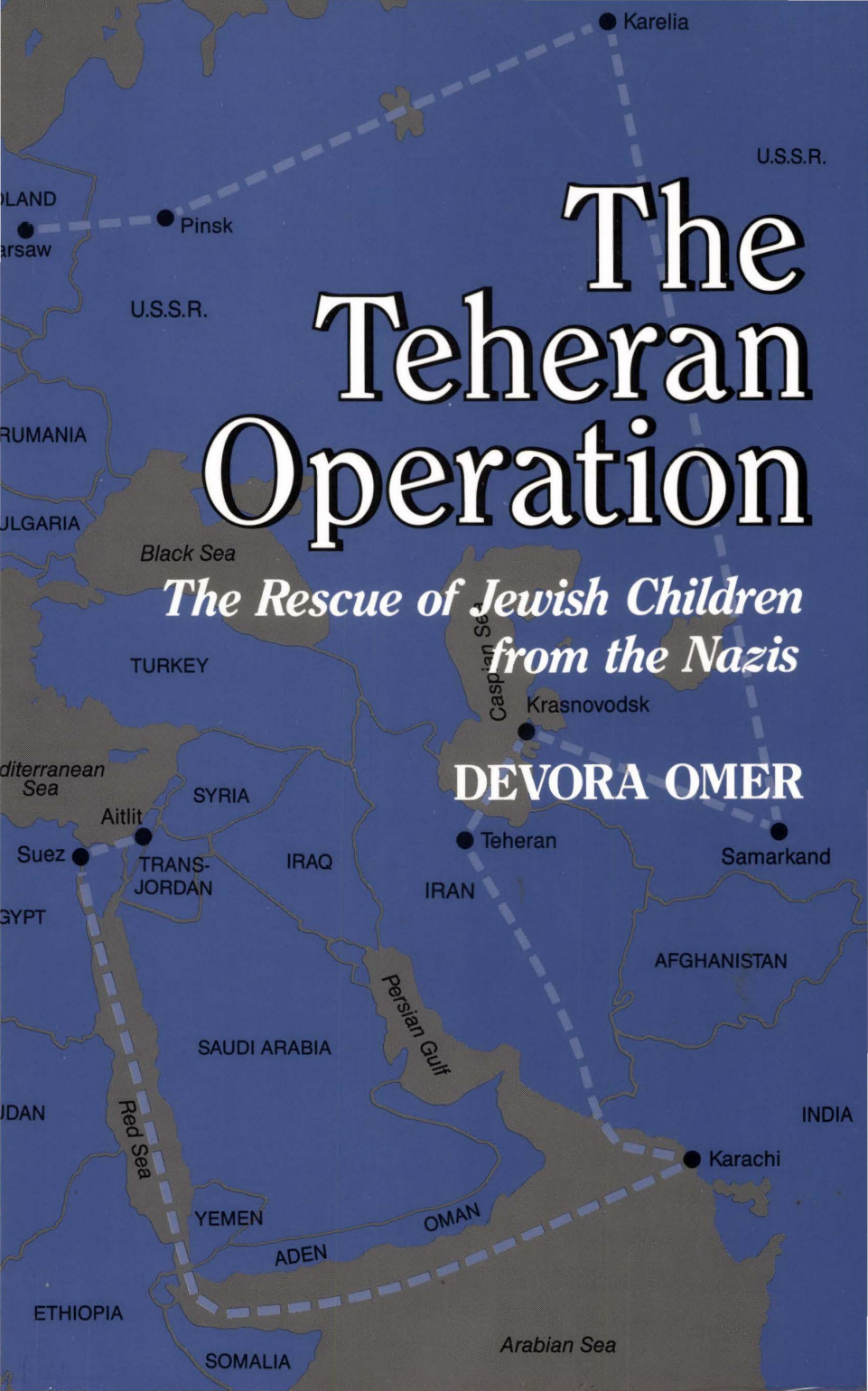


The Teheran Operation

The Rescue of Jewish Children from the Nazis

DEVORA OMER

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Based on the biographical sketches of
David and Rachel Laor

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The Teheran Operation

The names of the Teheran Children and their families have been changed, but the events in this book are drawn from actual events.

Translated from the original Hebrew title, *Hatahana Teheran*.
English translation by Riva Rubin.

Translator's note: At the end of the book, the reader will find a glossary, with a translation and short explanation of some of the proper names, terms, and expressions which appear in their original language.

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to "Operation Exodus" and "Operation Solomon," the Russian and Ethiopian Aliyah. As this book is being released, thousands of Russian and Ethiopian Jews are arriving in the Land of Israel.

As the Teheran Children described in this book escaped from the jaws of the Holocaust to arrive in Israel and successfully set down deep roots in their new homeland, we hope and pray that these new immigrants will similarly acclimatise themselves and begin a new and productive life in the Holy Land.

As President Herzog has said, "Bringing the story of the Teheran Children to the consciousness of the general public and to the youth in particular is, in fact, an important contribution to the recognition and appreciation of national independence." Bringing this story to the awareness of the new Aliyah as a model of successful integration into the life of our dynamic country is no less important, and we wish all of our new citizens the very best.

David Laor

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1

KWADRAT 48

WAS THERE NO possibility of escape?

There was not.

The situation was hopeless.

This had been made clear to me by one of our guards, an officer in the Red Army, when he noticed my scrutiny of the approaching shores of Lake Onega, one of the biggest lakes in the Soviet Union.

Afterwards, he had added: "The area is full of treacherous swamps and thick forests. It's a death trap for anyone trying to escape!" But while he was speaking, he had pointed meaningfully in the direction of the Finnish border. I felt a surge of renewed hope.

It seemed as if I had been thrust into an evil dream, a nightmare. How had I, David Laumberg, a young Jew about to emigrate to Palestine, come to be arrested by the Russians in Pinsk, in the summer of 1941? How had I come to be in Soviet Karelia, charged with belonging to the Zionist Underground? Sentenced to five years' hard labour in a

Re-education Camp? Exiled and in the process of being transported across Lake Onega by raft, to the woodcutters' Camp Kwadrat 48?

But it was no nightmare. This world I had fallen into was a bitter reality.

The Russian officer explained that we had to work, where I was going, and anyone unable to stand up to the conditions would not last long! In the course of conversation, I learned that he was an ex-prisoner himself and that he was forbidden to leave the district, even after his release. I looked at him: he appeared to be about my age, in his mid-twenties, wearing a grey "*rubashka*," riding breeches, black leather belt, dark boots and a cap with the hammer and sickle badge of the Red Army.

He informed me that there was no need for physical punishment at this camp. Anyone not filling his work quota was deprived of his food ration. That was enough. He went on to promise me that I would work so hard that I would even lose any desire to sleep with a woman!

As he spoke, his face hardened and he prodded the prisoners to move off the raft and onto a platform coupled to a small engine. Mutely, I climbed on, too. I hoped that he had perhaps been exaggerating, and decided that, however difficult—I would try to escape!

For the time being, I was exhausted from the long journey by raft and, prior to that, by train. I had already found out from the veteran prisoners that the Soviet system was to break a man through humiliation, starvation, complete change of the conditions—primarily climatic—to which he was accustomed, hard labour, and by cutting him off from civilization. And this, apparently, was what awaited me, too.

There were a few platforms, now crowded with prisoners, attached to the small engine. The "train" conveyed us through a dim forest, its ground a swamp of black mud. Was this an omen for the future?

The area was devoid of people, with no civilian population, only prison camps—I had the feeling that I had reached the end of the world.

The small engine plodded ahead with its mute human freight. We came upon a band of prisoners trudging to work; weary, tattered, the soles of their gaping shoes bound with rope to the uppers. I gazed at them: blank-eyed human shadows. Was this what lay ahead for me? I was afraid . . . Treacherous swamp, dark, dense primeval forest . . . ?

We reached the camp as evening fell, and passed through the gates. I saw rows of wooden huts surrounded by a fence that had manned sentry-boxes with machine guns and searchlights. The huts stood either side of the only road in the camp. There were various service buildings, and—was that a shop? I was pleased. But it turned out that there was nothing to be bought in it. The Russian staff's quarters were at the centre of the camp. They numbered about fifty people, of whom some forty were guards. As I passed I saw the camp hospital and the lock-up.

I would get to know two more important centres the next day: one was where they sliced the bread which was issued in daily portions of 200 gr., and the other was where the hot water boilers, the *"kipyatok,"* were kept.

I was put into a hut full of wooden bunks among which terrifying giant rats scampered. One of them, the size of a cat, ran past me and I recoiled to the mocking cries of the veterans. I was completely bewildered and shocked.

The duty squad arrived carrying two big, steaming pots. I was sure they had brought soup and looked forward to a hot meal—but I was soon disappointed. The pots contained only hot drinking water, which naturally did not satisfy my hunger. I climbed into my bunk and despite my empty belly, the hard wood, the biting of the bugs and fleas that swarmed there, and the unbearable crowding, I fell asleep quickly. Scores of people were crammed into the small hut, where stench and airlessness prevailed. Very tired after the journey, I sank into a deep sleep undisturbed by the glitter of the northern night, whose golden light contrasted so sharply with the darkness into which I had now been flung.

I was awakened by the sound of metallic banging. It was five in the morning, and the prisoner in charge of our hut was waking us for work; my first day of work. He hurried us.

I rose, wearing the clothes I had slept in, and went outside to receive my breakfast of boiling water, black bread and watery porridge. Food that did not satisfy hunger at all. I was then equipped with a pickaxe and an axe and found myself walking in a column of prisoners leaving the confines of the camp for the woodcutting site, some ten kilometres away.

On our way out, the guard placed his hand on the head of each of us, counting: "One passed, two passed, three passed." I was the fifth to be counted in this way, like a beast.

Escorted by armed guards, we flailed through the viscous black mud of the endless forest marsh. Large mosquitos flew around us, stinging our faces and every other exposed patch of skin. The road went on without end. I thought of asking one of the guards if there was still a long way to go. I wanted to start a conversation. Maybe I could get him to talk, like the Russian officer escorting us on the raft the evening before, but the armed guard merely barked at me that he was not my friend, cursing me for being a damned fascist!

I carried on marching in silence, moving faster. Was it possible to escape from this forest? Which way? I looked around: big, menacing, German shepherd dogs guarded the prisoners.

Barking loudly, they bared their teeth as soon as I dared look around in search of another path. They were held on iron chains whose clanking added to the chorus of barking as they leaped towards me as if planning to tear me to bits. The guards threatened to shoot anyone moving out of line by so much as one step to the left or right. One of them brought his dog threateningly close to me. Had he guessed my thoughts from the expression on my face?

A grey, misty sky could be seen through the treetops. It matched my mood. The dogs were agitated. These animals, trained to hatred, to ferocity, were ready to fall upon a prisoner and tear him limb from limb if he aroused a guard's suspicions, or if his strength failed and his steps lagged. I continued to trudge in the mire. My clothes and shoes were plastered with mud. The road stretched ahead. What was at the end of it? Rumours, together with the appearance of the prisoners we had encountered on our way to the camp, prophesied nothing but evil.

We finally reached the work site. The skies had cleared and the sun was dazzling. Was this a good omen? I had no time to think. We were immediately divided into groups of four, each member of the group having a different task: the first sawed the tree; I, the second, lowered it to the ground; the third stripped its branches, using his axe, and then burned the branches; and the fourth sawed the trunk into logs. It was very hard work. I had to hold the falling tree with all my strength

to prevent it from hitting myself or the others, and then I had to lower it slowly, exerting every muscle and panting with the effort. After which, we had to help load the logs onto the cart which took them to the river, where they were floated to their destination.

On the first day we were not expected to fill our quota, as we were being trained for the job, which was extremely difficult, even so. My clothes grew damp because of the proximity of the swamps to the forest. I was sweating, too. I wanted to get close to the heaps of burning branches, to dry myself, but I was afraid. My prison garb was made of cloth padded with highly inflammable cottonwool. I carried on working in the dampness which enfolded me, until the order came for us to return to the camp.

We were taken back earlier, on that first work day. This benefit would not last, I knew. Tomorrow or the next day we would have to meet the full quota set for us, and if we did not—our food ration would be decreased.

Going back, the way was far longer than it had been in the morning. I was weary, exhausted. My clothes, which had dried out a little during the day, again absorbed the foul swamp water we were walking in. What would it be like in winter? I understood, now, that I had no choice; I would have to work. Everything the officer had told me had been the truth. For example, my friend Dr. Margolin, with whom I had been arrested in Pinsk, had not gone to work this morning with the rest of us. Depressed, insulted and utterly humiliated, he had gone on strike in protest. He was immediately reported by the prisoner in charge of the hut, an evil-hearted, lame man, who was intoxicated with the sudden power invested in him. As a result, Margolin had not been given even the meagre breakfast I had received, and in the evening he was not entitled to the piece of black bread and thin fish soup they dished out for our meal.

The cook did not bother to stir the soup in the big drum as he poured my portion, so that I did not get any of the few grains of barley and flakes of potato that had sunk to the bottom of the drum. I stayed hungry.

On the other hand, Mishka and Andrei, two young Russians sentenced to many years, had exceeded the prisoners' daily work quota. Their reward—they ate at a separate table, which even had a cloth on it, they were excused from having to provide their own spoons, which was the general rule, and they received a glass of milk and a double

helping of soup with extra barley and potatoes. Many eyes regarded them enviously and hungrily. I decided to work like them the next day in order to get more food.

