

June 22, 1941, Germany Invades Soviet Russia

The tension grew stronger. We were not released as expected when we finished our work laying down the wider railway tracks. On June 22, 1941 Nazi Germany attacked their former allies, Soviet Russia. We were ordered right away to go to the collection points to be prepared to go to the front lines.

The Germans in their invasion of Russia used the same tactics as in their invasion of Poland. The Nazi Germans attacked at night and the sudden blow spread an uproar and bewilderment among the people and the Soviet Army. The Germans were very fast and already in the first hours the Soviets suffered thousands of casualties. The "Blitz Krieg", the lightening strike, which had succeeded in Poland and now imparted to the Red Army threatened their defeat and their inability to recover and to reorganize themselves to oppose the advancing Germans.

One day I spotted a train full of refugees and there I saw the faces of my brother Ya'akov and his family in the very depths of Russia. I thought to myself; "how strange life is". They were being moved away from the front lines and I am going in the opposite direction, to the war front to face the Germans.

The frontline units tried somehow to stop the advance of the Germans by blowing up the railroad tracks and the bridges but it did not succeed in stopping the invading German Army and the Luftwaffe [German Air Force]. The Germans were quick in taking cities and towns and strategic points. They quickly overtook the Soviets to a radius of 60 km. Apparently in some places the Red Army was still there but it was already surrounded on all sides without any opportunity to break out of the choking chain. Unfortunately a Soviet general betrayed his country and handed over his unit to the advancing Germans. Thousands of soldiers that fought against the invasion died and thousands were taken prisoner without a fight. Despair filled everyone. Due to anger that the Soviets failed so quickly and in the disappointment in the Soviet leaders, thousands of soldiers abandoned their weapons and handed themselves over to the Germans. The road was full of wounded soldiers and dead bodies. Our commanders took my unit to Charanko. The destruction there was terrible.

The War was at its height. The Germans were now in the depths of the Soviet Union. The war front was far away but we were surrounded. Our officers tried to organize and encourage us but we soldiers lost our faith in our officers and everyone thought of how they could save their own skin.

For twelve days I, and part of my unit, went around with guns in our hands and in total confusion. We were hungry and tired. One day we stopped at an old Ukrainian's house. The woman fed us latkes with saturated oil. We were a small group and we each made the sign of the cross and looked at a picture hanging on a wall. I made the sign of the cross and spoke in Ukrainian, as I knew how to speak Ukrainian. The men of my unit did not know I was Jewish. After the meal the hostess advised us to throw away our weapons because the Germans were seen in the nearby area and were looking for Russian soldiers and take them captive. Any Russian soldiers taken at gunpoint were killed on the spot. When we heard this from our hostess we threw our guns into the river and we surrendered to the Germans.

In German Captivity **[Mordechai]**

The prisoners of war were concentrated in a camp full of thousands of prisoners. First the Germans were interested in eliminating all the Soviet officers, the Politruks [Political instructors] and then the Jews.

On the first morning we were ordered to line up according to our nationality. One of the prisoners, a Gruzin [Georgian], who knew I was Jewish, told me; "Come with me, they won't look for you after that". He pointed out to me the many Jews who were already shot. He was a good friend and I felt that I could trust him and I listened to him. From day to day life in the camp became more difficult. Different kinds of diseases spread despite the cold and the hunger. The rain did not stop. A typhus plague broke out and it caused many deaths. During the morning lineup the lines were constantly reduced. One of our friends disappeared. No one knew if he had died or had escaped; if he escaped we wished him luck. We slept on shelves and the constant movements and the noises bothered us a lot but we got used to it. I slept on the second level. This had advantages but also disadvantages which were that it was hard to go to the bathroom at night but there were also advantages as I did not have to worry about anyone urinating on me or hurling dirt on me from above.

There was constant yelling and quarrels and sometimes we couldn't sleep after a hard day's work. The German guards spit on us and hurled at us despicable curses.

No one was sure someone wouldn't steal from him a little bread or an article of clothing. We had to keep everything close to our bodies. There were situations that robbed us of our strength. The daily orders were very bothersome but the positive thing was that they kept the group together and we could adapt ourselves to these difficult situations.

The piercing sky, the autumn cold, rain, snow, mud puddles added to the hard work and the malnutrition made our life to be a hell on earth. The sad thoughts that I couldn't see my dear ones; my wife, my son Symcheleh bothered me and I worried constantly about my family and my brothers. Every day I saw hundreds of people dying of cold, hunger, and of typhus. Our food was limited to soup and small pieces of meat from dead horses. The soup was tasteless. Our existence depended on us being merchants. We sold potatoes, salt in teaspoons and *machukah* left over from a crude material used to make oil. Those with some means were satisfied with this *machukah.* For three months we didn't get any bread. Afterwards there was a change and we received one bread for 8 people - about a quarter of kilogram per person. At the beginning, a quarrel broke out and the bread was re-divided, the stronger got bigger portions. The situation got difficult and in order to prevent interference by the Germans it was decided to organize ourselves into groups of 8 people and one among the group would divide the bread.

The Germans were not used to the snow and to the cold. We, the prisoners, saw with out own eyes the carriages full of wounded returning to their native lands sick and humiliated. This was already in 1942 but in the meantime nothing deterred the Germans from advancing. At that time the Germans conquered all of the Ukraine and Belorussia. They hoped that in the surrender of Moscow the war would end. The Germans strove to join up with General Romel's front in Africa and their purpose was to conquer Palestine and take control of the Suez Canal.

At the Konotop camp order always ruled. The prisoners were divided into groups of 100. In each unit a head of the unit was chosen from among the healthiest, especially those from Siberia who were strong and tall. Their special rank was marked with an identification strip of cloth worn on their sleeve. It was my luck that my officer was a likeable man and I succeeded in having a friendly relationship with him. When I addressed him with the words "Tovarishtch officer" he asked me to address him with the words "officer". He treated me with respect especially after he saw that I was respected by my group of 100 prisoners. I did my best to make it easier for him to fulfill his tasks.

One evening he called me and informed me that tomorrow would be a close investigation to look for Communists and a body-check to search for Jews. He advised me to disappear for the day and he told me of a place to hide. It was a deep pit filled with garbage. I had to cover myself in refuse so that I would not be seen. I kept silent and didn't leave the pit for the whole day. At night I returned to the shack when everyone was asleep. Quietly I found an available place on the bunks. I was crushed. In the morning the officer reported that all was all right. It was encouraging to see friendships in the big camp as everyone was wrapped up in his own world and we only saw a cruel world. On many occasions I bought him cigarettes and candy. The more I got to know him the more I trusted him. I was convinced that he was a sworn enemy of the Nazis. After a few months he warned me again. Soon it was winter. He kept me in a cupboard in his room. After I was moved to a different camp I didn't see him anymore and our connection was broken forever.

One day, trucks brought tables, chairs, benches, and office equipment to the camp and according to their orders all the prisoners were brought out on the parade ground. It was quiet on the parade ground. Quiet was absolute in order to hear their commands. At the table sat German officers and nearby were interpreters. Every prisoner was ordered to approach the desks. Questions were asked and the answers were recorded. The questions: "Date of birth, place of birth, place of recruitment and time in the "Red Army", nationality and religion".

The Germans were meticulous in dividing prisoners according to their country of origin and religion. I knew they were looking for Jews and for Communists. Most of those who had been questioned were released from standing at attention and could return to the camp. Only some were ordered to stand in a separate group and were watched so as not to disperse or to mix with those who were released. The interviews lasted over seven days. In the meantime no one went out to work. Many were sent to other camps, some close to the front lines. In the Monotop camp there remained a few prisoners and I was among them.

My turn came. I was called by my adopted Ukrainian name of Andrei Ebashtsanku. I took on the name and identification of a Ukrainian boy who was killed in 1941 in the forests near Kiev. From that time I was a Ukrainian. When I was called to the registration table I handed over my identification with my adopted name. I tried to make it look natural. My clothes were clean and in order. They looked at my face and it was calm and healthy looking. I had shaved earlier. I looked like a 100% Ukrainian. I seemed not to have any worry

but deep in my heart I was scared. I approached the desk with a smile on my face like other prisoners did. To their questions I answered in clear Ukrainian. It seemed to me that the officer suspected something and he intended to ask me more questions but suddenly a soldier appeared and informed the officer that he was needed on the telephone. The officer stood up, looked around, told me to go and he ran to the office. I felt a heavy stone off my heart. I had saved myself.

The next day I went to work with the rest of my group. We were put on big open trucks. We traveled for more than one hour and arrived at the train station. We loaded heavy crates onto the railway cars. This was hard work. We were not permitted to rest. The Germans urged on us with curses and blows. We were like slaves and we felt that the situation at the front lines was not as the Germans would like it to be. This was already in 1942 and the Germans were approaching Stalingrad. The partisans also attacked the Germans. As the situation on the Stalingrad front became more difficult for the Germans our workload was increased. We worked countless hours. We were brought closer to the front to a place called *Chotar Micholobinsk*, a big rail crossroads. There were big warehouses where guns and food were stored which we had to load onto the train wagons. In spite of all this hard work we had a certain sense of satisfaction as we were certain that the German retreat had started. The signs were that we were emptying warehouses and the contents were being sent to Germany together with the dead and the wounded. Other railway cars carried tanks, cannons, guns that were in need of repairs. We heard that in the city of Stalingrad street battles were being carried out house by house. The Germans were surrendering and preferred to become captives rather than fight and die. What troubled us was that the Germans didn't let go of us and saw in our efforts the hope of success.

I tried to pay attention to the Germans' words and to their behavior. And indeed I observed strange things. They were annoyed and worried about their situation. They urged us to work with more energy as there was much work to be done and soon we'd have to move from here to another station and there was a rush to empty the warehouses.

And we, the slaves, our feelings were mixed. On one side we were happy that the front is nearing but from the other we suspected the Germans in their desperate situation were likely to liquidate us. One day we were awakened by the noise of exploding bombs that shook the whole railway station. From that day onwards hundreds of Russian planes were bombing the stations day and night. We looked for a hiding place and the guards also wanted to hide. As the bombing increased the more we all hoped this would be the end of our suffering. The Germans shouted and looked for us but we didn't answer. One of the prisoners seized command and told us to take advantage of the situation and to escape. The command came from the Russian officer known as "*Sibiriak*". We were 10 people. Everyone filled his bag with some food and grabbed machine guns and we began crawling away from the railway station. Bit by bit we were further away from the camp and the rail lines and crawled into a cornfield. The screams of the Germans grew fainter and we knew we were getting further away from them. The thought that I was going on to freedom gave me strength to crawl without pain. We tried to keep close to each other. The sound of the shots intended for us became weaker and weaker. When quiet prevailed we decided to rest. We waited til morning to check out our situation. The noise of the Red Army approaching on all sides was so strong that we didn't hear the sounds of the Germans escaping. In the meantime other ones who had also escaped had joined up with us – 26 in all. We heard sounds of hoofs of the horses of Russian soldiers. Two from our group went out to meet the Russian soldiers. After an hour they returned with two Russian soldiers on horseback. They were told that we were prisoners who had escaped from German captivity the day before. One horseman stayed with us, the second one went to his unit to report about us. Many hours passed. We waited. Tanks approached us and brought us food from their field kitchen. We were ordered to stay in one place. We understood that we'd be released after a check but one thing was certain: we were not in German captivity anymore.

In a Red Army Interrogation Camp [Mordechai]

After a few days had passed, officers of the Red Army Security department arrived. They gave us a primary investigation and took us to the train station and sent us to Moscow. We were sent to a big camp for prisoners who had succeeded in escaping from German captivity or who were freed by the Red Army. This camp served as a place of thorough investigation in order to sift the good from the bad. In this same camp there were people from the General Vlasov brigade, the Soviet traitor who went over to the German side as soon as Soviet Russia was invaded. The *Vlasovites* were dressed in the uniform of the German Army. In this same camp there was also a factory where we had to work making guns, bombs, etc. The work was very hard but the food, compared to the food we got under the Germans, was much better.

One morning, after about six months of being in this camp under Soviet guard and after having been investigated for many nights, I was called to one of the high officers, Meir Nikitin. He knew me well as I had been interrogated many times. When I told him I was Jewish he couldn't believe his ears that I had managed to stay alive all this time. I told him my whole story and of my disguise as an Ukrainian. To the officer's question of "are you ready to serve again in the Russian Army because people like you are required in the Soviet Army", I answered that I would be most happy to serve. The officer explained to me that I would not be send into a front line unit but to the "*Ochrana*" [Guard]. After awhile I realized that they meant to send me to the *Kamchatka* region. I was outfitted with a Red Army uniform, boots and a hat and supplied with a rifle and ammunition. And so, from a prisoner of the Germans, released and having been under suspicion as a traitor, I then became a security soldier of the Soviet Union. I served in this security unit until the end of the war in 1945.

I realized that the time had come to find my family. I sent a letter to *Bogorosolm* where refugees from the areas occupied by the Nazis and who had succeeded to escape to the Soviet Union were registered. After one month I received Tova's exact address. I sent her a telegram that I'm alive and well. My wife replied that she's healthy but she did not mention our son Symcheleh. I then realized that our son is no longer with us.

The correspondence between us encouraged both of us that the day was coming when we would meet and I wanted to accelerate the process a bit. I turned to some of the officers who liked me for my good service. I told them that I married in 1938 in Warsaw and after a short time the cruel war separated my wife and me and that I wanted to look for my family members in the Ukraine and in Poland. The officers advised me to turn this question to officer Nikitin because I am in a special role now and only he is entrusted to help me. I turned to him but he told me that I would be released in six months and that in the meantime I would accompany the *Vlasovites* to far away *Kamchatka*. I began to beg and I cried like a baby that they should release me from accompanying these prisoners to [far away] *Kamchatka* and that I am sure that in my unit there are many Siberians that would like to replace me in order to be close to their places of residence.

My pleas were to no avail. Nikitin stood his ground but I did not give up. I looked for different ways out. It seemed to me that money would be the answer. To give an officer a present wasn't so easy as you could fall into a trap. I turned to one officer whom I knew well and I told him the details of my situation; I was in the army at the start of the war, I went through many battles, I was in German captivity, and I told him about my son who died, and about my unfortunate wife who was in Rigar, a distance of some 10 days travel from here, and that I am about to collapse in spirit and in body. What he did for me saved many souls and his kindness I'll remember for eternity.

I only had 500 rubles as a bribe for my release. He told me that there was no chance of a solution of my problems but he established a contact with another officer responsible for the release of the soldiers. I promised to award him a gift as was the proper thing to do. He tried a few times to demand more from me but I only had 500 rubles and that was it. Finally the long awaited miracle happened. The officer took the money from me and gave me back my Ukrainian identification papers which I had received six years ago in the city in which I was born and other confirmations of my service in the Red Army. Finally my release order arrived. I was sure there was no happier man in the world than I.

I received a travel permit and a ticket to Rigar, the place where my wife and her sister Slova were living. But with the Army ticket I had received I had to wait weeks for the Army train and I therefore decided to go on the civilian train – an express, or fast train. It was difficult to go on the civilian train as it was full of people with their bundles. I got on the first civilian train that I had a chance. I went up to the locomotive and tied myself to the steam engine. To my right and to my left sat other soldiers. I was still dressed in the uniform of a Soviet soldier. During the trip I suffered from excess of heat, cold and the strong wind that whipped my face. When the train stopped and I got off for my personal needs or to fill my water bottle. I felt stiff like a stump of wood. Most of the time it was difficult to sit and I found it hard to stand. In this way I traveled days and nights and I finally arrived in Stalinabad and from there I went to Rigar.

To Uzbekistan [Tova]

After Mordechai [Muniek] was called up to the army I stayed with my mother and my young son in Vladimirec. In the meantime my two sisters, Slova and Batya with her baby joined us. Her husband Awraimele and his parents were deported to Siberia.

My aunt Leah Witkowicz, my mother's sister, did not have any children. They were Soviet citizens and were sent to the city of Kamenka Stromilovo near Lvov to fill a government post. Each time we would write to each other I was invited with my son and my sister Slova to visit them. Mother and Batya with her daughter stayed in Vladimirec while I went to visit my aunt Leah for less than a month. On June 22, 1941 the

Germans attacked their friends the Soviet Russians and we had to run again. The sudden attack on the Red Army put everyone in shock. A hasty withdrawal began. To my aunt and uncle, who were clerks of the government, was given the means to escape to Kiev, and having no alternative, we joined them. After all we couldn't return to Vladimirec. In Kiev we did not stay long with our aunt and uncle. Also, it was hard for them too. The Germans advanced rapidly eastward and overtook many big cities and occupied huge areas. The people of the government agencies escaped in a panic and our relatives couldn't worry about us anymore. We left Kiev. We boarded a boat. I don't remember how. In the meantime, Symchale got sick and we had to leave the boat. My sister Slova was with me. In the hospital they treated us rather well. They gave us a room until the boy got better and we could then continue on our way. When the situation of the boy improved a bit we tried to find a way to travel more deeply into Russia because the Germans were getting close. As the days passed we got on a train full of refugees without knowing where it was going. We had no money and food was scarce. Primarily we worried about the child. We arrived at Krasnodar. We were given an apartment. Due to the child's illness I could not go to work. Slova worked in the fields and with difficulty we supported ourselves. Everyone went hungry but what worried us most was that my son would starve. Months passed and we had to flee again. In order to arrive in the depths of Russia we had to embark on a ship on the Black Sea, and in order to get to the boat we first had to travel by train to the city of Makharadze.

We sat on the coast for a long time, day and night waiting for a ship. He who had money could go onto a ship faster. We did not have with what to bribe those who had to be bribed. My son, Symchala was sick and we did not even have money to buy food for the baby. We suffered from the cold because our few clothes barely kept us warm. Without a choice and full of despair, I went to sell my dearest thing – my wedding ring. I remember it as if it was today. While standing in the market trying to sell my ring a woman approached me and said: "It is forbidden to sell a wedding ring!" My decision was made. My son's life came first. I hoped that if my husband and I would return from the war we could get another ring. So with tears in my eyes I sold the ring and I bought bread and other essential commodities in order for us to continue to live.

We sat two more weeks on the coast of the Black Sea until our turn came and we went on the longed for ship. Unfortunately the situation of our child did not improve and he became seriously ill. When we arrived in Krasnobodensk we went ashore and from there we went by train to Uzbekistan.

<u>In Uzbekistan</u> [Tova]

The wagons were full and there was no space for us. Slova and I took turns holding the baby in our arms. The child burned with a high fever [40°C]. When the train stopped at a station I tried to get to a doctor but the boy died in Slova's arms. The last time I looked at my darling his eyes were closed and they took his body away from me. My son and another child were put in crates. At the next stop they buried the two children in a grave. We returned to the train wagon and we continued on our journey. And even to this day I don't know where is the grave of my son. I became sick with fever. Slova was the one who took care of me with compassion and looked after me in these times of crisis. With all the pain I understood that life is stronger that death and that we have to carry on. For a long time this frightful picture stood before my eyes.

We arrived by train to the city of Karasoy [?]. The refugees were transferred by horse drawn buggies. There we picked cotton. Slova and I were assigned to a shack with five other women. The shack was not furnished. We slept on planks and Slova and I covered ourselves with one children's size blanket. For our work in the cotton fields we got 200 grams of bread daily. It became evident that with 200 grams of bread we could not make ends meet. During the war we had to be clever about hunger. We sold the bread and in exchange we bought ground flour. We plucked leaves and different kinds of grass and we cooked them together with the flour and made crumbs. At night we washed our clothes because we didn't have a change of clothing. We were meticulous about cleanliness. We suffered a lot from lice that were a curse throughout the war days. Our will to live was strong and thus we overcame all difficulties. Our hope that the war would end and we'd all meet again and be able to tell our dear ones gathered in a family circle what had happened to us. Sometimes I was jealous of my son who passed away and was freed from suffering.

I had no news from Mordechai.

From my aunt Leah Watkowicz we received a letter that she is in Dagestan, in the city of Rigar. She invited us to come to her there. We were very excited and also with the fact that she had sent us money. We were able to release ourselves from the *kolkhoz*, we packed a few things and left for Rigar.

Our happiness was great but the times were not happy there. My aunt was a very hard person. We knew her well and it is good to keep good relations. We obtained a place of our own nearby with a couple we knew

and a new page opened in our lives. In the meantime our sister Sarah arrived in Rigar with her daughter Shoshana. She became widowed when her husband was killed in 1939.

Our room was overcrowded. Sarah handed over her daughter to the Jewish Institution. We had friends who worked in the cotton factories that produced cloth. I would obtain cloth from them on credit. From the cloth I sewed dresses and sold them in the market places in the surrounding areas. Here it is worthwhile to mention that a trip by train, even a small distance was possible only with a permit. I did not have this kind of permit so I couldn't buy a ticket to travel anywhere. In order to overcome this obstacle I would jump onto the train when it started to move. All night I would hide myself in the carriage. I was very alert and I succeeded. After I sold my dresses I would repay my debts to my friends and this way I earned a living. We were far from luxuries but we didn't go hungry. Compared to our situation in the Kolkhoz in Kazakhstan we were in a good financial situation.

One clear day a telegram arrived from Mordechai. He told us that he is alive and well. I urgently sent a letter to him and asked him to come to us, even for a few weeks. I waited with anticipation for an answer. Finally a letter arrived from Mordechai through Moscow. He confirmed that he was granted one month of leave. Actually it was for only 10 days as the train trip from where he was to us in Rigar took over ten days in one direction only.

It was hard to describe our happiness. We cried with a lot of sorrow over the death of our son Symcheleh. Hope for a better life in the future sweetened our sad memories. After all, peace was almost at hand. We were able to reunite our family. Ten days of vacation passed like one day and the hour came for us to part again. I requested that my husband beg his commander to get a discharge so that we could return to Poland. The argument had to be to search for our relatives who perhaps survived the war.

The hope of a release for Mordechai was realistic because rumors spread that releases were given to citizens of Poland in order to return to their native country based on an agreement between the Soviet Union and Poland on the repatriation of former Polish citizens. Slova and I registered to return to Poland and we waited for Mordechai's release from service in the Soviet Army so that we could travel together back to Poland. I wanted my sister Sarah to join us but, much to her sorrow, her daughter was in another city. She did not want to travel without her. We waited for the release of Mordecai and so after a few months we received the long awaited telegram that he was released from the Soviet Army and would soon be with us. I was pregnant again and I saw this as a good sign as the start of a new life.

Being that Rigar was a remote place, they instructed us to go to Stalinabad, the collection station for those who were returning to Poland [the repatriates]. And again pain started burning in my heart. Who knows if Mordechai will be able to arrive in time to join us. But this time luck shone on us and Mordechai arrived and we traveled together to the collection station in Stalinabad. We provided ourselves with whatever provisions we could. We traveled many days and nights until we arrived in Poland to the port city of Szczecin which was the former German city of Stettin.

After some time my sister Sarah also returned to Poland and she was sent to the same city of Szczecin and we lived together in the same apartment.

In Poland [Mordechai]

As soon as we crossed the border from Russia into Poland we immediately felt the anti-Semitism. We were in big danger. We were attacked by units of the N.S.Z., the Polish rogue underground which fought the Nazis, the Soviet Russians and also killed Jews. We were saved by the arrival of Red Army soldiers. The Soviets were in control of Poland at that time and they saved us from the hands of these murderers. We then continued on our way and arrived safely to Szczecin. We formed part of those Polish citizens who were repatriated from Russia. We were allocated apartments that had previously belonged to Germans who were themselves expelled by the Soviet into Soviet occupied East Germany.

The atmosphere in Poland was gloomy. We were surrounded by a sea of hatred. Everyday news came to us about attacks on Jews and finally the Pogrom in Kielce on July 4, 1946, over forty Jews were killed there and many injured. Some of the murderers were arrested and executed. But the situation in Poland did not remain stable and it was full of danger for the few surviving remnants who sought ways to leave Poland which was saturated with Jewish blood.

After the incidents of the attack on our train and the Pogrom in Kielce we did not think for a moment that we could stay in Poland; our country of birth. We waited for a signal from the Jewish Agency to continue on our way to Eretz Israel.

We received food from the 'Joint' [The Joint Distribution Committee] but we were fed up sitting around without work. In the meantime we found out that my sister-in-law Sarah was also in Szezecin. My sister Slova, who was unmarried, joined a kibbutz and there she met her future husband, Sigmund Nudelman.

Sitting around with no work bothered me. I bought a sewing machine and sewed hats which Tova sold in the market, but our dream was to go to Israel. In order to achieve this goal we had to join a kibbutz. This was a kind of spiritual preparation for Aliyah. In those days there were kibbutzim in the Diaspora to prepare Jews for Aliyah, but the kibbutzim did not generally take in families. Finally we were admitted at a family kibbutz of the Hashomer Hatzair. As a member of a kibbutz I had hoped it would speed up our clandestine travel to Israel. I was also a member of the "Nucham" organization which had an army character and a connection to the "Brichah", the escape organization that conducted illegal immigrants into Eretz Israel. Finally our turn came to leave Poland. Together with our friends from the kibbutz we left on our way to the American Occupied Zone in Germany with the hope of going from there to Israel. Slova and her husband, Sigmund had left Poland before us.

In a Displaced Persons Camp

The escape from Poland was not easy and full of obstacles. Part of the way we went on foot. With Tova being pregnant and carrying on her back the head of the sewing machine and I with a knapsack on my back and luggage in both my hands. We went through Czechoslovakia and Austria and finally we arrived to the American Zone on the Austrian-German border where we took up residence in a tent camp. On our first night there Tova told us that she is having contractions and is about to give birth. Before we could summon a doctor, she gave birth to a boy. The birth was in the tent in front of all the others. I did not feel too well. That same night Tova was taken to a hospital in Ailbron, this was on October 29, 1946 and I gave birth to a son. We named him David.

From the tent camp we were moved to a UNRRA[2] Displaced People's [DP] camp. We received a big room for two families and we started to lead a normal life, more or less. We received help from the Joint Committee. These organizations provided us with food and clothing. When Tova got out of the hospital we didn't even have any basic supplies for a baby. The *Brith Milah* took place in the DP camp. After some time we got the necessary things for the baby.

We located Tova's sisters Sarah and Slova and they were able to join us at the DP camp of Dono Bastion. Also, Sarah had married a man whom she knew from the DP camp. In this camp lived 120 families. After awhile the camp took on a look of an organized Jewish community. We had a feeling of autonomy. At the head of the camp was an elected committee of different political parties. Most were Zionists of all colors. I was a member of the United Zionists and I was honored with the position of secretary. The camp was bustling with culture and with politics. I became very active in different committees, like the *Keren Kayemet Israel, Adat Aliyah, Mas Im Halochem.* During the first year I was also a policeman of the UNRRA Camp. In this camp, on September 15, 1949 our second son Chaim was born. With his birth we felt that our fate was filled with honor and before us stood the possibility of a new life. The name of our second son, Chaim, "Life", was very meaningful and symbolic to us.

We Make Aliyah to Israel

April 1949. Finally our turn came to make Aliyah. We sent some of our luggage ahead of us and this way we could take only a small suitcase with us. We were very interested in all the things that were happening in Israel and also with the problems of absorption. We heard rumors that in Israel the immigrants needed connections.

After realizing that we didn't have family or friends to help us so we had decided to equip ourselves in different ways such as with political activities in the camp. We hoped that this would open for us the locked doors. In the meantime our Aliyah process was delayed since our sons David and Chaim were ill and we therefore postponed our trip by one week. We went to Marseilles and we boarded the boat *Kadima*. After four days at sea we arrived in Haifa on May 1st, 1949.

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2) UNRRA - *United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration [1943-47) founded to give economic and social aid to countries that were under Nazi occupation during World War II and to care for some 850,000 Displaced Persons.*

In general, the boat trip was very comfortable in comparison with the conditions the illegal immigrants had to endure. One can say that we were now respected citizens traveling to our native country. On the fourth day at sea we could see the coast of Israel, our promised land. A strong sun illuminated us and we soon felt our land under our feet. The day that we arrived in the port of Haifa remains engraved in our memory. It was the 1st of May. We didn't know that May 1st is a big holiday in Israel. We had to remain on the ship until the following day because no one worked in Israel on May 1st and the port was inactive. The following day we disembarked and the process started of checking of our immigration documents, etc. From the Agency we received eight Lira and we went on to a transit camp – The *Gates of Aliyah*, near the port, but not before we were disinfected against lice with a white powder. We were in this transit camp for one month. Life behind the gates of the immigration camp was very difficult. We were limited in our movements and without the certainty of what would be ahead for us. To this day I do not understand the logic as to why we were enclosed in this camp. We couldn't work or plan any activities because we knew we were there temporarily and every day we waited to be transferred to an immigrants' camp and then on to permanent housing.

Finally we were transferred to an immigrant camp in Beit-Lid, which was really a tent city. The camp was set up on a sand dune with no sign of any greenery. We were really in the desert. Tova burst into tears when she saw the sight of this camp. "How can two families with small children and babies live in one such tent?" she exclaimed. We were together with Slova and her husband and their young children. The children did not feel well. The food was bad but we did not go hungry. Life was very hard at all things. The tents were open and always dusty. Our worries were always for our young children. Chaim was nine months old and ill. We didn't know what was wrong with him but we knew that he was ill in isolation. As much as we remember, outside of camp there was a small temporary hospital and there were isolation rooms for the sick. Due to our bitter experience of not too long ago [Tova explains] I was anxious for the health of our children. It was my luck that during these difficult times I had found someone from my town of Sławatycze who knew me since my childhood but I didn't even remember him. He worked for the *Agency* of the camp and he promised me that he would do his best to take care of the baby and also to help us move out of the camp at the earliest possibility. He made good on his promise. He told us that nearby there was a beautiful town, Natanya, and that there is a new housing projects being built there and that homes will become available there within three months. In the meantime we knew there was the possibility for us to get into a housing project right away in Tel-Mond together with Slova. I felt that I cannot stay any longer in this immigration camp, I had already suffered enough in my life. First we have to look out for our children and therefore we decided to move to Tel-Mond. There was no electricity in this new neighborhood of Tel-Mond, but the important thing was that we had four walls, a roof over our head and a floor under our feet.

On one of the Shabbats we went to for a ride on our bicycles that we brought from Germany. We got to the neighborhood of Neve-Oved. Nearby we met old friends who were happy to see us and encouraged us to move to the new neighborhood and they promised to help us. In Tel-Mond they said that they are still building a lot of homes, the neighborhood will grow and the important thing is that at least in Tel-Mond there is no unemployment.

Encouraged by this visit we returned to the camp and told the representatives of the Agency that we decided to settle in Tel-Mond. When we arrived to the *Beit-Lid* camp, Mordechai started to work in the building trade. His first work was in Tel Aviv and in Bat-Yam.

Mordechai:

In Tel-Aviv I stayed with Tova's cousin, Golda Lerner from Sławatycze. When the Lerner family found out that we were in the *Beit-Lid* camp they visited us and promised us help, especially to find a place for me to live if I would find work in their vicinity and so I stayed with them even though the living conditions were not very comfortable as I had to sleep on the roof. But after all, in those days, this was very important help. They were observant and I felt very limited. I had to deal with the situation. I knew we would need a little money to pay to the housing project and for our livelihood and therefore I was not choosy. I was happy what they gave me. With all of our efforts to acquire the remaining amount we still needed 80 Lira.

Tova:

I had an older cousin in Israel by the name of Sarah. Her husband was a carpenter and they lived on Yarkon Street in Tel Aviv. I turned to them for a loan of the amount we needed to enter the housing project. To make it easier for them I brought along a silver candlestick, which I bought in Germany, as collateral for the loan. I was refused. I left my relatives' house with tears in my eyes wondering where help was to come

from. I then met a friend from my town of Sławatycze, Ya'akov Wasserman, who had a photography studio in Tel Aviv on Allenby Street and we had a good relationship with him and his family. I walked into the studio to calm down and he looked at me concerned. I was pale and tears did not stop flowing from my eyes. What happened to you and why are you crying, he asked? I told him everything and he calmed me down and suggested I stay with them and the next day I would receive the needed amount. He borrowed the money from a friend and brought it to me. With the passing of time I repaid the loan. I'll never forget his graciousness. We succeeded to enter the housing project and in good time and we received the keys to our house. We received a family unit and Slova, her husband and their daughter lived in the second half of the house.

It's hard to describe our happiness when we entered our own private home. With all the difficulties our decision turned out to be the right one.

Mordechai:

I started to work outside of Tel-Mond in the construction trade. Slowly new houses were built. I also worked for *Sollel Boneh*. My reputation as an expert construction worker preceded me and I started to work for myself. I worked together with my brother-in-law, Slova's husband Sigmund. We worked very hard more than eight hours a day. In the meantime, our families grew. We had a daughter, Batya, who was born on June 24, 1953. Our small apartment – 24 square meters – couldn't hold five people and often I thought of expanding our house. But it was not a simple thing to do. We needed money and free time as I was always busy working from morning till night. But we found a solution when one month I did not have any work and with the money we saved we bought materials and I started to build the addition to our house. It is interesting to note here that with the start of our building project we didn't have electricity and for eight months we managed with oil lamps.

Tova:

Mordechai didn't want to get into debt. The expansion of the house and our family increased our expenses and I decided to go to work. I worked in agriculture in different places away from our house, in hospitals and eventually in the military industry in Ramat Hasharon. I worked there until I went on pension. I would wake up early in the morning to prepare sandwiches for the kids and also to prepare lunch and dinner. The atmosphere in our house was peaceful and we were a happy family. It was a life of hard work and satisfaction with very little but we always strove for improvement.

Mordechai:

On Friday, October 29, 1956 on returning home from work, I found a mobilization notice for me to report to Tel Aviv on Shabbat at 9 a.m. I feared that on the Shabbat I would not arrive at the designated time. I left on Friday after eating in haste. I was dressed in Shabbat clothes and went to Tel Aviv. At the meeting place I found others who were called up. At ten in the morning, on Shabbat, we already sat in army trucks which took us in the direction of the Sinai. By the evening we got to Chen-Yonas and the war was at its peak. We received army uniforms and Czech guns and we continued to the front. They put me in charge of the supplies of petrol. Day and night we were busy with the supply of petrol to the army stations. I was the commander of my unit and I worked very hard day and night without stop. I arrived with my group to Abu Agilah which was the central station for petrol supply. We had a lot of work on our hands. We took the barrels off the trucks and filled them with petrol. We loaded thousands of jerry cans with petrol and distributed them where they were needed. We were busy for a month with no leave to go home. I worried about my family and that I was separated from my wife and children. I really was without strength, but we all knew the importance of our role.

Every soldier understood that victory depended on him and the strength of the Egyptian army. In the flash of war everything happens so fast that it is hard to comprehend. It was impossible to call home. I was almost near Ismaliyah. At home they didn't know anything about me. The war was over but I was still recruited and busy in my role.

The enemy withdrew in panic. One day when I was immersed in my work with my group in Avo-Agila, four civilian motor vehicles approached us to fuel up at the petrol station. They needed petrol and the drivers asked us to give them petrol. What astonished me was that they were none other than my friends of the

association of the building trade workers. They recognized me right away and were happy to see me. What an experience it was to meet at such a great distance from Tel Aviv in the middle of the Sinai Peninsula.

* *

Conclusion.

My dear wife, my friend in life, always stood at my side and helped me and encouraged me to be active. She was also active all the time and she was an active volunteer. She assisted the new immigrants; she worked in the kindergarten and was very active with the seniors. At her retirement in August 16, 1976 she received an esteemed citation from the Security Council and from her work place. From the local council she received an esteemed document for her activities as a volunteer in the relief services and the absorption of immigrants in 1991. She still continues with her volunteer activities twice a week in the kindergarten and she helps with the absorption of Russian immigrants. I also help her and I'm active with some of the councils in *Tel-Mond.*

Being so busy we do not forget the sons of our town who are in Israel and every year we participate in conferences and memorial ceremonies for the fallen sons of our town. Monuments were built to the memory of Sławatycze and Vladimirec and we were always ready to participate in all conferences and ceremonies. But with the passing of the time many are no longer with us and due to failing health it is not always possible for us to participate as we did in the previous years. But still, we try to keep up the connections.

Now that we look behind us at our past we can say in honesty that our family life was a model life -- peace and harmony at home. We did our best to raise our two sons, David and Chaim and our daughter Batya to be good citizens. Everyone was prepared for life and they had the possibility to learn so that one day they themselves could build a happy family.

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Chapter 9.6

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Sam Greene

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Transcription of audio recordings made December, 2001 & October, 2002

Edited by Henry L.[Chaim-Lejb] Gitelman

I was born in a small *shtetl* called Sławatycze. My original name was Szmuel-Hersz Grynblat and I changed it to 'Sam Greene' when I arrived to the United States. I reside in Charleston, South Carolina, USA.

My father, whose name was Chemia, was a good looking man, he had curly red hair and his nickname was '*Kashtan*' which means 'chestnut' in Russian. I was referred to as Szmuel-Hersz Kasztan's.

My mother's name was Rochel-Leah and her maiden name was Kaufman. Shortly after I was born I lost my mother. I don't really know in what year that was. I had an older brother whose name was Chaim. He was two years older than I.

I did not know my father's father whose name was Zalman. He probably died before I was born but I knew my grandmother, her name was Huma. She was smart, wonderful, and she had a lot of energy. She was an independent person and supported herself by buying milk from the farmers and reselling it to the neighbors. I remember that she used to pinch my cheeks whenever she would see me. My father had an older brother named Akiva and a brother by the name of Itsche [Isaac] who had three sons. He had another brother named Tovia who had two sons. They used to transport food to and from the railroad city called Brisk [Brześć].

My father's brother Itsche left Sławatycze for Argentina. We heard from him off and on, but we never were able make contact with him after the Second World War. By the way, my father was in the USA, New York City, I think, in 1905 or 1906. He didn't like the life there so he returned back to Sławatycze. His father had probably been doing well in Sławatycze, so he returned to participate in the family business.

I do not know if my mother had any brothers or sisters. I do know that her father, Abraham Kaufman, resided in St. Petersburg, Russia. After my mother died my grandfather used to send us letters for Rosh Hashanah and for Passover and he included money in these letters. The only thing I knew about my mother's father was that he was in the meat business in a big way and that he supplied the Russian Army. I had never met him and when the letters stopped coming we concluded that the [Communist] government classified him as an 'enemy of the state' [a *kulak*, a rich exploiter of the masses] and had sent him away, like many others, to the *Gulags*, the forced labor camps.

My father worked very hard, twelve to sixteen hours a day, to make a living for his family. The conditions were very difficult at that time. My father was a furrier and I traveled with him to help him sell his wares.

After my mother died, my father married a young woman by the name of Beyla. She must have been less than twenty years old then. I have a picture of my father and my stepmother. She was from Hanna, a small village near Sławatycze. Shortly afterwards she gave birth to my half-sister Hella. I was close to Hella and I later took her with me to Warsaw. Hella now lives in Chicago. The next one to be born was a brother who was named Abram-Lejb. Later on two more sisters were born. The youngest, whose name is Zelda, lives in Israel. The other sister is named Pesia.

Half of the population of Sławatycze was Jewish and the rest were Poles, Belorussians and Ukrainians. The Jews controlled most of the businesses in the town. Around the market square, the *rynek,* were located the bakeries and the stores. Every business was concentrated around this marketplace.

The social activities for the young adults in such a small town like Sławatycze were very limited. There was no library, no cultural activities so you just stuck around with the guys with whom you were close with and with whom you could do things. Mostly we played soccer, rode our bicycles and we also went swimming in the Bug River. These were our most common activities. I became very active in an amateur theater group. A bunch of us put on some serious plays and also some funny shows. One play in particular I remember well, and also my part in it, was named the *Die Zibben Gehongeneh* [The Seven Who Were Hanged]. These shows were always in Yiddish. We put on the shows in the large back yard of a friend's house.

My formal schooling was probably over when I was eleven or twelve years old. I attended *cheder* [a religious elementary Hebrew school] like all the other Jewish boys, but I probably dropped out of *cheder* because I had to go to work to help out the family.

At a young age I was apprenticed to a furrier. It was as if I was leased out for a season; from Rosh Hashanah until Passover. The apprentice had to take care of everything that the master asked of him. If they had a cow you had to take care of the cow and you had to take care of his children too. At the end of the season you might have earned enough to be able to buy a suit or a pair of shoes. I did not have a formal education. I was an orphan and I had no choice; I had to help out my family.

My older brother, who was two years older than I, was also apprenticed. There was no welfare then and we kids had to help out the family. The economic condition in Sławatycze were pretty tough for everyone and many left the *shtetl* and went to the big cities, like Warsaw, to try to earn a living.

In Sławatycze we had no electricity and no running water and no indoor toilets. We had to go to the well to draw water or hire "Crazy Duwedl", the water carrier, who brought water to the homes. He carried two buckets of water by means of a wooden yoke that he carried across his shoulders.

I remember the first time that I heard a radio playing. One of my friends got the first radio in town. He put the big horn, like RCA, out of the window and we all ran over there to listen to this radio. I was probably seven or eight at that time and all the kids and adults all ran over to listen to the radio. This was the first radio in town and it was a big achievement then to have a radio.

My father was Observant, but we weren't fanatically Orthodox. We kept *Shabbos*, it was a natural thing for our family to do. Friday night we used to have a *Shabbos* meal. My father used to travel a lot and he wasn't fanatically Orthodox but he did not work on the Sabbath. No work was to be done on the Sabbath otherwise they put you in a *cherem,* that is, you could get excommunicated. Everybody would come to the synagogue and they would make a big announcement and you were excommunicated from the Community, from the people, because you kept open a business on the Shabbath, such as a barber, or if you didn't observe the Shabbath rules you could also be excommunicated for that. And it was pretty tough for somebody if they got excommunicated because everybody would look at him as if he was a criminal and avoid dealing with him.

My stepmother, I would say, was a pretty good stepmother. She took good care of us and I respected her. Not everybody had a room of his own in our little house; we were practically on top of one another.

It is common knowledge that at that time Poland was a Fascist state. Today we have television and newspapers that bring this out into the open, but then crimes were committed against humanity, against individuals and no one knew about it. They could pick you up in the street, you could disappear, and nobody would know and your family could not do anything about it. Somebody had to go out and do something about it, say something. I became a political activist. I got involved in a movement that was called something like the 'Young Progressive Movement'. When I got involved in this organization I was probably only about twelve or thirteen years old. In Sławatycze we were mostly Jewish young people in this group and, of course, it was an illegal organization. We were trying to make a better, Democratic culture. We tried to bring the protest into the streets with placards and flags. I often was the speaker at these protest meetings. We had one of ours watching out for the Sławatycze policeman whose name was Funk. He was a tall man; maybe about seven feet tall, and you could see him coming from far away. The lookout would shout "Funk!, Funk!" and we would start to run away. I got away once, twice, and finally I was caught and they put me under arrest. I was probably about sixteen years old at that time. The local police tortured me and then they sent me and some of the others for additional questioning and more torture to the Pawiak prison in Warsaw. The Pawiak was the most notorious and most severe jail in Poland for political prisoners. The torture was terrible and no

one can visualize how such cruelty could be done to human beings. They tortured us and questioned us to admit, to bring out the names of the people in charge of this organization. Are they Communists? [This same system of torture was later carried out by Communist themselves in Soviet Russia.] They told us: "You be a good guy and you tell us the names of the members and leader of your group". If we did not tell them, the bad guy would come in and start throwing us from wall to wall and hit us. The worst torture that I endured was when they tied me up with my hands under my knees and they put in a long stick under my knees and they hung me upside down by this stick supported between two tables. Then they poured water into my nostrils. I was choking and drowning. They did this for a long time and then they would stop for a while and question you some more. "You", they said, "you will die unless you tell us who your leaders are". If you didn't tell them anything, two men would then pick you up and throw you from one wall to the other wall and kick you. This went on for a long while. I don't know how come I am still alive.

What was going on in my mind while they were doing all this to me? "*Just keep your mouth shut*". I wouldn't tell them anything. I told them I didn't know anything and so I couldn't tell anything. This, of course, drove them crazy. They went wild and administered more torture. They put me in a tiny cell and water would drip, drip, drip, on my head until you're out of your mind. It could drive anyone crazy. After this they took me before a court and they sentenced me for 'such and such' activities. No one was represented by a lawyer. They put me in jail for five, or maybe six years.

The conditions in the Pawiak Prison were terrible, so we staged hunger strikes. The hunger strikes would sometimes last a week to ten days. We didn't take any food at all and a lot of the prisoners just passed out. Some of them were force-fed and some of them were taken to the hospital. This was the only way we had to fight them and we thought that maybe this will become known on the outside. Hunger was the only weapon we had to fight them. The people that I met in prison were very intelligent people. They could be leaders in a movement, in a government and I got a lot of education from these people.

We were often kept in isolation cells, but mostly we were several prisoners in the same cell. This is the way we used our time teaching each other. I remember one particular person, a great man, he gave us some lessons. I forgot his name, he was a highly intelligent man and I was taken with him. He had been in jail for quite a while and I would have still been in jail except once in a while, on special occasions such as a special anniversary or the President's birthday, they would reduce the sentences of some of the prisoners or release them under an amnesty. I think that I was amnestied because I was rather young. After I served for two years, from 1936 to '38, I was then freed under such an amnesty. I was at that time about twenty years old and I started rebuilding my life.

I stayed in Warsaw and I started working as an apprentice to a furrier. When I went to a political meeting of a 'Young Progressives' group it was there that I met Regina [Rifka] Kawer and also her younger sister Ida [Edith]. Regina and I started dating and we fell in love. She had blond hair, blue eyes and she was a little bit chubby but beautiful and smart. I then also met her brother Lazer and later on I met Regina's parents.

Regina's family was very religious and her father taught in a religious *Yeshiva* [Religeous Hebrew High School]. Her mother Kayla wore the traditional wig that religious Jewish married women wore. During one of my visits for Shabbath dinner Regina's father, whose name was Moishe, tested me to see if I can read the prayers in Hebrew. I passed the test.

They lived in a very crowded apartment at 9 Wołińska Street. The family was not rich, but they made a living. Regina was working and her sister Ida and her younger brother went to school. They were less than middle class. At that time I would classify as middle class people in Poland who had some businesses in manufacturing and selling goods and who had a better income.

Warsaw was a modern and a cultural city but it was very overcrowded. The only thing that was bad there was the political system and the many Fascist, anti-Semitic gangs. Sometimes, when Regina and I sat in a public park these Fascist youth, they call them 'skinheads' now, would come up to us and shine their flashlights to check us out to see if you were Jewish. If you looked Jewish to them they would beat you up. As Regina was a blonde they passed us by without hurting us.

Warsaw was a beautiful city but the Jews were given a hard time there. The Jews controlled a lot of the small industry and commerce in Warsaw. They would generally sell their wares in the streets. I would say that the population in Warsaw at that time was probably about 50% Jewish. We had a very rich Yiddish cultural life in Poland and there were some famous theaters there; such as the Kamińska Theater and many others. There were many synagogues there, including a Reform Temple.

I lived in an apartment on Pawia Street near the main street called Zamenhoff Street. This street was named after the Jew Zamenhoff who invented "Esperanto" that was to be the international language. I, like

many of my friends, were learning Esperanto but by now I forgot it. At that time we thought that a common language would unite all the people of the world, but it did not materialize.

Regina and I, together with many of our friends, participated in the life of the big city. We became active in the "Youth Movement" and went often to their meetings. We also went to the theater, we used to go out for walks a lot, to the parks, to the main streets, and we ate some ice cream. Sometimes we were out until two o'clock in the morning, and then we would get up early in the morning in time to go to work. This was normal life for us. It was a lot of fun.

The time now was 1938-39. The atmosphere was tense. The Germans were already threatening Poland. They started deporting out of Germany all those Jews who had been born in Poland back into Poland. They were just dumped on the Polish side of the border. So we knew what was going on in Germany and we knew that sooner or later things would explode.

People started leaving Poland. But at this point Regina and I did not make any plans to leave the country. It was felt in the air that an explosion will soon come and a war would start and perhaps it would then be too late to go anywhere. So people who had money and contacts or family in other countries started leaving Germany. And some people in Poland also started going to England, Sweden, and Czechoslovakia.

In this tumultuous year of 1939, Regina and I decided to get married. Regina was 19 years old and I a few years older. We were married in June of that year in a small synagogue with a small group of people attending our wedding. A few of my family members from Sławatycze came to Warsaw and a few friends of ours in Warsaw attended. We moved into an apartment on Pawia Street. Our honeymoon was short. We went traveling for a couple of days, really over a weekend. The political situation was rather tense; war was in the air.

On the unforgettable morning of September 1st,1939, we were both walking on Zamenhoff Street where a lot of people would come out to promenade. As we walked holding hands we heard the air raid sirens blowing and people started running.

Of course, we somehow anticipated this but suddenly we were run off the street into the yards of the Warsaw apartment complexes. The gates to the yards were then closed and we were probably locked in this yard for about thirty or forty minutes. We heard the sirens and then we heard the bombs dropping. After about forty-five minutes we all got out of the yard. We then found out that the main area of Warsaw and also the outskirts were bombed by German planes and that the damage was considerable. And this was an undeclared war. That changed the thinking and life for all the people. We knew that war was here and some people started running and some people started making plans. We were all scared. It didn't take long for the Germans to decimate the Polish Army and to capture the Western part of Poland.

Life was so uncertain then and we didn't have any definite plans. We had just gotten married and the war started shortly after. Things got more terrible from day to day. One morning in early September, we heard on the radio an announcement from the Polish Government that all young men should go east where the Polish Government intended to regroup and fight the advancing German Army. This was just a dream, so we started going east. The roads were cluttered with people, not just young men, but people with families and young children and the panic was great. The German planes strafed all these masses of civilian people on the roads running east. Many were killed. We went together with five friends and we decided that if anything happens to one of us we would be able to inform the rest. After seeing a lot of people killed we decided that it is unsafe to walk in the daytime so we decided to hide in the countryside, on farms during daytime and walk during the night. So it took us about six or seven days to get to Białystok which is the largest city in Eastern Poland and at that time was still in Polish hands. Białystok was the largest city in Poland east of Warsaw. [Sławatycze is south of Białistok]. Białistok became overcrowded and could not absorb so many people. It became terribly overcrowded.

In the meantime, Russia and Germany made a secret pact known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Under this secret pact Russia would have the Eastern part of Poland and the Germans took the Western part of Poland. On September 17th 1939, as per the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact [1], the Soviets attacked Poland from the east and occupied the eastern part of Poland. The Polish Army that was retreating east collapsed completely especially when they found out that the Russians had attacked them too.

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1) *Named after the then German and Soviet foreign ministers.*

The Bug River became the border between German and Soviet occupied Poland. Sławatycze was now on the German side of the border and Białystok on the Soviet side of the border.

I was in Byałistok and Regina was still in Warsaw. Meanwhile, life in Warsaw was getting pretty nasty. She would stand in the long bread lines. By the way, my sister Hella was there too. They were both blond, with blue eyes and looked Aryan so they did not get thrown out of the long bread lines as happened to other Jews. Also, Regina spoke excellent Polish.

In the meantime, we started receiving information that the Germans had already started to pick up [arrest] Jews and people were not sure what to do. We were in a situation without newspapers, independent information with which you could make up your mind as to what was the situation in German occupied Poland. So many Jews went back to the German side because they couldn't find a place to live or to do anything for a living. There were people here one on top of the other. So many went back and by going back some of them were picked up by the Germans and they lost their lives. I was fortunate that a week or ten days later, Regina together with my sister Hella, started out from Warsaw on foot on the way to Sławatycze. The two of them looked like Aryan girls and the German soldiers even offered them rides on the horse drawn military wagons.

They arrived in Sławatycze alright. My family was still there. Of course, my father was very happy to see them and he did the best he could for them. But Regina was determined to join me in Białystok.

It may be surprising to realize that she knew that I was in Białystok. Even during wartime there were always people going back and forth. [Some of them were black-marketeers and also people-smugglers.]

So after we were in Białystok for several months we found a place and I always tried to be ahead of the rest. We started dealing a bit on 'black market' in order to be able to pay for the place and to be able to buy food. We didn't have the Germans there, but we already knew about the German atrocities.

Later on my parents and the children crossed over to the Russian side and in this way they saved their lives too. My older brother crossed over the border to stay with my family. As he was already married my father told him "you go back and be with your wife". So he went back to the east side. On his way back to Sławatycze he was killed by the Germans. His wife did not survive either. One of my sisters, the one in Israel, has a miniature picture of my older brother that was taken before the war.

Regina and I were in Białystok from September 1939 through the end of May, or so, of 1940.

Then, during the summer of 1940 the Soviets arrested all those Polish citizens who originated from the German occupied part of Poland. They packed them into locked boxcars and shipped them to the Siberian *Gulags*, the forced labor camps also known as *lagers*. The Russian secret police, the NKVD, were specialists at this. They knocked on our doors at one or two in the morning and told us to take what we could carry and then led us under guard to the railway tracks where closed freight cars were waiting for us. They probably loaded about fifty people per boxcar. There were two rows of wooden bunks. After they filled up the boxcar with about fifty people they slid the door shut and locked it. At the top of the boxcar there were these two little windows with steel bars, just enough for some air to come in. There were probably a couple of thousand people on this prison train. They had been doing this for quite a while during Stalin's time, arresting the landowners; whom they called *kullack*, and sending them to Siberia as prisoners. "Enemies of the State" is what they called them, and also us.

Luckily, Regina and I were in the same locked cattle car. We did not know where they were taking us but we could tell that we were traveling east. We had an inkling that they were taking us to Siberia.

We were definitely not traveling 'first-class'. In each of the boxcars there were a lot of people, including children. It was very crowded. The sanitary conditions were bad, that is, not existent. In the corner there was a hole in the floor and that was our toilet. People had a member of the family cover them with a blanket in order to save them from the embarrassment of defecating in front of all the others. The train did not stop at the regular train stations. The train would generally stop somewhere, way off the main tracks, where people wouldn't see us and where they would distribute our daily food rations which they called *payoks,* consisting of bread, boiled potatoes and some water. The situation was very, very bad.

When the train did stop at a station, or nearby, people would come out and offer to trade with us anything we had. They wanted our shirts but they themselves didn't have too much to give in return because they were hungry too. But we needed food so we made a deal with the guards. They would come into the wagon and ask for alcohol. Of course we didn't have any alcohol, so they asked for aftershave lotion which

they would drink because it contained some alcohol. This trip went on for over three weeks in these terrible conditions; locked in these boxcars with horrible sanitary conditions and with little food.

It was hot but we could see snow in the mountains. Every day was a long day. Everybody thought that we would rather be in a labor camp so as to be out of this hellish confinement in the boxcars. Finally we arrived to the city of Assino where the railroad tracks ended. Assino was surrounded by woods. It was not like a regular town, only prisoners and their guards were there. We subsequently found out that in a nearby high security camp were held high ranking political prisoners from the Communist past such as Zinoviev and Bukharin and many other famous political enemies of Stalin, real or imagined. At the camp there were a lot of guards with machine guns stationed in watch towers.

When we finally arrived to this place everybody was glad to get out of the boxcars, out of hell. The camp where we were taken to was cleaned out of all the other political prisoners and they moved them to some other camp, probably worse than this one. And this camp now became a place for the "Enemies of the State", that is how we, as the former Polish citizens were referred to. There were also families with kids but they kept them in separate log buildings. They told the local people not to get close to us or to talk to us as we were enemies. They didn't give a damn for the people.

Right after we arrived at the camp they took us to the delousing station to be deloused including our clothes, and to take a bath. Women were always in charge of these delousing stations. We undressed in front of them and they took our clothes and put them in special ovens so that the high heat would kill the lice. After our bath we received back our deloused clothing and we were taken to our quarters. Our beds consisted of upper and lower wooden bunks. There was no separation between men and women in the bunks and Regina and I stayed together. We have never seen so many bedbugs marching around as we did then.

It was in the middle of the summer but we felt cold. We were given our *payok*, our ration of bread that seemed to have been made of sawdust. I never ate such tasteless black bread. I would make chess figures out of this inedible bread. Then we were put to work. We were divided into groups of ten and each group was given a quota which we were to produce each day. Each group's daily production was written down in a book. If you made more than the weekly quota you were given more than the weekly *payok* of bread. It meant that if you produced more than the quota you were good workers and were rewarded with a little bit more bread and little bit more soup but not enough to over stuff you. The people that didn't make the daily quotas, the norms, would have their daily portion of food reduced accordingly.

As I was able to speak Russian, I was elected to be the leader [the foreman] of my group; called a *desiatnik* in Russian; that is, the leader of a 'group of ten'. I was put in charge of a group of ten Jewish guys and it was ironic that the Jews would produce more than their quotas and more than the Poles in our camp would manage to do. I had learned to speak Russian from other political [Communist] prisoners when I was in jail back in Poland. [2]

Assino is on the banks of the Ob River. Trees were cut down upriver and were floated downriver to the sawmills which were located in Assino. My group would jump on these logs floating down the river and hook them with long poles with hooks attached to one end and pull the logs out onto the riverbank. Then we would drag the logs to the sawmill. We had to bring the logs to a certain area to be counted, that is, to show that we made the quota for the day. This was repeated every day. No women worked with us, they assigned them to work in less dangerous places. The work was hard and strenuous and from day to day we were getting tired and more and more exhausted. After a few days we came up with some ideas of how to beat the assigned quota. We would bring over to our daily load some of the logs that had already been counted from the day before. Of course we risked our lives to do this. The Poles in our camp were used to hard work. They probably did this type of work back home and they were strong. And here I've got a bunch Jewish guys who have never before been exposed to this type of hard work so we had to cheat a little in order to get our rations, our *payok*.

Once a week, I think it was on Fridays, we were all gathered for a meeting where the big *nachalnik* [the big political boss] called out all the names of the leaders whose group had made, or had exceeded the assigned quotas. He also called out the names of those groups who didn't make the quota. Szmuel Grynblat's group always made the quotas. My people were happy that they had me as their *desiatnik*. They would get

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[2] *My being able to speak Russian well also came in handy later on when Regina and I were in Vienna, Austria, after the war. Vienna was divided into four zones. [Soviet, US, British and French) Our first born son Leonard was born in Vienna. The Russian magazines [stores) used to have a lot of provisions for children such as milk and other food. I used to be able to get food there because my Russian was very good.*

larger portions of food and sometimes they would give us a pair of socks as a reward. Anyway, Regina knew about this and some other guys but not everybody was told what we were doing. I told them that it is the only way we can survive. It was the talk of the camp that the Jews were making their quotas and that the Poles weren't always making theirs.

In the meantime, the situation in the *lager* [forced labor camp] was getting worse. There was a lot of sickness among the people, especially among the children. It was terrible. Women with children came out in a protest strike. Many of the men joined them too. This really caught the Russians off guard because in the Russian forced labor camps nobody ever stopped working and went on strike, or demonstrated. They brought in the high officials of the region, the NKVD [Soviet Internal Security Police, later on they were called the KGB]. They had something on their hands that they'd never had before. So what did they do? First they were going to bring in the guys who were in charge of the groups for interrogation and to hold them responsible for what was going on. Of course, they called me in too. And the most important thing they wanted to know was who were the organizers of this strike and who is the leader. I told them that I do not know anything about it. My people went out to work as required of us and we didn't know anything. They didn't like our answers so they started to interrogate us. They started off by keeping us overnight and Regina did not know and couldn't do anything about it. She knew that I and many others had been arrested.

There was no such thing as having a lawyer to represent you. They interrogated us all night and they didn't let us sleep. It was not only physical – but they kept you down mentally too, not to be able to think normally. "Okay", they said, "you know everything that's been going on, just tell us, just give us a few of the names of the leaders, who they are, and then you can go home to your wife". Now if you don't tell them anything then another bastard comes in, a mean guy, and he starts to threaten you. He starts to hit you. Then they change them. In the meantime, they don't let you sleep. They kept us there for several days. They probably couldn't get it out of any of the men so afterwards they started questioning women with kids.

They couldn't do anything and then it quieted down and the people went back to work. I think they changed a little bit. They gave some thought for the families. And as a consequence they decided to take families with children and send them out from this camp to somewhere else and in this way, they figured, they're going to break this protest organization.

They then brought in a train into the camp and started loading families into the boxcars. Regina and I then decided that we've got to take a chance and get out of here. I would say it was then the end of 1940 or possibly in the springtime of 1941. We didn't have any proper clothing for the winter. They didn't give us any clothing whatsoever and we were just freezing to death. But if you complain then you're a real Enemy of the State. So we decided we were going to take a chance to get out of there as we couldn't keep up the quotas without cheating. I thought that sooner or later they were going to get me. So Regina and I decided to try to sneak into the boxcars with the families and some people who knew us helped us out. They hid us under the lower bunks, behind some luggage, so we could not be seen. We made it. We got into our hiding places and later on these monsters came to the train to look for us. It was two frightening days before the train moved out of the camp. It was very frightening. But we were lucky, the train took off and we are on the train [3]. We traveled in the same type of boxcars, with the same type of guards, in the same conditions but now we traveled west from Siberia to the Ural Mountains. In the Urals is where they have the most mines, especially coal and iron mines. About ten days later we arrived in a small town called *Zeronsky Rudnyk* .

In the Ural Mountains it was different. There were no logging camps like there were in Assino. We were put in barracks but not under lock and key. There was a curfew and we were not allowed to leave the barracks at night. Nearby, there were areas where local people lived. We were not allowed to go to the train station or to near the train tracks or near bridges. In the barracks we were in a large room together with several other families. With us there was a doctor and his sister who were Jewish. I'll never forget them, they were very pleasant people. There was also a Polish family with us in the same barrack.

They sent us to work down in the mines. We went down probably about a thousand or more feet. In the mines we worked in shifts. At the end of each shift they exploded the walls of the iron ore with explosives and the explosions left a blue smoke, a gas. The ventilation was terrible. They didn't wait for the air to clear a bit before we were sent down the mine shaft right after the explosion, before the gasses were cleared. Also there was very little to eat. Regina used to stay in the line for hours to get some bread. They did not give her

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Editor's note:

3) *The Soviet guards of these prison trains would have been severely punished if any of the prisoners under their charge were to escape from the train. Therefore, they did not mind finding extra "passengers".*

a big portion of bread because she didn't work in the mines. She would cook up a soup, mostly water, maybe with little pieces of potatoes and I ate this and I worked an eight hour shift in this mine that was full of gas.

The local people were also told that we are "Enemies of the Soviet State", *Kulaks*, Capitalists, and that they should watch us and stay away from us.

The Soviets needed the iron and we were their slave laborers. It's hard to describe the working conditions in the mines with this gas in there and with the little food we were given. When we came up from the mine we would vomit up what little we had to eat. I didn't realise how strong I was then.

It was 1941. After we were probably there about six months I came to the conclusion that if we wanted to be alive we had to get out of there because I couldn't survive like this anymore. We had no food and these terrible working conditions. So what were we to do? Then Germany attacked Soviet Russia in June of 1941. [4]

[An Amnesty was declared for former Polish citizens.] I said to Regina we've got to try our luck and get to Samarqand. Many people had been in the railway station for weeks trying to get on a train that was going east and south. "If they put us in jail, it couldn't be worse than here", I said, "at least I wouldn't be in the mines with that horrible gas". At the train station it was terrible. People were lying all over the floor, one on top of the other. Some of them had been there two weeks and couldn't get on a train. Most of the trains passing through were military trains with soldiers on them and very seldom were there any passenger trains. And when a passenger train did pass one had to be very lucky to get on because people had been waiting for a long time. So I told Regina that I'm going to the *nachalnik*, [the chief] to see if I can bribe him to give us tickets. I knocked on the door. I heard a shout: *Stoy! Ruki na veher*, [Stop! Hands Up!] I told the guard "I want to see the *nachalnik"*. "For what?", the guard asked. "Tell him I've got something to ask him." Anyway, I insisted. They let me in and I told him that my wife and I want to go to Samarqand. He said: "you're crazy".

We wanted to go to Samarqand because the climate there was much warmer, life there was more relaxed and those Uzbeks did not like the Russians. So we had a lot of reasons to go to Samarqand.

There were a lot of Jews there and we had heard that it was a good place to go to. It was a good decision. He looked at me like I was completely off my rocker. In the meantime, the *nachalnik* started to tear off a piece of newspaper and roll in some *makhorka* [rough cut tobacco] into the form of a cigarette. I had a cigarette lighter with me at that time. I took out the cigarette lighter and I lit his cigarette. He jumped up. "What is it?" he asked. "What kind of machine is it?" It seems that he had never seen a cigarette lighter before. He took it in his hand and this was my lucky break. "Where do you want to go?" he asked. So I told him that we want to go to Samarqand. "What?" he exclaimed "We've got to transport the military and all you want is to go there?" And to make this long story short, this little cigarette lighter saved our lives. If I would have given him a bribe, as a lot of other people tried to do, it would not have been as effective as the gift of the cigarette lighter was. This saved our lives. He made sure we got on the train.

We made it to Samarqand and when we got there it was like a breath of fresh air. It was a different type of atmosphere as we weren't in a prison camp anymore. The people in Uzbekistan are different than the Russian people. They are Muslims and they didn't like the Communist System. Their life was based on what they can do for themselves and what they can do to avoid the 'Soviet system'.

So under the circumstances, we fitted in pretty well. You've got to take advantage and go with the flow of the people who were able to survive and make a living. This meant operating on the 'black market'. In Russia there is a famous word '*blat*'. *Blat* meant a bribe. You could bribe anyone; from the lowest to the top

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Editor's notes:

4) *Early in the morning of June 22, 1941, in a surprise attack called "Barbarossa", Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in violation of their Ribbentrop-Molotov Non-Aggression Pact. By the fall of 1941 the Germans had conquered much of the territory between the Bug River and Moscow, the capital of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the rest of vast "Mother Russia" was threatened.*

The Soviet Union declared an amnesty for all Polish citizens incarcerated in the Gulags and they were now considered as allies of the Soviet Union. Given 'propusks', certificates of release, these Polish citizens were now free to travel, but to go where? The war was raging in the west and the Germans were quickly advancing to the eastern slopes of the Ural Mountains. The released Polish citizens gathered in Samarqand, Tashkent and Bukhara in southern Uzbekistan. These cities soon became overcrowded with the large influx of Polish refugees. The Polish Government in Exile took many of their former soldiers [primarily Poles) out of Russia through Iran into British controlled Palestine. The war was raging to the west. The Germans were advancing rapidly towards Moscow and the Ural Mountains, and more and more war refugees were streaming east and south. The railway stations were overcrowded. Food was scarce. Utter chaos reigned.

one. This is the real morality that existed in Soviet Russia; you've got to bribe and I was pretty good at it. This helped us to survive. In Samarqand we rented one of those little houses in an enclosed yard.