After I had gobbled down my poor, totally unsatisfying meal, I took off my wet clothes and threw them on the floor. I had seen Mishka and Andrei, the two veterans, doing this. The prisoner in charge of the hut collected the clothes and took them to the boiler room, where they could dry out overnight.

I was so exhausted that it was hard for me to go outside to the only tap, where a long line of prisoners stood waiting. I was incapable of washing. Margolin was squatting on his bunk, but I lacked the strength to talk to him, so tired was I. I fell at once into a sleep full of nightmares, into which blended the sound of barking from the nearby kennels.

The gong woke us again in the morning. My body was leaden but I knew I had no choice. There was no way of evading work. It had to be done as well as possible. I got out of the bunk. I persuaded Margolin to join me. Then I went to the heap of clothing that had been returned to the hut and now lay dry, in a confused tangle on the floor. Where were my clothes? Someone had been there first and taken them, maybe because they were in comparatively good condition. I had not been quick enough, and was still inexperienced. Maybe my brief talk with Dr. Margolin had resulted in my being left with clothes that were torn and too small for me.

I had no choice but to put on the clothes that were left. With my friend, I then went for breakfast, which was just as inadequate and unsatisfying as the day before. This time Margolin also received his ration and ate it hungrily. After the meal we passed through the gates, again undergoing the humiliating head-count and began our march through the mire. I looked at my friend, that thin, bespectacled man: his hair had turned completely white during the weeks of imprisonment and interrogation in Pinsk. I could understand how I had come to be sent to the woodcutters camp, the hardest labour, but he?!

We marched in silence. If only I could escape! Tell the outside world what they were doing to us! Mobilize enlightened public opinion! But we were under heavy guard night and day. Anyone leaving or entering the gates was thoroughly checked, and anyone entering the zone between the fence and the watchtowers was shot.

There was no need for fences in the forest, of course—the armed guards, the fierce dogs, the treacherous swamps that surrounded us

were enough. Nevertheless, I persisted in surveying the area when we left the camp and during the march to the woodcutting site.

The second day of work was longer and harder than the first, and those that followed were harder still. I managed to hold on, to keep going, but my friend Margolin was weakening. He was unable to meet his daily work quota, and his food ration was severely curtailed. In addition, he was fearful of his glasses being smashed in the crush that always developed in the bread queue. Without his glasses he was virtually blind and therefore, through lack of choice, he would forgo the bread ration. Famished, he sold his watch to buy bread. He had no other possessions. Like me, he had been called in by the Russian investigators in Pinsk, ostensibly for brief questioning, and both of us had found ourselves unprepared and unequipped with personal belongings on our arrest. We were moved from pillar to post until we finally arrived at the woodcutters camp, Kwadrat 48.

Famished, Margolin searched for seeds and mushrooms in the forest, but found hardly anything. There were many hungry men around, and the forest had little to offer. As far as possible, I tried to help my friend to fill his work quota so that he could eat more, and so did others, whom he helped in return by writing or reading their letters for them. We also managed to arrange for Margolin to work at the bread distribution point instead of in the forest. The former was an avidly sought job, since the bread-distributor got the leftovers. But Andrei, one of the toughs, soon took over by main force, hoarding and selling the bread without the slightest pang of conscience. Others, unable to cut trees or work in the forest, simply starved.

Margolin wrote to his parents in Pinsk, asking them to send him provisions. Meanwhile, I looked for a way for him to get a meal even when he did not go out to work. I thought I had found a way: I possessed an empty tin with a handle attached. This I used for my hot drinking water and for my porridge or soup ration. I secretly made another tin like it and one morning when we were awakened for work, and the prisoner in charge had again written Margolin's name on the list of non-workers because he remained crouched in his bunk, I hid my extra utensil under my shirt. I left the hut and stood in line with the other prisoners waiting to receive breakfast. I hoped I would be able to fool the guard that was stationed there. I held out my tin, and

the watery porridge was poured into it. I hid it at once and swiftly pulled out the other, as though I had not yet received my portion.

Unfortunately, the guard had seen what I did and he immediately shouted at me and made me step out of the queue. He did not stop at this, but ordered me to stand by a nearby tree, to which he tied me. He wound the rope around my body, over my hands and feet, and pulled it so tight that it was impossible for me to move.

I had failed. Not only had I failed to obtain a ration of food for my friend, I had also lost my own. Meanwhile the mosquitoes that swarmed en masse from the vast forest swamps began to torment me. I was severely bitten on my exposed face. My hands were tied and I could not chase them away. My face began to bleed. I was in agony. The stings pierced my skin without any resistance from me. The sentry stationed himself in front of me, watching me twist and groan, apparently enjoying the sight of my suffering.

I stood like that, while the others ate, for about a half an hour that seemed to last an age. Then it was time to leave for work. I remained tied to the tree, aware that if I did not go to work I would go hungry.

Luckily, the overseer of the woodcutting squad arrived. On seeing me bound to the tree instead of standing with the workers who were getting ready to leave, he became very angry and berated the guard for taking one of his best workers. He ordered him to set me free. Having no choice, the guard obeyed.

I hurried to join the column of woodcutters setting out for their work in the forest. I stumbled along in the frozen mud; added to the difficult march, the hard labour in damp clothes, today I had to cope with the torture of the mosquito bites, which caused me to scratch myself until I drew blood. I almost tore the skin off my face.

In the evening I returned to the camp with the last of my strength. I received my portion of the black bread allotted to all the prisoners and hurriedly ate it standing up, with my free hand cupped under my chin to catch every stray crumb. I had earned an extra 200 gr. for my above-average output that day. One could reach 500 gr. a day if one achieved particularly high results.

I exerted all my willpower to restrain myself from finishing all the bread I had. I planned to save some for Margolin, or to keep a little for a day when I would not have the strength to go to work and would receive no food. I managed to save only one slice, because I was so hungry after having had no breakfast that morning. I was clutching it

tightly as I dragged my feet over to the hut, when one of the prisoners, his name was Rij, darted out in front of me. He was very excited. At first I thought he had received a long-awaited letter from his woman, but the real reason soon became clear. My friend Margolin had finally received the parcel he had been waiting for; rather, he had received what was left of it after the guards had pilfered most of it, as they usually did when a prisoner received a parcel. But Margolin was not to enjoy even the little that remained. Some prisoners had attacked him and snatched the last bit of the food his parents had sent him. There were hooligans, felons and criminals in the camp, sent by the Soviet authorities to the same camp as the political prisoners. I had already come across these hard cases and I knew how bad it was to fall foul of them.

I hurried to the hut and found them beating my friend who had collapsed to his knees. I pulled a plank from one of the bunks and, with the aid of Rij and some others who had rallied round, we drove off the attackers. But they got away with the parcel.

I lifted my beaten friend and took him to the camp hospital. Margolin was bruised and injured. He was bleeding and shocked to the depths of his soul. He requested that, should I ever succeed in getting out of the camp and to Palestine, I should remember his wife's address and find her and their small son, and tell them everything that the Russians were doing to him here, how they were hastening his end.

I tried to encourage him by telling him that we would both soon be out of here and on our way to Palestine, but I found it hard to sound convincing.

After I had taken my friend to the hospital, where conditions were far from acceptable, I returned to the hut and climbed into the top bunk, which had been allocated to me. It was definitely an advantage to sleep at the top. It was warmer and less crowded there, and despite the danger of falling or being bruised on the way up or down, I certainly preferred it. I could now hang the remaining piece of bread on the hook in the ceiling, in the hope that no rats would manage to reach it.

I huddled wearily on the bunk; the mosquito bites and the lice which swarmed in my hair and clothes bothered me terribly, but my tiredness won and I fell asleep. I awoke in panic when a gigantic rat climbed onto me in its attempt to get to the bread. It was not only the humans who fought tooth and nail here to get some food for themselves; the

animals did the same. The two-footed and four-footed had become the same under the hunger and the terrible battle for survival that had been imposed on us. I knew that conditions would become much more serious with the arrival of winter. Temperatures would reach tens of degrees below zero and the snow would cover everything. I had to escape before the snow season came! I made the decision that night. But how?!

One fine day it seemed that the right time had come for my escape. We were given the job of cutting some trees very far from the camp. We were taken to the forest and back by truck, instead of making our usual long march. Scores of prisoners were crammed into the vehicle, including Rij, Andrei, Mitka, and even Margolin, who had not yet fully recovered but had come to work to get his portion of food.

The truck passed the sign indicating the Soviet-Finnish border. I decided to act together with another prisoner. Who would be worth considering? I looked around, for a moment I thought of Rij, who had a woman he missed very much, anguished by their separation. But perhaps, precisely because of that, he would hesitate to endanger himself! Whispering, I turned to Mitka, who had been sentenced to ten years hard labour. I suggested that we overpower the guard, put him out of action and try to get over the border. Mitka agreed at once, without any hesitation. He found imprisonment hard to bear, I knew, which is why I approached him, this well-built young man with the blond forelock.

We decided to draw lots as to who would be first to attack the guard. We were both well aware of the extent of the danger.

The truck was passing close to a pine tree. Mitka reached out and plucked a big cone and we passed it between us, from hand to hand, as in a children's game. I asked Rij, who had a good voice, to start singing and then stop suddenly. Whoever had the cone when he stopped, would be the one to hit the guard.

To my surprise, Rij began to sing my father's song: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" And when the ancient melody rose, I began to pray in my heart that the good Lord would come to my help. Apparently my prayer was heard. The guard had noticed nothing of what was going on in the truck. Rij suddenly stopped singing, as I had asked—and the pine cone was in my hand . . .

I was the loser; it had fallen to me to attack the guard, who was sitting at the far end of the truck.

How could I approach him without rousing suspicion? He was armed with a rifle and I knew he would not hesitate to use his weapon at the slightest hint of anything suspicious.

I addressed him in a whisper and he told me to come over to him because he could not hear me.

Mitka cleared a path for me, pushing men aside and explaining that the sentry had called me to him, and so, my nerves at breaking point, I was hustled forward by my fellow prisoners. In a moment I would be there . . . and then . . . I would have to hit him before he could shoot: one hard, stunning blow.

But at that exact moment the truck stopped in front of the border police post. I knew I did not stand a chance here. There were guards all around. I had missed my opportunity.

The next day, when I witnessed the dreadful spectacle of Mitka's punishment, I realised that I had been very lucky. Persisting in the attempt to escape, he had jumped from the truck the night before, and raced madly for the Finnish border when we were on our way back from work. But the guards had immediately caught him and thrown him into the lock-up. In the morning, he was tied to the back of a moving cart.

His fair hair was blowing in the wind as he ran desperately trying to stay on his feet, helplessly jerked and flung about in the wake of the cart as the guards whipped the horses to greater speed, calling to him in sadistic enjoyment that this was his chance to escape: Now's your chance to run! Run if you like! And Mitka ran behind the cart drawn by the galloping horses, until he fell and was dragged to his death along the hard ground. He had become a bleeding lump of meat. All this took place in front of my very eyes, as I stood watching in total shock.

Was escape completely impossible? I refused to accept this in the first months of my imprisonment, and I again planned my escape. Prisoners serving sentences three or four times longer than mine regarded my sentence as child's play, time that would pass quickly. They would not mind having a punishment like mine, said Andrei, who

was sentenced to ten years, each day made unbearable by his tormenting longing for his beloved woman.

Nevertheless, I could no longer bear the situation and decided to face the danger and difficulty of escape, and to do so before the winter snow would enclose us in a white, impassable wall. Rij took comfort in the few letters he received from his girlfriend, hoping she would wait for him. As for Andrei, he had long since despaired of escape and concentrated on bettering his living conditions, and on attempts to obtain cigarettes. The craving for cigarettes made him collect every scrap of paper he could find for rolling mahorka, a mixture of roots obtained in various strange ways, which was the stuff people smoked in Russia.

Notices within the camp were hung behind wire mesh for fear of their being torn down and used for smoking. Andrei and others addicted to smoking learned how to poke a stick through the mesh to get the much sought-after paper. I was pleased I did not smoke when I saw what they were prepared to do to feed their addiction.

To obtain extra food, false excess work quotas were systematically recorded. The increased food ration went with other benefits, too, such as clothing, shoes and tobacco. People sold the few possessions they had managed to bring with them, or smuggle in, or buy. They were ready to pawn their future, their bodies and souls for a loaf of bread or a cigarette.

I worked with all my might, withstood hardships and earned benefits which eased my lot somewhat. But what would happen with the arrival of winter?!

I had to make my escape in the few weeks that remained before the snow began to fall.

As I was being transported with the other prisoners to the work site, in the morning, I again looked around and began to re-plan my escape.

I plodded in the mud, no longer hearing the sentries' shouts and the barking of their dogs. I was deep in thought. I wondered over and over—how had I come to be here, at all? What had gone wrong, and why, on the road that had begun with my birth into a home that lacked nothing?

Memories came flooding in.

2

BOYHOOD AND YOUTH

TRUDGING THROUGH THE greening forest to the woodcutting site, I remembered—a warm morning in an entirely different forest in the Polesia district near Pinsk, where I spent part of my childhood with my paternal grandmother when my parents moved from the Ukraine to Vilna. My mother's name was Haya, but they called her Anyota, and my father's name was Nahman. Carefree and active, I was happy in my grandmother's home. Even my mother's health, which had been bad since the birth of my little brother, Zwi, did not spoil my good mood. My parents had moved with my brother and sister to Vilna, where they were staying with the Vernicks, my mother's kin, while I went to my grandmother until things straightened out.

My late grandfather had been the owner of a riverboat, the *Theodor Herzl*, which plyed the waters of the Pina and Dnieper Rivers, transporting merchandise. He and my grandmother, whom I adored, had a handsome house which I loved. It had a porch facing the street and

stood on about an acre of ground planted with a green garden and fruit trees—pears, plums and a special type of winter apple—which yielded the jams and jellies and other confections that grandmother bottled and stored in the cellar, where, also, pungent braids of dried garlic and onions hung above potatoes covered in straw, so that they would keep.

I would dash around the yard, near the hens with the rooster at their head, or visit the cows in their shed, and gobbling the delicacies Grandmother made from their milk: cream cheese, heavy cream, yellow butter that she would wrap in cabbage leaves glittering with drops of water that always reminded me of beads of perspiration.

When she was widowed, my grandmother's financial situation deteriorated, yet nothing was lacking in her house; there was dark furniture, handcarved by a master in the style of the turn of the century, elegant chinaware and silver, heavy velvet curtains, and, in the cellar, an abundance of foodstuffs, some fresh, some cooked and preserved.

I began to attend a Jewish kindergarten there, in Pinsk. It was one of a chain of kindergartens run by the "Culture" education network. I joined my friends in having a good time and getting up to all sorts of mischief. We pinched apples from the neighbours' gardens—as if we did not have enough of our own! The forbidden fruit was irresistible. I poked a metal rod through the fence and knocked down a tempting apple, rolled it towards me and then, before I could sink my teeth into it, the neighbour came into her yard, carrying a basket of eggs. She saw what I was up to and confiscated my cap with the school badge on the front—the word "Culture" written in the shape of an open book. When she snatched it from my head I was so angry that I picked up a stone and threw it at her. The stone landed in the basket of eggs she had just collected. A yellow mess began to ooze from the basket and I fled in alarm.

I ran down the cobbled street, wondering where to turn: I could not go to the kindergarten now, without a hat. I was also scared to go home. The neighbor was sure to tell my grandmother the whole story and she would be extremely angry with me. The missing cap would make her even angrier because I would be breaking a religious law by going about with my head uncovered.

Grandmother was orthodox and even had rabbinical qualifications, which was as unusual for a woman then as it is now.

I did not know what to do.

I was suddenly aware of my situation: a small boy who did not understand all the rules and regulations of the adult world he lived in. I decided to run away.

When I reached the Pina River, which flowed through a forest, I came across a raft taking cows to pasture on the other side of the river. I immediately joined them and floated away. I spent the whole of that day playing in the meadow over the river, a place of bountiful green, blue skies overhead, the fragrance of blossoms and a special kind of silence. I forgot everything that had happened. I did not sense the hours slipping by until it was time for the cows to be loaded onto the raft again to take them back to their owners. I had to go back, however little I wanted to. I did not dare stay alone in the forest. It would be dark soon. I had to return with the herd. I was also beginning to feel pangs of hunger. I came back to the town, but did not go home. I wandered around until I came to the market, which was open on two days of the week, that day being one of them. The gentile farmers began coming into the square. They were big-bodied men wearing heavy coats and suede boots with leather soles. They began to gather around the Jews' stalls to stock up on food, tobacco, haberdashery and other provisions.

With drooping eyes, my stomach contracting with hunger, I looked at a group of farmers sitting around a basinful of potatoes boiled in their jackets, eating, and sipping surovatka, their standard drink, which was the whey that dripped through the special cloth bag used in the process of making white cheese from sour milk. It was considered to be a poor man's drink, but as I stood there it seemed like a feast for kings.

One of the farmers, noticing my stare, gave me a warm potato and held a big mug of the sourish liquid to my lips. This was a delicious snack, but it did not satisfy my hunger. I was a physically big child and had an appetite to match my size. My hunger tormented me, and this compelled me to return to my grandmother's house.

The old woman welcomed me with open emotion and concern, murmuring: "Dudik, Dudik," which was her name for me. She embraced me and did not rebuke me for being bareheaded. Apparently she did not even notice this in her excitement. Thus, dressed with her usual care in an embroidered dress with a lace collar, from which hung a watch at the end of a chain, she held me to her and caressed me.

My uncle Yosef emerged from a little building at the back of the house, where homemade soap was made. He was very angry that I had disappeared and had not responded to his calls. Grandmother insisted that "the boy" should first have something to eat, and led me to the kitchen.

There were big loaves in the oven, emitting the familiar fragrance of new baked bread. My mouth began to water. I was so hungry. The maid, Ostia, opened the oven door and removed a loaf of black bread with a long-handled, wooden spatula. She cut thick slices, spreading them with a generous layer of yellow butter. She also served me a glass of warm milk, which warmed my body, chilled by the long stay outdoors. Ostia was very diligent and devoted to us. She did all the work in the house and yard. Now she left the room to go to the cowshed, and my grandmother began questioning me—Where had I been? What had made me run away?

At first I kept quiet. Only when she promised not to punish me, and Uncle Yosef did likewise, did I dare tell them what had happened. My grandmother immediately went to the neighbour, but returned without the cap that had been confiscated because of the broken eggs. Grandmother had succeeded only in getting the "Culture" badge back from her and this she sewed onto a new cap.

As she did so she delivered a sound rebuke and the warning that, if I did not mend my ways, she would send me to my parents in Vilna.

I did not want that to happen. Although I missed my family, I loved staying with grandmother and, like all children, I did not enjoy change. So I promised, for the umpteenth time, to be a good boy.

It did not take long for me to forget everything I had promised. One morning I was walking from home to kindergarten. The sidewalks were made of boards under which, because of recent rains, puddles had accumulated. I began to jump on the boards, bouncing them forcefully and spraying mud and water in all directions, including my face and clothes. Despite my promises, I could not resist the temptations I found outdoors. The Pina River had overflowed its banks in the wake of the rain, becoming a proper sea during the flooding, suddenly so wide that its opposite banks could not be seen. I had had such an enjoyable time there, the week before, and now the meadow seemed distant, almost at the other end of the world, beckoning and inviting me to visit. With difficulty, I resisted the temptation to join Ostia, who

was leading grandmother's two cows to the raft. But I could not resist my desire to stamp my boots over and over again into the gap between the sidewalk boards. It was a favourite rainy season game for us children. I was completely covered in mud, but at least I won! I had managed to get my feet deeper into the mud than any of the others did, so why should I care if the foul sewage water had spattered my trousers. In this state, I arrived at kindergarten, only to be sent home immediately, to the extreme annoyance of my grandmother, who had to scrape me clean from top to toe.

Still shivering from the icy chill of the outdoor lavatory, I was carried by my grandmother into the room that had been my parents' when they were newlyweds. I particularly loved this place. It was spacious and had heavily curtained windows facing the garden. A solid box-wood bed with rigidly starched sheets stood in it. Grandmother put me into the bed, under the soft, warm eiderdown and I lay there, getting warm, looking at the big dark wardrobe with the carved doors that always revealed magical forms to my gaze. I made faces into the mirror and laughed in happy amusement.

My joy increased when snow began to fall, bringing new, intriguing sights and entertainment—which I could not relinquish, even when the time came for me to start school and punctuality was expected. There was a hill I loved climbing in the mornings. It had a pump from which the local inhabitants used to draw their water, carrying it to their houses. I used to go up the hill in order to slide down from its crest, sitting on my schoolbag, swooping down crowing with delight and then climbing up, over and over again.

There was much woodcutting activity in wintertime in the district of Polesia, and it made a great impression on me. I liked watching them prepare the trees for sawing, and the chopping, felling, and then the floating of the trunks down the river. I could watch this for hours, at the expense of my studies. I reached the conclusion that there were many things that were much more interesting than school. Therefore, even on those mornings when grandmother's lectures had left me determined to go straight to my classroom, the way was never short or easy. At times this was through no fault of mine.

There was a Polish church near our house which I had to pass on my way to school. Here the "*shaigetzim*" used to lie in ambush for us.

Also called *"shkotzim,"* these gentile boys used to demand that we remove our caps as we passed their holy place.

One morning we were hurrying past, a few six- and seven-year-old Jewish pupils, trying to evade the humiliating ritual we resented. But the shkotzim did not let us, and began to pull off our caps by force. An unequal battle ensued. Apart from the pain and insult, we found it hard to understand why some adult Jewish passersby did not come to our aid, and even lectured us about deliberately provoking the shkotzim.

This was not my first encounter with the phenomenon of anti-semitism I became familiar with it at an early age and never could come to terms with it. One third of the inhabitants of Pinsk were Jews, but the Poles related to us as a negligible minority. And the local Jews accepted this.

We got away from our attackers with difficulty, that day, and returned home while we were still capable of doing so. Why had the ruffians attacked us? I gave vent to my sense of insult, but my grandmother was unable to explain it to me. She sighed and concluded that I would be better off with my parents in Vilna. She was too old to look after me.

She wrote to my father, who arrived to take me back with him.

The parting from Grandmother saddened me. I loved the big dining room in her house, the long pinewood table with many chairs around it. The framed family photographs adorning the walls. The big cuckoo clock that was unique in the town. The silver utensils, the *Hanukka* lamp, which had been in the family for generations. At the edge of the table, the imprint of a palm recalled the time when Grandfather had struck the table a mighty blow in a moment of great anger at his son Nahman, my father, when he was about my age, according to Grandmother. Instead of hitting him, my grandfather had hit the table. Had Father also been mischievous, at times? I wondered, while Grandmother's voice came from the kitchen, recounting my escapades to my father. The maid was kindling a fire from the embers, using a bellows, and father sat sipping hot tea from the samovar, sweetening it with his mother's homemade jam.

I travelled to Vilna with my father, wearing my best clothes: new riding breeches tucked into my boots, a light-coloured polo-necked

shirt and over it a cardigan with a single-striped sailor collar, to match the breeches. My hair was clipped short, I was full of energy, of upright posture and I felt I was much older than my seven years. I was very excited about seeing Mother and my sister and brother, whom I had not seen since the move to Vilna.

I mounted the stairs at a run, to the second floor of number 5 Viwulsky Street, where my maternal grandfather and grandmother Vernick lived. It was an emotional meeting and I was amazed to see that the baby, as I remembered my brother, was already able to stand. He was holding my sister's hand and was quite prepared to wrestle with me. I found my mother lying in bed, pale as the cushion that supported her dark-haired head.

The move from Pinsk to Vilna presented no difficulty for me. On the contrary, here I had a big family, my parents, my sister and brother, and mother's brother and sister. It was this aunt who took care of us children.

My grandfather, Mordechai Vernick, was an orthodox Jew with luminous blue eyes. He ran a wood business, but actually devoted most of his time to charity and to the *Mizrachi* religious movement. He was involved in many anonymous charitable acts and other good works, and used to bring a *yeshiva* student home for lunch every *Sabbath* after synagogue.

My grandmother Zissele Rivka, whom the students called Babushka, prepared the meals. She was not as educated as my paternal grandmother, but she was good-hearted and a superb cook.

We all sat around the table for the Sabbath meal, since Father insisted that nobody be absent. I would be sent to the bakery to fetch the pot of *cholent*, which had been put into the oven the previous noon, there to remain for a full day, slowly browning. I would search among the many pots in the oven full of Sabbath dishes until I found our cholent, with the folded layer of newpaper—"*Haint*," Today, which was read in our house—under the lid of the pot. This was my family's marker. When the lid was raised, the house was filled with the fragrance. I waited in anticipation for that taste from one Sabbath to the next. After the sumptuous meal, boiling hot tea was sipped, its heat preserved in tightly shut bottles that grandmother had filled and stored away under eiderdowns before the Sabbath, so that we would have a hot drink although no fire was lit in the house. We had the tea with dry biscuits

that had a taste all their own. After the heavy meal, the adults would retire for a nap, while I hurried to don my *Hashomer Hatzair* uniform of short pants and scouts' scarf. I had recently joined this youth movement, and would dash off to take part in activities at the den.

Owing to Mother's state of health and the amount of money it cost to treat her, our financial situation was not very good. My father, who was an accountant, had a clear set of priorities: first of all, Mother's medical expenses, and then our education, which also cost a lot of money. Nor did he stop giving to charity. All the rest came after these. There was more than one argument at the dinner table about the sums he donated, but charity was of major importance to Father.

The days passed pleasantly for me in Vilna: studies at *Toushia*, the Hebrew secondary school, activities in Hashomer Hatzair, which included outings and camping trips, and games in the *Maccabi* sports field next to our house. My grandfather's five-roomed apartment was full of life and happiness. I enjoyed running wild with my brother and sister, with whom I shared a room. We got up to all sorts of mischief accompanied by Grandmother's protests and threats to tell our parents; but Mother was sick and Father was busy and preoccupied. So we ran through all the rooms, even the maid's cubicle adjoining the kitchen, yelling and screeching to our heart's content.

When I reached my *bar mitzvah*, I decided that I would not be religious like my grandfather. I chose the path of Hashomer Hatzair, encouraged by my parents and with the consent of my grandfather, who gave me the freedom to choose. I devoted all my free time to the movement. Even in winter, dressed in short pants, I would go down to the valley where the den was, sinking knee deep in the soft white snow. I longed for a sled to swoop me down, and how delighted I was when my Uncle Yosef, before leaving for Paris, gave me one—on condition I would now be a well-behaved boy. Of course, I gave my promise, although I was not always able to keep it.

I enjoyed going sledding and coming back to the well-heated house. As wood merchants, the family was never short of firewood and there was always a pile of cut logs in the yard, ready for the big, white-tiled stove. Despite the winter cold, the house was warm day and night. When Grandfather set out to do business in the villages he put on knee-high boots, a warm coat with a hood, a colourful, high-collared

sweater knitted by Grandmother, and gloves. A bottle of vodka went into his pocket. In this garb he looked nothing like a religious Jew of the Mizrachi movement.