Soldiers used to hunt men in the streets and try to catch men and induct them in the regular army or into the *trud* [labor] army and send them to the front or to the work camps.

I often had to hide in a tub located in one of the small houses in our yard. I used to hide there and try not to be caught, but how do you make a living in order to survive? When I did go out I went to the market, the 'bazaar' they called it, and there you could buy almost anything. The breads they baked there were flat and round like pizzas. Besides bread there was a lot of fruit grown there and life was easier there. I made some friends. There were a lot of Jewish people there who had run away from somewhere else and came to Uzbekistan. People starved and died in the streets.

There were two different ways of making a living there. I was lucky to be able to make a living; I dealt on the black market. I lined up farmers who would bring to me tanned sheepskins and cowhides which they tanned illegally. These I sold to shoemakers who would sew them up into shoes and boots which were then sold on the bazaars illegally. In this illegal operation I cut-in a Russian policeman. He and his wife would have the boots sewn and his wife sold them on the black market. It was not a matter of making a lot of money; just enough to survive. I was able to help friends such as the writer, Moishe Grossman. He was a very famous writer but he was helpless in this situation and if he hadn't been under my wing he would have died. Under these circumstances intellectuals were rather helpless. Intellectuals couldn't adapt themselves to this type of life. Since my early childhood I had the "street smarts", the instinct of how to survive.

We were making money on the black market and I had to be careful not to be caught. I also had close contacts with the Uzbeks, they were very good people. Then, suddenly, the police raided our house. We had made a lot of money and Regina would roll up the *rubbles* and hide them in the ceiling. During the first raid they did not find the money but not long after this they returned and they started tearing up the ceiling and suddenly bundles of money were tumbling down to the floor. Of course, I was arrested as this is a very big crime having black market money. It was a serious case. I was put in jail and Regina couldn't do anything for me. So I told her find out if she could bribe the main prosecutor of the city of Samarqand. I was called up before the prosecutor several times; they read to me the charges and the punishment for such things. Regina had already paid the prosecutor a sum of money. He told her that he would let me out provided she gave him an additional sum of money, a pair of boots and also a gold watch. When Regina paid him the extra demands they let me out. This is what life was like in wartime Soviet Russia.

Shortly afterwards the war situation eased up a lot. We Polish citizens became important. Soviet Russia needed our help and the Polish people were released from the Soviet prisons and *Lagers* [Slave Labor camps]. The Polish Provisional Government in Exile, located in London sent representatives to Russia to recruit support from Polish citizens. Poland and Russia were now allies against Nazi Germany. We organized into groups and here I have a picture of me sitting at a table with a group of Polish citizens sitting and standing around the table. We even flew the Polish red and white flag with the Polish Eagle on it. In the group there were many women and most of the people were Jewish; former political activists like me. We were getting information and bulletins about what was going on in Poland then, what was going on in England and in other places of the world. We were the official representatives so this was a big, big achievement because before this time you would be jailed for obtaining such information. Yeah, instead of being enemies of the Soviet State we were now representatives of their allies, the Polish State.

As time went on, the German Army lost more and more territory and finally Germany capitulated in May of 1945. Then we knew we were free and eventually we would be able to go back home but we didn't know what we would see there. Not everyone was able to return right away because Poland was not ready to receive such big masses of their former citizens. I tried to do my best for us to get out of Russia.

Before we went back to Poland we pretty well knew what had happened in the Warsaw ghetto and what happened in other places, at that time it was no secret. We had no idea what had happened to any members of our families. Regina's family probably perished in the Warsaw Ghetto.

In July or August of 1946 Regina and I were able to leave Samarqand and we went back to Warsaw. By registering with HIAS, the Jewish Organization, we found out that Regina's sister Maria [Ida] had survived on false papers. It was like something out of the air. I did not find anybody who was looking for my name, that is, from my side of the family. We found that a Maria Godlefska who had been living at 9 Wołinska Street before the war. This is what got me. I said "My gosh! Maria and 9 Wołinska Street", who else can it be from that address. I was surprised she didn't change her name back after the war. That street address was her pre-war address. It was a big apartment block, dozens of people lived there but this name stuck in my mind.

So I started to check out where is Maria Godlefska. The information that they had was that Maria Godlefska worked in a hospital somewhere in the city of Legnica, in the Western part of Poland. So I got all the information and we went there by bus.

When we got there we told a Jewish looking Russian high medical officer, a doctor with the rank of *Polkownik,* that we were looking for a Maria Godlefska. With a solemn face she asked me: "How do you know her?" So we told her we know her not as Maria Godlefska but as Ida Kawer and she then started to interrogate me because she was, after all a Russian official. Later on I found out that this Russian medical officer's name was Kagan [Cohen in Russian] and that she was the head of the hospital. Maria had papers as Maria Godlefska because she had been working for a Polish farmer who had a daughter by that name who had died. They were close in age and the Polish woman was very kind to her so she gave Maria her daughter's papers. And this is how she survived, because of these papers and also because she looked Polish; she was blonde and with blue eyes. And as I understand it, the woman who ran the hospital, the Jewish doctor, liked her so much that she planned to adopt her. When I told this doctor that we came to take her with us, she told us that we couldn't get her right away. Of course when we met her and she saw us embrace each other, she finally decided that Maria [Ida] could join us. We went back to Warsaw and later we went together to Lódz and she eventually came with us to the United States.

When we were in Lódz we joined up with the *berichah* [5] and they smuggled us out of Poland into the American Occupation Zone of Vienna that was controlled by the American Military Forces. The trains were very crowded and members of the *berichah* pulled us and other Jews through the windows of the train.

In Vienna the refugees were lodged in DP [Displaced Person] camps located in former German Army barracks. The refugees were fed by the UNRRA [6] and other organizations such as HIAS [7].

Maria was with us in Vienna. Regina was pregnant then and I decided I didn't want to live in a damn old army barrack. I didn't want my baby to be born in a camp, so I found a private place for us outside of the DP Camp. Our son Lenny was born in Vienna in 1947.

There was no work to be had. At least in the DP Camp people got food, on the outside we had to provide for ourselves. So I started "black marketeering" like many others did and like I had done before. We were *spekulants* [black market speculators]. We bought and sold American cigarettes, rice, leather and liqueur and any other hard to obtain items. A lot of things were hard to get so I went into the Russian Zone dressed in a long leather coat with high leather boots and since I spoke Russian well I never had any problems if somebody would stop and question me. They thought that I was a Soviet Party officer. I was very successful in dealing on the black market.

We then started getting some information from our relatives in America and we received a letter with ten dollars in it from my wife Regina's aunt, Edith Toporek of Charleston, South Carolina. They obtained our address from the HIAS. We showed our appreciation and we started to correspond with Regina's aunt and with the Goldbergs [Graham] from New Jersey. Regina's aunt Edith and her uncle Louis Toporek then sponsored us and we obtained papers to come to the USA. That is how we were able to come to Charleston in 1948.

Regina also had a first cousin named Edith Miedzyrzecka- Kirshtein who was also living in Charleston. The two Ediths, the aunt and cousin, were about the same age. Regina's family was from Kaluszyn, Poland, and there was a long tradition of people from Kaluszyn coming to Charleston where there was a Kaluszyn *Landsmanshaft* Aid Society. They all helped each other settle in the United States.

From my black market activity in Vienna I was able to save up quite a bit of money. From Vienna we brought with us expensive china and good silverware and also about three and a half thousand dollars. This was considered to be a lot of money then.

Editor's notes:

5) *Between 1944 and 1948 a Jewish underground operation called "berichah", ["flight" in Hebrew) was organized by various Jewish organizations to smuggle Jews out of Poland and other East European countries into the American Occupied Zones of Germany and of Vienna, Austria, with the intention of then smuggling them, mainly through Italy, into British Occupied Palestine. At that time Vienna, like Berlin, was divided into four Allied Occupation Zones; American, Russian, British and French.*

6) UNRRA - *United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration [1943-47) founded to give economic and social aid to countries that were under Nazi occupation during World War II and to care for some 850,000 Displaced Persons.*

7) HIAS - *Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society formed in New York City in 1909. [Source: Encyclopedia Judaica)*

We came over to the USA in March of 1948 from the port of Le Havre, France, on a transport ship called the "Marine Flasher". It was a rough crossing.

I really do not remember exactly when I changed my name from Grynblat to Greene. It must have been when I made out the official papers when we arrived to the USA. I think it was Regina's uncle's son Dale who suggested we change our name to Greene. Dale spoke Yiddish well. Regina's uncle's four sons all had different last names. Instead of Goldberg, Dale's last name was Graham. When Dale met his first cousin Maria they fell in love.

When we arrived to the USA we stayed with the Goldbergs in New Jersey for about a week or ten days, and then Auntie Edith Toporek came to New Jersey and took us back with her to Charleston.

I will never forget when we were still in Vienna we received a package with food for the baby from a store in Charleston called "*The Piggly Wiggly*". It was a franchise store owned by Albert Kohn, another of Regina's cousins.

We arrived in March and in about June or July it was time for me to get to work. Uncle Louis Toporek said that every newcomer to Charleston starts off by being a peddler like he himself had done. So we put a bunch of stuff into a bag and Uncle Toporek dropped me off in a strictly black neighborhood. He went back home in his car and I was left alone carrying this big bundle of merchandise on my back, going from door to door trying to sell the merchandise. It was a hot day. I had written down in Yiddish what is the price of a shirt, skirt, blouse, pants, and I started to knock on doors. Doors were opened and I showed them my wares. They looked over the merchandise and asked me questions and I didn't understand what they were saying. I showed them the numbers on the paper what that costs and this way I started off working to make a living. It was very tough. In the evenings I went home by bus. This was my daily routine. I remember that on the first day I brought home fifteen dollars. It was a lot of money then. So I kept it up for a couple of weeks and it got to be very hot in July. It wasn't just the weather but I was walking carrying a bundle on my back. So I asked Uncle Louie wouldn't it be a good idea if I bought a car. Oh, he answered, it's too early for you to buy a car. When we came here we carried our bundles on foot for a long time and only later did we get a horse and buggy. I told him that I don't want a horse and buggy, I'd like to buy a car, at least a used car. He wasn't sold on my idea. So I kept it up for a while with the bundles on my back. After I got a little bit more experience and I could already speak a little more English and I was taking some orders from customers and I brought the merchandise back to them. I now had an account at the department store to buy my merchandise. So I figured that if I had a car I could carry much more stuff and I wouldn't be so tired. Finally, I told Uncle Louis we'll go out today to buy a used car. So he went with me and we bought a `41 Chevrolet and I started to sell more and more and I made more money. I then started to go into different wholesale places and I built up credit accounts with them. On Sundays I would go to collect from my customers. I realized that I have all these possibilities and of course the freedom of choice. In 1949 I decided to rent a small place and I called it "Sam's Credit Company". I would send my customers in there and Regina would sell to the customers on credit and I was getting the merchandise on consignment from Sam Solomon's department store.

In 1950 Regina and I bought our own house. Maria was still living with us in 1949 and 1950 until she married her cousin Dale. Our relatives were shocked at our rapid advancement when I hired a black man to work for me doing the door to door peddling. Then we opened our new store called "Park Furniture Company" and Dale was supposed to be the inside man and I would be the outside man, but Dale did not like Charleston or the furniture business so he went back to New Jersey. I had to take out a bank loan to buy him out.

In about 1950 I finally found out through the Red Cross that some members of my family had survived the war and that they were in Poland. Also, I found out that my father had died a natural death in Russia in about 1943 and that my older brother was killed in Sławatycze at the beginning of the war. Later on, in about 1954 or '55, my stepmother and my step sisters left Poland for Israel. Eventually, my nephew, my step-sister Hella's son, came over from Israel to Chicago and he then brought his mother over to the USA. My step-sister Hella lives in Chicago with her family and I see them often.

* * *

I have an interesting story to tell about how I found a childhood friend of mine from Sławatycze. Like me, he also left Sławatycze and went to live in Warsaw.

In Charleston, we had been representing the "Ethan Allen Furniture Company" and we went on one of their tours that they had for dealers. The tours were to New York City, New England and also to Quebec City and to Montreal, Canada. When Regina and I were in Montreal I remembered that in 1938 my childhood friend Awrejml Repkowski, also a furrier, had emigrated to Montreal to join his sister Dora who had come there from Sławatycze in 1928, or so. When our tour bus came to Montreal I looked in the telephone book for my friend's name but I could not find any Repkowskis or Rybkowski's. I then got the idea to call a couple of furriers who were listed in the Yellow Pages of the telephone directory and the second furrier I called knew Awrejml Repkowski, who by now had changed his name to Abe Reback. The furrier told me where Awrejml's fur shop was located and as it was not far from our hotel, Regina and I walked in on Abe Reback. It was him, alright, my old friend Awrejml Repkowski who was now called Abe Reback. Abe's two sisters and his three brothers and also his brother-in-law Hershel Gitelman and their families also lived in Montreal by then. Hershel is the one who recognized me in the Siberian camp of Assino. He knew my father very well. Hershel had a memory like a computer. Gitelman was certain that I must have been born in 1917 or 1918 and not in 1914 as is stated on my official papers.[8] He said that after giving birth, many women, including his own mother, had died during the great epidemic that occurred at the end of the First World War.[9] He was certain that my mother had died when I was less than one year old. Regina and I had been to Montreal many times and we attended many of their family functions.

Regina and I have three sons and one daughter. Leonard was born in 1947 when we were in Vienna, Austria. The others were all born in Charleston, South Caroline. Our daughter Karen was born in 1951, and our son Harlan was born in 1953 and our son Tom was born in 1960.

My Regina, my dear wife of 52 years, died on May 2nd, 1990.

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Editor's notes:

8] *In October of 2001, during a visit to the Sławatycze records office, I was able to obtain copies of birth, marriage and death records of many members of my family. I was also able to obtain the "delayed" registration of the birth of "Szmul-Hersz Grynblat, son of Chemja Grynblat, furrier, and Ruchl-Leah Kaufman who died in Sławatycze in the year 1918".*
This document, dated February 19, 1931, states that the father and the witnesses attested that the actual birth of the child, Szmul-Hersz Grynblat, had taken place on the 20th of March, 1914.

According to Prof. Jerzy Tomaszewski of the University of Warsaw, who specializes in the history of the Jews of Poland, it was common practice among Jews in Tsarist Russia and in Poland to delay the registration of the birth of their second and subsequent sons so as to avoid them being drafted into the Tsarist army for 10, 15 and even 25 years. Firstborn sons were exempt form serving in the Tsarist Army. After WW I, when the authorities forced them to register the births of their sons, Jews would register them as being 4 or 5 years older than they really were. This was done so that when the young men presented themselves for the obligatory "Army call-up" at the official age of 21, they would look small and scrawny like teenagers, which they really were at that time. These young boys would then be dismissed for reasons of being of "stunted growth and therefore not physically fit to serve in the army."

9] *The Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918-1919 during which more than 20 million people died in Europe over a period of 18 months.*

Chapter 9.7

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Ze'ev Domaczewski

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Testimony Given at Yad Vashem
October 01, 1996

Translated from Hebrew by Akiva Gitelman, Montreal, Canada

My name is Ze'ev [Wolf] Domaczewski. I was born in 1929 in Sławatycze, Poland. My parents were Yosef and Sara Domaczewski. The parents of my grandfather were called Grandpa Abraham and Grandma Batya. On my mother's side there was just my grandfather, Beryl Klein.

In our house we were four children; the oldest was my brother Pinchas, I was the second, the third was my sister Esther and the fourth was my brother Zvi [Herszel].

My parents earned their living selling manufactured goods. We had a textile store in the centre of the town opposite the marketplace, the *rynek.* My father would travel to Warsaw and bring back textile goods to be sold in the store. Once a week, on Mondays, there was a market fair in the town and many buyers would come, mostly farmers, from the surrounding area.

My family was a religious family. My father was a Chassid from Mezrycz [Międzyrzec] and my grandfather was a Chassid from Domczi. We had an extended family in the area. My father had 5 brothers in Sławatycze, my mother had four sisters and one brother and he brother lived in Warsaw. They also had children. In other words, the family was very large.

My family had no connection with Zionism but in the city there was *Betar*, maybe *Dror,* Zionist Organizations. There was a close connection to the town of Domaczewo [or Domaczów], across the Bug River from Sławatycze. There were 1,200 or so Jews there and there was a special connection with the youth of Domaczewo and they organized in Sławatycze too.

My name Domaczewski is derived from the town of Domaczewo. It is not generally a Jewish name. When Sławatycze was burned down during the First World War many Jews went across the Bug River to live in the town of Domaczewo.

At home we spoke Yiddish and at school we spoke Polish. When Jews in Sławatycze spoke Polish it was possible to recognize them by their Jewish accent. We also spoke *po chochłacku,* a peasant Belorussian [Belorus] dialect. I know Belorussian better than I know Polish since all the clients of the area were not Catholic Poles but Russian Orthodox and they spoke Belorussian and were called *Chochols.*

When I was among the Partisans I spoke Belorussian with them and they could not distinguish that I was Jewish. For Jews, speaking Polish was a problem. Even if they spoke Polish well their accent gave them away. My Polish accent wasn't good. When I was in the forest I spoke Belorussian with everyone as I was with the Belorussian partisans.

The relationship between the *goyim* [Gentiles] and my family was very good. There was a Jewish representative on the city council. My grandfather, Beryl Klein, was once the head of the city council. He was also head of the *Chevrah Kadishah* [the Jewish Burial Society]. He was an active man when he was older, as I remember him in the 1930s people would come to him for advice and when the Germans occupied the town they came to my grandfather, thanked him, and then appointed my father to be the head of the Jewish Community [Jüdenrat] of Sławatycze.

I went to the Polish school and I had many friends in the neighborhood, all kinds of friends of my age. I attended 4 grades in the Polish school in addition to that I also studied in *cheder* [Hebrew school]. I do not recall any acts of anti-Semitism in Sławatycze before the war, only during the war.

I remember the outbreak of the war in September of 1939. There was a gap of perhaps 2 weeks or so between the exiting of the Polish government and the entrance of the Nazi Germans. Many Jews of the Left, mainly young Communists, took control of the city. First, German tanks entered the city; I think it was on September 13th, 1939, and then, after four days or so, the Germans withdrew. On September 22nd the Soviets entered Sławatycze. Communist Jews greeted the Russians with Soviet red flags and received the Russian Army in a splendid way. Then the Russians withdrew, and before the Germans re-entered Sławatycze, the *goyim* [Gentiles], mainly the peasants, wanted to stage a pogrom. I remember my father went with some other Jews to the *galach*, the priest of the city, and requested that they not carry out any riots on the Jews and they were successful in preventing any pogroms against the Jews.

Before the Germans attacked their Soviet allies on June 22nd of 1942, many people in Sławatycze attempted to escape from German occupied Poland to the Soviet side of the Bug River. The border was closed and whoever was caught by the Russians or the Germans was killed on the spot. It was impossible to pass.

I continued studying in the *cheder* until 1942 but I couldn't continue to study in the Polish school. After the outbreak of the war between Germany and Russia life became very difficult for us. The Germans started abducting people to the work camps. There was a camp in Mezrycz [Międzyrzec] which is not far from us.

We were without any income as father was not able to continue in his business. We lived on what we had saved up from before. We sold merchandise which we needed for ourselves and from this we lived.

Then there was rationing of food. But the problems, from an economic point of view, became very difficult. There were many restrictions and sometimes different prohibitions. Jews had to wear a Star of David and all from the age of twelve had to report for work.

At the beginning the relationship with the Gentiles still remained not bad, we had no problems with them at all. But afterwards some Jews were killed. I remember that on June 28th they abducted some Jews and some of them were killed, like the wife of the butcher, and four or five more people, all were killed on that same day. Then SS arrived and the German police remained. From time to time decrees were issued. For example in the winter of 1941 Jews had to bring to the Germans all their fur coats and he who was caught with a fur coat was killed on the spot. There were three Jews with us from Wisznice who did not turn in their fur coats and they were taken and killed. Then they started another work brigade to dig pits.

In 1942 new edicts were issued. Then we heard that the Germans were taking children and burning them. It was understood that in the presence of a child we didn't talk about these things. We heard about this and we knew everything because not far from us there was a concentration camp called Sobibor and we knew that it was an extermination camp. We heard of the *Aktion* [1] in Włodawa, a city about 24 km south of Sławatycze. They carried out an *Aktion* there on the eve of *Shavuoth* and took the children to Sobibor. Someone had escaped from Sobibor and told us all about what had happened. I was 13 years old then and I remember this very well.

My father took me and my brother and some young friends aside and told us to escape to the forest. Like every child during this period we didn't feel any fear. Occasionally the *SS* came to the forests and grabbed some of the people hiding there. I remember an incident that occurred at the beginning of 1940. Peasants, gentiles, together with the *SS* arrived outside the place where we were hiding and they did a search at night and caught four people and locked them in the school. The next day they again did a search during the day and any Jew they saw in the town they grabbed. They said it was because some of the gentiles were angry with the Jews about them having carried red Soviet flags. Together there were 39 Jews and the next day, at three in the afternoon, they were all killed. This was in February or March of 1940.

At that time the border was closed and it was impossible to escape to the Soviet side. The Russians simply killed anyone trying to enter their side. There were two incidents, Goldstock and one other. They tried to flee to the Soviet side and they were killed. There was a fence and it was impossible to pass. In the synagogue there was talk about escaping to Romania and to Hungary, but no one did anything about it. At the beginning of the New Year, *Rosh Hashanah*, in September of 1942 the expulsions from the city started.

Also, compulsory work started in the forests for young children, both boys and girls. We were about twenty boys of my age and about seventy or eighty young girls. There were no special guards watching over us. We planted small trees and saplings all day long, from morning until evening. They wanted to plant a new forest. We worked without a break. They had a kitchen there and we had to prepare our own meals. We lived in a hut in the forest. This lasted for about four to five months during which time I got to know the forest well. Also I got to know how to live in the forest and this came in very handy in the future.

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[1] Aktion; *literally an "action", a "roundup", generally carried out by the SS.*

The work in the forest was not hard because peasants were supervising the work and not Germans. It was an agreement between the "*Arbeitsamt*" and the "*Judishe Gemeinde*" to keep the girls and boys busy.

During the time I was in the forest I was able to be in contact with my family. We were only about 6-8 kilometers from the town. They came to see me from time to time even though it was forbidden to leave the town but with an escort they were able to come to see us.

In 1942 I was supposed to celebrate my *Bar Mitzvah*. But then we didn't celebrate *Bar Mitzvahs* or go to the synagogue when we worked in the forests. My parents supplied me with some money that they had hidden in their clothes, in case something should happen, God forbid, and I would be able to get away and with it I would be able to buy food. Each child had such secret money hidden on them.

In our town of Sławatycze there was no closed ghetto. The Jews were restricted to an area of two streets but it was not a closed ghetto, it was open but we had to leave our home to move to the prescribed area. We moved in with a family named Fogel. There was one room occupied by four children. When we lived in our house in the market square where we had our store we lived in five rooms, but we had to leave our house and move to the two back streets. It was not possible to take everything with us as it was impossible to put everything we had into the one room assigned for us when we went to live with the other family. That area became overcrowded with Jews. The city numbered 1,200 Jewish souls but during the war the number increased to 1,800 souls because they came from different cities to Sławatycze to try to get across the Bug River to the Soviet side. Also, Jews who were expelled from Radzyń were sent to our town and they were added to those already living there. It was very crowded in our town and there was no room.

In the house we lived in the mood was depressing all the time. The mothers could not do anything for their children and the fathers could not help their children to be educated, to fulfill their needs as everything was restricted. There was pessimism all over; we didn't see any hope. However, from time to time we read some newspapers and listened to the clandestine radio.

At the end of 1942 the Germans advanced to near Moscow but could not go further. They could not conquer Russia and there still remained a sparkle of hope for us. Later on this hope increased, this was in 1943, but by then my family was destroyed.

In 1942, on *Yom Kippur* day, or rather, on the first day of *Sukkoth*, things exploded early in the morning. They gathered all the Jews in town and brought them all to the empty bazaar, called the *targowica,* near the Catholic cemetery. After about 3 or 4 hours, farmers arrived with horse drawn carriages and the *SS* ordered the women and children into the carriages. The men had to follow on foot. After traveling about 5 kilometers, at an intersection in the road to Wisznice, military trucks stood on one side of the road and on them stood men in German uniforms. I am not certain if they were Germans or Ukrainians. They started to shoot at us. Some among us were killed on the spot and those who survived were then lined up in groups of sixes. There was one group that was not a complete six, so they shot them. The rest of us were marched in sixes to Wisznice, about 20 km away.

I was walking on foot together with my father and my uncle. My uncle was then shot and killed. I and my father, my brother and my grandfather got to Wiszince. There we were put into a big hut overnight. The next day they transferred us to Biała Podlaska and then to Mezrycz [Międzyrzec Podlaski].

In Meztitch then starts a new chapter, a series of *Aktions*. When we arrived they brought us to the place where the first ghetto was. It was a big ghetto, but after the first *Aktion* not many Jews remained there. Ten days later they started another ghetto. Then there was a second *Aktion* in Mezrycz and they were taken to Treblinka and did not return. A third *Aktion* was carried out by the Polish police.

We found a big cellar and the whole family saved ourselves during the *Aktions* by hiding in this cellar.

Then a fourth *Aktion* was carried out by the Jewish police of the Ghetto. The Jewish police of the ghetto had to bring in 500 Jews, so they started to request that people give themselves up willingly to the Germans.

All the Jews who were caught outside of the ghetto and who had been hiding in the surrounding area were brought to the synagogue of Mezrycz [Międzyrzec Podlaski]. I remember it as if it was today. In a sense I felt that I caused everyone to be caught. Those of us who were hidden, me and my cousin looked like *goyim* [Gentiles] and we were always able to bring food to those in the bunker. One morning, when we left our

hiding place to buy some food, we felt as if we were followed. We were then surrounded by the Jewish police. The Jewish police who numbered about 500, were not from Mezrycz. It is easier to get strangers to do the dirty work. I escaped and a Jewish policeman caught me. I told this policeman; why are you taking me to my death? I did not get a suitable answer. He raised his whip and he beat me. He took me to the synagogue. In the synagogue I saw a lot of children with their parents and other people too. Everyone was crying. When they accumulated 500 people they would be shipped to Treblinka or to some other place, I am not sure which. I crawled up to an attic. I hid until it was a little darker and then I succeeded in escaping. I was used to escaping, to running away, I had done it many times and I will tell about it later on. After I got out of the synagogue I returned to my parents' hiding place in the second basement and there I found my grandfather and my uncle Ya'akov and other family members of 4 or 5 brothers and their families from Mezrycz were there to.

Everyone who was caught was taken to Treblinka. Half of the Jewish policemen were taken to Treblinka too. The same Jewish policeman who grabbed me was also taken away to Treblinka. I met him after the war and I said to him "why didn't you want to let me go?" He had no answer. I was a child then and the policeman was wounded when he jumped from the train to Treblinka and returned to the same ghetto. The ghetto existed for another half year. Together with my brother and my father I worked for a German company that still exists today. I was recently in Germany and I saw the firm. We heard once that there was to be an *Aktion,* a slaughtering, so we remained outside of the ghetto. We hid ourselves for a certain time and then we returned to the ghetto.

On May 2, 1943 the fifth *Aktion* took place.

I was used to escaping. One time the group left and I didn't catch up with them. I was with someone else, with 2 or 3 people, and a policeman stopped us. Where are you going?, asked Zimski. He was the commander of the Polish policemen in Mezrycz. He took us to the police station. He started to ask questions and write down our answers. Suddenly I saw that one policeman was loading his pistol. I was sure he would shoot us. So I made a sharp turn to get away but standing behind me was another policeman. I hit him in the mouth. I jumped from the upper floor and I escaped to the outside. He chased after me but he couldn't catch me. I was used to escaping and therefore I remember my escape from the police station. I always ran away when I sensed danger. I was in the ghetto on May 2nd when, during another *Aktion,* they took my father, my mother, my sister and two of my brothers. They were taken to Treblinka and Majdanek. I stayed alone in our bunker. I stayed in our bunker under the cellar that had a double wall. I stayed in this cellar when the Germans took everyone.

My family had been hiding in the same cellar under the double wall but the Germans found us. They broke open the door because someone inside had fainted, I don't remember exactly who, but something was going on inside or maybe she started to suffocate, and they felt the Germans getting close. They knocked down the walls and took everyone out. But I was able to hide myself and I stayed there until the evening. In the evening I got outside, I looked around to see that there was no one nearby and I escaped to an empty house near the Mezrycz cemetery. I climbed onto the roof and I stayed there for three days. I saw that the Polish police were bringing Jews to near the cemetery, once they brought six people, another time eight people. I heard shots for three days in a row. I saw how they killed these people. As I looked around on the fourth day I saw that they were transporting people to work. A Jewish policeman was walking and behind him more and more people following him going to work. He was leading them. And so I jumped down from the roof and I asked him what was the situation and they said that they were busy with all kinds of different work requested of them such as to clean up and to liquidate the ghetto as there were some Jews hiding there. I saw all this and I entered the ghetto and waited for another 2 or 3 days. After three days my mother appeared. She, together with my sister, had jumped from the train when they were being transported to Treblinka. We waited another few days because we thought maybe my younger brother would appear because he was together with them in the same train.

When we realized that he was not coming back, we decided to run away to the forest. We roamed the forest for a month. My mother just about surrendered when she heard German spoken and she thought that we were not there with her. My sister and I dragged her with us and we escaped. We ran into the forest and I decided to make a hiding place there. I hid my sister and my mother behind trees. I succeeded in hiding myself too. In the evening, after the Germans left, I returned to the same place where we had been. I found my mother dead, killed, they shot her in the head. My sister and I buried her.

I had previously been with my uncle, my father's brother, but I could not find him now. I was looking for him and he was looking for me. I went around for three more weeks looking for him. I couldn't tell a gentile that tomorrow I would be here or there so that my uncle could meet up with me as I was afraid that the *goy* would send the Germans. As I couldn't meet up with him, I took my sister, who was younger than I, she was born in 1932, and we returned to Mezrycz [Międzyrzec]. It was a distance of about 80 km but we couldn't go by way of the roads so we went by way of the forest and the streams and then we arrived near the town of Mezrycz.

We got to the dense forests of Zeszinka. As we were gathering dry leaves to make a fire we suddenly discovered a bunker right under our noses. There was no sign of life in there and it's possible that it was discovered by Germans or the *goyim* [Gentiles]. The bunker was well made. In it we found clothes and we realized that someone had been living there through the winter of 1942-43. It seemed that there were Jews that hid in the surrounding forest. We determined that if my sister, my uncle and I hid in this underground bunker no one could tell that someone was there. It was something fantastic. No one had been there for a full year as everything was rotten by now, so we cleaned it up. We were in this bunker for about month when I met a *goy* whose name was Ubelski. The Germans killed his family and he and his son were roaming in the forests. I told him the story that my mother was killed the second time I escaped from the Ghetto of Mezrycz. I also realized that I wouldn't find my uncle. I and my sister then returned to Mezrycz. In Mezrycz [Międzyrzec] I found that, despite everything, there remained there about 200 Jews out of a ghetto of about 1,000 Jews. Two streets remained of the whole ghetto. We were there for a week and after this something happened. It seems that a German was killed near the ghetto and they claimed that it was done by Jewish partisans. When I heard this I said to my sister Esther and three more people that we should escape and go to the same bunker where we were before. Within an hour or two hours screams and firing started. The Germans encircled the two streets and took everyone out. I stayed outside of the ghetto where I was for two days and when I saw that there was no one around. I grabbed my sister and the three friends of about my age of 14, 15 and 16 and we got away. People knew that I had come from outside of the ghetto and they started to pressure me to show them how to escape to the forest. At the beginning I said I would do it but after that I was convinced I should not take any more with me and we left that night to the forest.

I was asked why I returned to Mezrycz from the forest. It was because everyone was there and in the forest I had no one to talk to except my sister. I tried to find my uncle. I went around like an animal in the forest. I couldn't even find any Gentiles. I wanted to see Jews again and see what will become of them, and what will become of me. But after I met three of my friends and that gave me courage and bravery. I told them to just get me a strong flashlight and some other things and we left for the forest together. The purpose of the flashlight was to permit me to get food from the peasants. When I approached a peasant's house at midnight with my flashlight and knocked on the window the peasant was scared, not knowing who is behind the impressive flashlight. When I demanded bread the head of the household said take it and then told me that he was with the Partisans and if I only needed a piece of bread he didn't want any problems with me. I took the whole loaf and left. We couldn't stay in one place as I knew that if we stayed in one place they would catch us. We left the same day that I stole the bread and we went somewhere else.

I continued like this until we came around to the same area where we had been before. Then we went to Wisznice. I found this bunker when I bumped into this peasant whose family was killed and he stayed there with his son. He provided me with a revolver and six bullets. With this gun I would go out from time to time to farms for food in an area of about 15 km. I was with the group until September of 1943.