That was the winter I fell in love for the first time.

Hannah, my classmate, had black hair and fiery green eyes, which she would fix on me most invitingly. Though attracted to her, I held back fearfully. She was a rabbi's daughter, a fact which made me bashful. The more she sought me out, the further I withdrew, wavering between the natural desire to be close to her and the femininity that was being revealed to me, and reason, which whispered that it was forbidden and I had better not get involved with her.

When summer and the school holidays arrived, our family rented a wooden house from a peasant in a resort town not far from Vilna. The three children, Mother, Grandmother and Aunt Sarah lived there, while Grandfather and Father remained in town, joining us at weekends.

The house was next to a river, and one of my favourite occupations was jumping from the bridge that spanned it. Although I belly-flopped again and again, this did not deter me and I continued, enjoying the dive and the splash, and swimming in the river. I also liked to wander around in the green forest, looking for mushrooms and seeds. I had a special sense which enabled me to find them, and I took pride in doing so precisely in those places where the others said there was nothing.

On one such summer day I first met Irena. I was stepping through the dim forest, slightly stooped, my gaze on the ground, when I suddenly felt that I was not alone. Someone was looking at me. I raised my eyes, and there she was: she seemed to have emerged from the passionate dreams that had begun to visit me. A blue-eyed girl, with golden braids and a shapely body. We gazed at each other with no need for words. I was a fourteen year-old boy full of nascent, surging desires and she, about my age, was fully developed. We soon found ourselves drawn together, embracing and kissing. I was very excited by this powerful experience. I a Jew and she a Pole. All the restraints I had employed during the winter in relation to the rabbi's daughter now vanished completely.

I returned to our summer house in turmoil after the encounter with Irena, wondering whether to confide in anyone, but deciding to keep quiet, after all. My secret burned in me and I found myself in the same

place the next day, where Irena awaited me. I spent a lot of time with her that summer. She was more experienced than me, but nevertheless withdrew from complete physical contact. Those were days of lust and passion, and I was sorry when autumn arrived and it was time to return to the city. I knew we would not be able meet again, that the separation would be final. And so it was. A relationship of that kind between a Jewish boy and a Polish girl, daughter of an income tax clerk, was unacceptable. And I, who knew how to employ reason to control my emotions, broke off the relationship even though I wanted very much to maintain it.

Luckily for me, this was a period of intense activity in the movement, and I was able to immerse myself in it. I went up to the senior level and was made a group leader, and eventually head of a division of a hundred younger members. I was very busy planning activities, instructing, and taking part in outings and camping trips. In my knee-length khaki pants and long socks, my khaki shirt with the sleeves rolled up and the movement badge—"Strength and Courage"—on the pocket, and the scarf and beret, I cycled from place to place, organizing and taking part in activities.

I felt more grown-up than my years. I was well-built, physically powerful, like my father. I sensed that the girls liked to be around me, but Hashomer Hatzair restricted boy-girl relationships unless they were based on love, and this had not happened to me, as yet. I planned to finish secondary school and go on "*Hachsharah*," the training period preparatory to emigration to Palestine. This was my dream.

A unique Jewish atmosphere prevailed in Vilna, which is why the city was nicknamed "The Jerusalem of Lithuania." There were many institutes of Jewish learning and culture where Hebrew and Yiddish were studied alongside Polish. The city had many synagogues, study houses, and sports clubs which held matches on Saturdays, and there were various social activities and charity drives. A Jewish students' union was organized. Youth groups belonging to various political and social streams were active, and the Zionist youth movement members joined the *Hehalutz*, "Pioneer," movement when they reached adulthood, and prepared themselves for emigration to Palestine.

One day, some fellows from the "*Hapoel*" sports organization in Palestine arrived in Vilna, mounted on bikes they had stowed in the

hold of the ship that had brought them to Europe. What excitement accompanied these fine young men as they rode around the city, everyone looking at them in admiration, amazed at the sight of these young Jews, so strong and healthy. We were not the only ones filled with wonder—so were the non-Jews. The Palestinian fellows made us proud to be associated with them.

However, there was anti-semitism in Vilna, too, despite the fact that the Jews lived apart from the gentiles in the city and there was almost no mixing. A wave of Jew-hatred arose when a cell of the Polish nationalist students' union, the "Andeks," began to harass Jewish students. The Poles imprisoned them in the university, refusing to let them out and forcing them to study standing up. They also spat at them and beat them.

Rumours of these disturbances spread through the city and reached our house. My sister Esther was studying at the university at the time.

My father, despite being middle-aged, heavy and balding, still kept in shape and would go out half naked and rub himself down with snow. He was a strong man. He now decided to go to the site of the trouble. He went into the maid's room and dismantled the legs of a wooden chair, keeping one for himself and handing the other to me. We set off at a run down the stairs, into the street, and from there in the direction of the university. I felt proud. I was no longer a child hidden away during *pogroms*. Now we would hit back. The place was in turmoil when we arrived, there were violent fights, and a shot had been fired by a Jew at his assailants.

The pogrom atmosphere gripped the city. Windows of Jewish businesses were smashed, people on both sides were beaten up, and calm was restored only by intervention of the authorities. But the anti-semitism continued to simmer. Squads of Poles prevented their people from buying at Jewish shops. Members of the Jewish youth movements mounted guard on Jewish institutions.

I knew my place was in Palestine, and now was the time to put this into effect—now that I had finished secondary school. I entered on my Zionist training period in Slonim, but on completing it did not emigrate to Palestine as planned. Mother's health took a turn for the worse, and she died. Further, I received notice of my call-up to the Polish army. Some people managed to get out of this duty one way or another, but

I did not, owing to difficulties in obtaining the necessary money to buy a release. I parted enviously from my friends when they left for Palestine, the day before I had to report to the recruitment base. I was extremely depressed.

I was dressed in a leather jacket, riding breeches and boots, and knew that the next day I would be wearing a uniform. My sister had recently married Moshe Grobman, a wood merchant, and they had left the city. I felt alone and isolated without my younger brother Zwi, who had gone to Palestine, where he was studying at the *Mikve Israel* agricultural school, with financial help from an uncle in the USA. Our room, always so full of life, happiness and also the occasional brotherly quarrel, was now empty and silent. I was mourning my mother's death and my spirits were very low. If only I could suddenly meet Irena.

We abstained from wine in Hashomer Hatzair. Smoking was prohibited and so was sex. I was almost twenty already. I was grown up and I decided I could allow myself these pleasures.

I walked through the city and went to have a haircut, for the army. My thick dark hair was cropped in military style. I left the barber's chair with a sense of oppression and went home. Even the football game in the adjoining Maccabi field did not draw me this time. Just as well that Irena could not see me like this. I looked in the mirror, to be confronted by my shaven head, white domed and with the ears protruding on either side. There was nobody at home. My grandfather had left that morning, as he did from time to time, to buy some acres of forest for timber. Grandmother had gone to the market with Aunt Sarah, and I was finding it hard to be on my own.

I decided to go to a fortune teller whose wonders had been extolled by my sister Esther. I found him, a bearded yeshiva student, who held my hand and foretold my future. He murmured something strange about my reaching Palestine one day, but by a long and devious route through distant, exotic lands. He said I would be involved in rescuing Jewish children like my relative, who was already doing so. Was he referring to my Uncle Yosef Vernik, I wondered. Nothing he said sounded feasible to me. That I would be an officer in the Jewish army!! In the Jewish State?—There was no such thing! There were many waiting in line behind me, and it was not possible to ask him to clarify. I dismissed as nonsense everything he told me and went home regretting that I had gone to him and paid good money for meaningless words. He had obviously deduced from my haircut I was about to go

into the army. He had also managed to guess that someone close to me had died, and that it was my mother. The rest was rubbish. It would never come true, of that I was certain.

The following day I was drafted into the Polish army and completely forgot the strange words of prophecy that I had heard in Vilna.

Now, in Kwadrat 48, memories of my youth and boyhood rose as I trod the long way to where I had to serve my sentence of hard labour, cutting trees. The prophecy also came to my mind. I tried to draw encouragement from it. Maybe . . . maybe I would get out of here alive, maybe I still had a future ahead of me . . . it was hard to believe. Thus I marched on, moving between the difficult present and the past, with my memories, returning to the Polish army camp where, one day in the mid-thirties, I found myself.

3

WAR

THERE I WAS, a rookie in the basic training camp at Novovileika, some twenty kilometres from Vilna.

Immediately on arrival, I heard shouts. It emerged that there were some Polish village lads in the camp who were washing their feet for the first time, and in order to remove the accumulated dirt of a lifetime, they had to scrub their feet with a horse-brush and this was causing them considerable pain.

The rookies were quartered in barracks and the staff in brick buildings.

Anti-semitism was rife in the camp and it expressed itself from the first morning, at the morning parade, when the Polish recruits sang loudly:

"On the day that Moshek was born there was a terrible stink in the town!"

They insisted that I sing with them, and they did not stop at singing. There were only two Jews in my unit and in basic training, and the Poles took every opportunity to harrass us.

The training was hard, but I did my best not to fall behind in the running, the drill and weapons practice. During bayonet practice with a straw-filled sack, I tried to aim exactly and plunge the sharp blade over and over until the figure in front of me gave up its straw soul.

"Stab! Pull!" the commands roared out, and I split the sack to their rhythm, proving my devotion to the task. But this did not endear me to them. I was a Jew and therefore an inferior soldier. I found the anti-semitism very hard to take. Indeed, I had encounteed it before, but not in this harsh, crude form. As a Jew in Vilna, I lived in a strong, highly influential centre of independent culture, whereas here I belonged to a scorned, denigrated minority.

I was a young man in my early twenties, used to being away from home since I was a boy. I had participated in the outings and camps organized by the youth movement. During the past year I had spent many long months far from my family because I had been on Hachshara. But now, for the first time, I was living in the company of gentiles. I was the only Jew, in cramped quarters with a closed society of Polish country boys, for whom the most elementary rules of hygiene were strange. It was a very difficult sensation which weighed heavily on me, and I longed for family and home.

Once a week, on Sunday afternoons, the families of recruits were allowed to visit. My grandmother Zissele Rivka Vernick would arrive from nearby Vilna in the morning, and wait until we could meet.

She would station herself beside the fence with her basketful of the delicacies I loved: sweet and sour pickled fish, or stuffed fish marinated in brine with horseradish, cholent, biscuits left over from the Sabbath, fruit, sweets and drinks. Sometimes she would wait for hours until we met, but she never left without handing me what she had brought, hugging and kissing me and asking how I was feeling, and only then, sometimes it was already after dark, would she return to the city.

My mother's mother was a simple woman and compared to my other grandmother, of the Laumberg family, who was an educated woman, she had studied little. But she was blessed with a basic wisdom

and understanding, which could be learned only from the school of everyday reality. During these visits of hers she always tried to convey something of her life experience to me through the fence. Persuading me not to get involved in anything, encouraging me by saying that the army service would be over sooner than I thought. Everything comes to an end in life, and this, too, would pass. The main thing was for me to take care of my health, she said.

I would hug this stocky, plump woman, promising to do as she said, looking into her kindly brown eyes, my heart flooding with warm love for her. I promised her I would soon return safely and would continue to explain the prayers in her book, "Go Forth and See," as I had done ever since moving to Vilna. I promised not to laugh at her if she made mistakes, as my brother and I used to do. The letters in books had always seemed like mountains she could climb only with difficulty and, on more than one occasion, I had suffered pangs of conscience for making fun of her.

The days of my boyhood and youth seemed so distant now. I missed the warmth of my family and the comforts of home here in the camp. I hugged Babushka, as I called her, and she hugged me, her Dudik, promising to come again on the following Sunday. I would have to wait a whole week—I sighed on my way back to the barracks lined with bunks. There were scores of rookies in the long hut, shouting, raining curses on their fellows and the whole world and not, of course, omitting the Jews.

Anti-semitism was against the law in the camp, but every opportunity to humiliate and depress the Jewish soldiers was exploited. We had a system of rotation for sanitation duty: each day one squad would clean the lavatories and the other would clean the showers, changing over on alternate days.

One morning in summer, after completing my shower-cleaning stint, I reported for morning parade. The Polish sergeant-major glared at me and accused me of not doing the job properly. Of course, I did not agree with this, having conscientiously done what I had to do.

I did not convince the sergeant-major. He opened his mouth wide, yelling commands at me:

"Put on your gas mask!"

"Bayonet your rifle!"

"Run around the platoon!"

I did not understand why I was being punished like that; however, I had no choice but to carry out his commands. He gave the platoon the order to march and I ran, covered in perspiration, not asking any questions. The sun beat down powerfully on my head, the perspiration dripped from my face, my whole body. I ran until I had no strength or breath left in me. My legs failed and I could not go on. I was about to collapse.

The platoon had left the camp at quick march, left, right, left— and I continued to circle them at a run and at a pace which made my heart race and thud, quickening my breathing, at the end of my strength. At last I heard the longed-for command:

"Halt!"

I stood panting, while the Polish soldiers faced me, laughing and making jokes at my expense, and the sergeant-major started sarcastically to interrogate me again:

"Tell me again, did you clean the showers this morning, as you said?"

I replied; "Yes, sir!"

Now he declared that I was not only lazy, but a liar, too. He began to torment me again with commands:

"Lie down! Get up! Take battle stance! Repeat! Lie down! Get up!"