The peasant then arrived with 10 people and a gun and they took me with them and brought me to the forest of Huszcza. In these forests there were Jews who escaped from the ghetto. There were also Jews who had escaped from Sobibor after the uprising there. The people here were Russians, they were a group of 10 or so, and I was with them for one and half months. They brought my sister to a peasant and told him that he had to take care of her. I moved around with them because I knew the area very well, I was their guide. Then suddenly one day, after about month and a half, they brought me to where my sister was and we took her with us. They told me "now you're going to Huszcza, to the Jews there. We arrived there in September or October and we stayed with them. There were six or seven girls and some young boys too. Before this, something else happened. I met up with a group near the Bug River called "*Jechiel's Group*". The Jechiel Group had a machine gun. They crossed the Bug River but the other partisans did not want to take them into their *otriad*[2] and told them to return to the Polish side of the Bug River and to fight there. When we arrived it was *Yom*

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[2] Otriad*: Russian for "a detachment", generally a group of Partisanst.*

Kippur day in 1943. I saw that there were no Germans nearby. About 3 km. from us there was a farm where the people were cooking and eating as if nothing had happened and as if they were new arrivals. This did not please me and I told my friend that we are not going to stay here as I knew the Germans would lose and that the front line would come through here soon. This would happen, sooner or later. This group came from near the Bug River; they were a rowdy bunch and were running and going to other forests in other areas. But we stayed nearby. My friends told me that we should go back and cross the river without them. I agreed as I knew the area well and with three friends we tried to cross the Bug River but we couldn't, the river was too deep at that time. Two of my friends did cross the Bug River but it was too deep for me to cross with my sister so we turned back. I returned to the place that had the bunker and that same peasant, Obelski and his son who had remained in the bunker. He was happy to see us. I could speak to him. There was also a *politruk* [Soviet political organizer and instructor] who was parachuted in to organize the partisans.

My sister and I were with them for a month and then we went to an *uchuzia* [rest area]. It was at the end of the year and a manhunt was carried out by the Germans. A woman who had escaped from the ghetto was killed. I don't remember from which ghetto. There were three more girls and some Jews with rifles in the same *uchuzia*. I was with them for a few days and after that I decided that we would not stay, we would go further. After the Germans attacked us in the forest, we hid in the city. I said to my companions how they all seemed to become disorganized and run wild when the Germans came close. And I was right. Afterwards I heard that sixty Jews were killed, all from the same group that had ran wild. I took a few more friends with me, one was an old friend from Włodawa and three others; one from Lódz, one from Lida and one who escaped from Sobibor and came over the Bug River. We crossed the Bug, it was already frozen at that time so we were able to cross the river and then we divided up.

My friends entered the *Voroshilovski Otriad* and I entered the *Zhitovski Otriad. Voroshilovski* was on the left side of the Bug River in the direction of Brest Litovsk [Brześć]. Afterwards I met with a partisan officer who took me to a farm near the Bug known as Korbunkia. He placed me there because there were partisans in that area at the time. The whole area of about 30 km was under partisan control. After that something happened as the front line was approaching us – we had to leave Korbunkia and enter the forest again. We went to the Radicz forest. There was once a big farm there and it was burned by the Germans. They also burned the town and the villagers were staying in the surrounding swamps and this is where we stayed until the end of the war.

My sister was with me. I was not in the partisan *otriad* then, I was in the village, but I effectively served with the partisans. They came to me and I gave them information that I gathered for them. I acted as a spy for them and I followed some boys who served the Germans. No one knew that I was Jewish. I don't know, but I assume that they, [the *otriad*] knew, but not by my looks, because I always looked like a *goy* [Gentile] and I spoke Belorussian like a Russian.

Thinking back I can say that I do not recall ever suffering from hunger. I sneaked up to farmhouses and I stole food. I always had food to eat when I was in the forest. In the ghetto there was an incident when I was chased by a Jewish policeman, I jumped into an alley and then climbed upon a roof. I hid on top of the roof for a while. I then got into the house below where I found a room full of clothing, expensive merchandise. I carefully closed the room and later on I returned and picked up some of the merchandise because no one lived in the house anymore and I started to sell it and I made some money for my whole family to make a living. I found a Gentile in the market and I would bring to him the merchandise to sell for me. I did this for a certain time and from this we could make a living.

Living in the forest during the summer was no problem. But in the winter it was difficult as there were tracks in the snow. We had to cover ourselves under straw to keep warm. Often, we had to relocate to different hiding places and it was hard. I got through these few months of suffering. My sister was with someone else; then she was brought to a certain peasant and I lived there too, together with her. I remember that it was 30 degrees below zero. But in the *uchuzia* I always found something to eat but we had to cover up our tracks. In 1943-44, I was already in Karbankia across the Bug and I stayed there with my group.

After I entered the forest in 1943 I didn't bump into Germans anymore. I escaped to the forest at the end of May 1943 and then in July I retuned to Międzyrzec. I was in the forest for a year.

Life was very romantic in the forest. When you go to the forest and look around and say I am here and there is no one around, the world is blooming but everything is empty, you are alone in the world. You start looking around and think; "What will I do tomorrow". It is a warning. You start looking around and at my age it was very hard. You see a world with nothing, without a future. Also, there were certain incidents that happened to me then. I was looking for my uncle, as I told you earlier, and so I went once to a certain peasant and so I had this feeling that someone was following me. The next day they told me there was a policeman and he was waiting for some of my friends. He was a *goy* who always killed Jews. He even killed my aunt and her two kids. He was a police commander in Slawatycze. He followed in order to capture me. Be it partisans or someone else, there were many such incidents. During this period I went to Międzyrzec and I bumped into partisans in the forest. I met a man whom I didn't know and he said that he was a friend of ours. I was not afraid because I was like the head of the forest. He brought me to a group and I saw a machinegun and sitting around there were eighteen of his friends and I couldn't understand what was going on. He started to interrogate me as to who I am and what I'm doing there. I didn't say that I was Jewish. He asked me with whom I am [connected] with and I said with Ubulski, the same *gentile*, I mentioned earlier. The commander asked where Ubulski is located and he asked one of the boys to take me to him and to bring him back. I took him to where he was. I knew that Ubulski was in a house at the edge of the forest. We met and he asked me "who is this boy with you?" I told him that he was with me. It became evident to me that this was a rival faction of the same partisan group. A Jew by the name of Lichtenburg was the commander of a Jewish group of partisans and he had an automatic weapon. It was the same Lichtenburg from whom the leader of this group wanted to take away this weapon and when Lichtenburg wouldn't give it to him so he killed Lichtenburg. Afterwards my friends arrived in the area where this group was and they asked me if his [the killer's] name was Kulko. Afterwards three friends came from his group to our place. It became evident that Kulko had killed other Jews and that he was in the same area and that Ubulski knew them.

Most of the time I was in the forest with other people and I was not alone. But for a period after they killed my mother I stayed alone for a while and then I went to the city of Miedzyrzec.

It was my friends who convinced me to go to the forest with them. I was with them until when they crossed the Bug and they stayed there. After the war I saw them. They had entered a certain battalion. In a certain sense I owe them thanks for pushing me to go to the forest. I want to say that I was the youngest of all in this group. I was 14 years old, and they were 15 or 16 years old but I was the leader, I'm certain, because I knew the forests. I knew how to live in the forest and I think this is how I succeeded in staying in one place. I left my sister 10 km. away and I went to find her. I would find her afterwards every place that I left her. I once brought her to a certain bunker. Because I always had to bring her food there I always found her. It did not leave any markings so as to later find this place. I always looked for certain places of hiding, but one time I did not succeed in finding the hiding place and this was with my uncle. He disappeared from me the same time they killed my mother. They told me that she wasn't killed and that she was with my uncle. I went to a certain peasant and he told me "I saw your uncle Mendel Domaczewski and he was looking for you". But I could not tell him where I could be found. I came back a week later and three weeks later and I saw I could not find my uncle so I decided I had to return to my group.

In July of 1944 the Russian front advanced in our direction and then it got to the Wisła River. In July of 1944 I returned to my town, more correctly, I returned to Włodawa.

I am not able to remember the day of our release [liberation]. It is as if it was erased from my mind. I cannot remember this day. I try to pick my mind; "what did I do when the Russians entered?". I cannot in any way remember that day. Until today I know I was in Włodawa and after that I went to my town of Sławatycze. The Russians were on our side of the Bug River. I stayed there until February 1945, it was then when they killed some of the Jews in that place. We were four or five Jews there. A man named Grynszpan, [3] he had a coffee house in Sławatycze and some peasants got drunk there and they killed him. I don't know what had happened. I then left Włodawa.

I was fifteen years old then and I was not old enough to be recruited into the Red Army. I operated a coffee house with two girls. I married one of them. She was the daughter of a Rabbi. Not long ago she died here [in Israel]. She is buried in Petach-Tikvah. I have a companion, her name is Zisla. She is a widow. She was together with me in the forest. She doesn't remember some of the events either. There are many people

who don't remember. From the day I was set free when the Russians arrived to Włodawa I remember everything.

After Włodawa I went all over Poland in order to earn some money. We arrived to Berlin, I and my sister, and I spent some time with a few friends there. One of them, Yankele, is in Bat-Yam. In Berlin I encountered a problem and we returned to Poland and they put me in jail. When I was released from jail I went from Poznan to Lódz, from Lódz I went to Szczecin and afterwards I returned to Berlin. In Berlin I did some [black market] business. Again they caught me and I spent six weeks in prison. Pesach of 1946 I met a young woman called Ganya Shebudron who was a representative of the [Jewish] Agency and I left my sister with her.

We went to live and study in a *kinderheim* [an orphanage] in a house that had belonged to the Warburg family which was located in a suburb of Hamburg, Germany. [Otto] Warburg had been the [third] president of the World Zionist Organization. We were in this house until May 1947. Later, in Israel, I studied in Jerusalem in a school run by Mrs. [Chaim] Weitzman whom I met at the *kinderheim* in Hamburg.

On May 31, 1947 we arrived in Israel. We came on the ship called "Providence". There were about 1,500 entry certificates [to Palestine] assigned to this area of Western Germany. We entered Kibbutz Hulda. During this time I studied there until the outbreak of the war in 1948. I entered the army and I was a radio operator in the artillery. After 1948 I worked for the post office.

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3] Editor's Note:
In a recent telephone discussion with Henry Greenspan of San Francisco, USA [Chaim-Joszke Grynszpan of Sławatycze], Henry stated that after liberation, when he was out of town on business, his father Wewe Grynszpan was killed in Sławatycze. Wewe Grynszpan was possibly killed by rogue elements of the Polish underground fighting forces known as the NSZ *[Narodowe Siły Zbrojne] [the National Fighting Forces], that fought the Nazi Germans, the Soviet Russians and killed Jews in-between.*

Chapter 9.8



Michał Grynberg

by

Jagoda Grynberg / Krawczyk [1]

Translated from Polish by Maria Strońska, Montreal, Canada

My father, Michał [Meir] Grynberg, was born October 15th, 1909 in Sławatycze nad Bugiem. His mother, Gitl Blusztejn, was also from Sławatycze. His father, Benjamin Grynberg, was born in the small town [*miasteczko*] of Piszczac, which is about 35 kilometres from Sławatycze. Benjamin was a *kamasznik.* [2]

In 1914, at the outbreak of the First World War, Benjamin Grynberg was drafted into the Russian [Tsarists] Army. Towards the end of the war he was wounded in battle and was taken as a prisoner of war by the Austrians. At the end of 1918 he returned home very ill and a few weeks later he died.

Michał's mother worked for a furrier and earned very little money. Conditions at home were very difficult. In 1920 his mother remarried to Towia Fajgenbaum, a widower. Towia lived on a farm near Antopol which was leased from the Zalewski family. The farm was about 18 kilometers from Sławatycze. Towia had four children from his previous marriage. The oldest was a son named Berel and he was serving in the Army at that time. One of his daughters was called Bejła. All the family worked on the farm.

After a few years, Michał left the farm and returned to Sławatycze. He took up residence at Fruma's who took care of the orphans in Slawatycze. Fruma arranged for him to go to *cheder* [Hebrew elementary school] and to also "eat days"[3], that is, each day he ate at a different home. At the *cheder* Michał learned to read the Hebrew prayers. He also was tutored privately by the teacher Mendl Szuchmacher who taught him Polish and to read Yiddish. In about the year 1922 Michał was apprenticed to a tailor. This type of [trade] apprenticeship was costly and his father's brother Lejb Grynberg sent money from the United States for this purpose. He learned the trade from a number of tailors. Life was difficult for him at the tailor Hersz-Lejb Sznajder. Hersz-Lejb had three daughters and two sons; Meir and Szmul. One of the daughters, Sarah, emigrated to Palestine before the War. The youngest son, Szmul, served in the Polish Army and he perished in the Lipowa Street prison in Lublin which was for Jewish prisoners of war.

Hersz-Lejb's youngest daughter Rywka was at that time in the fifth grade of elementary school. When Rywka studied together with her friends, Michał overheard them read and it was then that his curiosity of wordly things was aroused along with his determination to try to educate himself.

Practically everything he earned as an apprentice at Hersz-Lejb's he paid to the Aleksander Maczkowski School for studying there.

Editor's Notes:

1) *Based on the autobiographical, Part 2 of Michał Grynberg's book, in Polish; "Slawatycze, domu mój..."*

2) *A kamasznik is a maker of leather "lasts" or "uppers" which a shoemaker then incorporates into the fabrication of shoes and boots by the addition of the outer and inner soles.*

3) *"Eating days" or "essen tejg" in Yiddish, was a charitable way for Jewish families to provide orphans and out-of-town Yeshiva students with free meals on a rotating basis of one day a week.*

He lived in Sławatycze and studied there until 1928. His teacher prepared him for the fifth grade of elementary school. With a heavy heart he told Michał to bring him the homework he did and told him that: "A tailor you will not be". This fell heavy on his heart.

Michał left Sławatycze and went to Warsaw where he worked and also taught himself. The leftist workers' movement fascinated him. He believed that in a new, better social structure people would be able to study and to work and that racial prejudices would be eliminated.

In the summer of 1936 Michał was arrested for demonstrating at the trial of Paweł Finder and he was sentenced to a six year prison term. After spending 2½ years in prison he was released during an amnesty of political prisoners.

At the outbreak of the War in Septemebr 1939, he left Warsaw and travelled on foot to Sławatycze where his mother lived and also where many of his family had remained. This journey took him five days walking on foot under constant German bombardment. At last he got home.

In his memoir, he wrote: *"... during the war-days life in the town came to standstill. The Police station, which before the war was a centre of power, was closed. All four of the policemen disappeared. Jews lived in fear of being robbed. Young boys organized themselves into a group in order to protect the terrified population. About the 20th of September, a small squad of the Russian Army came into town"*. Their stay was a short one as the determining boundary line [between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union] became the Bug River. After the departure of the Soviet Army from Sławatycze, a group of Jewish teenagers ran to the other side of the Bug River. Michał also left Slawatycze and went to Domaczewo on the other side of the river and then went further on to Brześć and from there to Białystok which was already occupied by the Russian Army. At the end of October, 1939, with a first group of emigrants, he was taken East. In that group was his future wife, Dina Witelson, originally from Warsaw. In Minsk, on another stage of that journey East, both of them started to study at the Gorki Pedagogical Institute. Thanks to their linguistic skills [studies were in the Russian language] after the end of school term they both worked as teachers of German.

After Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941 and their subsequent occupation of Minsk, Michał and Dina, with their seven month old child, ran from Minsk. Under heavy German bombardments they reached the train junction station of Orsza and from there they went by train to near Stalingrad. There they were sent to a rural school where Michał started work as a teacher. His image of the Soviet Union was in ruins, the local people were hostile towards Jews. When Michał read letters for his illiterate landlady from her son who was a soldier in the Soviet Army, he found the following sentence: "I heard that Jews running away from the Germans may come to you. Do not let them get beyond your doorstep." There were also some exceptions. The school secretary used to bring a bottle of milk under her coat and secretly pass it on to Michał for their baby girl. At the end of the school year of 1941/42, the teachers working in that school were mobilized to the "*trud armii*" [work army], Michał was amongst them; he was sent directly to the Stalingrad front. He was designated to lead a platoon of 20 soldiers whose duty was to build fortifications and decoys to mislead the German airmen. He was promoted to company sergeant. He could not reach any higher rank because he was a "*zapadnik*" [a Man from the West]. Michał was awarded a medal for his part in a battle at Stalingrad. Very often he was a translator of German for captured German soldiers. His unit, the "4th Front of the Ukraine", went forward along the southern part of the country in the direction of the northern part of the Caucasus. He was decorated for his part in the battles of the Caucasus. Going east, his unit reached the southern part of the Ukraine, and then he went on to Hungary and to Czechoslovakia. On the last day of the war, May 9th 1945, he was in the Czech town of Presow. That day, full of joy, shouts and cheers for the victory, songs and dances remained in his memory for ever.

In the same way, what had also been ingrained in his memory were the common graves of murdered Jews on the fields of southern Ukraine. His army unit got to Cracow and then to Katowice. He then decided to visit Sławatycze with the slight hope of finding members of his family among the living. On his way there he stopped in Warsaw. For two days he wandered the streets of the former ghetto, on Gęsia, Pawia, Zamenhoff streets. Ruins and ravages were everywhere. He scarcely met a human being there. He could hardly believe that this was reality when he recalled the life on those streets before the war.

In Warsaw he registered himself at the Central Jewish Committee, where they kept records of Jewish survivors of the Shoah.

In his book Michał wrote:

"With a picture of ruins and ravages of the streets of the former Warsaw ghetto before my eyes I set on my way to Sławatycze. After two days of travelling by train, horse cart and on foot I arrived to Sławatycze, my home, my little shtetl where I grew up, worked and suffered. Here I lived out my first joys and my first reflections on humanity's fate, and here, after many years, I am here again, but this is not the same town that once was so vibrant with life. All the houses surronding the market square were burnt down. Once, on that market square everything bubbled with life. Children played, one could hear rumbles from sewing machines coming out of workshops and the tapping of shoemakers' hammers. In addition to all that was the town idiot, Duwedl der Meshugener, Crazy Duvedl, singing beautiful melodies from his rich repertoire while carrying water to the homes of the well-to-do. And now I am standing in the middle of the market square, alone, not even one other living soul is here. This is the end of my little town as well as the end of hundreds of other such Jewish shtetlach in Poland and their inhabitants. I looked around for the cart that brought me here to get away, but it was gone."

Michał then went to the Sawoniuk family whom he had known before the war. They lived at the edge of the town, at the end of Kodeńska Street. The neighbours gathered and they talked all night. The people talked about the way the Jews perished and how some of them were rescued. Amongst the rescued were Wewe Grynszpan and his son Chaim. Both were saved by the Parczewski family, who were later decorated with a Yad Vashen Medal. With certain embarrassment they spoke about how just after the war ended "unknown people from the forest" invaded Wewe's home and murdered him, but his son miraculously escaped certain death. After that event, the few remaining Jews who survived the war left Sławatycze for Włodawa. Michał then went to Włodawa and met with a group of the surviving Jews. The information he received from them he used in his published work.

Those few days which were sad and full of tragedies passed very quickly. He had to get back to his army unit and he had to be very careful. En route there were "unknown people" who pulled out Jews from the train compartments and killed them. He was in a doubly dangerous situation as he wore a Red Army uniform.

Together with his army unit he stopped in Lwów and once more he requested his discharge from the Army. He awaited a negative answer, similar to the one he received in 1943 when he wanted to join the newly formed Polish Army. To his great surprise he received a positive answer. From Moscow he went to Magnitogorsk to get his wife and daughter.

At the beginning of February 1946, the first transport left Magnitogorsk for Poland, taking the people who on September 17th, 1939 held Polish citizenship. Among them were Michał and his family. The whole transport was directed to lower Silesia. Some of the repatriates got off in Dzierzoniow, then still called Rychbach. At the train station, they were welcomed by Froim Solarz, the provincial representative of the Jewish Committee in Lower Silesia. He was a friend of Michał's from before the war. Michał and his family got off at this train station and after a few weeks stay in the town he was nominated chairman of the Jewish Committee of the Legnica District. He started his work in March of 1946. At that time there was only a small group of Jews in Legnica who had survived the German occupation and Hitler's camps in lower Silesia. There was also a small group of Jews who managed to return from the Soviet Union. In Legnica there existed a branch of the Jewish Committee.

Immediately after the war, Michał wrote:-

"... there was a considerable development of Jewish institutions in Poland. In the initial period these institutions mostly helped the survivors, both morally and physically. That situation had a great significance for the Jews who had survived the Shoah; those who lived through the war in Poland and the ones returning from the USSR. Their situation was tragic as they were actually returning to nowhere. Everything that they possessed before the war had been destroyed. The majority of people had no means for existence, living in constant fear of tomorrow. Their mental condition caused by inhuman treatment in the death camps, or staying in forests and other hiding places was such that a lot of them did not believe in the possibility of normal life in the places where they used to live before. For them it was important to create new conditions of life, to cure their soul, and to work."

Adding statistic to that time frame he wrote:-

> *" ... in the first quarter of 1946 about 214,210 repatriates came back from USSR, among them 120,579 were of Jewish origin, 75,145 persons were sent to lower Silesia, 5,322 to the district of Legnica, 3,657 to the town of Legnica, 300 to Ghojnowa, 486 to Jawor, 279 to Nowa Sól and 600 to Złotoryja. At that time the number of Jews in Legnica was steadily increasing. Jews were constantly coming to Legnica from different places; some to join their relatives and friends and for the possibility of finding work. At the end of the first half of 1946 it was estimated that there were 4,000 Jewish people in Legnica."*

Michał threw himself into the turmoil of his work. He was an excellent organizer. Together with his fellow-workers he set up a home for orphaned children, a nursery, Jewish school, a boarding school for teenagers and a rest-home for the old people. They organized jobs in Jewish co-operatives. At that time there already existed the Headquarters of Work Cooperatives, *Solidarność,* and a "Credit Union for the Advancement of Jewish Production". The name was later changed to "The Cooperative Bank for the Business of Jewish Production".

In 1947 the Jewish Committee, besides giving steady help for institutions and cooperatives, devoted a lot of attention to helping veterans and war invalids. In the Jewish Committee there existed a "Circle" of veterans and invalids. Michał started to work in Wroclaw at the State Branch Headquarters of the Cooperative Production, *Solidarność*, in Lower Silesia.

His first book on the Jewish Cooperatives from 1945-1949 which was published in 1986 was dedicated to the Headquarters of Production Cooperation and all the cooperative branches. His work also showed the progress of organizations and developments of the Jewish Cooperative activities among Jewish Communities from 1918 to 1939. In 1950 Michał was officially transferred to Warsaw and employed in the head office at a ministerial level, taking charge of regional industry cooperatives, crafts and small private entrepreneurs.

Being ambitious and hard-working he was soon promoted. For his achievement he received several state awards. But, in 1968, at the time of widespread anti-Semitic oppressions in Poland, Michał was removed from his position and he lost his job. But in those difficult times his friends, his co-workers and the honest people did not abandon him. Three years later, in 1971 Michał obtained a position as archivist at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. The work in the historical archives had great meaning for him. Looking through and analysing evidence in connection with the time of the Holocaust resulted in his publishing a series of articles about the life and the annihilation of the Jewish population of Poland during the Nazi occupation and also by the rogue Polish partisan movement known as the NSZ [Narodowe Siły Zbrojne]. His priority was researching the life and the destruction of the Jewish population in his native Sławatycze.

During the years 1973 - 1985, the Warsaw Yiddish weekly newspaper; the פֿאָלקס=שטימע, *"Fołks-Sztyme"* [*Głos-Ludu*] [Voice of the People], published thirty of his articles in Yiddish.[4] He also undertook to research the subject of Jewish life during the Holocaust in the northern Mazowsze district, which had been merged into the German Reich. The material he obtained helped him prepare the book "Jews in Ciechanow, 1939-1943." This book was published in Warsaw by the State Science Publication Organization. That work also helped him in his postgraduate studies for his Doctorate degree which he successfully defended on March 21st, 1989 at the Polish Institute of History and the Academy of Sciences. Michał had obtained permission from the secretary of PAN [State Academy of Sciences] to begin his postgraduate studies for his Doctorate even though he did not have the prerequisite Masters Degree nor had he as yet completed his studies for his Baccalauriate. During his studies he edited and published the book "Memoirs from the Warsaw Ghetto". This book was published in 1988 by the State Science Publishers [of Poland] and he received a Cultural Award of *Solidarność* from the Independent Cultural Committee of Poland.

The following year Dr. Michał Grynberg received an Honorary Diploma from the Warsaw Association of History Enthusiasts. In 1993 the second, revised edition of that book was published. In 1993 the [Polish] State Science Publishers published his next book; "'Book of the Righteous" about Christian Poles who had helped Jews during the Nazi occupation of Poland. As a show of appreciation the "Righteous" admitted Michał to their Association as an honorary member.

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4) *Six of these articles, which Michał subtitled; "Fragments of a Larger Work" were eventually incorporated in his book about his hometown;* "Sławatycze, domu mój..."

In 2002 this book, "Memoirs from the Warsaw Ghetto", was translated into English by Philip Boehm and was published in New York City by Metropolitan Books under the title: "Words to Outlive Us, Eyewitness Accounts from the Warsaw Ghetto".

The last years of his life he devoted to the work of the life and the destruction of the Jewish communities during the World War II in the territory of the Polish Republic. This book titled "The Life and Anihilation of the Polish Jews, 1939-1945, Witnesses' Memoirs" which was prepared by Michał Grynberg and edited by Maria Kotowska, was published posthumiously in Warsaw in 2003 by the Science Printing House. Out of the seven thousand memoirs, or recollections, deposited at the archives of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, only 107 were chosen. Most of them were written in Yiddish or Hebrew, covering 71 different locations. Some of those places do not exist in the territory of present day Poland as it applies to Eastern Galicia, Polesie, Wilenszczyzna, Nowogrodczyzna and Wolhynia. In 1998, for his part in this work, Michał received a diploma from the "Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Association" of the Stephen Spielbierg Foundation.

In 1985 Michał spent two months in Jerusalem as a guest of the Yad Vashem Institute. Being there and reading volumes of memoirs about the anihilation of Jewish towns in Poland, he became convinced of the necessity to write a history of the lives of the Jews of Sławatycze so as to honour the memory of fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, friends and colleagues from his native town. He did not want to be in debt to the past. And that is how his last book: "Sławatycze, domu mój..." came to life.

If there is a place in the world to which his thoughts always returned it was Sławatycze, a small town on the Bug River. The most vivid, the sweetest memories of the touch of Mother's hand, the streets covered with snow, and in summer sitting in the sun, bathing in Bug River, youthful friendship and first lovers' walks. Is it possible to describe something so unique? This world does not exist any more, this world has disappeared. About people whose shadows are phantoms to the memory of the ones who remain.

Michał Grynberg died in Warsaw on April 20, 2000. Our wonderful and marvellous Father and Grandfather, devoted to his family, unusually hard-working, modest, always seeking to know the world, a great self-taught man!

Days full of memories of living together pass away but the pain does not go away, it stays eternally in our memory.

His children

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Chapter 9. 9

■

Hochbaum / Frydman
[Orbaum / Freedman]

■

A Family History

by

Jack Orbaum, Toronto, Canada

"People will not look forward to posterity who never look backward to their ancestors"
- Edmund Burke, 1729-1797.

Preface

Every Jewish family has, in one way or another, been affected by the tumultuous history of the Jewish people. The family history of the Orbaum, Freedman and Loewenstamm families will be a record for future generations of our family to know what their forebears experienced, as far as the facts can be ascertained. At the time of writing, in 1993, there are hardly any people still alive who can supply much detailed information about my grandparents, the Orbaum or Barnett families of over 100 years ago. Consequently, there will be a number of gaps in this history which will probably never be filled.

Without some written record, such as this Family History, to pass on to future generations, many events of historical importance - important to the family - will eventually be forgotten. It is hoped that this history, which traces the roots of our family in a hostile Europe to life in a friendlier environment in Canada, and the movement of quite a few members of the family to Israel, will provide some idea of the kind of world the antecedents of the Orbaum, Freedman and Loewenstamm family had to endure. The family's Jewish roots in Europe should not be forgotten. Even though many details from 70-100 years ago, and further back, are now impossible to find or verify, enough information has been available to compile a substantial history of the families that were our progenitors.

Introduction

The tumultuous history of the Jewish people already referred to is well documented in many history books. Circumstances have continually forced them to find more friendly places in which to live. In 1290, the Jews were expelled from England; in 1392 from France; in 1492 from Spain; and in 1497 from Portugal. Many of the exiles perished; others found asylum in the Netherlands and in the Turkish possessions. The great flight of Jews to the east that carried the stream of refugees from Spain and Portugal across the Mediterranean to Turkey had its parallel in northern Europe. Poland, which became something of a great power in the 16th century when it formally cemented its union with Lithuania under the sons of Casimir IV, represented the second great haven of refuge for the persecuted and harried Jews. For generations, Poland was a land of promise to which ever increasing hordes had turned in their distress. New emigrants came from Germany, Austria and Bohemia.

The greatest single source of Jews since the middle ages, by far, has been Poland. Medieval Jews lived in Poland and Lithuania because they were among the last countries to be Christianized. Poland was still a pagan country until the end of the tenth century, and Lithuania did not accept Christianity until about 1400. Pagan kings, having no religion of their own to promote, were much more tolerant of Jews than Christian kings, who believed that their salvation depended on the elimination of heretics. While the land of Israel may

be the ancestral homeland of the Jewish people, Poland is the more immediate ancestral homeland of most of today's Jewish population.

Poland was once the largest country in Europe, embracing not only the present Polish borders but also Galicia, Lithuania, White Russia and the Ukraine. It was these areas that had the greatest sources of European Jewish origin. Beginning in 1772, the country was carved up and apportioned between Germany, Austria and Russia, and by 1795 Poland as an independent country had disappeared from the map altogether, not to reappear until 1918.

Throughout the nineteenth century more than 80 percent of the world's Jews lived in Europe. The proportion was as high as 88.3 percent in 1880, just before the first wave of emigration to the New World. In 1880, the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe - of the three empires of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia, and of the Balkan countries - numbered more than six million. About three million were in the Russian empire. Their forebears had lived in these regions for centuries.

When the German Jews emigrated to Poland they took their language with them and established it in Poland. Jewish-German, or Yiddish, became the language of common use. It was a form of Middle-High German mixed with Hebrew and Slavic words. Even among the Jews long settled in Poland it gradually displaced Polish. It was spoken in families, academies and schools. It was from this milieu that the Orbaum family came.

At the time my family emigrated from Poland to England in 1900, their home, Sławatycze, was part of Russian territory. After the assassination in 1881 of Alexander II, the Russian Czar, a wave of pogroms erupted in the Ukraine and swept over the neighboring provinces. During an eighteen-month period in 1881-82, Jews were attacked in at least 167 towns in South-Western Russia; the damage to 20,000 Jewish homes and stores and the livelihoods of perhaps 100,000 Jews were impaired.

In Russia, the pogroms sowed panic among the Jewish population. To the terrified people the only course seemed to be flight. Emigration committees formed with unprecedented speed and set to work. An exodus began that surpassed anything in all previous Jewish history, even the expulsions from Spain and Portugal. Before the century ended, nearly a million Jews had left their former home in Eastern Europe. The principal stream of refugees poured into the United States of America but many went to Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada, South America and England.

For the Jews who did not emigrate from Europe at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries a terrible fate awaited them. Nearly 70 percent of all European Jewry were exterminated in the Holocaust - 90 per cent of those in Poland, Germany and the Baltic countries. Some members of the Orbaum, Freedman and Loewenstamm families were, unfortunately, among them.

My Sławatycze Roots

I am often asked the origin of my name - Orbaum - and my reply has always been "My father was born in Sławatycze, Poland, and he moved to England as a child, where I was born. " At that time Sławatycze was part of Russia. Secondly, the family name was Hochbaum,[1] not Orbaum, and this, in all probability, was of German/Yiddish origin. However, the family did not speak German, Polish or Russian for that matter – they spoke only Yiddish.

The family of my paternal grandfather, Psachia Schlomo [Simon] Hochbaum, lived in Warsaw. Simon was born there in 1860 and nothing is known of his life except that he married Chana-Dewora Frydman [later Hannah Devorah Freedman] who was born in Sławatycze in 1863. Chana-Dewora was the daughter of Chaim-Szulem Frydman and Chaja Ralsman who were married in Slawatycze in January 1859. Psachia-Szlomo and Chana Hochbaum lived in Sławatycze after their marriage, probably with Chana's parents as was the custom then. It was there, in Sławatycze, that my father Wolfe [Wulf] was born in 1891. He had three brothers and three sisters. With the exception of the youngest two, all were born in Sławatycze. The oldest was Peshy, the second was my father Wolfe [Wulf]. Henry was the second son and then there were two girls; Leah and Esther. The two youngest children - Jack and Joe - were twins. Esther married Psachia Rubenstein, the son of her father's sister - i e., her cousin. .

Virtually nothing is known about their lives in Sławatycze. My grandmother had two brothers and one

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[1] Editor's Note:
On many Sławatycze birth, marriage and death certificates of the late 1880-90s, the name "Jankiel Gochbaum" often appears as an official witness. At that time the documents were written in Russian and the name "Hochbaum" would be spelled in Cyrillic with a "G" as there is no aspirating "H" in the Russian alphabet.

sister who presumably also lived in Sławatycze, especially in their early years. My grandfather earned his living as a tailor's presser. Life would not have been easy for them, or for most of the Jewish population in Slawatycze. This is supported by the fact that in 1890, when my father was only eight years old, the Hochbaum family left Sławatycze and then emigrated to England in about 1900. They traveled through Germany to Hamburg and from there by boat to England where they started a new life. They settled in Leeds, the centre of the clothing industry. Here, presumably, my grandfather could find work. For reasons unknown the family name was later changed to Orbaum. What prompted them to leave their home and start life in a foreign land? From what is known, they emigrated to England to improve their economic condition. Could it be that growing anti-Semitism also had some bearing on their decision?

When the Hochbaum family arrived in England they settled in Leeds, Yorkshire, quite probably because Simon Hochbaum was a tailor's presser and Leeds was then the centre of the tailoring industry and there was a growing Jewish community there. Jews first appeared in Leeds in the late 18th century. However, a community was founded only about 1823. Towards the close of the 19th century many Russian and Polish immigrants settled there and were absorbed largely in the clothing industry.

My father Wolfe was 14-years-old when his father Simon died in 1906 at the age of 46. Hannah Orbaum was left to support her seven children. She started a small grocery store in the poor Jewish area of Leeds. Hannah Devorah Orbaum, who never learned to speak English, died in Leeds in 1944 at the age of 81. As the oldest son, my father Wolfe undoubtedly had to contribute to the family income at age fourteen. His limited years of schooling ended, as it did for most children in those days. It is unknown what he did to earn a living in his early years. During the First World War [1914-1918] he was in the Pioneer Corps, made up of non-British residents in Britain. He never did officially become a British subject [citizen].

My grandmother Hannah-Devorah Orbaum had two brothers and one sister, also born in Sławatycze. The two brothers, Pinchus and Shlaimie Freedman [Frydman] and their families went to England and the sister Liba-Bejla stayed in Sławatycze to look after their parents. Liba's husband, Szyia-Lejb [Joshua] Lerer, who was a tailor, was persuaded to go to England on his own, presumably to make a better life for them all, but his wife never did leave her parents so he went back to Poland in 1914, just before the First World War. The parents eventually died and after the war [WW I] and Poland's independence, conditions improved in Poland and in Sławatycze; so they stayed there. Liba-Bejla and Szyja-Lejb Lerer perished in the Shoah together with a daughter, son-in-law and three grandchildren. One son and two daughters survived the Shoah, after being in concentration camps. Of my father's cousins, the Lerers, the older sister Chawa and her family also perished in the Shoah. Her two sisters Frima and Ester and one of the three brothers; Chaim-Shulem, survived the Shoah in Russia and they with their families emigrated to Israel in 1949. Their brother Berl [Boris] stayed in Russia. His son Moshe now lives in Israel. In 1928 the third brother, Isak Lerer, left Sławatycze and went to Argentina to join his older brother Berl. From Argentina Isak went to Biro-Bidzhan, Soviet Russia. After spending many years in the Soviet labor camps, the *gulags*, he and his wife were repatriated to Poland in 1956. He died in Warsaw in 2000 at the age of 94.

Pinchus Frydman, known in England as Philip Freedman, and his wife Hannah [Annie] Fiszman had three sons and two daughters. Their eldest son Yosel [Joseph] was born in Slawatycze and died as a young man in England. The other four children Harry, Goldie, Betsy and Nathan were all born in Leeds, England. Goldie married Eddie Brooks and had two sons Barrie and Kenneth. Barrie is living in Quebec, Canada and Kenneth remains in Leeds. Betsy married Harry Goldman and emigrated to Canada and then to the United States. They had three children; Doreen, Leslie and Jeffrey. Doreen lives in Vancouver, Canada. Leslie lives with his family in Los Altos, California and Jeffrey [Goulden] lives with his family in Edgewood, Washington.

Descendents of Pinchus and Shlaimie Freedman [Frydman] and Psachia Schlomo [Simon Orbaum] Hochbaum, live today in England, Canada, the United States, Israel and in Australia.

What made them all uproot themselves? Was it the need to improve their economic conditions or did growing anti-Semitism also play a part? In the years at the end of the 19th century nearly a million Jews emigrated from Eastern Europe to England, the USA, Canada and many other countries seeking better lives. I grew up surrounded by many aunts, uncles and cousins and more distant relatives who were the descendants of Pinchus Freedman [Frydman].

We can all claim to have our roots in a small Polish *shtetl* - **Sławatycze**.

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Chapter 9.9
Part 2

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Hochbaum / Frydman
[Orbaum / Freedman]
A Family History

■

Meeting my Mother's Uncle Shloimie and Aunt Henya

by

Sam Hillel

Israel, November, 2000

Meeting my mother's uncle Shloimie [Solomon Freedman / Szloime Frydman][2] and his wife Henya in Newark [England] is indelibly imprinted on my mind, because we fell in love at first sight. It was in the month of July and during the Battle of Britain. I had been evacuated at the beginning of June from Dunkirk and I was now posted to help guard an emergency landing field near Newark. I had told my mother [by 'phone] that we bathed in public baths in Newark. When she heard where I was she directed me to visit her Uncle Shloimie, "as soon as you can because they are wonderful, you should know that your father and I spent our honeymoon with them" [My father and mother were married in Gateshead-on-Tyne in 1907!] I had never heard of her uncle Shloimie. She sent me the address and at the first twelve-hour break [guard duty was continuous with three crew shifts] I went to visit them. From the first moment, after I introduced myself, it was quite wonderful, as if we had known each other for years, and despite the great difference in age, I was just coming up to twenty-two, we had no difficulty communicating. I went there as often as I could. It obviously gave them great pleasure to see me too. On one occasion, marching in [military] column on a street in Newark, Henya saw me and came to walk beside the column and speak with me. I wasn't in the least embarrassed though afterwards I was treated to a regular ribbing from my comrades-in-arms. Believe me, I feel so much richer for having known him and his gentle wife, they were truly wonderful. I never heard of the sons but the daughters, even then, were in the gown business and had a shop or shops in Leeds or Nottingham [England].

The contact was not of long duration. Shloimie was already in his eighties when I met him, but I remember reporting to my mother that, "I thought he was about sixty, perhaps nearer sixty-five because he was already retired." They seemed to be comfortably off in a house with a garden at the back and I remember that Shloimie told me he had been a cap-maker [as was my grandfather, before he became a butcher]. The outstanding impression, the one I cannot forget, was a sense of peace and calmness that seemed to radiate

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[2] *Shloimie Freedman [Frydman) was born in Sławatycze in about 1859 and emigrated to England between 1892 and 1894. He married Henya who was also born in Sławatycze in about 1861. They had seven children: Sarah, Sim, Joe and Harry who were born in Sławatycze and Harry, Bessie and Rachel were born in Leeds, England. Shloimie Freedman died in 1945 in Leeds.*

from them; difficult to explain. Both these meetings were, what does one call them, 'significant events' in my life. I'm sorry there isn't more of 'substance' to tell you but if Shloimie's name was derived from Shalom, another constantly recurring name in our family tree, then he was well and correctly named [my elder brother Solly was also a Shulem]. I sometimes wonder who was the original Shalom among our forebears; an important name in our family.

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Chapter 9. 10

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Gochbaum /Gitelman / Szuchmacher

A short Family History

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By Pauline-Leila Cohen / Sonboleh,
San Diego, California

Recently, I obtained a photocopy of the original entry of the '*Akt*' of Matrimony [in Russian] of my grand-parents which took place on October 28, 1879 in Sławatycze, Poland. It states, in part, that "*the bride Pesia Gochbaum, 22 years old, daughter of Wolf and Ester-Chana Gochbaum married Gedalja-Lejb Gitelman, 19 years old, son of Elya-Yona and Dwora Gitelman.*"

Their daughter, my mother, Sara-Dwora Gitelman was born in Sławatycze in 1887. I was born in Brooklyn, New York. I was named "Pesia" after my mother's mother.

My mother had told me that her mother Pesia died when my mother was very young and that her father Gedalja remarried and my mother claimed that her stepmother was mean to her so she went to live with her grandmother. My mother had two brothers, Sachya [Sam] and Hershel who were also born in Sławatycze. I do not know if there were any siblings from the second marriage. Hershel married Sluva, and like many Sławatyczers, they went to England. Sam also went to England and then he came to America. Most of my family left Poland in the early 1900-1920 and emigrated to England and also to the United States.

My mother married a Nathan Frydman in Sławatycze. Her husband preceded her to America and I have my mother's passport from when she left Poland and his name appears in it. They divorced shortly after my mother arrived to America. My mother never divulged to me any details of her first marriage or of the divorce. I know that she had lived for a while in Kansas City but I do not know if it was with Nathan Frydman.

After her divorce from Nathan Frydman, my mother married my father, Yosef Szuchmacher in New York City. My father was born in Sławatycze in 1895. My grandfather Yosef-Ber died when my grandmother was pregnant with my father and my father was therefore called "Yosef ben Yosef". My father and many members of his immediate family went to England where their names were changed from Szuchmacher to Shulman and to Cohen in order to facilitate the pronunciation and spelling of their names. My father became Joe Cohen.

Many of my Szuchmacher cousins, Moishe, Mottle, Yosel, Nettie, Chawa, Chana and more, all of whom were born in Slawatycze, went to America where their names were changed to Shulman. My father's sister Hanna married a Grynberg in Sławatycze and they also emigrated to Leeds, England. My father had another sister whose name was Ida and two brothers who were named Yoel and Chaim-Herszel.

In 1917, during the First World War, my father was called up for service to the British Army and he served in Palestine with the Jewish Legion under General Allenby. My father was wounded in battle and His Majesty's Government awarded him the British War Medal and the Victory Medal, each inscribed with his name. These two medals were passed on to two of my grandsons who carry his name. I also have the original certificate which states that in 1920 my father became a British Subject, that is, he received British Citizenship.

In 1926 or so, my father then moved from England to America to join his Sławatycze cousins. It must have been through them that he met my mother whom he knew in Sławatycze. My parents were married in New York City.

I remember the cousins gathering on Sundays, eating boiled potatoes in the skin and schmaltz herring and talking about the old days, about life in "*Slavatytch*", "*Dematcheve*", *Vlodeve*", . . .

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Chapter 9.11



David Edelstein

Translated from Hebrew by Yuval Edelstein.
Israel, March 2004.

My name is David Edelstein [Edelsztejn]. I was born in a *shtetl* called Sławatycze nad Bugiem, Poland, on or about October 25, 1935. The exact date is not known. My father's name was, Gedaliah, son of Baruch and Tsipora Edelsztejn. My mother was Esther, daughter of Libe Frydman and Joshua Lerer, known as *Shiye der fisherker's* [Shiye, son of the fishmonger].

My father, Gedaliah Edelsztejn, had 3 sisters: Chana,Yehudit, Szeindl and Sura.
My mother, Libe Lerer/Edelsztejn, had had 2 sisters; Chawa and Frima and 3 brothers; Berl, Isak and Chaim-Szulem.

My father was a carpenter who in the summertime worked in the nearby Polish villages and returned home only on weekends, that is, for *Shabbat.* Usually, during the winter he was out of work. He learned his craft of carpentry when he was apprenticed to my maternal grandfather Joshua, which actually led to the first encounter between my parents. My mother had a boyfriend then, whom her parents refused to let her marry, but when she told them that she wanted to marry Gedaliah, they readily agreed to the match. My parents were married in 1932. I was born after my parents lost their first born daughter at birth.

My first memory of Sławatycze is probably from the age of two and a half. This memory is associated with my long hair before my first haircut, known as *upshern*, at the age of three. My father's sisters took me to my grandfather's house, which was a tin shack, and they weaved 2 braids in my hair. They put me over a little fence, which was in front of a window where my grandfather was working at a huge table on the other side of the window. When he saw me with the braids, he started shouting to his daughters that they "made a girl out of a boy". It is probably because of all of this shouting that the story remains in my memory.

The second story I remember of the town is linked to a fire that burned down most of Sławatycze in 1938. I was 3 years old then and I was already studying in a Heder. The big fuss that was outside made us the students, very curious. We went outside to the staircase and watched the thick smoke rising from the center of the town.

In 1938 my mother gave birth to my brother Mendeleh.

I was 4 years old when World War II broke in 1939. My father was forced to run away from Sławatycze with all of the family, primarily because he was a Communist. He rented a horse drawn cart, put in it all that could be taken from the house, and we went to the town of Domaczewo, which was on the other side of the Bug River. This river became the new border between Russia and German-occupied Poland as agreed to by the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact.

My parents rented a flat in Domaczewo, and stayed there with the thought that we will return to our home in Sławatycze in a very short time.

Thousands of refugees, mostly Jewish, came to Domaczewo from the other side of the Bug River. The Russian government didn't want the refugees to live close to the border, so they decided to move the refugees East into Russia. My family, which included my uncle Haim, and my aunt, Fruma [my mother's brother & sister] with their families, all went together East to Belarus. We arrived at a town that was near a forest and we settled there in houses of local farmers, who were forced to give us rooms. We stayed there a few weeks. One day, a man came looking for carpenters – he was managing a factory which built ships and river-ferries. When he heard that my father and my uncle Haim were carpenters, he hired them immediately. A truck came, and we all went together to a town named Narovle which was on the banks of the Pripet River. When we arrived there, each family was given a wooden house not far from the factory. We lived there until 1941 – when the war between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia broke out. I remember that there we had a relatively good life - there was never a shortage of food, and I, for the first time, went to a kindergarten.

In the summer of 1941, when Nazi Germany attacked Soviet Russia, immediately, all the men were recruited to the army, including my father, my uncle Haim, and my mother's brother-in-law, Zvi. Two days later, we were forced to go onto a river ferry and we went South on the Pripet River towards the Dneper River. On the ferry we partied – not because of the situation but because of candies. The Candy factory that was at Narovle was dismantled with all its machines and goods and it was evacuated on the same ferry on which we traveled. All the time during our journey we ate candies. There were days that this was the only food we had.

When we came to the Dneper River we continued until we came to Kiev – the capital of the Ukraine. We couldn't continue further on the river as the bridges across it were bombarded day and night, so it was dangerous to go under the bridges. After two days of waiting we slipped under the bridge at night and continued on to the city of Dnepropetrovsk.

At Dnepropetrovsk we went off the ferry and boarded a train at the train station. The train took us East to a city called Makhachkala, near the Caspian Sea. This city took in thousands of refugees who fled from the Nazis. The Russians didn't have enough trains for the refugees and therefore the trains were extremely overcrowded. People were settled in horribly overcrowded conditions, including in the city's institutions. A contagious epidemic broke out which mainly affected small children. My family was devastated. My little brother Mendeleh became ill. He was taken to the hospital and died shortly afterwards. My uncle Haim and his wife Leah lost their four year old daughter Mashah and my aunt Fruma lost her one year old daughter Chaja.

After all these tragedies, we were moved to the *Kawkaz* [Caucasus] area, to a Kolkhoz but I don't remember its name. My mother worked at the kolkhoz at various farming jobs, from early morning till night, mostly loading potatoes onto carts to be sent to the front lines of the Soviet army fighting the Nazis. I remember seeing my mother driving a wagon drawn by pair of oxen, a thing I didn't believe she was capable of doing. We stayed in this Kolkhoz until the winter of 1942. At that time, my uncles Haim and Zvi joined us, and we were very happy to be together again. In 1942, when the German Army came close to our Kolkhoz, we were on the run again. This time, we went east to Baku in the Soviet Republic of Georgia, which is on the coast of the Caspian Sea. There we boarded a ship that took us further east. After three days of sailing we reached the city of Krasnovodsk on the east coast of the Caspian Sea. From there we went by train to the city of Bukhara in Uzbekistan.

Now I want to tell the story of what happened to my father after he was recruited into the Russian war effort. My father and my uncles, Haim & Zvi, together with all their friends from Narovle, were posted to a work regiment of the Red Army [known in Russian as the "Trud Army"]. Their work was to dig anti-tank ditches in order to halt the advance of the German army. But the Germans knew how to overpass these obstacles, and they continued on to east.

The Russian army was forced to flee east, and so did my father and my uncles with their regiments.

At some stage the regiment had to scatter and they were ordered to go to a meeting point in the city of Tula [50 km. south of Moscow]. On the way there my uncle Haim had a road accident and my uncle Zvi stayed to take care of him. Luckily, he was only slightly wounded. My father was probably separated from them even earlier, and he didn't know what happened to them when he reached Tula. At Tula, he and his friends from the regiment were ordered to dismantle a factory that manufactured house utensils. [The city of Tula was well known in Russia for its cooking utensils, especially the "Tula Samovar"]. The factory was dismantled and all the machinery was loaded onto freight trains. After the dismantling was finished, the workers were ordered to go into the wagons with the machinery. The train went far to the East; to Siberia – to

Novosibirsk, a city in southern Siberia. There, the factories were reassembled, but now it was an army supplies factory that manufactured anti-tank shells. Later on my father worked in the factory maintenance department.

During the time my father was in Novosibirsk, we – I, my mother, my uncle Zvi and my aunt Fruma lived in Bukhara. There, I went to a kindergarten, and later, at the age of seven years old I started first grade, all in the Russian language. Also, I spoke Russian at home, so by then my Yiddish was almost completely forgotten.

All this time my mother continued to look for my father. We didn't even know whether he was alive or not. With the help of several institutions and organizations that were set up for the search of lost relatives which were then established in Russia, my mother tried to locate her husband. Every time my mother received the same response:- that the whereabouts of the person she is looking for is unknown to them. At this same time my father was also looking for us and he was receiving the same replies. My mother, who was a skilled dressmaker, started working in a sewing workshop that made uniforms for the soldiers. The wages were very poor, and she had to work from morning till night, and some times, even on Sundays, all this for a very small salary which was not enough for survival. My uncle who was a shoemaker, started working in a big shoemaking workshop and he also earned very little. Very soon they understood that in order to make a living they had to leave the workshops and work at home and to sell their products on the black market. My mother and my uncle succeeded in bribing a doctor who gave them a medical certificate that stated that they are forbidden to work in factories [because of their frail health], and with this certificate they could leave the workshops and started to work at home. My mother bought a sewing machine and some white bed sheets at the market. From the bed sheets she sewed simple dresses which she then dyed with water colors. She sold the dresses on the black market and in this way she could earn a better living. My uncle also took up shoemaking at home and he earned a lot more than working in the shoe factory and our economic state improved a lot.

During this time, my mother continued her search for my father, but the lack of success probably brought her great despair. One day she met the neighborhood postman, and she told him that if he will bring her a letter from a man named Edelstein she will give him a very nice present. A few months went by, and sure enough, the day did come when the postman delivered a letter from a man named Gedaliah Edelstein – my father.

The postman told an interesting story about this letter. It seems that my father received the wrong address from the "relatives' search" organization office, that is, except for the city. The postman told his friends who were sorting the incoming mail that if they were to find a letter addressed to a wrong address they should let him know before they returned it to the sender. When our postman heard that the name of the sender was Edelstein he jumped immediately and asked for this letter and he delivered it right away to my mother. Of course, my mother immediately gave the postman some money. She sent a letter back to my father and this is how the connection between us was renewed. As far as I can remember, this happened in the summer of 1943.

After we discovered that my father is alive and in Novosibirsk, mother started to plan to reunite with my father. The handling for the reunion took a long time since we needed many permits, visas and passports in order for us to move from one place to another in wartime Soviet Union. After many months of arrangements, my mother succeeded in obtaining all the necessary documents, and we started to prepare for the move to Novosibirsk. But then I caught intestinal typhus. Mother made every effort so that I won't be taken to the hospital because the treatments there were very bad. So my mother had to pay large sums to private doctors so she could get a certificate that I was sick with malaria and not typhus, and that I could be hospitalized privately at home. She also had to pay for medicines, which cost a lot of money on the black market.

Only a month after my recovery we were ready to travel to join my father. We traveled to Novosibirsk in the fall of 1944. When we arrived there it was very cold. My father didn't meet us at the train station because he didn't receive a permit to leave work. Instead, he sent his friend who took us to his own house. There, I met my father after so many years. The meeting itself was interesting – when we arrived at the friend's house, my mother and that friend left me alone in the house, and went to meet my father at the factory where he worked. When evening fell, they hadn't returned as yet, and I fell asleep on a bed that was in the room... suddenly someone touched me, and I awoke, and in front of me stood a man I didn't recognize and who asked me: "Do you know who I am?". I said "No, I don't know, but you must be my father!"

In Novosibirsk we lived for a year and a half, until the war was finally over. In 1946, together with thousands of other Polish Jews, we went back to Poland. We were brought to the new territories that were

appended to Poland from Germany after the war, to the coastal city of Szczecin [formerly Stettin] where we stayed for about 2 months. When my uncles arrived from Russia, uncle Zvi from Bukhara, and uncle Haim [he and his wife Leah were in a town some 200 km from Bukhara], they were settled in Wroclaw, so we went there and met up with all the family.

The situation for Jews in Poland was bad. Anti-Semitism continued to rule Poland, and pogroms occurred where many Jews were killed. This was the primary motive for Jews to try to find a way to escape Poland. Groups of Jewish people were organized for "aliah" [עליה] to the land of Israel which was then under the British mandate. Those groups were called "Kibbutz" [קיבוץ]. My family also joined such a Kibbutz of Pioneers [חלוצים] which was called "Poaleih-S'mol" [פועלי שמאל] [Workers of the Left], "HaBricha" [1] or "Aliah Bet"[עליה ב' / הבריחה] people from Eretz-Israel organized the smuggling of Jews into Western Europe.

So, together with the Kibbutz we left Wroclaw. We reached the border between Poland and Czechoslovakia and we managed to cross this border after the "HaBricha" people bribed the border guards. From Czechoslovakia we traveled to Austria, and from there we took a special train with thousands of other Jews, to West Germany. We were brought to a town named Ziegenheim. We were placed in a DP [Displaced Persons] Camp which previously held Russian prisoners of war [a *Stalag*]. In this camp there were long wooden barracks, but the great surprise for us was when we entered one of these barracks. Along the walls there were three storied wooden sleeping bunks but the inside of the barrack had an awful, putrid smell of stale body odor and rotten garbage. We couldn't stand the sight and the smell for even a minute and we all ran out of the barrack. After consulting with the other families, we decided to sleep on the outside during that night. Each family received a US Army cot and US Army blankets. It was in the autumn and the nights were very cold and many people couldn't sleep all night. The next day, all the men started cleaning up the barrack and the women and children helped out. Everything was taken out from inside the barrack – nothing was left except the bare walls. Each family was assigned a small area in the barrack where they put the Army cots and all their humble belongings. That night we slept a bit better. During the next few days all the men guided by the carpenters, my father and my uncle Haim among them, started dividing the barrack with wooden walls so that each family would have their own space. In each barrack there was an oven to heat the barrack and it was also used for cooking our meals. We received food rations from the "Joint" and the UNRRA support organizations.

The social life in the camp was blossoming – a school was started and all the children were taught Hebrew. Teachers came from Eretz-Israel and also teachers from the pre-war "*Tarbut*" schools who spoke Hebrew came to teach us. There were many meetings and parties, and even a small theatre was started where shows were performed. In order to watch a movie we went into the town of Ziegenheim where there was a cinema. We didn't understand anything of the movie as we did not understand the language but regardless, we enjoyed it very much. In Ziegenheim DP Camp we lived for more than a year and then the entire camp was moved to the larger city of Kassel where we were settled into brick buildings which had been the dormitories housing soldiers and officers of a former German Panzer [tank] Korps. We stayed in Kassel until we left Germany. In 1948, in the Kassel DP Camp, there occurred two major events in my life: – the State of Israel was born and I had my Bar-Mitzvah.

After the establishment of the State of Israel, talks started about us making *Aliah* to Israel. In May of 1949 we left Germany, took a train to France where we were settled in an "*Olim*" [עולים] camp near Marseilles. In June, 1949 we boarded the ship "*Negbah*" [נגבה] and within four days – on June 8, 1949, we arrived at the port of Haifa.

After debarkation from the ship we were taken to an *Olim* camp near Haifa named "*Sha'ar Aliah*" where we were housed in tents. Then, after two weeks, we were moved to another *Olim* camp near Pardes-Hana. Once again, we were housed in tents. A few months later we were moved to a former British-Army barracks.

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[1] Editor's Note:
"Bricha", from the Hebrew "HaBerichah, הבריחה, flight, was the name of an organised underground operation moving Jews out of Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and other countries under Soviet domain into Central and Southern Europe between 1944 and 1948 as a step toward their, mostly illegal, immigration to Palestine. This organisation was formed in 1944 in Lublin by former Jewish partisans, Warsaw Ghetto fighters and Jews returning from Central Asia under the leadership of the legendary Jewish partisan, Abba Kowner.
[Source: Encyclopaedia Judaica)

We lived there until the spring of 1950. In that former army camp there was no proper place for kids to study so I stayed at home and missed more than a full school year. When we were lodged in this camp we went through the worst winter that Israel had in many years. It snowed throughout the country and we suffered terribly from cold inside the unheated army barracks.

My father worked as a carpenter in Haifa and he traveled to work by bus and returned home late at night. In the spring of 1950 we moved to *Ma'abrat G'lil* [מעברת ג'ליל] near the town of Herzliah. There, we were housed in a *badin* [בדין], a small house made of tent canvas. It consisted of one big room. The toilet facilities and the water was located outside. I went back to school and by the end of the school year I completed grade six. We lived there for one year.

In 1951 my father bought a house in Kfar-Saba and in the summer of that year we settled in Kfar-Saba. I was then 15 years old. The following year, when I was then over 16 years old, I finished the eight grade of elementary school. I did not want to continue studying in high-school so I started to work; first as an electrician's helper and later as an apprentice carpenter. At the age of 18 I was drafted into the Israeli Army [IDF] where I served in the "Golany" infantry brigade for 2-1/2 years. After I was discharged from the Army I started working at carpentry again. At that time an evening high-school was opened at Kfar-Saba and I started studying there during the evenings while I continued working during the day. When I finished a part of the final exams [*bagrut]*, I heard that there was a demand for teachers, so I enrolled into a teachers' seminar in Be'er-Sheva. I was accepted to the teachers' seminar even though I did not finish all the final High School exams. At the Teachers' Seminar I met Geula Cohen. We studied together, we fell in love, and when we both finished the seminar in 1959 Geula and I were married. Since we, as teachers, were obligated to work anywhere that we would be assigned to teach, we were sent to teach in the border town of Bet-Shean. My wife Geula's family lived in Bet-Shean since their *aliah* from Morocco in 1957.

Our first born child, our son Eyal was born in 1961. Our second son Ronen was born in 1965. After the Six Days War in 1967, we moved to Kfar-Saba, and there, our third son Yuval was born in 1972.

My wife and I continued to work as teachers – Geula worked in Kfar-Saba, and I worked first in Tel-Mond, and later in Ra'anana. Both of us taught in elementary schools.

In 1986, my wife was diagnosed with cancer. After courageously fighting the disease for over five years she passed away in the summer of 1991. Within the next four years I lost both my parents – mother died of cancer at 1993, and then in 1995, my father died of a stroke.

In 1992 our son Ronen married Sigal Gavriel and in 1995 our son Eyal married Liat Levy. Ronen and Sigal have two daughters; Neta born in 1995 and Rotem born in 1999. Eyal and Liat also have two daughters; Shahaf born in 1996 and Ofek born in 2003.

During these past difficult years my comfort has been my three sons, my daughters-in-law and my four lovely grand-daughters.

—§—

Chapter 9.12

▪

Abraham Ribkovsky



▪

by

Shoshana Ribkovsky / Afel
Ramat Hasharon, Israel, April, 2004

My father, Abraham Ribkovsky was born in 1896 in Sławatycze, Poland. His parents were Shab'btai Repkowski and Chana-Pesia Blusztejn. My father had three sisters; Esther-Cyrla, Tema and Chaja-Blima and three brothers; Jankiel-Mejer, Szaja and Herszel.

My father made *aliah* to Eretz Israel as a *halutz* [pioneer] in 1922 or 1923 and settled in Hadera. At that time there were many swamps and malaria was rampant. My father worked at draining the swamps and he got very sick with malaria. He had to leave this region and he then settled in Tel Aviv. There he also worked very hard. He worked on road construction and he lived in a tent on the seashore. At that time he met my mother, Rachel Silver. They were married in 1925. They had two children; I, their daughter Shoshana was born in 1928 and my brother Shab'btai was born in 1930. They then built for themselves a small house on Dizengoff Street in Tel Aviv.

Later on my father purchased a wagon with two horses and he worked as an independent contractor carting materials for the construction of roads and he also transported various commercial goods. Before long he saved up enough money to buy himself a truck.

In 1936, when there was an economical depression in Eretz Israel and times were very difficult for everybody, my father went to work for the British Army. The British Army sent the Jewish drivers to the head of their convoys in case there were mines on the road so that the British soldiers should not be hurt. This work brought him into many Arab towns and villages such as Jenin, Tulkarem and as far as Beirut in Lebanon and also to Damascus in Syria. Needless to say this was hard and very dangerous work.

In 1937 he was promised a job in the settlement of Even-Yehuda and he built a house for his family there and they moved into the settlement. Unfortunately, my father did not find enough work in the settlement to earn a living for his family so he returned to work for the British Army. Only rarely could he return home to be with his family. My father was lonely and it was very hard for him to be separated from his family for such long periods of time. Eventually our family returned to Tel Aviv and with the little money he had saved he again built his own house. During the struggle for Independence this area was very dangerous since it was in the vicinity of Arab villages and we had to move out of our house for about a year.

In 1958 my mother went to Montreal, Canada, to be with her brother Shmuel-Jankiel [Sam Silver] who had just lost his wife Hanna. Sam Silver had come to Canada from Wyszogród [near Płock, Poland] in the mid 1920s. Seven years later he was able to bring over to Canada his wife and their daughter Hinda-Sura [Hilda]. At my mother's insistence, my father joined her in Montreal two years later. My father also had relatives living in Montreal, his older brother Jankiel-Mejer's two daughters, Chaja and Dora and their four brothers; Abraham, Nathan, Reuven and Moshe and their families were at that time also living in Montreal.

Shortly after my father arrived to Canada my parents settled in a small Jewish farming community not far from Montreal. There, they owned and operated a chicken farm which produced eggs for the market. They also kept a cow for milk, just like my father's family did in Sławatycze. Life on the farm was not easy for them.

My father used to tell us about his life in Sławatycze, about their home and about his brothers and his sisters. His father Szab'btai died in Sławatycze in 1924 and his mother Chana-Pesia perished in the Shoah.

My brother Shab'btai had worked with my father in the business of carting sand and gravel for the construction of roads. The work was very hard and it was often done in dusty environments. In 1967, during the Six Day War, my brother served in the Sinai Desert and it seems that more dust and sand had settled in his lungs and he suffered greatly from Silicosis. In 1972 my brother Shab'btai passed away during the Simchat Torah celebrations. He left behind a widow with four small children.

My mother Rachel passed away in Montreal on December 31, 1973.

My father was left alone but he continued living on his chicken farm for a while and after some time he went to live in an old age home in Montreal. He passed away in Montreal on December 29, 1985; far away from his daughter in Israel and his many grandchildren.

My father Abraham was always ready to help people, including once having saved a person's life. He was a dear and brave person and was loved by all.

His daughter Shoshana Ribkovsky /Afel

—§—



Rachel and Abraham Ribkovsky on their farm in
the village of Ste.Sophie near Montreal, Canada.

Chapter 9. 13

▪

Gitelman / Repkowski

▪

A Family History [1]

by

Henry L. [Chaim-Lejb] Gitelman
Montreal, Canada



Chaja-Blima Repkowska-Gitelman with son Chaim-Lejb in her lap and her eldest son Szepsel standing beside her. Sławatycze 1934

Our Life in Sławatycze

I was born in Sławatycze "*on the sixth day of Sukkot, the year they were putting in the telegraph poles*". That is how my mother remembered the event. It turns out to have been in the year of 1933.

My older brother Szepsel [Szab'btaj] was born in 1928 and my younger brother Mojsze was born in 1938. About 15 months after the birth of my older brother, my mother gave birth to another son who died of pneumonia when he was only about six months old. I was named after my great-grandfather Chaim-Lejb Hitelman and probably the name "Chaim-Lejb" was chosen for me as an amulet since '*Chaim*' means 'Life' in Hebrew. My father Dawid-Hersz was born in Sławatycze in1902 and my mother, Chaja-Blima Repkowska was born in 1903 in the small village of Hanna, about eight kilometres south of Sławatycze, where her mother's family, the Światlość, lived.

My father's family, the Hitelmans [after Poland became independent in 1919 the named was officially spelled as "Gitelman"] were all born in Sławatycze. His brother Akiwa was born in 1904 and sisters Breindl and Chana-Marjem were born in 1910 and 1914. After the death of my father's mother, Chaja Gitel Sznur, his father Awrum-Icke remarried the widow Shejndl Gutmacher and moved to Malorita, Belorussia, about 40 km. east of Sławatycze, there to join his brother Aron in the fur business. In Malorita, my father's father and his stepmother had four children; Yachad born in 1920, Chaja born in 1922 and twins, Chaim-Lejb and Szulem-Wolf born in 1924.

My mother's siblings were all born in Sławatycze. Her only sister, Dora [Dobe-Riwka] was born in 1905 and her five brothers; Szaja-Leib was born in 1906, Awrejml [Abram-Wolf] b.1908, Nute-Hersz [Nathan] b.1911, Riwen [Rubin] b.1914 and Mojsze [Morris] b.1918.