He barked his commands standing before me. My senses became muddled and I was close to losing consciousness. Only then, sensing that he had overdone it, did he order me back into line. I marched, stumbling, back to the camp with the platoon, still wondering and not understanding why I had been punished.

We had no sooner arrived, than the sergeant-major led the platoon to the lavatory, which was foul and stinking, and thundered at me:

"Liar!—See, you didn't clean the toilets!"

I attempted to explain to him that it had been my turn to clean the showers, not the toilets, and that I had done so.

The voices of the Polish soldiers began to rise around me, calling: "Filthy Jew, you stink of onions and that's why you've made all the lavatories stink, too . . ."

This pleased the sergeant-major as he stood in front of the filth that covered the place, full of self-righteous superiority, accusing me of a double transgression—dereliction of duty and lying.

I tried to get a word in, to explain that I was not supposed to clean there that morning, that it had been platoon C's turn to do so.

Trying to appear fair, the sergeant-major turned to the soldier in charge of the duty roster, and asked if this was so.

Without the flicker of an eyelid, the man answered: "The Jew's lying!"

I felt the blood rush to my head in such anger that I lost control. Without considering what my action would cost me, I whipped my army belt from around my waist and hit the lying Polish soldier with it. The metal buckle struck his head with enough force to knock him to the ground. They dragged me off to the lock-up. I was jailed in a narrow cell for two days, after which I was tried and sentenced to ten days in prison for hitting the soldier.

Those were difficult days, but not for a moment did I regret what I had done: I had proved to the Poles, the Jew-haters, that one of us was also a proud man who would not allow them to humiliate him.

When I was released from prison, I was transferred to another unit, where I finished as an outstanding soldier and was even included in the group selected for officer's duties.

I was proud to return to Vilna in army uniform, erect, radiating strength. The city had a developed Jewish centre, pioneer youth movements, a flourishing, proud Jewish community, but it did not have many Jewish soldiers. Therefore, my appearance drew a lot of attention as I marched towards my family's apartment with my head held high.

I had served in the Polish army for two years and was a corporal and a candidate for the officers' course. But I did not want a military career. It was my ambition to go to Palestine, and I planned to do so as soon as I was released. Most of my friends had already emigrated, and my younger brother, Zwi, wrote me letters from Palestine. It was my turn, now. However, things do not always go according to one's wishes and plans. The economic situation delayed me once again. My grandfather had died, and my grandmother, in failing health, had moved with Aunt Sarah—her daughter, who now took care of her—to Warsaw, where my father was then living.

I was a grown man, now, and had to save the money I needed to emigrate. And this I did. I also left Vilna and went to work for a relative

who had a factory in Warsaw. I rented a flat in one of the new, high buildings that had gone up in the Praga area, on the other bank of the Wisla on the outskirts of the Capital. I worked diligently and earned a good salary. At the factory, I fitted in well and was promised a promotion and a rise in salary to go with it. I lived in a comfortable flat overlooking the river . . .

As a handsome young man with a good salary I had many opportunities to enjoy myself. But I had no intention of remaining in Poland, in spite of the pleasures the big city offered me. I wanted to leave, as soon as possible.

There was a bad atmosphere in Europe in the mid-thirties. Hitler came to power and the Germans then invaded Austria. Polish Jews living in Germany, who had been deported back to Poland, told of attacks against Jews under the Nazi rule. A kind of cold war prevailed between Germany and Poland in the beginning, finding expression in various provocative incidents along the border; relations between the two countries deteriorated to the point of a flare-up.

At the end of August 1939 I left the plant where I worked, on the other side of the bridge over the Vistula, in the Praga Quarter, and went to the Capital to enquire about the possibilty of emigrating to Palestine. I met *Mordechai Anilewitz,* who had listed the addresses of members of Hashomer Hatzair in order to assist them to emigrate to Palestine, and also for purposes of defence, should this become necessary. To my disappointment, there was no news regarding my emigration, and I returned to my flat feeling depressed. On arrival, the concierge handed me a call-up notice, which had arrived in my absence.

I looked at the document and wondered—was there really going to be a war soon? I was instructed to report to the army that same day. Therefore, I went back the way I had come. I wanted to say goodbye to my family before I was mobilized. I went to my grandmother first. The old woman, whose body had wizened of late owing to her illness, was very happy to see me. I did not dare reveal that I had come to say goodbye, and who knew when we would see each other again.

I was bewildered. War? Would I again have to cancel my plans to emigrate to Palestine? What was going to become of me? And here my old grandmother, as though possessed by the spirit of prophecy, gave a sigh and said:

"The *goyim* hate the Jews and one of these days they're going to annihilate the lot of us."

Shocked, I accused her of taking a black view of things; what she said was unthinkable:

"Babushka, how can you talk like that?" I tried to calm her hysterical outburst.

But she continued, pointing with her wrinkled hand at a fly hovering over her bed:

"That fly, like every other living creature in this world, also wants to live."

I did not get the point. I was afraid her illness might have muddled her mind. I reached out to swat the fly, but she asked me to let it be. I opened the window and it flew out.

I said goodbye to my grandmother and my aunt and went over to my father's apartment. I was surprised to find this hearty, usually optimistic man depressed. His mood became even darker on hearing that I was about to go into the army. His feelings mood was heavy, ominous, and he whispered to me:

"Son, I know we'll never see each other again."

He added that it was good my brother Zwi was in Palestine, because he would be spared what lay in wait for the Jews in Poland. He hoped that I, as well as my sister and her family, would manage to get out of Poland. As for him . . .

At this meeting, Father gave me some addresses of relatives in America, Russia and Palestine. He urged me to learn them by heart—who knows? Perhaps I would be needing them quite soon. His tone was strange, in fact, he was altogether different from his usual self. I felt as if he was entrusting me with his Will. He furnished me with advice of various kinds, out of a sense that I still had some chance of being saved, whereas he had none. He spoke like a man condemned to death. I found it difficult to part from him in his painful mood, and he also wanted to prolong our meeting—which he feared was our last—as far as possible.

Together, we left his apartment and went out into the Warsaw street drenched in autumn sunlight. But Father was full of grief in spite of the golden shafts of light and the season, which is so beautiful in this country. Young people thronged the streets on their way to join the army. We took a tram to the gathering point, and there we said goodbye, my father and I, with a strong embrace, kisses, and a final, manly

handshake. Father tried with all his might to control himself, but it was hard, the tears streamed down his face, and I could also barely control the weeping which welled up in me. Surrounded by scores of young men who, like me, had been summoned to the meeting point, we parted; Father, who had a feeling we were parting forever, and myself, trying to push aside this feeling, trying to hope and believe that it was not so.

We let go of each other, and it was forever, as I was to find out. Indeed, I did later try to reach Warsaw to find him, but without success. I never saw him again, exactly as he had forseen.

At the time, however, I gave it no thought. Preparations for the impending war were going on all around me, and I was immersed in my return to army life and fears for the future.

I was sent to the infantry officers' school, at Ostrub-Mazowieck, and after a few days we were transferred near to the Narew River, in the Wyshkow district. Our company was stationed there for defence.

There were many forests in the area of our encampment. Field kitchens were rapidly set up, trenches were dug, and patrols were organized. On returning from its rounds, one shocked patrol reported the discovery of the bodies of two Polish soldiers hanging from trees, one of them bearing a sign that read:

"This will soon be the fate of Polish and Jewish pigs!"

On Friday, the 1st of September, 1939, a clear autumn day I shall never forget, the war began. Germany invaded Poland. That was the date when the conflagration started, a blacker than black day for millions of people all over the world, and all the more so for the Jews.

The radio announced that four hundred German bombers escorted by fighter planes had begun to bomb Warsaw. The evil tidings followed each other in quick succession and conflicting stories spread regarding breaks in the Polish lines at several points, and German advances and victories.

The thunder of commands could be heard in the forest, echoing through the green trees, cutting through the dim serenity that had prevailed:

"Fix bayonets! Prepare for attack!"

We obeyed orders, after we had all had a sip of strong liquor to spur us on.

I had some rum on an empty stomach, in the morning, which produced a strange mood in me: on the one hand I felt a certain satisfaction about going into action. The uncertainty and anticipation of the past few days, since my mobilization, had frayed my nerves. But I was also worried about the war that had just broken out.

"Forward! Attack!" the command roared out.

And if I was killed . . . who would know? How would they notify my father? I wondered. There was a photograph of me among my papers. It was taken in the den, in Vilna, and showed me in my Hashomer Hatzair uniform. I took it out and made a note on the back, with my name, my father's address and the date: 1.9.39. I replaced it in my wallet. Thus, maybe . . . but on second thought, I took it out again and added a sentence: "I, David Laumberg, am proud to participate in the hand-to-hand battle against the German foe." That is how I felt. Should I be killed in this battle, I would fall with my weapons in hand, fighting against Hitler, Yimach Shemo veZichro—may his name and memory be obliterated.

The clatter of approaching German armoured divisions came from over the river. The enemy was advancing along a broad front, preceded by trucks carrying temporary bridges which were laid across the water to enable their forces to reach the opposite bank, where we were stationed.

Artillery fire rained down on the invaders. Machine guns rattled. But the mighty wave of the enemy rolled on, threatening to submerge us.

What use were all those exercises in bayonet-fighting, I was thinking, as were so many of the other soldiers around me, since in the tumult that accompanied the enemy's advance it was difficult to put that antiquated battle theory into practice. The German bridges already spanned the river and tanks and armoured troop carriers were now moving towards us, disgorging enemy soldiers shod in high boots and equipped with side packs and automatic weapons.

Ponderously, we moved forward to confront them: on our backs we bore rucksacks in which were packed our winter uniforms and a change of shoes, with a mess tin, a gas mask, a shovel and a steel helmet. The whole of it weighing over thirty kilos. We were armed with rifles with five-bullet magazines. Thus began a battle of absolutely uneven forces.

The artillery bombardment from both sides set the trees on fire and flames began to shoot skyward. The opposing sides in this intense, fiery battle faced each other. It was a deathtrap for the unfortunate soldiers caught up in it.

I advanced, shooting as best I could, stopping to reload my rifle from time to time. But I carried on shooting, feeling that I was harming the enemy, doing my bit. Indeed, afterwards, I had a feeling of satisfaction at having played a part, however small, in taking revenge on those fiends.

But there was not much to be done when footsoldiers armed with rifle and bayonet were faced with tanks and armoured carriers. And what could the Polish cavalry on their horses do against the invading forces? The cavalry galloped, banners aloft on their bayonets, against German armour. They were courageous, but the blood toll among soldiers and horses was horrifying.

Throughout the battle, the enemy planes circled overhead.

But they were not dropping bombs yet, for fear of hitting their own men. The deafening sound of the planes, the sight of the swastikas on their wings, and even the pilots, whose faces could clearly be seen as they flew low, filled us with alarm. They looked like monsters in their flying helmets and goggles.

The battle went on, without quite tipping the scale. After surrounding our troops, the Germans withdrew for a new onslaught. There was no doubt they would be back soon with reinforcements. The dead and wounded of both sides were strewn on the forest floor.

I knew I was lucky not to have been wounded. Masses of soldiers had fallen all around me. I huddled there in the forest; it was autumn, in a heat wave, and the sun beat down even through the crests of the trees under which we had flung ourselves down to rest. Our field kitchens had been hit and so had our water tanks. I was tormented by thirst and when it became unbearable, I crawled about in the ruins of the kitchen where I found a boiler with some remains of coffee; I thrust my steel helmet into it and ladled some of the dregs into the helmet with my cupped hand. With this I slightly eased my thirst.

And further? What lay in wait for me from now on? I knew the worst was still ahead of us. The order to attack came again, and it included my company. At the command, I moved towards the narrow road that led to the adjoining forest. Suddenly, right beside me, I heard

someone cursing the "filthy Jewboys" who always ran away and looked after themselves; it was one of the sergeants accusing me of running away so that I would not have to exert myself by digging a trench. As far as he was concerned all Jews were lazy and cowardly.

I was stunned by his words. I was carrying out an order. Even at a time like this—anti-semitism? Such hatred? We were all soldiers, after all, allies in this war for life or death. The Germans hated the Jews, but they also hated the Poles and the chance of being captured alive was as remote for the Poles as for us. The war was a common cause for all those who opposed the Germans, for all citizens of Poland. However, the Polish soldier, who had been cursing me ever since I arrived a few days earlier, did not agree. I had noticed his great hatred for Jews from the moment I first met him. He was now lying next to me, and I wanted to make a pointed remark to him about this—but just then a burst of fire from a machine gun riddled him with bullets and he rolled over dead on the ground.

There was no time for thought. The battle was in full swing and we were completely surrounded by the Germans. We fought with all we had to break through, even after our ammunition ran out: we used our shovels, our belts and our bayonets, as well as our teeth and our fingernails, to beat and slash them. . .

A German appeared in front of me, aiming his automatic weapon right at me. To this day, I do not know why he did not shoot. Did his weapon jam? Did he have no ammunition? The fact is, he did not shoot, but gave me a blow with the butt of his gun, and I hit him back. I do not know what happened to him. I felt a terrible pain in my leg and dropped bleeding to the ground. I rolled into a hole and lost consciousness.