Some documented variations of my mother's family name are Repkowski, Rypkowski, Rybkowski, Ribkovsky, and also Rapkowski and Reback in Canada.

Our life in Sławatycze revolved around my maternal grandparents. We lived with my mother's parents; Jankiel-Mejer Repkowski and Sura-Toba [Światlość].

My *Zeyde,* Jankiel-Mejer Repkowski was a carter and he also owned a farm in the nearby village of Kuzawka but the family lived in Sławatycze

My great-grandmother, *die elter-bubbe* Chana-Pesia [Blusztejn] the widow of Szepsel [*Shab'btai*] Repkowski, lived with her eldest son Jankiel-Mejer and his family. In that house we were four generations

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[1] Extract from the Memoir "I am Drenched in the Dew of my Childhood" by Henry L. Gitelman

under one roof. I remember my *elter-bubbe* taking me into her bed and we cuddled under her large *perinne* [a feather bed or duvet] made with fluffy goose down. She would tell me Bible stories in which her son Abraham was always the hero of the story. My grandfather's younger brother Abraham [Ribkovsky] made *alliah* to Eretz Israel in the mid 1920s. There, he practiced the family trade of carting sand and gravel on road and railway construction sites. Great-grandmother had a picture of her son in Palestine standing in front of his wagon that was drawn by two horses.

The Hitelmans / Gitelmans were all *kirzhners* [furriers]. There was not much work for my father, nor for anyone else, in Sławatycze, so my father and his brother Akiwa [Kiwa], his sister Breindl [Bronia], my mother's brothers and many other young people of Sławatycze left the *shtetl* to find work in the larger cities, especially in the capital city of Warsaw. People from the provinces were not allowed to live in Warsaw without residence permits, but many did live and work there illegally. They would rent a room from a *Warszawer* family and worked, ate and slept in the same room on a pile of furs as their bed. My father often related that lodging space in Warsaw was so scarce that some people from the provinces rented a kitchen table as a place to sleep. The table was available to them only after evening tea was finished to until just before breakfast. I am not certain if he told it as an apocryphal story or if he personally knew such poor wretches.

During the fur season, that is, during winter months, my father went off to Warsaw to work in the fur trade with his brother and his sisters. In the off-season, that is, *fun Peisach biz far di Yom Toivim* [from Passover until before the High Holidays] my father worked in the surrounding villages as a *cieśla,* a construction carpenter [*plotnick* in Russian, *Zimmermann* in Yiddish or German]. My father often worked with his close friends, my mother's second cousins, the three Epelbaum brothers. [The Epelbaum/Applebaum brothers, their mother, their sister Chaja Bakalinsky and her family with their two orphaned nieces immigrated to Winnipeg, Manitoba in the late 1920s.].My father and his crew put up barns and log houses for the farmers who were too busy during the summer eking out a meagre hand-to-mouth existence on their small farm plots. Father and his co-workers slept in the haylofts and sometimes they ate non-kosher food.

In Sławatycze, our staple diet in the winter was bread, potatoes, turnips, sour pickles, sauerkraut, more potatoes, rendered chicken or goose *schmaltz* and potatoes, again. Lest I forget to mention here the prodigious quantities of salted and pickled herring that was consumed, summer and winter. During the growing season we ate red and black radishes, green onions, young cucumbers, small new potatoes, apples, pears, cherries, string beans, peas, rhubarb, borsht made from red beets and *shtchav* [a cold soup made of sour tasting wild sorrel leaves]. After biting into an apple and before swallowing the first bite, we always checked the part of the apple in our hand for the other half of the wiggly worm. If yes, we would then spit out the chunk of the apple in our mouth, remove the bitten off part of the worm and then continue to enjoy our "organic" apple. In the summer our family went out to the nearby forest to pick sorrel leaves, wild blueberries, a kind of sour tasting bright red berry called *vaimpelech* and also wild mushrooms. The aromatic wild mushrooms were strung with loops of cord and hung outside to dry for later use in the delicious, thick, bean and barley soups. Jam was made from the wild berries. Jews seldom ate tomatoes, I guess because it reminded them of blood, which is forbidden food to Jews. In the winter months the only green vegetables we had to eat were sour pickles. We were fortunate as my grandparents kept a cow, so we had milk, sour cream, sour milk [a form of yoghurt] and butter year round.

One of the unique delicacies I remember eating was baked herring. A whole herring was wrapped in newspaper and put over the hot coals in the stove. The paper caught fire, the melting fat of the herring saturated the paper and turned it into a parchment-like cocoon in which the herring was baked to perfection.

Most people in the *shtetl* led a hand-to-mouth existence. Spring was the cruellest time of all. The food that they may have laid-in in their cellars during the autumn, such as potatoes, cabbages, sour pickles and turnips, was getting scarce or was rotten by now, and nothing had as yet come out of the fields or the backyard gardens. The next potato crop would not be harvested until the middle of August. Whatever spare food he had, my *Zeyde* sent over to our poor relatives.

During the First World War the retreating Cossacks burned most of Sławatycze including my grandfather's house and the old synagogue that dated from the 1600s and drove the Jews out of the *Shtetl.* My grandfather Jankiel-Meier and his family went to stay with relatives in Berditchev, a predominantly

Jewish city near Kiev, in the Ukraine. After spending close to three years in Berditchev they returned home to Sławatycze in 1918 or 1919.

In 1928 my mother's sister Dobe emigrated to Canada. She was sponsored by her mother's two brothers, Meir and Aaron Światłość who emigrated to Canada before the First World War. In Canada the two brothers became "Sweet". In Montreal my aunt Dobe Rybkowska became "Dora Reback" and she married Joe Waterman, formerly Yosl Waserman, her Sławatyczer *landsman*. In December of 1938 my uncle Awrejml [Abram Repkowski], the *kirzhner,* followed his sister to Canada and there he became "Abe Reback", the furrier.

I was about three years old when I started *cheder* [Hebrew school]. On the first day of *cheder* my father wrapped me in his *tallis* [prayer shawl] and he carried me in his arms all the way to Mendele Kolker's *cheder*. My mother was there too and she fed me honey and candies to make *cheder* a sweet experience. The *melamed* Mendele Kolker, was a poor man, as were most of the *melamdim.* The *cheder* was in his house and his wife and his younger children were always about. We kids sat on benches on both sides of a large table. The top of the table was level with my chin. There must have been about two dozen kids in this *cheder* studying in unison the Hebrew prayers and the *Aleph Beis* [Hebrew A,B,C's] The *melamed* sat in the middle, not at one end of the table as one would expect, as from this position he could reach any kid and slap those that he thought had misbehaved or who mispronounced the *Aleph Beis.*

Cheder was from early in the morning to late in the afternoon or evening. I remember that it was already dark when I walked home from *Cheder* and that I carried a lantern made from a pumpkin with a lit candle inside, the precursor of the Halloween lantern. It wasn't until about a year after I started *Cheder* that I got a real kerosene lantern as my reward for having learned the *Aleph Beis.* One year he brought us battery operated lanterns and my brother and I were the first kids in Sławatycze with these newfangled flashlights.

In the summer we were allowed to play in the backyard of the *cheder.* There was no playground equipped with swings or slides. We improvised our own play. In one game we threw a penknife into a marked out circle on the ground, bisected the circle and claimed the largest section as our own domain.The winner was the one who acquired the largest area of the inscribed circle. Another game that we played was with two sticks and a shallow pit. We would lean one stick on the side of the pit and with the other stick we would hit it so as to propel it high into the air. The winner was the one whose stick flew the furthest. At the end of the game we invariably peed into the pit. Only close friends were allowed to pee together into the same play pit. My father, when recalling an old childhood friend, would say "*mir hobn gepisht in dem zelbn grieble*", we peed into the same pit, indicating their old childhood bond.

In 1937 my parents bought an empty plot of land on uł.Włodawska, near the small bridge that spanned the *rowek* [ravine] and the following year my father, with the help of his friends, built his own house in Sławatycze. The back of our new house faced the Bug River. A large cellar under our house served as a cooler where sacks of potatoes, onions, turnips, beans and cabbages were kept throughout the year. Cellars also served as the "refrigerator" where earthen jugs of milk and buttermilk and slabs of butter were kept cool. Blocks of ice were cut from the river in the winter and kept in the barn covered in sawdust for later use during the summer months.

Throughout his life my father was an energetic spirit and an inveterate joiner. He was a furrier, a carpenter, a tanner, a union activist, a socialist, a member of the *Arbeiter Farband* [a Jewish workers' organisation], a volunteer fireman, an amateur actor, a *Purim shpieller,* a raconteur, an ardent fisherman, a *Matzoh* baker, and the greatest Polish pickle maker that ever was.

I remember my father taking me to visit the fire station in Sławatycze. The fire station was located at the end of the market place, beside the Catholic Church. At the firehouse there was a huge wagon with a huge red steel drum on top of it to hold the water and the wagon was pulled by four horses. Ten volunteer firemen would stand on the long sideboards on either side of the fire-wagon to operate the water pump. By pulling down and pushing up on the overhead wooden bars they provided the manpower required to pump the water from the large drum through the fire hoses to the brass nozzles that were held by the senior firemen. To fill the tank, the fire-wagon was taken to the Bug River and the drum was then filled by a bucket brigade. On the walls of the firehall hung firemen's hooks with long wooden handles.

At home, in our attic, my father kept a shiny brass fireman's helmet that had a mane of horsehair running down its crown and also a fireman's jacket with a large leather belt from which hung a huge fireman's axe. I loved to show off my father's shiny helmet and the fireman's axe to my friends.

Fires were common occurrences in Sławatycze. I remember the big fire that occurred in early 1939. My *Zeyde* packed up the family and moved us all to his farm in nearby village of Kuzawka. The fire started in an attic storage room of the bicycle shop in the center of the marketplace and it rapidly spread to the other shops. The Sławatycze fire brigade could not cope with the spreading fire and they called in the fire brigade from the bigger nearby town of Włodawa. They came with their more modern equipment that consisted of a wood burning, steam-operated pumper mounted on a wagon that was drawn by four horses. The fire was contained, but not before half of the shops on one side of the marketplace had burned down.

Even though the fire chief and most of the firemen were Poles, there were also a number of Jewish members in the Sławatycze Volunteer Fire Brigade. To raise money for the fire brigade, the Jewish volunteer firemen and their friends put on plays in Yiddish, especially during Purim festival. I remember seeing my father on stage acting in a dress-up play called *Die Josef Shpiel.* [The Joseph Play]. It was a play based on the biblical story of Joseph who was sold into slavery by his eleven brothers and taken to Egypt. The actor portraying Joseph wore "a coat of many colours" that may have been his wife's bathrobe. The other eleven brothers all wore long black "shepherd's" coats with black sashes tied around their midriffs that looked rather similar to the garb worn by Chasidim. All the twelve brothers wore Polish style visored caps with the name of the brother that each actor portrayed inscribed in Hebrew letters on the hatband.

Many of the other plays that they performed had a strong social content, such as; *Die Zibben Gehonghenne* [The Seven that Were Hanged], *Mirele Efros* and other plays by Jacob Gordin such as *Die Shvue* [The Oath]. My father claimed that they staged many plays that had been banned by the Polish Government. In the Poland of that time all books and plays had to have the government censor's stamp of approval, otherwise one chanced being fined or given prison terms for possessing banned books or staging unapproved plays. These regulations were often defied by using two different scripts, one expurgated script to show the government inspectors in order to get their stamp of approval and another, the original unapproved script that was used by the actors.

All his life my father was very proud of having served in the Polish Cavalry. My father maintained that not every Jewish boy wanted to or could serve in the Polish cavalry. In the cavalry one had to serve for 24 months rather the usual 18 months and be able to ride on horseback. My father often retold stories about the life in the Polish armed forces and how harsh it was and that many Jewish boys avoided conscription by self-mutilation. They would cut off their trigger finger, pierce their eardrums or they would arrange to make a *kille* [a hernia].

Father served in the *"Pięrwszy Pułk Marszałka Piłsudskiego"* [Marshal Piłsudski's First Regiment], an elite mountain cavalry unit stationed in the North Carpathian Mountains. In May of 1926 my father's cavalry regiment was transported by train to the suburbs of Warsaw where they took up positions on the side of Marshal Józef Piłsudski's forces when he made a military "coup" against the government. My father related that the only casualty his regiment suffered on this military campaign was the loss of his captain who rode up to the top of a small hillock, stood up in his stirrups in order to see better with his binoculars and got a bullet in the middle of his forehead. That was the extent of the military action of their regiment. *Marszalek* Józef Piłsudski ruled Poland as a benevolent dictator until his death in 1935.

September 1st, 1939 - The Start of World War II

During the summer of 1939 there seemed to be a lot of nervous activity in Sławatycze. Groups of people were milling about in the marketplace and in the streets exchanging rumours about the unreasonable ultimatums that Nazi Germany was issuing to Poland and of the imminence of war. People gathered around the only radio in Sławatycze. The owner of the radio listened on his earphones [there were no loudspeakers on the battery-operated radio] to foreign news broadcasts and repeated out loud the essence of the broadcast to the crowd around him. For the past year there were a number of Jewish refugees from Germany that passed through our town. Of course, few could comprehend what was happening to Jews in Nazi Germany or what was about to happen to us too.

On September 1st, 1939 the Germans launched their *"Blitz Krieg"* [Lightening Attack] on Poland without any declaration of war. World War II had broken out.

On September 28th, in accordance with their secret "Non-Aggression Pact", also known as the "Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact", Germany and Soviet Russia partitioned Poland between them. Under this Pact, the Germans occupied the western part of Poland and Soviets annexed the eastern part of Poland, that which primarily lies east of the Bug River. By October 5th, 1939 sovereign Poland was, once

again, no more. The Bug River now forms the border between present day Poland and what is now the independent republics of the Ukraine and Belarus [formerly Belorussia].

At the outbreak of the war, my maternal grandparents, my great-grandmother, my mother and we children went to stay at my grandparents' farm, some 6 or 7 km from Sławatycze. My father had been called-up to the Polish Armed Forces and initially he was not with us. A week or so later he suddenly appeared at the farm. It seems that his military unit in which he was serving had dispersed and he hid in the countryside near Malorita where his father lived. My uncles had also scattered, I do not know where.

German Stukka dive-bombers bombed and strafed straggling Polish soldiers and columns of refugees. Some of the refugees were killed. My grandfather and the farmer went out to help the wounded.

After less than a week on the farm we returned to Sławatycze. My father also had clandestinely returned home to Sławatycze. The Germans had not yet come into Sławatycze and there was no one in authority for a few days. A "Workers' Militia" was formed and my father was one of them. Wearing red and white armbands and carrying rifles that they had commandeered from the local police station, they patrolled Sławatycze. They arrested a few of the minor Polish officials in town and buried some weapons for later use.

Chaos reigned. In their attack on Poland, the Soviet Red Army had overrun their agreed-upon borders, crossed the Bug River and came into Sławatycze.

But before the Red Army would enter our town, the Russian commander demanded that a delegation of prominent citizens, carrying red flags, come out to greet them and "invite" them into our town. The town Rabbi, together with the Catholic and the Russian Orthodox priests, went out to greet the invaders in the traditional way that dignitaries and conquerors were greeted in this part of the world; by the ceremonial offer of bread and salt carried on a platter.

The Red Army then entered Sławatycze and bivouacked in the *rynek* [marketplace]. The locals could easily converse with the Russian soldiers in their own dialect and they were very friendly to the population. The huge, steaming, field kitchen set on a horse drawn wagon fascinated me. It was not much different from the Sławatycze fire pumper. Everything was horse drawn, the cavalry, the artillery guns and supply wagons. There were no tanks or trucks to be seen.

One day, the population was gathered in the marketplace where a Soviet *politruk* [political instructor] stood on the back of a wagon expounding the merits of International Communism to the crowd. About a week later the Red Army pulled back east across the Bug River and the Germans came into Sławatycze riding on motorcycles with sidecars, motorized cannon, trucks and a couple of tanks.

Since Sławatycze was now right on the German-Russian dividing line, it had become a good jumping-off point to crossover from German-occupied Poland into the part of Poland that was now annexed by Russia. Many people wanted to get out of German occupied Poland as they heard rumours that the Germans were extremely brutal with Jewish soldiers whom they took prisoner.

My father was afraid that the Germans would arrest him as a Polish prisoner-of-war so he crossed over to the Russian side of the Bug River. There too, he had to hide so as to avoid being arrested by the Russians and taken as a Polish prisoner-of-war.

The most curious part about this situation was that my father had my older brother Szepsel sent over to him on the other side of the Bug River. This very fact may have been the most fateful coincident of the many propitious coincidences that saved the lives of my immediate family.

In Sławatycze, the Germans had commandeered my parent's new house to serve as their headquarters. It was the newest house in town; my father built it himself less than a year earlier. We moved across the street to live with my mother's parents. Once, a German sergeant came to ask my mother's permission to drive nails into the wall of our new house so that they could hang up their helmets and their clothes.

I went to visit our new house where the German solders were now staying. They slept on bundles of straw spread on the floor and spoke in what seemed to me as "big city Yiddish". The soldiers were very friendly to me and offered me lemonade and candies. I was warned by my mother not to accept any treats from them as it was rumoured that the Germans poisoned Jewish children.

I distinctly remember the last time I visited the German soldiers in my former home. I looked up, and there before me I saw this tall man staring at me. He was dressed all in black and wore a red and black armband and a high hat with a black visor and on top of his hat there were badges of an eagle and a skull and crossed bones below it. I did not know then who he really was but he seemed very frightening to me. He

must have been an officer of the "*SD Einsatzkommando*", the security division of Nazi extermination teams, who came into our town to size up the Jewish population. The next day it was decreed that all Jewish shops had to display a yellow Star of David.

Soon afterwards, my father appeared at the river's edge on the Russian side of the Bug River, and, in between passes of the Soviet and German border patrols, he yelled across the river for someone to:-

"GO GET CHAJA YANKEF SZEPSEL'S, I HAVE TO TALK TO HER !"
[Chaja, daughter of Jankiel son of Szepsel].

My mother, like every one else in Sławatycze, was always referred to by her father's and grandfather's names. Some were referred to by their matronymics, such as "Chaja Leah's" or by their nicknames, such as" Szmuel-Zawel die Kille", "Szmuel Kasztan's", "Mojsze Kalte Wetcheres", [Mojsze-Cold-Supper] "die Poliszukes"; the nickname of a large extended family in Sławatycze. One was never called by their surnames. The imposed surnames were for official use only.

Neighbours quickly summoned my mother. My father shouted across the river telling her that he is not coming back to Sławatycze and that she and the children should cross over to join him on his side of the Bug River. To her regret, about a month or so earlier my mother had sent my older brother Szepsel across to the other side of the border to be with our father.

My mother refused to join her *meshugener* husband on one more of his adventurous escapades. She did not want to leave her parents and her elderly grandmother by themselves and she in turn demanded that her husband send their eldest child back to her. Szepsel was by then eleven years old and he too was adamant about not wanting to go back to Sławatycze. He was having a grand time in Domaczów, adults were paying a lot of attention to him and there was a cinema there. My father, my brother Szepsel and three of my mother's brothers were staying at the *pensjonat* [resort hotel] that my grandfather's youngest brother Herszel Repkowski owned in Domaczów, now on the Soviet side of the Bug River. Our family often visited Domaczów and my redheaded great-uncle Herszel and his chubby wife Henja with their two chubby sons, Szepsel and Bunja.

A week later, my father again appeared at the river's edge and again tried to persuade my mother to cross the river with the children and to join him. Shortly after this second cross-border communication, my mother's older brother Szaja with his wife Dobe and their little girl came from the nearby town of Włodawa to be with his parents in Sławatycze. Now that her eldest brother was here to look after her parents and her grandmother, my mother felt that she should join her crazy husband in Domaczów as he was obviously not coming back to Sławatycze any time soon and he insisted on keeping her eldest child hostage.

People were not aware of the actual situation or what was happening in other parts of Poland. Perhaps my father had an instinctive inkling of the true meaning of things that were about to happen. His keen instincts for survival served us well during the war years.

My *Zeyde* hired a fisherman whom he knew in order to smuggle his daughter and her two children across the Bug River in his rowboat. Together with us in the smuggler's rowboat was the sister of my uncle Awrejmel's partner in Warsaw. She and her husband had come to Sławatycze, to their friends the Gitelmans, to be smuggled across the Bug to the Soviet occupied side of Poland.

In the middle of one cold, dark night at the end of November or early in December, before the river froze over, we were rowed across to the other side of the Bug River. In case my baby brother should cry out and alert the border guards, mother doped him by having him suck on a piece of cloth that was soaked in kirsch liqueur.

After we landed on the other side, we were directed to a farmhouse that belonged to a relative of the fisherman and now a smuggler. A lamp placed in the window of the house acted as our beacon. The peasant woman, who knew my mother's family, was expecting our arrival. After we settled in, the woman told my mother that early every morning the Russian border patrols come to the farmhouse looking for deserters, smugglers and refugees that had crossed the river the night before. The peasant woman explained to us that

she could shelter my mother and her two children by telling the Russian border patrols that we are her relatives who are visiting, but our friends will have to leave the house and hide somewhere else. She could easily explain my mother's presence she said, as my mother spoke the local dialect, but our friends speak with a big city accent and she dare not hide total strangers in her house. My mother then told her "if you won't hide my friends then don't hide us either".

Early the next morning soldiers of the Russian border patrol came to the farm and arrested a number of people who had crossed the border the night before. They found people in the barn and in the bushes, they stuck their bayonets into the haystacks in case someone was hiding there too. Then the Russians came into the house and arrested us.

The bundles of luggage and the women with young children were put on a horse drawn hay wagon and the rest of the adults were marched behind the wagon. We were guarded by Russian soldiers with their long rifles and fixed bayonets held "at-the-ready." Shortly afterwards we arrived in the nearby town of Domaczów and were ushered into a fenced-off schoolyard.

In Domaczów many people lined the route of the daily parade to see if they recognised anyone they might know among the detainees.

I was riding on top of the wagon when suddenly I spotted my father in the crowd of onlookers. I jumped off the wagon and ran to my father. The Russian guards shouted at me: "*Stoy!, Malchik, Stoy*!" [Halt! Boy, Halt!], but I did not pay any heed and they did not shoot at me, the Germans surely would have. My father had my older brother Szepsel whisk me away to uncle Herszel's *pensjonat*. The wagon with my mother and my baby brother and the other detainees was brought into the fenced-off schoolyard for processing.

The Russians detained deserters, "spies", smugglers and other undesirables and "threw" the rest back across the Bug River to the German occupied side of Poland.

Through the schoolyard fence my father whispered instructions to my mother:- "*When they take you and the others out of the schoolyard to be sent back across the river to the German side, you should take only the baby with you and leave your peklach* [bundles] *behind and when you and the others are marched out into the street, you should stay on the outside of the line-up, that is, on the side facing the curb".* My mother protested that she needs all the clothes that she brought with her for the baby. Somehow my father was able to convince my mother to listen to him and to do what he insisted that she do.

Before leaving the schoolyard, my mother extracted a small package from her bundle and secreted it in the large shawl that she wrapped around the baby. The contents of this little package that my mother carried with her throughout the war years consisted of a rather unique treasure that was always a great solace to her for the rest of her life.

Throughout the war years my mother carried with her this little packet and it was not until after we arrived in Canada in 1948 that she revealed what this treasured possession of hers was. The packet contained many family photographs, my father's and her own "*Dowód Osobisty*" dated 1934 [the Polish internal passports], my father's Army Mobilisation Call-up Card, his "*Karta Rzemieslnicza*" [trade card], dated 1928 and other such valuable documents. There was also a small piece of blue paper that seems to be an official receipt from notary Stefan Rudźinski of the city of Włodawa for the registration of "*Akt N° 864*" dated November 9th 1937. It is possible that it is the receipt for the notarial deed of the lot on which my father built their new house in 1938. [2]

My mother's most unique treasures in that small packet that she took with her were her *T'noim*, the Jewish prenuptial marriage agreement, and her *K'tubbah*, the Jewish marriage contract. The T'noim spelled out the amount of the *Nad'n,* [dowry] and listed the property that the wife brought to her husband at marriage. Not too many survivors who had gone through the war in Europe, Siberia and Kazakhstan can boast of possessing such treasured mementos.

My mother reluctantly left her *peklach* behind in the schoolyard and with the baby in her arms she joined the group of the other detainees. They were lined up in rows of five, and under heavy guard, were marched out from the schoolyard into the middle of the street that led to the bridge across the Bug River. As instructed by my father, my mother positioned herself on the outside row of the parade of refugees.

When the refugees were marched down the street, there was a sudden commotion among them. As previously arranged, my mother's youngest brother Mojsze kicked a soccer ball into the parade of detainees,

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[2] *During my second return trip to Poland in October of 2001 I was able to obtain a copy of the deed of sale of the land based on my mother's little notarial receipt marked "Akt.No.864 notariusz Stefan Rudźinski, Włodawa, 9.11.1937".*

right near where my mother with the baby in her arms was located. People pushed each other and tried to step out of each other's way. In this ensuing confusion, my father quickly plucked my mother out from the parade and stood her right behind him on the sidewalk. A friend took the baby and others closed around my mother so that she could not be seen and be recognised by the Russian guards. The lines of detainees reformed and were marched to the bridge to be sent across the Bug River to the German occupied side of Poland.

That is how my father saved my mother and my younger brother from certain death. God only knows what would have happened to us all if she and the baby were sent back to Sławatycze.

Is it fate, luck, or the presence of mind when the right decisions are made that save our lives? It seems that as various critical situations arose, my father always made the right choices, as if made by some instinctive sense for survival.

One day in February 1940, German soldiers came to my grandparent's house in Sławatycze asking for Jankiel Rybkowski. They had a list of forty names of the most prominent people in Sławatycze and asked my grandfather to come with them, claiming that he was needed for a work brigade. His older son Szaja, who was in the house with them at the time, asked if he could go instead of his father, so they said "you too, you come with us." They took the forty-one Jews to a small wooded area behind town, had them dig a shallow ditch, and then executed them. At that time the Germans still needed falsified documents to cover up their bloody deeds so they forced the Rabbi of the *shtetl* to sign a prepared document certifying that forty Jews froze to death while on a work assignment. Then they shot the Rabbi.

The reason the details of this massacre are known is that one person did escape. When the executions began, *Mojsze der Toiber* [deaf Mojsze] started running into the forest. Being deaf or hard of hearing, he did not hear the executioners' shouts for him to stop nor the shots they fired at him. He was wounded but managed to get away and give an eyewitness report of this first "*Einsatzkommando Aktion*" in Sławatycze. I heard my parents retell this story many times over the ensuing years.

After getting word of this tragic news, my mother and her three brothers sat *Shiva* for their father and older brother. Shortly afterwards we moved away from Domaczów in order to be far away from the new border. We wound up in a resort colony called Nowostaw near the small railway town of Klewan, some 200 km east of the Bug River. Before September 1939 this area was part of Poland, but at that time it was already annexed to Soviet Russia and to this day it remains part of Russia, or more precisely, the Ukraine.

Our One-Way-Trip to Siberia.

Early in 1940 the Russian authorities decreed that all those who were born in the territories of former Poland which had recently been annexed to the Soviet Union, that is, those born East of the Bug River, were all now citizens of Soviet Russia.

All those born in that part of Poland that lies West of the Bug River, in what was under German Occupation, might apply for Soviet citizenship and would be relocated further east, away from the border reas. Any Polish refugee who did not want to accept Soviet citizenship were required to register with the German Commission which was sitting in Soviet annexed Poland for eventual return to their birthplace. My father did not want to become a Soviet Citizen and he did not want to move further east into Soviet Russia. So, like many others, my father registered to return home to Sławatycze. To return, of course, only after things quietened down a bit. The Soviets now had the names and addresses of all refugees under their jurisdiction who did not want to accept Soviet Citizenship.

In the beginning of June of 1940, at about four o'clock in the morning, there was a loud banging on our door. Russian soldiers of the NKVD [the Soviet Secret Police], with rifles at the ready, came in and searched the house for weapons. They informed us that we are under arrest as *Vraggy Naroda* [Enemies of the State] and that we were to take only what we could carry with us and we are to come with them, **NOW !**

We were marched under guard to a railway siding on the outskirts of town, a few kilometres from the Klewan railway station, where empty boxcars were waiting for us. Armed soldiers were all around us. We were not alone there; many families with little children and single adults were already being loaded into the boxcars. We were loaded with close to fifty other people into a boxcar. Other boxcars with prisoners were brought in from the nearby towns and linked-up to form a long train. Before the end of the day the sliding door on our boxcar was shut and the train started pulling out. Only then did we realise that my father was not

in the wagon with us. "Did he escape and abandon the family?" "Did he not say that he wanted to sneak back to the house and get some more clothing and other stuff for the family?" people said. "He must be in another wagon," my mother thought out aloud, but knowing her husband, she was sure that he had escaped, disappeared. It was not the first time that her husband had done things that annoyed her, she explained to the people in our wagon.

It seems that my father and a buddy of his got away from the train and went back to our house. They filled up a large wooden trunk with bolts of linen that my mother had, some more essential clothing that we could not initially take with us. Father took some furs that he had in the house and he also took with him the head of his furrier's sewing machine, leaving behind the frame and foot pedal. The two of them lugged this heavy trunk back to the prison train. But, by then our train had departed and we were on our one-way-trip to faraway Siberia.

Our family was among the close to one million Jews and non-Jews who were arrested and deported east to Siberia or north to Arctic Russia. All were former citizens of the German occupied part of Poland who had crossed over to that part of Poland that was now annexed by the Russians and who had refused to take out Soviet citizenship and to voluntarily move deep into Soviet territory.

Armed guards rode in a command rail car at the front of the train. Our train never stopped at regular railway stations, only at rail sidings outside of populated areas. The train often sat on the railway sidings for a day or two and let other trains pass us on the single track Trans-Siberian railway. Ours was not an express train in a big hurry.

The boxcars we were in had been outfitted to carry people over long distances. Graffiti carved on the inside walls told of many such earlier trips to Siberia. On each side of the wagon there were, two levels of wide wooden shelves on which people could bunk down on the "upper berth" or on the "lower berth". Our few bundles were stored under the lower shelves. The four small windows at the top of the wagons were strung with barbed wire. The boxcars had two sliding doors, one on each side of the car, but only one door was operative. In the middle of the wagon there was a coal burning, cast iron stove to provide heat and a pail with drinking water and a bucket for washing. At the outside wall, behind the stove, stood a wooden bench with a hole cut in its centre that was positioned over a similar square hole in the floor of the wagon. This was our "potty", our indoor plumbing. The shy ones in the wagon had someone shield them from view by holding a coat or blanket in front of them when they had to sit on the "potty". But, after a few days, such modesty was mostly dispensed with.

At various stops our food and water was brought to the command car at the head of the train. Once we were away from the station our prison train stopped and the *starosta,* the elected elders or captains of the wagons were let out to fetch our rations from the command car. Our food rations consisted of heavy, soggy bread and oily *kasha* [porridge] that was carried in pails by the wagon *starosta* and their helpers. *Kypyatok,* steaming hot water, was available from the steam locomotive.

In the middle of one night, after about ten days into our four-week one-way trip to Siberia, the door to our wagon slid open and in jumped none other than my father and his buddy *shlepping* a heavy wooden trunk. They were both unrecognisable except for their voices as they were covered from head to foot in coal dust and grime. All his life my father had this fantastic homing instinct. He had remembered the number of our prison train and also the number of the boxcar in which we were riding. On the sliding door of each wagon was chalked the number of the boxcar and the number of "passengers" that it contained. My father and his buddy had chased down our prison train by hitching rides on the locomotives of freight trains that were going in our direction, that is, east to Siberia. He managed to get rides because he could make himself understood in the various Russian dialects and he helped out the train crews by shovelling coal into the furnaces of the locomotives.

Those bolts of linen that were brought back by my father were our barter for food for the better part of the war years.

On our way east to Siberia father observed many trains laden with grain and with live cattle all going west. The train crews told my father that this valuable freight was being exported to Germany under the Russian-German peace pact and trade agreement. The Germans were stocking up with vital provisions for later use.

Our prison train was taken to a *lager,* as the Soviets called their prison labour camps, that was located in a pine forest just outside of the small town of Asino, about 100 kilometres north-east of the city of Tomsk.

By one of the many fortuitous coincidences that we encountered throughout the war years, my mother's three brothers were with us on the same transport and were also shipped to the Asino *lager*. They had also

been hiding out near Klewan, not far from where we were, and had been arrested and taken to Siberia on the same transport train as we were.

When we arrived at the Asino prison camp large barbed wire gates opened and our prison train rolled right into the forced labour camp. Two concentric barbed wire fences surrounded the *lager* with guard dogs running loose in the space between the two fences. High wooden guard towers with armed guards in them were located at each corner and at intermediate points of the fences. Outside the twin fences was a wide strip of ploughed ground that was raked regularly in order to detect any footprints of escapees. The fence was not electrified, that was not the Soviet style, and besides, there was no electricity in Asino.

On arrival, we were herded into delousing sheds. Most of us were scruffy and some had only the clothing they wore. Towards the end of our thirty-day trip we probably could not smell each other anymore. All of us were infested with lice.

The sleeping accommodations in our "family log cabin" consisted of four double-high, twin bunks that were nailed together for rigidity. Each twin bunk was to sleep two people but it was only slightly wider than a standard single cot. In the middle of the isle, separating the two rows of bunks, there was a row of plank tables and half log benches. In the isle, at the end of the benches stood a wood-burning stove.

Our newly assigned bunks were infested with all sorts of vermin such as nits, fleas, ticks and bed bugs. By the size of the bed bugs we could tell that the camp had been in continuous operation for a rather long time before our arrival.

Early each morning, all the adult men and the women who did not have small babies, were assembled into small brigades and marched out of the *lager* to their work assignments under an armed guard who held their long rifles with fixed bayonets at the ready. The primary industry of our lager was logging, lumbering, and shaping trees into telephone poles. Everyone, lawyers, doctors, furriers, shoemakers, men and women, all had to swing an axe or pull on the long lumberman's saw. In the egalitarian society of Soviet Russia where equality of the sexes was the law, many women worked right beside the men in the forest cutting down and trimming the trees. The workweek consisted of one day off for every ten days worked.

Most of the newcomers were inexperienced and clumsy with saws and axes. Often, someone swinging an axe would miss the tree and hit his foot instead. Others did not get out of the way of a falling tree quickly enough and were maimed or killed.

There was little food in the camps. The amount of the food rations, the *payok*, which a *Zek* [short for *Zakliutchiony*= one who is locked up, a prisoner] received, depended on the percentage of the "work norm" that each *desiatka* [squad of ten] produced the day before. Lenin's slogan, "*Those who don't work don't eat*", was often cited and applied. The less one produced, the less one got to eat. The less food one got, the less one could produce the assigned work norm, and therefore, one got less to eat. This must have been the origin of the phrase "Catch 22". Many people suffered from night blindness and from scurvy due to malnutrition and vitamin deficiencies.

My father, as a skilled *plotnik* [construction carpenter] and someone who could communicate with the guards in Russian, was soon made a *desiatnik* [a foreman of ten] and was also assigned as an instructor to teach the others the proper way to swing an axe and how to use the two-man lumberman's saw. As a *desiatnik* father received a larger *payok*. Families cooked their own meals in the cookhouse from the food rations assigned to their children plus what the adult of the family received.

One day, on the way to their workstation in the forest, my father's group came alongside another column of *zeks*. My father noticed a familiar face; it was none other than Szmuel *Kasztan's* [Szmuel, *Chestnut's* son], a Sławatyczer cabinetmaker and a *farbrenter Kommunist* [a firebrand Communist]. In pre-war Poland, Szmuel Grynblat[3] had been imprisoned a number of times for his Communist activities and had been incarcerated for close to four years in the infamous *Bereza Kartuzka,* a rather harsh maximum-security concentration camp for Polish Communists and hardened criminal. Before the outbreak of the war in 1939 Szmuel escaped from Poland into Soviet Russia.

Szmuel advised my father to apply for work at the sawmill where he was working. My father and my three uncles made the request citing their skills as *plotnicks* and shortly afterwards they were transferred to Szmuel's brigade at the sawmill. The work there was easier, less dangerous and the *payok* [rations] was much better.

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[3] *Szmuel Grynblat, now Sam Greene, lives in Charleston South Carolina, USA*

When my father asked his *landsman,* Szmuel Grynblat, "Tell me *Szmulek*, as a *farbrenter Kommunist,* how come you are not a *natchalnik* [a chief, or commandant] but an ordinary *zek,* a prisoner, just like me?" The former ardent Communist replied: - "Herszel, don't ask silly questions, *die Ratten Farband* [the Yiddish term for the Soviet Union] *is a farmachter kasten* [a closed box, an enigma], we knew nothing of its reality."

In the Asino *lager* I attended kindergarten and my older brother was in elementary school. The Soviets always treated children exceptionally well. Easily indoctrinated; children were the future, our parents were the enemy.

Russian natives from the surrounding area would come to the gate of our camp to sell or trade the wild honey and blueberries that they had gathered, the only spare food they had. These people were former inmates of the *lagers* who, after having served their sentences of ten, fifteen or twenty years, were released to the "outside", that is, they were exiled for the rest of their lives to live in the restricted areas in Siberia, at times just outside of the barbed wire fence of their former prison camp. The released prisoners could not return to their former homes but their families could come out to join them in exile. Some, like my aunt Breindl, did join their husbands in their internal exile.

As my father could communicate with these former *zeks* in peasant Russian, they told him that they had been warned by the authorities to stay away from us as we were "a strange people from a far away land" and that some of us were cannibals. Cannibalism was not a stranger in remote Siberia.

About three months after our arrival in the Asino *lager*, the women of the Polish section of the lager organised a protest march in front of the administration building. This was perhaps the first ever organised protest in a Soviet slave labour camp. The women, carrying babies in their arms, demanded to be returned to their homes. One of the women protesters borrowed my baby brother for the protest march. For some rather strange and incomprehensible reason this protest march was effective. The Soviets decided to ship out from our *lager* to a medium security *lager* those Polish citizens who had young children before the approach of winter.

Our family received an exit permit for 5 persons. This official *propusk* [lessé passé, exit permit] was hand written with a chemical pencil on a piece of plain paper. My father easily changed the **5** into an **8**. With an exit permit for eight people we were able to take out with us my mother's three brothers. These strapping young men without families did not qualify to leave the Asino forced labour camp under this special "family relocation ordinance". A few days out of Asino, when their presence on the train was discovered, the commander of the guards did not mind as he now had three "spares" in case anyone escaped from his train, as he was answerable with his own freedom for the full count that was placed in his custody.

We were shipped in a westerly direction and eventually our prison train stopped at a city called "Asbest" located at the eastern foothills of the Ural Mountains near the city of "Sverdlovsk" [now called Ekaterinburg, its old Tsarist name].As its name implies, the city of Asbest is where asbestos, the fireproof, and also carcinogenic, fibrous mineral is mined.

In Asbest we were placed in a low security *lager* on the edge of town, not far from the asbestos mines. The *lager* consisted of a cluster of barracks and workshops. There were no barbed wire fences anymore, but we were confined to the barracks for a nightly headcount and a dawn-to-dusk curfew.

My mother's three brothers were located in a nearby labour camp about 15 kilometres from us. There were no families in their camp and the work there consisted of logging in the nearby forests, but conditions were much more lenient than in the previous *lager* in Asino.

In Asbest my father worked as a carpenter in a construction yard where roof trusses and entire wall sections were prefabricated for the construction of barracks. My mother worked the night shift in the maintenance shop of one of the asbestos mine where she repaired burlap bags that were used to carry asbestos ore out of the mineshafts. Her work environment was laden with asbestos dust. In the bag repair shop, my mother, and her co-workers were made to wear strips of cloth around their faces as masks. Everyone there was given half a litre of milk to drink but they were not allowed to take home any of that milk. The entire town of Asbest was covered with a layer of grey asbestos dust.

My older brother and I attended a school that was set up for us in one of the barracks in our compound. Each day at school we were given half of a *buletchka* [a bread roll] and a quarter litre of milk to wash down the pervasive asbestos dust. We had to eat our bread and drink our milk at school and could not take home any leftover food or milk.

During the day we were allowed to leave our light security compound and go anywhere about town except that we were not allowed to go near the train station or near other sensitive areas such as railway tracks or bridges.

My parents had every second Sunday off from work and we with some of our friends, went to the nearby pine forests to pick wild mushrooms, wild blueberries and a kind of bright red sour berry which was made into compote and jam.
Food was not plentiful. At a time when Soviet Russia was exporting grain and other foodstuff to their Nazi German allies, bread was rationed, not just for us deportees, but also for all Soviet citizens. There were many bread and pastry stores in the city of Asbest but their shelves were usually empty. There were constant long *otchereds* [bread lines, queues] of people standing in line waiting for the next delivery of bread.

June 22, 1941

Early in the morning of June 22, 1941, in a surprise attack they called "Operation Barbarossa", Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in violation of their Ribbentrop-Molotov Non-Aggression Pact. By the fall of 1941 the Germans had conquered much of the territory between the Bug River and Moscow and the rest of vast "Mother Russia" was threatened.

There was then a general amnesty in the Soviet Union for common criminals who were then drafted into the military. As Polish citizens, we were now considered allies of the Soviet Union instead of the "Enemies of the State" that we were until the day before Nazi Germany suddenly attacked their Soviet allies.We were released from detention and subsequently given *propusks*, *lessé passés,* exit permits. We were free to travel, but where shall we go? The war was raging in the west and the Germans were quickly advancing to the eastern slopes of the Ural Mountains, not very far from where we were. The "Polish Government in Exile", headquartered in London, England, received permission from the Soviet Government to have their former citizens released from the Russian prisons and Siberian slave labour camps and to recruit them for the Polish Army. This new Polish Army, commonly referred to as the "General Anders' Army", was under British Command and was headquartered in Palestine. Train transports were sent out to the *lagers* to gather these former Polish citizens and to transport them to assembly areas in the cities of Tashkent and Bukhara in southern Uzbekstan and then take them out of Russia through Iran into British controlled Palestine. Tashkent soon became overcrowded from the large influx of Polish refugees.

Utter chaos reigned. Food was scarce. The war was raging to the west. The Germans were advancing rapidly towards Moscow and the Ural Mountains, and more and more war refugees were streaming east. Finally, our family of five and my mother's three brothers were able to get onto a freight train that was heading east. From Asbest our train went east to Novosibirsk and then we went south. When the train stopped in the city of Barnaul, my father went beyond the station to forage for food. The train left and my father was not on it. "*Mein meshugener man,* my crazy husband has disappeared again and this time he is gone for good," my mother lamented. We all had heard stories of people who became separated in crowded railway stations and never found each other again. Two days later my father reappeared, his arms laden with food.

When we reached the city of Bukhara near the Russian-Iranian border, the Jewish quota for the Polish Army was filled. The question facing us was; "Where shall we go?" My mother had a sister, a brother and two maternal uncles living in Canada. She also had lots of cousins who had emigrated to Canada in the late 1920s and most of them were living in Winnipeg, Manitoba. So my parents and my three uncles reasoned: *"Canada is a British colony, we heard that in China there is a city called Shanghai where there is a British colony, therefore, it would be easy to get into Canada from Shanghai. So let's go on to Shanghai and from there we'll go to Canada!"*

My family of five, together with my mother's three brothers and two other Jewish refugee families from Poland, again set out by cattle train going east on the Southern route, in the general direction of China and Shanghai. When we reached just past Alma-Ata, the capital of Kazakhstan, our train stopped running, our money had run out and we were stuck. The Soviet authorities placed our small group in a nearby *kolhoz* [collective farm] located near the Chu River. The collective farm must have had the usual heroic Soviet name but the local Kazakhs called it *Imbekshi*. We were put to work with the Kazakh farmers to help them take in their cotton crop. All the able bodied Soviet citizens had been inducted into the Soviet army and the collective farms were short of manpower.

After about two weeks, my father got impatient and anxious to get out of this "cotton picking" place. He bartered for a wagon and a pair of lumbering oxen and in the middle of one moonless night our family of five

and my three uncles made a plodding, "quick" getaway from this tiny Kazakh farming hamlet. After a few days of following the shore of the Chu River we came to a railway line. We caught a freight train laden with refugees that was heading southwest. When our train reached the fairly large Kazakh town of Dzhambul where there were a lot of Polish/Jewish refugees. We decided to stay in the area and not continue on our quixotic quest to reach Shanghai.

In Dzhambul the Soviet authorities assigned us to a small village called Dzhunganovka, some 15 kilometres south of Dzhambul. The official Soviet name of this village was *"Kolhoz Immeny Stalina"* [Kolhoz Named for Stalin]. Dzhunganovka is located in the northern foothills of the Alatau Mountains of Soviet Kirghizia and the Tien-Shan Mountains of Northwestern China. The Talas River, a fast flowing river, passes near the village.

Our family of five was billeted in a typical single room *kibitka,* an adobe type mud hut. All the huts in the village consisted of only one large room. As their families grew or they acquired another wife, additional huts would be built inside the family compound. At the rear of the enclosed yard there was a small door that led to the fields and the area that was used as a latrine. There were no outhouses and no specific area was designated for this purpose; one could defecate anywhere as long as it was outside of the perimeter of the inner compound. Human feces and animal manure was considered a prized natural fertiliser. A smooth stone, wetted with water or spittle, served as the local toilet paper. The European sojourners among them used cut-up newspaper [which was in short supply], leaves, grass or they adopted the local method of using a smooth stone which was always within easy reach.

The winters are fierce and the summers are rather hot in this area. The houses were comfortably warm when heated by the local fuel of preference; the slow burning, dry dung patties. At times it was so cold inside our hut that by the morning our pail of drinking water turned into a bucket of ice.

One day, while black-marketeering on the Dzhambul bazaar, my uncle Mojsze spotted a young woman selling candy from a kiosk. She looked rather familiar to him. He could not believe his eyes! She was his second cousin Chaja Paluch from Hanna. Chaja was the only one of her family who got away from the Nazis. Cousin Chaja joined the family in Dzhunganovka and moved into the same single room hut with her three cousins.

In the spring of 1942, a man in a torn *fufayka* [a padded cotton jacket] and broken glasses that were tied with string around his ears had shown up in the Dzhambul bazaar. He had travelled all night by train from a small town called Yangi-Yul near Tashkent, some 250 km away, in order to buy bread on the Dzhambul black market. He intended to bring it back to Yangi-Yul and resell it at a profit. Dzhambul was considered to be a breadbasket, while in nearby Tashkent, flooded by war refugees, food was at a premium. At the bazaar a Jewish refugee from Poland recognised this man's *Warszawer* accent and told him that not far from here, in a small village, there lives a Polish Jew who had worked in Warsaw. "What's his name?" the visitor asked. "Gitelman", was the response. "Oh, my wife's maiden name is also Gitelman" responded the black market bread dealer. He turned out to be my father's brother-in-law, Henryk [Heniek] Miller. That is how we found my father's sister Yachad [Jadzia] and her husband. They came to live with us in Dzhunganovka. In January of 1944 my aunt Jadzia gave birth to a baby boy who was named Janek. [Jankiel]

The making of ladies' fur coats or carpentry were not viable means of earning a living in this part of the world as most people wore padded cotton jackets in the winter and there was no wood available for carpentry. The locals knew how to tan sheepskins but they did not know how to make hard leather which is used for the soles of footwear. So my father opened a government sanctioned tanning school in order to teach the locals the secret of making hard leather. When my father was asked "how come a furrier/carpenter like you knows how to tan hides into hard leather", he explained that when he was a young boy they lived next door to a family of tanners and that it was pretty obvious to him what was their supposedly "secret" tanning process.

In Dzhunganowka I and my younger brother attended school while my older brother Szepsel worked with my father. At the back of our house my mother cultivated a small vegetable garden.

Throughout her life my mother observed *Kashrut.* Even during our sojourn in Siberia and in Dzhunganowka she would not eat meat that was not ritually slaughtered according to Jewish Law. Mother never ate salami nor would she eat ground meat that she did not chop herself. On the other hand, my father at times ate non-kosher food but he would never eat *chumetz* [food not fit for Passover] during *Pessach,* even in the worst of times.

May 1945. The War in Europe is Over!

Shortly after the war ended, former Polish citizens who were born within the newly defined boundaries of Poland, like our own family, were permitted to return to Poland. My three uncles and their two wives left to return to Poland at the end of 1945. Once back on Polish soil my youngest uncle Mojsze was inducted into the I Division of the Polish Army which was under Soviet control as opposed to the II Division which was part of the Polish Government in Exile and under British Army Command.

It was not until the spring of 1946 that the repatriation of families with children began. Our family of five and my aunt Jadzia [Yachad] and her family of three obtained "*propusks*" [permits] to return to Poland. We departed Dzhambul on May 3, 1946, a full year after the war officially had ended. The trains used for our transport home were the same boxcars as before, but this time there was no barbed wire on the windows, no guards, and our wagon door was not locked from the outside.

In preparation for our return home we made a lot of *sukhary,* the food that lasts forever and the food a prudent person in Russia "would not leave home without it". *Sukhary* consist of slices of bread that had been dried in the sun. It can be eaten dry, like "hardtack" or "Zwieback", or it can be softened by soaking it in the ubiquitous *kypyatok,* the boiled water that was available from the steam locomotives, at all railway stations and even in the forced labour camps, the *lagers*.

Returning refugees converted whatever assets they had into food and old Tsarist ten *ruble* gold coins, called "*chazerlach",* piglets. These gold coins made of pure 24 carat gold were the size of a Canadian or American dime. They were the favoured "currency" of black marketeers and smugglers as they could easily be taken through police and border checkpoints by putting them into a condom and hiding the loot up one's own anus.

Our emotions were sombre when we entered our home area and saw devastated cities and villages. The full extent of the Shoah and of its unspeakable horrors was only now becoming evident to us as we began hearing eyewitness accounts of the atrocities. The Polish authorities did not let us go back to our original homes. Our transport of returning Polish refugees was taken to Szczecin, the former German city of Stettin.

As our train was entering the Szczecin rail station we saw people at the far end of the platform, mostly elderly men and women with children, sitting on their *pecklach,* and waiting. Armed guards stood over them. After we were unloaded, our train moved up to the other end of the platform and these waiting people were boarded onto our former train. We were told that they were Germans who are being deported to Germany. The Polish government and their Soviet sponsors were doing some "ethnic cleansing" by removing all German nationals from the former German territory now annexed to Poland and transferring them across the Oder River into East Germany. A few hours before a train with Polish returnees like ours arrived from Russia, the NKVD Militia surrounded a city block and gave the German nationals two hours notice to pack up and take with them only what they could carry. These Germans were then marched under armed guard to the railway station for deportation to East Germany. For us it was all *déja vu*.

We were loaded onto "US Lend Lease" Studebaker trucks and taken to the apartments that had just been vacated by these deported German nationals. Two or three returnee families shared one apartment. The previous occupants left behind their furniture, bedding, dishes and pots and pans. The "Joint" [The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee] supplied us with free food rations.

Jews milled around the offices of the "Joint" reading posted notices and stood around in groups exchanging gossip and seeking relatives and *landsmen.*

Only now, as we met up with Nazi death camp survivors and former Partisans, was the incredulous extent of the Shoah beginning to become evident to us.

My father tried to get back to our *shtetl* Sławatycze to verify if any other of our relatives had survived and to again see his new house. Father went by train to Piszczac, now the nearest train station and about 40km from Sławatycze. A Polish man, originally from near Sławatycze, recognised my father and whispered to him that he should follow him to his house. In the privacy of his house the Pole warned my father that if he dares to go back to Sławatycze the "people from the forest" will surely put him in a sack and throw him into the Bug River like they did to a couple of other *Żidy* [Jews] who dared to return to Sławatycze and then possibly attempt to reclaim their properties. The "people from the forest" was a euphemism for the "NSZ", the *Narodowe Siły Zbrojne* [National Armed Forces], the rogue elements of the Polish underground army who fought both the Nazi Germans and the Communist Russians and in-between some of this group also killed many Jews. Their aim was to make Poland independent and also free of Jews, to finish the job the

Nazis had started. Poland was the only country where after the end of the war Jews were still being killed just because they were Jews.

Father's Polish friend hid him in his backyard orchard for he was afraid for his own life to keep my father in the house. Early in the morning my father climbed down from the apple tree he was hiding in and hopped a passing freight train to get out of town. He came back to us in Szczecin a shattered man.

A number of Jewish organisations were recruiting young people and smuggling them out of Poland into the US Occupation Zones of Germany and Austria. Eventually they were smuggled into Italy with the intention of then being smuggled into *Eretz Israel.* My older brother Szepsel joined a *Hashomer Hatzair kibbutz.* One had to be over 15 years old to become a member of the *kibbutz,* but since my older brother was a member, I was able to join even though I was only twelve and a half years old at that time. I was the youngest member of the group. The members of the *kibbutz* were taught Hebrew and socialist philosophy and we underwent clandestine military and weapons training.

A part of our group was preparing to be smuggled out of Poland by the *Bricha* into the US Occupation Zone of Germany. The group would then go to Italy and from there board all kinds of vessels, from small fishing craft to the famous ship, the "Exodus", to run the British blockade of Palestine. Later we learned that most Jews trying to smuggle themselves in British occupied Palestine wound up in British prison camps on the island of Cyprus.

In July of 1946, after the Poles "celebrated July 4th" by staging a *Pogrom* in the Polish City of Kielce, killing 41 Jews, my father decided that the time has come for us to get out of Poland. There was no time for procrastination. There was no time to think things over. My father was in the habit of making hair trigger decisions at times when the wrong decision could have been fatal. Father made it a condition that the *Hashomer Hatzair kibbutz* must also take his entire family with them to Germany, otherwise, he would not let my older brother leave with the group.

One dark night our *Hashomer kibbutz*, including my parents and my younger brother, gathered in small groups inside a large empty warehouse not far from the *kibbutz*. We were then packed like the proverbial "sardines in a can" into a covered US Lend Lease Studebaker truck. Our clandestine trip had begun to smuggle ourselves out of Poland and into the US Occupation Zone of Berlin. In the truck, adults sat on benches holding teenagers in their laps who in turn held smaller children in their laps. To camouflage its real cargo, the back-end of the truck was closed off with stacked sacks of potatoes. Our *Bricha* escort rode in a small automobile at the head of our convoy of two or three trucks. At the numerous Russian Army checkpoints our escorts showed them false manifests for a cargo of potatoes that was supposedly being transported from starving Poland into starving East Germany. After the proper bribes were handed over, our small convoy was waved through.

Early the next morning, somewhere in East Germany, our trucks drove into a barn on a farm that was used as a "safe house". We could get off the truck but were not allowed to go outside of the barn. Before leaving on our next leg of the trip, the *Bricha* collected and burnt all documents that people had on them so that the Russian or American authorities would not be able to identify us as having just been smuggled-in from Poland. Needless to say, my mother did not give up her secret packet that she had been carrying with her for the past seven years.

That night we resumed our trip. After travelling all through the night, early in the morning we arrived in the *Schlachtensee* district in the U.S. Occupation Zone of Berlin. Our convoy rolled into a DP Camp [Displaced Persons Camp] located in former German Cavalry barracks, the *Schlachtensee Ulanenkaserne.*

Displaced Persons [DP] Camps

There were many Displaced Persons Camps in post-war Germany and in Austria under the United Nations Refugee Relief Administration [UNRRA] auspices, housing and feeding former inmates of the Nazi concentration and forced labour camps, former Allied POWs and other non-German displaced persons and refugees. Eventually the DP Camps were divided by ethnic origin. In our *Schlachtensee* camp there were only Jews.

At the DP Camp we were processed and given refugee identification papers and rations cards. Anyone could assume whatever identity, place of origin, concentration camp, or any reasonable age they wanted to be. On paper it seemed to be a good idea to be younger. My older brother Szepsel, who was about to tum 18,

was registered as being 16 years old so as to delay the possibility of him being drafted into the army [in case there should be a military draft]. My younger brother Mojsze was also registered as being two years younger than he was because six-year-olds received bigger chocolate bars than did eight-year-olds. I was approaching the age of *Bar Mitzvah*, the age when it would be pronounced from the pulpit that "from now on you are a man", so I was not about to be made into an eleven-year-old kid, even if it was only pretend, that is, only on paper.

In 1946, the sixth day of Sukkoth fell on the 15th of October, so that date became my official date of birth. Years later, when I pointed out to my parents that in 1933, the year I was born, the sixth day of Sukkoth fell on October 10th so this date should be considered to be my birthday, my father wondered out loud why I am trying to be so precise about my birthday when my official birthday is really in January and not in October at all. He related that in Poland Jewish boys born after the High Holidays, that is, from September to the end of the year, had their births officially registered at the beginning of the following year. This was done so as to delay by one full year their conscription into the Polish army. In 1998 I obtained a certified copy of my birth certificate at the Slawatycze Records office. All those years my father was right, my official, and therefore, my legal birthday had really been January 2nd, 1934, and I dared to doubt my father all these years.

At the *Schlachtensee Ulanenkasserrne* DP Camp we were quartered in the horse stables, as the army personnel barracks were already full with Jewish refugees. We could not believe our eyes; horse stables with individual horse-stalls and sloping concrete floors with grooves in them so that the horse piss would run off to an underground cistern. [The stables had been cleaned out before our arrival.] Our family of five was assigned to two horse-stalls. Opaque white plastic sheets were hung around each horse-stall in order to provide some modicum of privacy for the new occupants of the stables. We slept on U.S. Army folding cots and were issued U.S. Army wool blankets that had "US" imprinted on them in large white letters. We got "US" mess kits and a knife-spoon-fork kit with the "US" monogram stamped on them. [As a treasured memento from our stay in the Berlin DP camp I still have two stainless steel spoons that have the "US" monogram on them which my frugal mother had saved over these many years. I use them during the Passover Seders, together with the "bitter herbs", as a *"zecher"*, a reminder, of our personal Exodus from slavery.]

Our UNRRA food rations consisted of powdered eggs, powdered milk and powdered potatoes. As an authority on potatoes I can confirm that powdered [dehydrated] potatoes taste awful.

Jewish policemen guarded the inside of our DP Camp. They wore civilian clothes, blue and white armbands and US Army helmets with the word "UNRRA" stamped on them. They carried no weapons. US Army Military Policemen [MPs] in US Army Jeeps were stationed on the outside of the main gate of our DP Camp and verified the documents of anyone entering the camp. Germans, or anyone else without proper authorization, were not allowed to enter the DP Camp.

Most of post-war Berlin was a ghost town of bombed out skeletons of tall buildings. It was now a year and a half after the end of the war and many of the streets were still blocked with rubble. Sections of the underground train system, the "U-Bahn", were flooded and unusable.

At that time Germany and the city of Berlin were divided into four occupation zones, American, Russian, British and French. Before the blockade of Berlin in 1948 and the subsequent erection of the Berlin Wall, there were no restrictions on travel between the various zones. The streets of Berlin were patrolled by military police from the four Allied occupational forces [US, British, Soviet and French], riding together in an American Jeep driven by an American Military Policeman. [Eventually the American, British and French zones became West Germany and West Berlin and the Russian zone became East Germany and East Berlin.]

The winter of 1946-47 was very severe. Elderly Germans came to the gate of our DP Camp to trade articles of value such as watches, silver cutlery and candlesticks for food. Many of these expensive articles must have been war booty. Some Germans sold to the Jews bars of grey soap with the initials "RJF" embossed on them, claiming that "RJF" stands for "*Rein Jüden Fets*", that is, it was made from "Pure Jew's Fat". They also sold scraps of parchment from *Sefer Torahs* that had been used as wrapping paper by German soldiers to send parcels home from the occupied territories. The Jewish community in the DP Camp bought the "RJF" soap and the scraps of the Torah and gave them a proper Jewish burial.

Our *Hashomer Hatzair* group left Berlin with the intentions of going to Italy and from there to smuggle themselves into Palestine. Since my parents could not come along with us they persuaded my brother and me to leave the group and to stay with them in Berlin.

Shortly afterwards, my older brother [who was officially 16 years old] and I entered an orphanage for Jewish children. The orphanage was located just outside of the DP Camp and was run by a Jewish organisation under UNRRA auspices. We were given new clothes; I got my first toothbrush and underwear. The food was better there although the potatoes were still those awful tasting dehydrated type. Also, our accommodations were much better than those in the main DP Camp. We slept on steel-frame beds with real mattresses instead of the US Army issue canvas folding cots.

Like my brother and me, many of the youngsters in the orphanage were not true orphans and some had one or both parents living somewhere back in Poland. Their parents had allowed the *Bricha* organisation to smuggle their children out of Poland without the parents accompanying their children. The Jewish organisations were anxious to make an international issue about the large number of homeless Jewish orphans and to get these young Jews into Palestine. At that time they did not want the old people, as it was considered to be easier to build a new Jewish country with the young. The older Jews, who are difficult to move about and difficult to be indoctrinated into a new social order, would come later. [It is reminiscent of the Jewish people wandering for forty years in the desert after the Exodus from Egypt so that the old would die off and only those who knew no slavery would enter and build the new country of Israel.]

I celebrated my Bar Mitzvah in October of 1946 in the *Schlachtensee* DP Camp. There was a makeshift synagogue and I was called-up to the *Torah.* My father wrapped a *tallit* around me and he made the benediction of *Baruch Sheptarani,* effectively saying "you are now responsible for your own sins". My parents provided a *Kiddush* of herring and *schnapps* for the congregants and thus I became "a Man".

In late 1946 we were able to make contact with my mother's sister Dora and her brother Abe in Canada. Mother, the prodigious letter writer, remembered their address in Montreal. We received a telegram from them informing us that Nute and Riwen and their wives are in a Displaced Persons [DP] Camp in the city of Bamberg in the US Occupation Zone of Germany and that their youngest brother Mojsze was with them. [Later we learned that Mojsze had defected from the Polish Army and was smuggled into the US Zone of Germany by the *Bricha,* the Jewish escape organisation.] Our aim was to go to Canada to join our relatives there, but at that time Canada was not admitting any Jewish refugees.

At the end of 1947, before the Russians blockaded Berlin in 1948, we obtained permission to leave the Berlin DP camp and join my mother's three brothers in Bamberg. From Berlin we were taken by an open Studebacker truck to a staging DP camp in Stuttgart and from there we were to go by train to Bamberg. We had no problem obtaining train tickets to Bamberg but getting into a railway car was impossible as all trains were overcrowded with people moving from one place to another. Some people squatted with their bundles on the roofs of the railway cars. When the train to Bamberg rolled in we heard a voice shouting *"Amchuh!, Amchuh!". Amchuh,* the Yiddish version of the Hebrew word *"Amechah"* [your People], was the identification code word that was used by Jews after the war as a way to identify themselves to their fellow Jews. We, and a few of the others around us, started running to where the call emanated from where we saw a young man leaning out of an open window of one of the commuter train compartments shouting *"Amchuh! Amchuh!".* He had barred the doors to the compartment from the inside and opened one of the windows and pulled in through the open window only those who responded with the proper code word or other words in Yiddish. We helped each other climb in through the open window into the already crowded train compartment. There was not enough room inside the compartment for my older brother and some of the other Jews, so all through the night my brother Szepsel stood on a switchman's tiny footrest on the outside of the wagon with his hands locked around the handrail. He had fallen asleep standing up but luckily he was not hurt except for cinder burns on his face and his clothes and he was covered from head to toe with soot from the coal burning locomotive.

In the Bamberg DP camp my mother's brothers were able to obtain lodgings for us in the military barracks and not in the perennial horse stalls where many of the other DP's were quartered. We were issued ration cards by the IRO [International Relief Organisation, successor to the UNRRA] but the rations were not sufficient to feed hungry teenagers. To buy additional food we had to find ways to earn money through employment, which was difficult to find, or to trade on the black market. My father started a furrier school under the ORT[4] vocational school system. My uncle Riwen worked as a camp policeman. My uncle Nute was dealing on the black market and he took on my brother Szepsel as his apprentice. Apprentices like my

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4) ORT- Organisation for Rehabilitation and Training, the international vocational organisation originally founded by Jews in Russia in the 1880s to teach industrial skills to Jewish youth.

older brother bought cigarettes by the carton and resold them by the pack or even by the single cigarette. The big guys on the black market, like my uncle Mojsze, bought and resold wheat and other goods by the carload, sight unseen. These black market "biggies" dealt directly with rogue officers of the US Quartermaster Corp. They even sold carloads of black market wheat to the Russian Authorities.

My younger brother Mojsze and I attended school in the Bamberg DP Camp. There we learned arithmetic, Hebrew, Zionist marching songs such as "*Anu, Anu Hapalmach*" and the beginning of Basic English. In the classrooms we spoke a mix of Yiddish, Russian and Polish. Only our teachers had textbooks. *Siddurim* served as our Hebrew textbooks. In late 1947 we received some American textbooks on Basic English that were illustrated with cartoon characters and with instructions in incomprehensible English.

During the afternoons I attended a trade school where I was learning to be a locksmith and a machinist. The trade school was sponsored by ORT. The man in charge of our trade school was a German Jew who was an Engineer before the war. He spoke to us in German and we found it odd that a Jew would speak to other Jews in despised German.

As the two best students in our machine-shop class, I and an other fellow were enrolled in an eight-week apprenticeship course at the Bosch Company, the German manufacturer of auto electric components. Even after having been in Germany for close to two years, as Jews we felt very awkward being in such close proximity with Germans and to being addressed in German.

My older brother Szepsel was enrolled in my father's ORT furrier trade school where he was learning the family trade, but he still continued his activities on the black market on a part time basis.

My mother's sister Dobe [Dora] and her brother Awrejml [Abe] tried to bring us to Canada, but to no avail. Since the late 1930s Canada had had an unofficial immigration policy for Jews of "*None, Is Too Many*". Under this policy, administered by anti-Semitic civil servants and under pressure from the French Canadian Fascist sympathisers, as few Jews as possible were to be allowed into Canada. Bringing in condemned French Nazis and admitting Ukrainian and Lithuanian Nazi collaborators was OK, but no Jews were to be allowed in. In early 1947 some Jewish war orphans were finally admitted into Canada.

In late 1947, my mother's uncle Aaron [Światlość] Sweet, who was an egg and hide dealer in the small farming community of Winchester, Ontario, arranged for a farmer friend to sponsor my uncle Mojsze for immigration to Canada "as a much needed [single] farmhand". But by that time my uncle Mojsze had active TB [tuberculosis] and he knew that he would be rejected from entering Canada with such a highly contagious disease. So, in order to get his entry permit to Canada, my uncle Mojsze paid someone to stand in for him for the prerequisite chest X-rays.