After some time I realized that this had saved me from being trampled by the retreating soldiers stampeding past. At the time, though, I just lay motionless, feeling nothing. I awakened after nightfall. I was pierced by a sharp pain, and I was covered in blood. Apparently, a shout in Polish was what had roused me from my stupor caused by the loss of blood. It was someone giving an order—"Take only ours, and only those who are lightly wounded." What did they mean by "only ours"? I did not know. Did they mean Poles and not Germans; Poles and not Jews? I did not delve too deeply into this problem. With the last of my strength I crawled out of the hole I had fallen into. The pain was hellish, but I dragged myself over to the medics who were

evacuating the wounded. I was put onto a stretcher which was loaded onto a cart driven by a Polish peasant who had been enlisted together with other peasants to evacuate the many wounded. Six stretchers bearing wounded were loaded one after another onto the cart which then made its way towards Brisk where there was a first aid post. The peasant led his horse along a back road, and the cart bounced over the paving stones, throwing me from side to side and causing me to groan in agony.

The roads were crowded with refugees and Polish soldiers in retreat from the enemy advancing on Warsaw. German planes were bombing the fleeing people. They swooped so low that the bloodthirsty expression on the faces of the pilots was clearly visible. Their machine guns mowed down men, women and children, without mercy. They threw hand grenades and the air was thick with the smell of gunpowder.

What could I do? Where could I turn? Where could I hide?

Would it be better to get off the cart, where I lay exposed to enemy fire? I was unsure which would be the safest way to save myself. Owing to my wound, I was not very mobile and perhaps that is what saved me.

The Germans were directing their fire at a train, near me, and they converted the engine and coaches into molten scrap iron. They then turned their fire on the panic-stricken passengers hiding in the bushes beside the tracks. They mowed them down in cold blood at close range. Shattered corpses, of humans and horses, bleeding dark purple pools of blood that glittered in the sunlight, and vehicles twisted into otherworldly, animal-like shapes were flung by the roadside.

I was still being jounced around on the cart, groaning in pain and stunned by what I was seeing. We reached the field hospital in Brisk in the evening. Here I received treatment, and my wound was diagnosed as light. I was ordered to return to my unit within a day or two. However, the Polish army was defeated by then, and there was nowhere to return to. Perhaps I had better stay put?

But German planes were bombing the hospital, despite the Red Cross flag hoisted over it. Many of the wounded were killed, including those destined to be sent as reinforcements. The entire Polish Military Command had crumbled and I had nowhere to go and no way to fight. I knew that if I remained there I would also be hit sooner or later. What was I to do? I still had the key to my flat in Praga. Should I go there? Warsaw was being heavily bombarded and the entrance to the city

had become a death trap since the Germans had surrounded it. But my family was there!—I wanted to help my father, grandmother and aunt . . . would I be able to reach them there, in the midst of the flames?

My leg in bandages, I dragged myself from the bombarded hospital to the road. There I found an abandoned bicycle, its driver dead, I assumed.

A fair-haired young Polish officer, who drove past with his family in a car, shouted to the straggling refugees that the Germans had broken through the front lines "They're getting close, it's all over!" He was in complete despair. "Run!"—he called back to the people staggering beneath their bundles, as he drove away.

Run? Where?

I realized I had no chance of reaching Warsaw alive. I decided to put a distance between myself and the Germans with their planes cruelly attacking overhead. I would make for Pinsk, where I had spent those happy childhood days. My paternal grandmother Henya still lived there. My decision was made.

I laboriously mounted the bicycle, armed with a submachine gun I had found on the roadside. I moved forward, having difficulty pedalling because of my wounded leg. The roads leading eastward were full of refugees, and soldiers who had shed their uniforms and weapons. Their war was over. They had to take care of themselves, now. I passed more shattered bodies and the carcasses of horses. Blood, pain, cries and groans, and autumn gilded by a sun that shone just as golden on the wings of the Luftwaffe planes as they swooped, sowing death.

I advanced on the long, hard death-road. Sometimes, when I reached one of the villages, I would find food and drink. I pedalled on, suffering pain, faintness and weakness, but not stopping until I reached the Polesia district, where Pinsk was. I could at last ride on the highway with no fear of being shot or bombed, safe from attack by robbers or the desperately ravenous soldiers that hid in the villages, and away from the treacherous swamps around Polesia. I was careful to stay on the main road, out of danger.

I rode like this without pausing to rest, until I could take no more: one night, I felt such intense fatigue that I was unable to continue. The road I was on now passed through a thick forest. Aware of the dangers that lurked in the darkness, I prayed I would get through safely. But I decided I had to stop for a short rest. I dismounted and huddled on the dewy grass. Its fragrance assailed my nostrils, so different from the

stink of gunpowder that had encompassed me during the last few days. Memories of my sweet and remote childhood stirred with the grassy scent. I recalled my wanderings in this area, in search of mushrooms and forest seeds.

I was still resting and sniffing deeply the special fragrance of the grass, when I heard a rustle, and then saw a light flickering towards where I lay. I was frightened. I knew there were desperate people hiding in the forests, ready to do anything to stay alive. They were likely to rob me of my provisions, my water, as well as the bicycle and submachine gun. And who could tell if I would remain alive after the encounter. As I hid away, I heard and then saw the approach of a horse and cart driven by a peasant. He seemed very startled at the sight of me. In reply to my question he said that Pinsk was close by, indicating a path. But I preferred to get onto his cart, loading the bicycle as well. The peasant, apparently intimidated by the armed soldier, silently agreed to drive me to the town.

I looked around me in the moonlight as we came to the outskirts of Pinsk, which I had last seen when I was a boy of seven. The sights and streets were still familiar to me. I also made out the hill with the water pump on it, and the church, and knew I was near my grandmother's house. I told the peasant to stop and got down, dragging the bicycle with me. I walked along the wooden sidewalk and remembered that the first house was occupied by the Rabinov family, then came the pharmacy; I passed on, my submachine gun on my shoulder, dragging my leg. Here! Here was my grandmother's house!

My heart was pounding with excitement. I could hardly believe I had arrived safely. I stood rooted before the house with its veranda facing the street, the garden and orchard around it; I could even remember the moss stuffed in the crevices of its beams as protection against the weather. But perhaps I would find someone else, a stranger, in the house itself . . . I knocked forcefully at the door after leaning my bicycle against the wall, calling loudly:

"Babushka, Babushka, it's me, Dudik, open up!"

I heard sounds and voices on the other side of the door; dragging feet and cries of amazement—who could be knocking out there, in the middle of the night? Then the door was opened. I could not stand on my feet anymore. The wound was hurting, I was so weak, tired and bewildered. I sank into the outstretched arms.

But before I lost consciousness, I had time to notice that grandmother's dark hair was streaked with white. She embraced me with great feeling, wonderingly, almost unbelievingly repeating my name: "Dudik? Dudik? Dudik!"

When I awoke, I found myself in the bedroom I remembered from my childhood. Everything had remained so much the same: the twin beds, the heavy curtains, the fretworked wardrobe, the marble top with the basin and pitcher. This was the sight that greeted me when I opened my eyes. Grandmother was beside me, and Uncle Yosef. I was still in my filthy uniform and army boots. They had lain me like that on the snowy bedclothes, uncertain what to do with the submachine gun and ammunition I had collected on my way. How should they treat me, without getting me into trouble as a soldier of the defeated Polish army, should the Germans come, or the Red Army, whose leader, Stalin, had signed a pact with Hitler, dividing Poland between them?

I asked them to conceal the weapon and ammunition in the cellar, since I might still have need of them. And what about the uniform?

It was only a question of who would reach the city first—the Germans, or their allies, the Russians. It could be assumed that neither of them would be very considerate of an enemy soldier. It was fairly certain that I would be taken captive, or even killed. I had immediately to get rid of the uniform and any mark identifying me as a Polish soldier. But what would I wear?

My uncle's clothes did not fit me, he was smaller than me. There was no men's clothing in my widowed grandmother's house. She was afraid to borrow clothes from the neighbours, in case they discovered my secret. This danger would also exist if she went to buy me clothes. So she took my filthy uniform, washed it well, and dyed it black. She then ironed it with her big charcoal iron and when I got out of bed and put on the clothes, it was impossible to tell that they had once been a khaki uniform, or that I had been a battle soldier less than a week before.

My military service was over. But the hardships of war, the struggle to survive and come out of it, had only just begun.

4

IMPRISONMENT

WINTER IN PINSK. So strange and different from the days I had spent there as a child, playing in the snow and sliding down the hill on my schoolbag on the way to school, yelling with joy.

Poland was now partitioned between the powers that had invaded it. Half, with Warsaw at the centre and including all the zones up to the River Bug, was in the hands of the Germans. From there eastwards, the Russians were in control. With the Polish army's retreat beyond the rivers, Pinsk was left without rulers for a time, until the Soviet army entered.

My grandmother, afraid of the new conquerors, wanted to know how my Russian was, cautioned me against revealing that I had served in the Polish army, and urged me to pretend to be a native of Pinsk. The question was: How could I convince them?

I tried to do what I could in the matter. When the Polish administration left the city, the clerks who remained behind were mainly Jews.

With their assistance I organised false papers for myself. I also learned some words of Russian, with Grandmother, and the language I had spoken as a child soon returned to me, even with the correct accent.

The Jewish population of Pinsk received the rumours of the Russian advance with enthusiasm. When it became clear that the Russians really were approaching, many people turned out to welcome them. I was among them, the wound on my leg now healed and my erstwhile uniform now unrecognisable.

The unit that entered Pinsk was headed by four tanks which clattered down the street lined on both sides by the cheering, waving crowd. I observed the tank crews closely. Was I imagining it, or did they all look like Jews? As if to dispel all doubt, the commander of the first tank drunkenly shouted out in Yiddish, which I clearly heard. What did he say? He wished the Jews a good morning and announced that the Bolsheviks had arrived and there was going to be trouble!

It has already been said that truth may emerge from the mouths of drunks—or that wine flows in and secrets flow out. I knew this, but I never imagined to what extent those drunken words were to prove true. At first, in the early weeks of Soviet rule, we did not experience any of the troubles he had hinted at. But gradually the situation became complicated. In the wake of the Soviet administrators and soldiers, representatives of the Soviet secret police, the NKVD, began to move in to Pinsk, to bring "order" to the town. Equipped with false documents and posing as a native of Pinsk, I, like many others who were associated with the past regime, was in danger of being classified as an "enemy of the regime," a counter-revolutionary, liable to accusations of idleness, exploitation of the proletariat, or any other charge by the Soviet police force.

We had real cause for anxiety. The expulsions and arrests began immediately. These were carried out in darkness, as a rule, and many people were uprooted from their homes and families. The pounding of the policemen's boots could be heard virtually every night. Voices were raised, orders were flung out, to the accompaniment of pleading and weeping. The following day—yet another house would be empty. Another shop or business was closed.

My grandmother was afraid of the Russians, of the NKVD, from the very beginning. "The Greats" as she called them. She had some very uncomplimentary memories and stories about them from World War I.

At first, I thought Grandmother's fear was exaggerated, that she was making mountains out of molehills, and I never guessed how right she was and what troubles would befall us at the hands of the Bolsheviks we had received so warmly. The beginning really did not seem at all worrying. The Soviets established the currency rate at one Polish zhloty to one Russian rouble; they ordered the opening of all shops and businesses, buying goods enthusiastically, but claiming that they lacked nothing in Russia, that they had everything, even a lemon factory. . . Still, their behaviour gave no evidence of the Soviet Union's economic success, nor of any abundance.

Many Jewish refugees began to gather in Pinsk; some received Soviet citizenship and were transferred to Russia. Others considered whether or not they should return to the areas of Poland under German rule. Confusion reigned—what was the correct thing to do, how should they behave in order to get safely through the war?

Evil rumours began to circulate concerning the fate of Jews under German rule. I was very worried about my father, my grandmother and my aunt, who had remained in Warsaw, as well as my sister who was living with her son in Biala-Podlaska. It was still possible to travel between the Russian and German sectors. My brother-in-law Moshe arrived in Pinsk during this time and we made plans to cross the border—which they called the Green Line—in order to bring the rest of the family to Pinsk. I made contact with my friends in the Zionist youth movement, and we planned to leave Poland via Vilna. Vilna was still under Lithuanian rule and many Jews were being smuggled out in exchange for huge sums of money.

I heard of people who had reached Palestine by way of Japan. As for me, I had been wanting to get to Palestine for years.

When I came to Pinsk I became acquainted with Dr. Margolin, a Palestinian Jew who had come on a visit to Poland in 1939. Caught by the outbreak of war, he had lost contact with his wife and young son in Palestine. I became friendly with this slightly-built, bespectacled young intellectual. Together, we responded to a call for language teachers to work for the Bureau of National Education. We were both aware that people with jobs were more secure under Soviet rule. I had false papers, whereas he had come from Palestine, which was ruled by the British, the mutual enemy of the Russians and Germans, at the time. Therefore, it was wisest for us to get into a job and demonstrate our

"belonging" to the regime and administration. How naive we were, not sensing the trap that had been laid by the secret police and the net that was tightening around us.

We went to the office every day, sorting books according to language: Hebrew, Polish, Russian and Yiddish. We made a list of these books, which was sent to Moscow on completion. In going through the books, we found a thick volume of Holy Writings. To our great surprise we discovered as we leafed through it, that many pages had been removed from between the hard covers, to be replaced by daring pornographic pictures. This discovery, which we reported to our superiors, caused them great satisfaction, since they saw this volume as proof of their claim that religious people were hypocrites. We were praised for handing over this book to the authorities, but this did not make us more acceptable to them. Margolin, as an educated man, was suspect because he was not a member of the proletariat, but of the bourgeoisie, the class of the exploiters. They designated me to keep an eye on him in secret, precisely as they had designated him to keep an eye on me. We trusted one another, but there were many around us who were not to be trusted.