It was not until the middle of 1948 that our relatives in Canada were able to sponsor us for immigration to Canada. In the port city of Bremerhaven our family of five and about 500 other immigrants were loaded onto a 14,000 ton US Navy Liberty Ship cargo and troop carrier; the "USAT General Stuart Heintzelman" for our eight day cross-Atlantic voyage to Halifax, Canada.

Women with small children were assigned to small, cramped cabins. Men and teenage boys slept in the cargo holds on four tiered hammock-type canvas bunk beds supported by four floor-to-ceiling pipes. Women and teenage girls were assigned to separate cargo holds that had previously housed *non-coms* [non commissioned officers] and they slept on similar hammocks but only two tiers high rather than four high. Linens and pillows were issued to the women and young children only. The men were each issued a blue navy blanket with "US" stamped on it and a "*Mae West*" life preserver which doubled as a pillow. We were all fed navy rations and the men and women ate in separate cafeterias. We all ate standing up at high metal tables supported on similar floor-to-ceiling pipes that supported the tiers of bunks. Everyone, including the women, had to do KP duty [Kitchen Patrol]. Yet no one seemed to complain, we were happy to be out of the DP Camps and on our way to join our relatives in Canada. My uncles Nute and Riwen and their families followed us to Canada about two weeks later.

Canada

In Montreal, my aunt Dora and uncle Abe lodged us in a third floor "cold" flat. Eleven of us, our family of five, my uncle Nathan [Nute] and his wife Andzia, my uncle Rubin [Riwen] and his wife Haya [Chaja Paluch /Rapkowski] and their two young children, all occupied the same three bedroom flat. My brother Szepsel [now Sam] and I [now Hymie, but I preferred to be called Henry] both slept in one ¾ size double bed

that was located in the open parlour. My younger brother Mojsze [now Morris] slept on a cot in the same room with our parents. We were all used to living in crowded quarters and to be oblivious to human noises.

My father easily found work in a fur shop. Since he, and other such skilled immigrant workers, "had no North American work experience" the Furrier's union permitted the shop owners to pay the new arrivals only half of the regular union wage-rates for the first year of employment.

Our funds were meagre and we all had to make do with very little. My uncle Abe and my aunt Dora helped however they could and we did not want to depend on others or on our more distant relatives. We wore second hand clothes and second hand shoes and bought day old bread and other cheap food. Eventually each family moved to its own flat.

My aunt Dora, the *geyleh,* ["yellow", meaning *old-timer* as opposed to us the *greeners,* the greenhorns, i.e., the newcomers] decided that even though I was almost 15 years old and should be attending high school, and since the nearest high school was five long blocks from our flat and that I might lose my way I would not be able to ask for directions on how to get back home. My aunt solved the problem by enrolling me into an elementary school which was only one short block away from where we lived. Aunt Dora told the principal that I just got off the boat, that I was twelve years old and that she wants to enrol me into grade seven. Since I could not speak English and I was [supposedly] only twelve years old [though big for my age] the principal decided to put me into grade six. I must have been in elementary school for three months before I discovered that I was really in grade six and not in grade seven. Anyways, it really did not matter since I did not know what was going on in class. In addition to our textbooks we were issued English dictionaries but I did not understand the words that described the word whose meaning I was seeking.

At the end of the school year I was promoted to grade seven, probably based on my age and not based on my school marks. I felt strongly about catching up with my education, or rather getting it going. I was to have started school in Sławatycze in September of 1939, but the war intervened. I attended school in Asino [Siberia], in Asbest [Urals], in Dzhunganovka [Kazakhstan] and again in the DP Camps of Berlin and Bamberg. My education was constantly interrupted. Father, who was functionally illiterate, always encouraged his children to acquire as much education as was available to us and he offered to support us financially so that we could continue with our education. "Education", he always claimed, "is portable wealth that cannot be ever taken away from you".

During the summer of 1949 I attended a tutorial school for remedial English. At the beginning of September 1949, I marched off to Baron Byng High School to register for grade nine. It was now eleven months since we arrived to Canada and I had by then acquired some of the rudiments of the English language. But at the age of almost sixteen I could not express myself well in any one language. I never learned Polish, my Russian was fading, and my German and my Hebrew were sketchy at best. Yiddish was always my *mammeh's lushen,* my mother's tongue, although I never had any formal education in Yiddish.

At Baron Byng High School I told the principal that "I just got off the boat" and that I wanted to enrol into grade nine. I did not reveal to him that I had been in Canada for close to one year and that I attended grade six in a Montreal elementary school, nor did I mention the gaps in my schooling. The principal told me that my knowledge of the English language was surprisingly good for a refugee who had just arrived from Europe and that, since I was about to turn sixteen, I should be enrolled into grade ten. I shivered at the thought of skipping three grades and at being catapulted into grade ten. I was afraid that my lack of school basics would be uncovered. I persuaded the principal to enrol me into grade nine of the eleven-year school programme of the Quebec Protestant English School Board.

Grade nine did not turn out to be as difficult as I had feared. I finished the year with high marks in all the math subjects. Math always came easy to me as I always had good spatial perception and it required very little language skill. In 1952 I graduated from Baron Byng High School.

In the fall of 1952 I was admitted into the five-year Engineering Program of McGill University from where I graduated in 1957 with a degree in Mechanical Engineering.

Eventually I was able to assimilate into contemporary Canadian society.

I made it, but the memories of long ago persist.

* * *

Epilogue

On October 19, 1958, at my Uncle Morris's [Mojsze] wedding, I met Judy Fink, a most charming and bright young woman from New York who came to live in Montreal the year before. We started dating the following February, we fell in love, became engaged in May and we were married in a little synagogue in the Bronx on October 31st [Halloween], 1959.

We have three sons and two grandsons, and a redheaded little granddaughter. Our son Lewis Martin [*Levi-Meir*] was born September 29th, 1960. Our son Akiva was born October 5th, 1962, and our son Jay Victor [*Jacob-Avigdor*] was born in 1964 on his mother's birthday, July 13th.

Our grandchildren, Lewis' and Debbie's children are: Julian Adam [*Abraham,* named for Debbie's maternal grandfather] born on May 28th, 1988. Dustin Nathan [*David-Nathan*, named for my father David-Zvi and Judy's father Nathan] born on December 4th, 1991 and our granddaughter Mira-Eve [named for both her parents' grandmothers] born on April 8th, 1999.

My mother, Chaja-Blima Repkowska-Gitelman, *Z"L*, died on March 19th, 1991, four days after her 88th birthday. My father, David-Zvi [Hershel] Gitelman, *Z"L*, died on October 28th, 1991, three weeks after his 89th birthday. Both were clear of mind to the last days of their lives.

* * *

On my sixty-fifth birthday, fifty-nine years after my family and I fled for our lives from our birthplace, I stood in the Sławatycze *Beth Olam* [cemetery], I recited the *Kaddish* for my ancestors and I bewailed the destruction of three and a half centuries of documented Jewish life in my *Shtetl* Sławatycze.

Then, with all my might, I emitted a long, silent, scream: -

אם אשכחך...!

Lest I Forget...!

—§—

Chapter 9. 14

■

The Last Jew of the Sztetl Sławatycze [1]

■

Here lies the boulevard of trees on both sides of the road, behind the village of Sławatycze. In the distance can be seen the green and ploughed fields. A forest lies far behind us. And in front of us, the Polish cemetery with the crucifixes and the green parks, just like in the old days.

Many years ago, on lovely summer evenings, groups of youths from the village spent their free time in the parks, sitting on the grass under the trees. They sat and argued spiritedly, bordering on scuffles, with the objective of convincing those that were opposed to their beliefs. Each claimed that his [political] party was the true and proper one and only it would bring freedom to the people. Upon hearing this, others from the group would burst into raucous laughter.

At a short distance from this unruly crowd, it was possible to discern the shadows of loving couples who did not hide their passions, and expressed their love for each other in full view.

Here, at the entrance to the village, stand the two churches with their crucifixes. Both still stand as in years gone by. They are tall, standing guard, bathed in the sun's rays and overlooking the ruins of the village.

He continued the tour. The market, the ancient water well still remains in the center of the marketplace. Skeletons of brick ovens peek out from the ruins, testimony that here once were residential houses.

He identifies the locations. Here was the large shop belonging to Masza's daughter Gitele. Here was the business of the ironmongers of the Goszek family and over there the shop belonging to Masza's son Lajbele.

On the other side of the marketplace [*rynek*] stands the wall of the Ratynski Garden. Below it, a little way down the slope, stood the humble wooden dwellings, the little huts of the artisans of the village who lived in dire poverty: Urcze Miller, Jojnele *der Sztepper* [family name: Neumark], Hersz-Gedaliya [family name: Sztyrmer], and many others, together with their adolescent and their young children.

These people always filled the ramshackle wooden huts with their loud cheerfulness. Not far away, on the hill, stood the village school. He remembered those *Szabbes* days when all the shops were closed and all the villagers wore their *Szabbes* finery, long bearded Jews wearing long clothes, others with short beards and short clothes. The children carried their *taleisim* [prayer shawls] and *siddurim* [prayer books]. The [married] women wearing wigs or scarves on their heads stood on the verandas of their *chates* [huts] and gazed on the radiant faces of the husbands and the children approaching their homes.

And now, it is all in ruins, all ruins. One single solitary Jew remains in the village. That's it.

His house stands a short distance away, behind the wall of Ratynski's Garden. It remained intact. Inside, a little damaged and in disarray, is the kitchen. Here, the children's room. Szejndele, Herszele, Nissan, his wife is overloaded with work . . . as usual.

His life unfolds before his eyes like a movie. His and his wife's hard and strenuous work to eke out a living in order to be able to honourably educate their children and also to reap, in time, some *nachas* [joy] from them. Oh, what has become of all this? . . .

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[1] Editor's Note: *From a diary, written in Yiddish, by an unknown Sławatycze survivor. This diary was found among the personal files of the late Ya'akov Wasserman. Ya'akov was born in Sławatycze and made Allyah to Eretz Israel in 1935.*

Here is Szejndele, a small, pale child, with two large blue eyes, and she is ill. The concern for the child, his only daughter. Gradually she recovers from all these childhood ailments. She grew up and developed into a beautiful flower. Herszele, Nissan'le, their childhood and development.

All their suffering and happiness, of him and his family, until Hitler's bandits showed up.

The pressure on his heart is terrible! His throat constricts until he feels choked. His eyes stream with tears and the weary partisan leans on his elbows. He too sobs out loud, like a child.

After calming down somewhat, he begins reconnoitering in Wlodawa Street, at the place where his parents-in-law lived before, amongst the Christian population. The street remains unchanged but in a state of disrepair. Along both sides of the street, small wooden houses, low and white, they still stand. The roofs are covered with thatch, and the houses are surrounded by beautiful gardens bordered by low fences, full of vegetables and flowers. Here is Guszke's house. And next to the little bridge there stands a deserted ruin with a thatched roof. Parts of the ruins are strewn about. Emptiness and wasteland abound. Behind the ruins, where there once was a garden, high weeds grow. Nothing remains of the fence that surrounded the garden and the house. Only two ancient apple trees with their widespread branches remain. He remembers them from decades ago. Here they would gather on summer days and at times of leisure or on the religious festivals, the grandchildren, the grandchildren of his parents-in-law, the children of Josl from *Kodnie* [Kodeń], the children of Chana from *Parczewe* [Parczew], his children. They spent their time here, happy and mischievous, under the broad shade of the fruit trees.

The adults surrounded the children with great love and gentleness. And what a deep, devoted and sincere love the children felt for their aged grandmother and grandfather!

For dozens of years, during the hot summer days, an elderly Jew, Reb' Efraim [Froim] sat in the shade of the two enormous apple trees, with a large *Gamara* book [Talmud] spread on the table before him. And while sitting there, this Jew would sing sweet *Gamara* songs, as if the entire world was forgotten by him, and materialism was worlds away.

He was annihilated by the Nazis at the beginning of 1942, together with many others. The Master of the village, his mother-in-law, his wife and three children, later at the Mezrycz [Mędzyrzec Podlaski] ghetto. From this large family, only he and Chaim-Joszke remained.

The tears were exhausted. The pressure inside so great that he felt like he would explode. Who was so bloodthirsty for the murderous annihilation of women, babies and old men? Why, Oh why???!!!

The Christian neighbours notice him. They genuflected out of incredulity and stood unmoving, as statues, open mouthed and gawking. "Aaah !!!! *Panie* Welwel !!!!!! " [Mister Welwel !]

They approach him. They expressed their condolences and sadness to him on the deaths of his family and the other villagers. Of course the Hitlerite fiends are to blame. Many of them paid with their lives for hiding or assisting Jews.

They are full of praise for the elderly mother-in-law and father-in-law who were murdered; they express their esteem and note the good neighbourliness that existed for the decades that they lived amongst them, and the mutual and just relationships that were their lot in life.

They are very happy that he survived and has returned in good health and in one piece. As far as they know, one of his children also survived. They invite him to their home for a visit, and beseech him not to leave the village. Luckily, his house is undamaged, so that he can set himself up in a job of sorts. They know him as an energetic and active man. So they are convinced that he will succeed in anything he sets his mind to. On their part, they will assist him with anything he needs.

The truth is that there are some rumours that the A.K. [*Armia Krajowa*, Land Army, the Polish underground during WW II. See Editor's note [2]] attacks Jews on the roads or kills solitary Jewish survivors. But these are only isolated incidents. And they will protect "*Panie* Welwel" as one of their own kin so that he will not come to any harm.

In addition, it has only been a few months that the [Polish] government has been in power, and over time, all [problems] will diminish and Jews will be able to continue to live normally.

In the meantime, their children grew up; their houses are white and clean. Gardens surrounded by fences, everything in its proper place, as in the past.

He thanks them for their condolences and for their offers, but in the meantime, the ground beneath his feet is aflame. He knows how the murderous Nazis treated the Jews, but he did not expect such destruction. Not one Jew from the village survived, besides himself.

He was well aware of the fact that not all of the Christians he met were telling the truth. Besides a number of simple folk that he knew to be good people, many of them were anti-Semites and it was not impossible that many of them were collaborating with the Nazi regime. But, without bringing this into account, he decided stay in the village, with the intention of aggravating the anti-Semites who were under the impression no Jews would remain in the village any longer. As regards to fear of the new regime, No! No fear. Wewe is not a coward and was never one. Amongst the partisans, he was not a coward. And now, more so, in liberated Poland he was not afraid.

He has enough money at the present and he will open up a business in his old house. He is convinced that this will bring him a good livelihood and in time, Chaim-Joszke will be together with him. He feels that the new Polish government will quickly control the situation and he will start to build a new life for himself and for his son.

He therefore started implementing his decision when he returned to his empty house. He determined how many tables and chairs were required and where to set up the counter and immediately approached his old Christian acquaintance, a carpenter. A price was set, and on the third day, people sat at the bar over a glass of Vodka and snacks. They drank *na zdrowie*! [*Le'Chayim!*, To Health!] with "*Panie* Welwel" and wished him the best of luck in his new endeavour!

Over a glass of Vodka the local peasants and the rustic villagers consummated various deals with Wewe. Many times they offered to sell him valuables.

Days go by, and weeks go by, and the business is prospering. Add to this the other deals he did with his customers. He had never earned so much money as he does now.

The daily job was from early morning to late at night and trade filled his thoughts and enabled him to disengage somewhat from the terrible tragedy that had befallen him. But in the wee hours of the night, when the noise of the drunken peasants and the patrons had abated, and his workers had finished their tasks and left for home, and the lights were extinguished, when he saw the dark and gloomy night that enveloped the ruins of the village, a deep, black, bitterness gripped him and his thoughts drifted back to his past. He imagined that he saw the previous villagers: Lajbel Masze's, Adler, Jankiel Fuchs, Aszer Poliszuk, his wife and his children. A shadow fell in a ring over the ruins of the village. He imagined he heard the voice of crazy Duwedl emanating from the *boidem* [attic] of Zalman's wife Rachel. He sings quietly, in an alluring and melancholy voice, prayers for the *Yamim Hanora'im* [the sad prayers of the High Holy Days].

And these sad ditties dissipate in the dark of the night. He remembers the first day of *Sukkot* in 1942. The Nazi thugs expel the village Jews, old and young, and concentrate them in the large square of the *targowica* [the marketplace].

He sees how the Nazi thugs snatch the children from their mother's arms; they beat them and fling them aside. He hears the bitter wailing and the shrieks and screams of the miserable and beaten women, children and old people, the residents of his wretched village, Sławatycze.

Later on, the expellees had to walk dozens of miles on foot to the Mezrycz [Międzyrzec Podlaski] ghetto, and the blows were delivered from rifle butts to quicken their pace.

Also, the shooting of those whose strength failed them or who asked for a drink of water from the peasants. And the bodies of the dead, cast like animal carcasses in all directions that could not even be buried. Only through a miracle did he managed to save himself, and this because the moment he sensed the danger, he ran and hid in Lejbele Ninne's basement and later at a Christian acquaintance in the Sawiak forest. His Chaim-Joszke also managed to escape on the way to the Mezrycz ghetto, into the forest near Wisznice and now he is alone in the village with the dark shadows of the night, without friends, without family.

Chaim-Joszke, his small comfort, is not with him now. Okay, so he has lots of money and could earn even more, but for whom, for what?! And the mood amongst the Christians in his business, the anti-Semitic toned conversations, especially when they are drunk. They talk of a Jew who showed up in the village, and he is cheating them and takes money from the poor. The peasants are crude and simple. Or, when they drink themselves blind they then refuse to pay for the liquor and threatened him that they will send him to where the rest of the village Jews are.

The next day, some of them came to apologize for being drunk and they say it was only in jest . . . he remembers that his acquaintances warned him not to return to the village. Because in the village, and in the surrounding forests, roam members of the A K. [*Armia Krajowa* [2]] who are not satisfied and are opposed to the new Polish government, and they vent their anger on the surviving Jews. They advised him to get out of the village as soon as possible, where every clod of earth is soaked with copious Jewish blood. He did not agree with them.

His reason was that he needs to earn money and there will always be time to travel. His property and his land is in this village. And behold, on such a lonely night, thoughts of remorse overpower him. Maybe they are right.

The time is very late. His eyes are drooping from tiredness. Tomorrow he must again rise early to take care of drink and food and other things. Out of habit, he feels in his pockets, checks his pistol and he feels much more secure. He turns down his bed and within minutes, exhausted from a full and packed day, is snoring gently from a deep and sound sleep.

On the roads, in the fields and in the forests, and in the dead of night, when they came across a helpless Jew, they carried out their mission, their "patriotic" and brave murderous deeds. And here, in the village of Sławatycze, it was such an audacity, *chutzpah,* that a Jew, a Communist, returned to the village hale and hearty, found his house undamaged, and opened a business. The Jew cheats and he takes money from the poor and honest peasants. They will not abide such a scandal!

It happened in 1945, a few months after the liberation of Poland. On a gloomy autumn night, dozens of shadowy figures moved through the marketplace. The figures halted in front of Wewe's house.

One of them knocked softly on the window and called: "*Panie* Welwel, open up!" When they did not get a response, they knocked, but this time violently. Now sounds were heard from within the house, the respondent, half asleep, asked: "Who is knocking?"

"It is me, Janek, don't you recognize me, *Panie* Welwel?. Open up quickly, I have something very important for you". A moment later the scrape of a door was heard, and in a flash, Janek was inside. A violent crashing sound was then heard and a few minutes later the movement of figures in the dark, and then a deep moan, then, only a terrible silence.

On *Kodnia* Street, a pair of lovers part with great warmth.

Amongst the ruins of the village marketplace, a lost dog barks, barks and wails in the dark of the night.

The next day, early in the morning, when the gentile woman came to work at the business, she found the door wide open and inside, total chaos as she had never seen before. There, under the table, in a large pool of blood, lay Wewe Grynszpan. . . .

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[2] Editor's Notes:

The reference is probably to the rogue elements of the A.K known as the "NSZ" [Narodowe Siły Zbrojne, the National Armed Forces) the nationalistic and anti-Semitic underground military organization in Poland whose goal was to fight the occupying Nazi Germans, the Communist Soviet forces and to eliminate minorities. The NSZ murdered hundreds of Jews who sought refuge in the forests and among the Poles. After Poland's liberation, the NSZ struggled against the new regime, while continuing to murder Holocaust survivors.

The "A.K" [Armia Krajowa, the Home Army) the Polish underground fighting organization which operated in Poland from 1939 to 1945. It carried out armed raids and participated in partisan fights against the Nazis. In February of 1942 it created a Section for Jewish Affairs which collected data about the Jews under the Nazi occupation. It provided little practical help to the Jewish underground. Source: "Encyclopedia of the Holocaust"

Chapter 9.15

■

My Visit to Slawatycze in June, 1945 And My Encounter With Some the Jewish Children of Sławatycze Who Survived the Shoah [1]

■

by

Michał Grynberg

Translated from Yiddish by Henry L. (Chaim-Lejb) Gitelman, Montreal, Canada

In June of 1945, before I travelling to visit my birthplace Sławatycze, I learned from a chance encounter with a woman from Sławatycze that there still reside a few of my acquaintances from before the war, evidently not Jewish, and including the former policeman, Stanisław Funk. He and I were very well acquainted. Funk served in the Sławatycze police force since 1925 and had carried out this function until the start of the war in 1939.. To the Jews he did no harm, even though his huge stature projected fear. He was tall, over two metres tall, broad-shouldered, and with a face like a watermelon....

Funk had his favourite Jewish merchants who always "rewarded" him with something. It was especially appreciated when he caught them selling on Sundays – then it had to cost them...

The greatest role Funk carried out was during the weekly market days in Sławatycze, which usually were held on Mondays. Then, Funk was in his glory. The other policemen, including the Chief of the Police, did not really count during the market days, except Funk. The peasants trembled in his presence. It was enough if someone had a bit too much to drink and got rowdy or tried to pick a fight in the marketplace, Funk then quietened them down rather quickly. We all knew Funk's "Sposób", that is, "Funk's method". With the left hand Funk grabbed the rowdy peasant from the back by the collar and with the right hand he grabbed the poor fellow by the back of his pants, and squeezed tight. This is how he led them through the marketplace to the police station on Włodawska Street. After sobering up, the peasant was sent home.

As a social activist, I myself had experienced a few times of Funk's "Sposób". Funk also served as a policeman in Sławatycze during the Nazi occupation. From information I had later obtained from a few of the Jewish children who survived the terrible war years in Sławatycze and also in the surrounding area, it seems that Funk, in certain cases, had helped certain Jews, but obviously not for nothing... During the transport of groups of Sławatycze Jews to the Mezritch (Miendzyrzec Podlaski) Ghetto through the Praczew forests it was possible in the presence of Constable Funk to disappear into the thick forest. Thus it happened that Tema Fogel escaped into the forests, but unfortunately, she was later killed by a German soldier.

As I have subsequently learned that Funk appeared as a witness for the prosecution in the trial of a *Granatowy* (Navy-Blue) collaborationist policeman, Josef Cichorodski, with whom Funk served in Slawatycze during the Nazi occupation. Compared to the many Poles in Sławatycze, Josef Cichorodski ardently carried out the Nazi orders, especially against the Jews whom he delighted in torturing and killed them in full view of others.

In 1949 the criminal court in Lublin sentenced Josef Cichorodski to death and he was executed on July 15, 1950.

I was a happy to hear that Funk is alive. I was hoping that I would find out through him of what had happened in Sławatycze during the horrible years of the Nazi occupation.

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[1] *During the years 1973 - 1985, the Warsaw Yiddish weekly newspaper; "פאָלקס=שטימע", "Folks-Sztyme" (Glos-Ludu) [Voice of the People], published over thirty articles in Yiddish written by Michał Grynberg. This article appeared in the Folks-Sztyme in the January 3-10, 1976 issue. It was subtitled "Fragments of a larger work".*

Having found out where Funk lived I went straight to his residence. The June day was ending. The houses which survived the war stood mute and closed. Also, here, at the end of the Marketplace where the Włodawska Street begins, as in the center of the Marketplace, reigned the same frightful silence. No-one appeared; not even a rooster, not a hen, neither a cat nor a dog, no one, no one broke the terrible silence. The border between the Marketplace and Włodawska Street was the little bridge that spanned the *rów* [ditch] which carried the rain water from the surrounding streets to the Bug River. Before the war, many of the houses on Włodawska Street were occupied by Jews. The last of the Jewish homes belonged to Motl *Patcherkes* [a *melamed,* a Hebrew teacher] and to Duvdl *der Agen*t [David Herbst] — who was the chairman of the presidium of the Sławatycze Judenrat during the Nazi occupation. — further on, at the end of the street, lived Poles. Practically the only Jews who lived among the Poles was Moisze *fun Hojf,* [Moisze Epelbaum], the owner of the grits mill who was known as *Moisze of the Manor* and Efraim Waserman, know as *Poliszuk,* who owned a wool carding shop at the end of that street.

Right near the bridge, to the right stood the house which before the war belonged to Teltze *die bekerin* [the baker] and on the left side the house of Herszel *der Kirszner* [Hershel the furrier] Gitelman. Herszel's house was one of the nicest homes in the *shtetl*, built in 1937 or in 1938. The house stood on a high foundation and a substantial set of stairs led to the front door.

While standing at the edge of the Marketplace bordering Włodawska Street, I noticed that Constable Funk and his family were sitting on the porch of the house which before the war had belonged to Teltze *die bekerin*, that is, Funk must now live in that house.

Funk was very surprised when I addressed him in Polish while wearing my Soviet Military uniform. At my suggestion of a chat, his astonishment was evident but after he made eye contact with his wife he invited me into the house. Before the war, the hallway of the house had served as a store where the baked goods were sold. Before the war housewives would run in to Teltze's bakery early in the morning to buy fresh rolls and fresh bread. On both sides of the hallway were shelves stacked full with delicious smelling baked goods. Now the hallway is bereft of shelves and clothing hangs all over these walls. Against the wall was a bicycle, probably the one Funk rode before the war on his police rounds.

My chat with Funk did not click. Perhaps I was projecting my mental condition after I had seen what remained of my *shtetl* and also Funk's nervousness. I realised that Funk may not have recognized me as I was dressed in my Soviet Army uniform and I had pulled my military cap over my forehead. The moment I removed my hat Funk recognized me right away and he fainted. I had to call his wife to bring some water for him.

All my assurances to Funk that I did not come to do him harm and that I came only to inquire about the life and death of the Jewish population in Sławatycze during the Hitler occupation did not convince him of my friendly intent and Funk became mute.

We agreed to meet again tomorrow but, unfortunately, the meeting did not happen. When I came to his house the next day, I was told that Funk was not at home and Funk's wife explained that he had to go see a doctor because he is ill. I then realized that Funk made himself scarce...

That Sunday night I spent with the Sawoniuk family, my acquaintances from before the war. Even though the dinner they prepared for me was delicious and the bed for me was made up with clean, white linen, I was anxious to know details of the fate of the Jewish population. Mrs Sawoniuk had invited a few neighbours who shared with me their stories about the fate of Jews in Sławatycze during the war years. Also, the picture of the three Jewish girls of the *shtetl* wearing white armbands with the Star of David was given to me by one of their neighbours. I have since forgotten many details of my visit with the Swoniuks. Not realizing then that thirty years later I will want to write about this event but, unfortunately, I did not make any notes at that time of my visit to Sławatycze.

From the Sowaniuk family and their friends I found out that in Włodawa, about 20 km South from Sławatycze, there lived a few Jewish children from my *shtetl* who had survived the war with the help of some Polish people. Then they became embarrassed in relating that after the war these children returned to Sławatycze. Similarly, the Jew, Wewe Grynszpan, Efraim *Poliszuk*'s (Waserman) son-in-law, with his son Chajm-Joszke. But during a certain night there arrived some "people of the forest" and shot Wewe in his own house. The son was able to save himself from certain death by jumping through the window and in the darkness of the night.

On the second day of this tragic event, all of the surviving Jewish children, together with Wewe's son, were brought to Włodawa.

* * *

Life had never "patted me on the head". From my childhood on I have always been exposed to pain and suffering. At the age of 14, I was apprenticed to the tailor Chaim Szye's. There, I went through all forms of Hell. Also, I was imprisoned for a few years [for Communist activity] in a Warsaw prison and I was also held in a prison in the city of Rawicz. During the Second World War I served as a soldier in the Soviet Army — I took part in the Battle of Stalingrad, the battles the Caucuses, the Carpathian Mountains and I had fought in Czechoslovakia. I was wounded a few times.

In Włodawa, when I met the few surviving Jewish children, I had difficulty saying a few words, seeing what few had remained from the vibrant Jewish life of prewar Sławatycze. Tears flowed down my cheeks and I felt embarrassed. The children were slightly frightened of me as they did not initially recognize who I was. When I had left the *shtetl* in 1929 to work in Warsaw they were still rather young kids. But when Chajele Mendel Lerer's [Szuchmacher] came in, she immediately recognized me — the children then broke out crying in happiness.

This is how passed the first minutes of my face-to-face encounter with the few surviving Jewish children of our *shtetl* Sławatycze on the Bug River [nad Bugiem].



Three Jewish girls from Sławatycze. This picture was taken after the Nazi ordinance of October 1939 that Jews must wear white armband inscribed with a blue Star of David. On the left and on the right are the two Fogel sisters. In the middle is the daughter of Szmuel *Guze* [Sznajderman]. The fate of these three girls is unknown.
This picture was given to me by a friend of my hosts, the Sowaniuk family, during my visit to Sławatycze in June of 1945.

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Chapter 10.0

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Oh! Sławatycze, my home!

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Conclusion

by

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Translated from Polish by Maria Chmielewska-Szlajfer, Warsaw, Poland

I often recall the prewar years. I see before my eyes scenes of life in Sławatycze, the sight of the nearby woods, fields and the Bug River winding north towards Brześć. Saturday walks along the riverbank were always great, they gave a lot of satisfaction and relaxation after a week of hard work and it even helped you to forget your worries. It is with great fondness that I recollect those days, those places and those people among whom I grew up and among whom I lived, the Bug River and the town in general. This is why I sometimes feel nostalgia... it all happened a long time ago. The town's name has remained the same, people are still living there, but the town itself looks completely different. In place of the demolished Jewish houses, new ones have been built, some even clad in brick. The marketplace, also looks totally different, there are no Jews there.

In the 1980s, from time to time, I went to Sławatycze in order to visit the graves of my family [of those who remained there], I relived everything that now has been gone forever. The *Bejt Hamidrasz* [synagogue] wasn't there any more, where the Hasidim had their houses of prayer was desolate now, there was silence where sewing machines used to rattle and where you could hear cobblers singing. By a tragic irony of fate the *mikveh* [ritual bath] which was half-dug into the ground, remained standing. Horrified, I bent my head, lost in deep thoughts. The poet would probably cry with pain:-

Oh! Sławatycze, my home..., where are you?

Appropriate are here the words of the poet Luba Waserman, the Sławatycze native, who, right after the war, cried out :- [1]

איך וועל קיין קריעה דאָ נישט רייסן	I won't be rending my garments
ס'איז מיין היים פארלענדט, פארשניטן	My home is ravaged, wiped out
איך בין געבליבן דאָ אַליין.	I am left alone here.
שטיי איך איצט אינמיטן שליאד	I'm standing in the middle of the path
און איך טראַכט וווּ צוּ גיין.	Thinking of where to go.

[1] *Translation of the poem from Yiddish to English by Henry L. [Chaim-Lejb) Gitelman*

דערנער שטיינער כ'האָב באגעגנט	I've encountered only thorns and stones,
געזען כ'האָב נאָר אַש און קויט;	I saw nothing but ashes and dirt;
זאָגט, ביי וועמען זאָל איך פרעגן,	Tell me, whom shall I ask,
ווען מיין שטעטעלע איז טויט?	When my little town is dead?
שוועסטער, ברידער, טאַטע, מאַמע	Sister, brother, father, mother,
אין וועלכן קבר ליגט איר דאָ ?	In which grave do you rest?
ווו בין איך געווען דעמאָלט	Where was I then
אין אייער לעצטער לעבנס שעה?	In that last hour of your lives?
ווו'זשע ביסטו, אסתר בלאַסע?	Where are you now, my pale Esther
מיט די שוואַרצע, לאנגע צעפּ?	With your long, black braids?
ווו'זשע ביסטו שוועסטער מיינע,	Where are you, sister mine?
ס'איז דיין שיינער קאָפּ אין קרעפּ,	With your beautiful head in locks,
ווו'זשע ביסטו ברודער לייבּיש,	Where are you brother Lejbusz?
מיט דיין הויכן קליגן, שטערן?	With your high, wise forehead.
ווו'זשע ביסטו ברודער דוד,	Where are you brother David,
איך וויל דיין שטימע איצט דערהערן	I want to hear you voice now.
עס קוקט דער גרויל פון טויטע ביינע	Staring is the horror of dead bones.
זאָל כאָטש דאָ אַ האן אַ קריי טאָן	If only a rooster would crow,
אויף מיין גרויזאַמען געשריי.	In answer to my painful cry.
נאָר עס ענטפערט קיינער, קיינער,	But no one answers, no one,
עס קוקט דער גרויל פון טויטע ביינע ...	Staring is the horror of dead bones...

Oh! Slawatycze, my home ...!

— The End —

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