Spring arrived in full bloom this year, too, seeming even brighter despite the war, or maybe because of it. The city was thronged with anxious refugees. The situation at the front was very bad. The Germans and their allies scored victory after victory in that first year of war. The border between the Russian and German sectors of Poland was now closed and I had not managed to reach my family; all contact with them was lost. Nobody knew what each day would bring. What would happen to us here, and to them over there. The economic situation was deteriorating, everything was in short supply. My grandmother began letting rooms in her house for a living. I continued working in the Soviet office, but I had no head for my work. I would arrive in the morning, collect the books for inspection and, without reading them, I would go to the bank of the Pina River. This place held many memories for me. I rowed to the other bank in a little boat. Here, it was as I remembered it: green, grassy. Birds chirped among the bushes, and I spread out naked on the sandy shore enjoying the sun and the warmth, the blue sky above me, the silence all around. The town's houses and church spires were not visible from here, nor were the prisons recently erected by the Russians. Here, absolute silence and serenity prevailed, as though there was no war, nor people

groaning under the grinding weight of the German gestapo on the one hand, and the Russian secret police on the other.

That year, 1940, most of Europe succumbed to Germany. England was bravely withstanding the aerial bombardment. At that time, gigantic labour camps were established in the wastes of Northern Russia: Soviet Karelia, Siberia, and Murmansk.

It was hard to believe that the Russians could move tens of thousands of people to such remote places. Indeed, there were rumours about it, but it was simply unimaginable. I preferred, in those early summer days, not to probe into what was happening over there and it certainly never occurred to me that the same fate lay in store for me.

Among the boarders my grandmother took into her house were a young woman named Polnia, and her little daughter. This woman was the wife of a Polish official who had been imprisoned. With her fair hair and blue eyes, she reminded me of sweet, shapely Irena and, like her, also sought me out, ready to do anything for me. She declared her boundless love for me. Her obvious motive was her feeling that she and her daughter were safe from arrest or expulsion, living with a Jewish family. As for me, I enjoyed myself with her without a trace of conscience, satiating myself on whatever she chose to offer.

That was in June, and the city was drenched in clear, pleasant sunlight. In contrast to mankind, nature shed nothing but good on the world. Pure blue skies, the fragrance of colourful flowers, and an abundance of greenery. Ferns unfolded their fragile leaves and drooping stalks in the dimness of Polesia's forests, the swamp humidity hastened growth and deepened the green of the plants—all this while the war raged burning through Europe; while arrests and expulsions under the Russian conquest increased from day to day.

In Pinsk and its environs they started arresting those refugees who refused to accept Russian citizenship, or were listed for expulsion from the Soviet zone. Many of them were people I knew. Others were arrested as enemies of the regime under various charges, such as black marketeering, without which it was becoming hard to find food, or subsist.

At first we were not anxious about our future, Margolin and I. Like many others, we hoped that the arrests would not apply to us. We were employed in work useful to the authorities, which reassured us.

As summer approached, I frequently heard the policemen's tread, the commands in the deep of night, the pleas of arrested people, feet tramping towards the railway station and expulsion.

One night, Margolin was arrested, too. He lived in the same street as my grandmother's house. When I arrived at work on the following day, the Russian police came to my room. A young policeman with a boyish, snub-nosed face and innocent eyes politely requested me to accompany him to the offices of the secret police, to clarify some matters concerning my proposed tenure at work, as he put it. I had no reason to disbelieve him. I was still naive about their sly and deceitful methods, and I had not the slightest idea that this was their usual manner of making an arrest . . .

So I left the office, unprepared for what was to come. The nice policeman suggested that I take my coat. Maybe I would be cold, waiting in the queue for my talk with the commander. I did as he suggested and draped my light coat over my arm as I left with him, oblivious to what lay ahead of me. I did not even say goodbye to my family, and I never saw them again.

Not far from my grandmother's house, in a building that had earlier served as barracks for the Polish army, on Albrechtowska Street, the offices and prison of the Soviet secret police were housed. That is where we went. I came to the yard, where scores of others had also been brought. The pleasant young policeman vanished all of a sudden, and so did the decent attitude. I was now in the hands of the Russian investigators, the NKVD. Armed with revolvers, they were our jailers and guards. In a moment I turned from a person into a prisoner despised and degraded and devoid of rights. The transition was so sharp, it seemed that the sun had been suddenly extinguished on a clear summer day.

Shoelaces and belts were taken from us, and the key to my flat in Praga was confiscated. I realized this was a bad sign.

The guards yelled at us. They cursed us foully, as though we prisoners were not human; they cursed our "mother's cunt," which organ was mentioned in various contexts in every sentence, amid shouts and threats, as though we had lost the last shred of our dignity and they need not consider us, or watch their language in our presence. As far as they were concerned, we were like dead men, ineffectual against them. We could neither complain nor bear witness.

From the yard, we were transferred the same night to a small room without a window or any other means of ventilation. It was unbearably hot and stifling. As I entered I saw some fifteen prisoners lying crammed together on the floor. I undressed and lay beside them, mingling my stream of sweat with theirs. A dreadful stench arose in the room, and the crush was insufferable. Every so often someone would bang at the door, which would be opened, allowing some fresh air to penetrate for a few moments before it was shut again.

In this way, I spent my first night of imprisonment. I did not shut an eye. I was in shock, burning with heat, choking from lack of air and helpless rage. I went through the same difficult time the next day, until noon, when I was moved to another cell where prisoners were lying huddled on double-decker bunks. I looked around. I knew that it was a cellar in which potatoes used to be stored, when it belonged to the Polish army. It was dark in the cellar and the bunks were built crowded around the four walls.

I saw someone familiar near me: a stocky Jew who was sobbing like a baby. I remembered him. It was the chemist. Only yesterday, I had bought some medicine from him. Now he was a humiliated prisoner, like everyone imprisoned here. And we were all Jews.

I was locked in that cellar for a whole week, eating bread and soup. We were not allowed out except to go to the lavatory at the end of the corridor. I did not feel hunger, but I suffered from thirst all the time owing to the heat in the place. I hammered on the door, which was opened by a policeman. I pleaded with him, as a comrade, to get me some water, which provoked curses and shouts in the manner of: "The wolf's your comrade, not me!"—and a rain of blows and a stream of unmentionable obscenities, before he slammed the door in my face. I needed to go to the lavatory. To get out, if only for a moment. I knocked loudly, and he opened the door again. He refrained from coming inside, as though we were lepers. He permitted me to go out, but I had to return immediately, without being allowed any water to drink.

Noise, turmoil, crowding and airlessness prevailed in the cellar. My incarceration stretched on beyond bearing. After a few days, the interrogations began. Every night prisoners were taken out. They never returned. The sentry would come and collect their belongings, another prisoner would be called, and so on, one by one.

I waited very tensely. When would my turn come? I would finally discover what I was accused of, at the interrogation. I could declare my innocence. Talk to the interrogator. He must be on a higher level than these sentries, with whom it was impossible to communicate like human beings; who only knew how to yell and use filthy language.

I spent a few days in impatient anticipation of being summoned for questioning, and in wondering what had happened to those already interrogated. Had they been released? How was the interrogation conducted? There was nobody to ask. I was sprouting a beard. I was dirty. My pants slid down over my hips, because they had taken my belt. I no longer looked like a well-groomed, handsome young man. I most probably looked like a criminal. I could imagine how my face appeared from observing those around me. I had not a single personal belonging: no change of clothing, soap, comb or tooth brush. In this condition, I was summoned for interrogation one night.

The sentry led me out of the cellar to the second floor, where the offices of the secret police were situated. I walked along a whitewashed corridor. Everything was so different up here, compared to downstairs. There, prisoners were crammed into cellars like soulless objects, in darkness and suffocating stench. Their cries could not penetrate the thick walls to the outside world.

Upstairs was a different world. The lamps hanging in the corridors were shaded. A huge picture of Stalin graced the centre of the white wall. His hair and moustache were black, and he smiled in satisfaction, garnished with medals. A door was opened and I entered a clean, spacious room. There was a lamp with a green shade on the desk at which a man of about thirty was seated. Our eyes met. I saw a man in civilian clothes, clean, elegant, his revolver in front of him and, next to it, a jug of lemonade and a pack of cigarettes—luxuries hard to obtain in Pinsk at the time. In my great thirst, the jug of cold lemonade, with shiny droplets of moisture on it, seemed almost an illusion, an impossibility.

I had been in prison for less than a month, and I had already lost touch with things that were once common and everyday, such as liberty, home, fresh air, a cool drink.

The interrogator read my name and date of arrest: June 19th, 1940. I suddenly remembered that the 19th had special significance in my life. It was the day on which I had finished school, the day of my enlistment and also the day of my discharge from the army.

What else? The interrogator studied the report in front of him. He read aloud from my dossier, listing many details of my life, including the date of my birth, my first, second and last addresses, and then went on to add that he had further details concerning the fact that I was a Zionist, a fascist, and an underground activist, together with Dr. Margolin, a citizen of an enemy country.

He advised me to provide information of my own free will concerning names and details he needed to complete his files, and to admit my guilt, of course.

I denied all his accusations, at which the investigator lost his temper and began to curse me with a choice selection from the Russian lexicon of curses and, on the same linguistic level as my guards, he rained crude names on me and my parents, even including Mary the Mother of Jesus in his ranting. He threatened me that whether or not I confessed I would spend the best years of my life in a concentration camp. Then he ordered them to put me in solitary confinement.

A soldier now led me down a different corridor where a lot of people were standing with their hands raised and their faces to the wall. All I could see of them was their backs, and they were unable to see me at all. The Russians did not want their detainees to know each other. I looked to see if I could find Margolin among the people standing there, but could not. I was afraid for my slightly-built friend, who could barely see without his glasses. Where was he now? What would become of him? Of me? What were the charges against me? Trying to leave the city? Trying to save my family?

The cell they put me into was a hole in the ground with bars on top. It was about one square metre in size. You could neither stand upright nor lie full length in it. A blinding light bulb hung overhead, and it was never turned off. Within a few hours of confinement there I completely lost track of time. My watch had been taken from me long since and night and day had now become indistinguishable here.

I was given a piece of dry bread, a dish of potatoes and over-salted, watery soup that only served to intensify my thirst. There was a pail in one corner, for my needs.

I sat in this cell, huddled into the narrow space, for hour upon hour. How long? I do not know. I was then led upstairs again. After the obscenities that had characterised the previous session, the new interrogator surprised me by his courtesy. He received me with an apology

for my having been needlessly held in solitary confinement. For a moment I hoped I was about to be released. But this was not so. The interrogator, politely but firmly declared that the accusations against me were serious, clear and just. He promised to soften my sentence, and even to get my family, whose names and addresses were before him, out of the German sector. All this if I would cooperate. How? I was to give him the names of all my fellow members in the Zionist underground whose existence I so emphatically denied.

I shook my head in refusal. Naturally, I wanted to see my family again and to get them out of the sector under Nazi control, about which we were beginning to hear rumours. But how could I cooperate with the secret police against my comrades? Against Margolin and the others? On no account could I do such a thing. The interrogator now wondered, eloquently, at my ability to betray my father, my very flesh and bone, for the sake of strangers.

I was amazed at this approach, which did not seem to suit a Soviet person in the least. In those days I still had a naive belief in that regime, its motives and endeavours for humanity. I did not know the things I was yet to learn. The hard way.

Apparently despairing of persuading me through kindness, the interrogator marched over to a door near me and, as if casually, opened it wide. A terrible sight met my eyes: a dark room, in which I discerned a man bound and hanging from some kind of apparatus that looked like a washing line. A man in civilian clothes stood swinging the barely conscious "hanged man" back and forth. He kept throwing questions at him. The unfortunate man remained silent. The other then slapped his face, shouting at him to talk, or he would kill him. I heard the terrible sounds, saw blood spurt, teeth being drawn. Then my interrogator shut the door without a word. I knew what he was telling me by revealing that sight to me: this was what awaited me if I insisted on refusing to incriminate my friends.

But I was again led away without anyone raising a hand against me. Would it be so next time, too? The dreadful scene hovered in front of my eyes for many days. I could not forget it.

When I was led from the interrogation room, I was not, to my surprise, taken back to the hole. I was taken to a cell where some Polish prisoners were sitting. Most of them were teachers accused of spreading anti-Soviet propaganda in their classes. That is how they introduced themselves to me, but I was wary of them. I did not trust any of the

prisoners. I did not reveal to anyone what I was accused of. I knew there could be collaborators among them.

I was in that cell for a week, trying not to become friendly with anyone. I waited in dread to be called for more questioning. I worried about my grandmother and my Uncle Yosef, who did not know where I was nor what had happened to me, and were probably running around trying to find me. If they realized that I had been arrested, they must be trying to free me. But to get anyone out of the clutches of the secret police was impossible.

Thus the days passed, without me knowing how long I would sit here, nor what the future held for me and my relatives.

One day, when I was taken out for a walk in the yard with the other prisoners, I met Margolin. I was so shocked by his appearance that for a moment I was not sure it was he. It was almost impossible to recognise the respectable doctor in this unkept, dirty, white-haired prisoner. Prior to his arrest his hair had been slightly greying; it was now completely white. I approached him and he told me in a whisper that they were organising a detachment of prisoners to be sent to a labour camp in Russia. He was apparently going to be sent there. Therefore he made me swear that if I got out, I would go to his parents in Pinsk, tell them what had happened to him, and ask them to write to his wife in Palestine. He then slipped away. I had no further chance to talk to him. The sentries ordered us back to our cells.

I marched along with the rest of the prisoners, all of them scruffy and sprouting beards. I assumed that I looked the same as they did.

Luckily, the two years I had served in the Polish army had made me strong and healthy, and I was able to withstand the hardship and pressures of the solitary confinement and the repeated interrogations. The Soviets had a system of making one fill out identical forms, which they compared after you had completed them. I had to be careful about every detail I wrote down so that they would not find irregularities or inaccuracies. On my way to interrogation, and in the long hours of waiting for it, I worked out my answers and learned them by heart in order to cope with my questioners.

One day as I was sitting in my cell planning my answers for the next day's interrogation, I heard terrible screams. I only learned what

had happened during the daily exercise in the yard. There I encountered a group of children whose hands were all bandaged and bleeding. They told me they had been arrested and accused of distributing leaflets. They had starved them for days over here, and had then served them boiling hot soup in small bowls. The cooks had deliberately ladled the boiling soup onto the children's hands, and not into the bowls, scalding the young prisoners and causing them severe and excruciating burns. What more were these Russians capable of doing, I wondered fearfully.

I was very worried in case my family would be hurt, punished for my silence. They did not hesitate to punish whole families if one member was accused of being an enemy of the regime. My grandmother and my uncle were here in Pinsk, and another uncle, my Mother's brother, was living in Russia.

I was urged over and over again to sign my confession, and when I refused, they said sarcastically that they were not the illiterate bumpkins I thought them, and could very well sign for me.

I knew they would not hesitate to forge my signature, which was on file.

And that is what they did. I was tried for the charges they cooked up against me and was given five years' hard labour, with expulsion to Russia, where I would serve my sentence in a labour camp designed to improve my values and behaviour. That is what the Russians called it.

I spent a few more weeks in the Pinsk prison, until, one day, Dr. Margolin, some other prisoners, and myself were put onto trucks and driven through the streets of Pinsk.

5

LATITUDE 55 TO LATITUDE 65

THE TRUCK TAKING us to the railway station from the Pinsk prison passed my grandmother's house. If only I could call out to her, say goodbye. But this was not possible. Nor was it possible to inform her where I was, or where they were taking me. Just then, on the floor of the truck, I saw a scrap of cardboard blackened with coal dust—the truck must have been a coal delivery truck—and on this I scratched a few words. I asked the finder to notify my grandmother, adding her address, that her grandson was being transported to Russia. That was the most I could manage. I secretly dropped the cardboard onto the street, hoping it would be found and delivered. I knew the chances were slim.

The truck continued with its human freight until we arrived at the Pinsk railway station. From here we would be transported to Russia where I would be imprisoned for re-education for a period of five years

with hard labour, as sentenced, despite my innocence. Was there any chance of escaping? I took a look around. The station was full of men, women and children deportees who were being loaded like beasts into freight cars. I was also led to one of these cars. If only I could slip away into the crowd before the door closed on me. But I was surrounded by many guards, soldiers, officers and men of the NKVD. One of them, a young man with a grey shirt over riding breeches, a dark belt, boots, and a cap with the Red Army badge on it, looked sympathetic and I asked him:

"Where are they taking us, comrade?"

He yelled loudly at me:

"I'm no comrade of yours! We didn't go to school together! You're a damn Polish fascist!"

That's how they regarded me, imprisoned on charges of working to undermine the Soviet regime, sentenced to hard labour in a labour camp. My further attempts to find out from the Russian guards where I was being taken on this train met with the same failure.

That was in the summer of 1940. I became an unwilling passenger on one of those closed Russian trains that made their way northward day and night. For the time being, however, we were still standing in the Pinsk station. Perhaps I could bribe one of the Russian guards . . . but what did I have to bribe with? I was liable to get into even more trouble. I knew the city and its environs very well from when I had lived here as a child. If only. . .

But the door of the car was bolted from the outside. About forty people were crowded inside. These included some Polish officers' wives who were being sent to exile in Russia like myself and some other men sentenced for one thing or another.

My friend Margolin, who had been arrested at the same time as me, some weeks before, was put into another carriage that must have been just as stifling and crowded as ours. The trains belched smoke as they wound like black serpents through the forests, mountains, valleys and fields, leaving vanquished Poland for the Russian interior—the barren wastes of Siberia, Soviet Karelia, and other Godforsaken places. This uprooting of tens of thousands of people seemed inconceivable: but it was all only beginning.

In August 1939, Hitler and Stalin signed a secret agreement partitioning Poland between them. After only a few weeks, on the 1st of September, the German army invaded Poland from the west, while the Red Army invaded from the east.

Masses of refugees, including a large number of Jews, chose to leave the German-controlled zone and wandered along the blasted roads to the area held by the Soviets. The latter found it difficult to cope with the many thousands streaming in and moved them to the Russian interior. If anyone had the faintest doubt as to how it was possible to tear so many people away from their roots and exile them en masse, the Russians now proved it to be possible. They perfected a system of cold and methodical ethnic transfer. Entire families were loaded onto railway freight cars and moved north. There, at the edge of the White Sea, they built gigantic labour camps destined for enemies of the regime and anyone else Moscow decided was in need of re-education.

I was to cross paths with a number of people among these deportees. Some were destined to become my family; others, today known as "The Teheran Children," would become my charges and their counsellors. Old and young, individuals, or families such as the Drexler couple and their children Shaya and Rachel—many of these refugees were to become part of my life story although their existence was unknown to me at the time.

The Russians deported a half a million Jewish refugees to Siberia and Asiatic southern Russia. I could not imagine this, yet, as we stood for hours on end in the erstwhile cattle truck. There were about forty of us; men and women who were being deported for "re-education" because our way of life, past, customs, thoughts or activities did not please the Soviet authorities. I did not feel any particular need for this Soviet education I had heard about and sampled while in prison. But if I thought I knew what awaited me, they were preparing some most unpleasant surprises for me.

At last, after a long wait, the train began to move. There was an ear-piercing blast from the whistle, and the engine jerked the carriages forward. It was dark inside the car, the noise of the train's wheels grated and pounded in my ears. I had been expelled to a frontier zone. To a work camp. To the ends of the earth, the frozen wastes of Russia. What was my crime? Would I ever get out of there? What would befall

me? I was a healthy young man, in my mid-twenties, and I wanted to go on living. To see my family again, to go out with pretty girls who liked me. To eat well, to be happy, to sing and dance. To hope I would be going to Palestine soon; my dream of many years.

But now I was being taken in an entirely different direction. Northwards. To the arid Russian wilderness. What would happen to my family who remained under Nazi rule? What did the future conceal? How could I get out of here!?

I tried to make out where we were being taken. The NKVD soldiers who were guarding us stood silent and it was impossible to get an answer from them. The questions burned in me, but the guards opened their mouths only in order to shout and abuse anyone whose actions displeased them.

The only light came from a small barred hatch near the roof. Heat and crowding were unbearable. We travelled on for hours without any food, we were not let off the train to perform our bodily functions, and the train never halted.

A hole had been cut into the floor of the car near the door, apparently by deportees who had preceded us, for us to empty our bowels and urinate. There was no alternative, anyone needing to perform these functions had to do so in public. I preferred to hold on as long as I could, which added to my suffering on this journey without end. Meanwhile, the body made its own demands and it seemed that I, too, would have to relieve myself in front of everyone, like an animal.

Since I knew Russian I was appointed spokesman for the people in our car, and I addressed the sentry guarding us. But only after I had parted with my wristwatch, which had been returned to me prior to the expulsion, did he allow us to raise a blanket around the hole in the floor. This made it easier for all of us, mainly the women.

When my turn came, I hid behind the blanket and looked out through the hole. Perhaps I could get out that way? But the hole was too small for me to squeeze through. The speeding train would crush me as I fell, anyway, if I managed to work my way down. I saw that it was impossible. Getting off the moving train would be difficult and it would be hard to run away from the train once I was out. Maybe when it came to a standstill in a station?

No food and water. Hour after hour of travelling. There were some people who had taken provisions, when they were deported. Dragged

from prison to the train, I was not one of these. I was hungry, but I was mainly thirsty. This train would have to stop in the end, I thought, still standing, waiting expectantly, burning with thirst and heat.

Urgent voices moved me from where I was still crouching. There was a long line waiting to use our "toilet," and I returned to my corner, plagued by my thoughts of escape. The window? The wheels continued to pound in my ears. The train was galloping along an eternal track. The sun sank, night fell, I tried to lie down to sleep on the floor, but there was no room and the floor was filthy. Nevertheless, some people huddled on it, right among the bundles and feet of those who were standing. Snores arose in the darkness. I remained on my feet in the choking darkness, next to the hatch which afforded me a light breeze, badgered by my thoughts: what was liable to happen to my father in Warsaw? To my sister who had remained in Biala, also in German hands, with her small son? All my recent attempts to get them out had failed, and it was these attempts that had led to my arrest and expulsion, I was sure.

Again, I wished I had been able to say goodbye to my family. It was good that my younger brother Zwi was in Palestine. I was glad. At least one of us was free. Would I get there, one day? Would I see my family again? If I had been able to get them out of the German zone and into the Russian zone, as planned, perhaps they would also have been deported to Russia? I tried to console myself that at least this had been spared them, never imagining what dreadful future they faced. How was I to know that it would actually be many of us deportees who would survive the Holocaust?! The Soviet deportations were not planned to save Jewish lives. However, that is what transpired.

A new morning dawned, it was the second day of our ordeal. I was still at the hatch, peering out. Green summer landscapes passed in front of my eyes. I looked at the sky overhead, it was blue with occasional clumps of clouds, which took on and shed different forms. They were free to float playfully from place to place. But I was imprisoned, being forced into exile.

Trying not to think of the work farm or the future, I turned to the past, my happy childhood in the Ukrainian town of my birth, Kremjanchiuk, where I had grown up in the Laumberg family's handsome double-storied house. But quite suddenly I recalled a shocking

incident, one that was to leave a permanent stamp on me and the way I would live my life.

A pogrom broke out in my hometown in the early days of the Russian Revolution. I stood in the crowded, stifling, stinking railway car, hungry and thirsty, covered in sweat, filthy, hearing in the clatter of the train's wheels the sound of cries and shouts from that distant happening:

"The children, save the children!"

My mother's panic-stricken voice came to me, mingled with other sounds: the pounding of horses' hooves, groans, weeping, the cries of pain and alarm of Jews being beaten, against the roar or incitement and the lashing of whips and again—pleas for help.

I was about three at the time. Nahman Laumberg, my father, was on a business trip and my mother, my four-year-old sister Esther, and I were alone at home. On hearing what was happening outside, my mother dragged us into the house and bolted all the shutters. But through the slats I saw the mounted Cossacks approaching our house.

My mother's image came to me now: a Russian language teacher by profession, she was solidly built, with thick brown hair bound in two braids around her head. Her brown eyes were alert and her eyebrows arched delicately above them. She, who had always seemed so strong and sure, had fallen into a state of panic, and was helplessly running about until she suddenly made a decision. She took my sister and me by the hand and dragged us down to the lower floor of the building, there she hesitated a moment as to whether she should go down to the basement, but no! she ran out into the yard where a pit had been dug for a new lavatory. A lot of water had collected there because of the rains, but Mother did not hesitate; clutching us to her, she jumped in. She raised our two little bodies above the water, which reached to her knees, and thus we remained for what seemed an eternity.

Mother was wet and exhausted by her live burden, and she was shivering with cold, but she did not dare return home until she was sure that the riders had left the town. They had left death and destruction in their wake. Only when they were gone did she lift us out of the pit and calm us down, her two frightened children, changing our clothes, feeding us and putting us to bed. Then she took off her own wet clothes and soaked shoes. But she had caught a chill. She became ill, at first with pneumonia, and then with complications leading to tuberculosis. She never properly regained her strength.

She gave birth to my brother Zwi five years after that pogrom. But her health had been so undermined that she remained bedridden after the birth, in declining health for a decade until she died. I remembered her with pain and longing, recalled how it had felt when she stayed beside my bed after the pogrom, assuring me that it was all over. Nothing to fear, she was beside me . . .

I was not a child any more . . . a grown man . . . there was nobody to help me. I had to help myself. Escape! Thoughts of escape never left me, they pecked away at my brain. It was night again, the train at last began to slow down and came to a halt after two full days of travel. The bolts on the doors were noisily withdrawn. The door opened and a gust of fresh air blew in.

I met the searching look of one of the sentries, and immediately, as the appointed spokesman, volunteered to bring food and water. He handed me a bucket and a container and told me to get out. I did as he said without further hesitation, getting down with the utensils in my hands, inhaling deeply after the stench and stuffiness in the car. Perhaps I could escape now? Where were we? I looked around in the weak light of the station lamp. Perhaps I would not arouse suspicion if I went about like this, without any bundles. I could put down the bucket and container I was holding and escape under cover of the darkness. But hunger won out. A big drum was steaming on a log fire, and I went to join the line of people waiting beside it to get some of the hot food.

I saw a prison train on the tracks, recognizable by the machine guns and searchlights on the roofs of the carriages. In the glare of the searchlights, which lit up the night, I could discern the people in the carriages. They were shaven-headed, bearded, pale-faced. My glance met a pair of sunken eyes, and I was scared. This would be my fate if I tried to escape and was caught. If so, there was no point in escaping, I decided. It was too dangerous. Meanwhile, the line stretched on and my stomach ached with hunger.

At long last, the cook poured the boiling soup into my bucket and I was given a piece of under-baked bread. I filled the water container and returned to the train. They all fell upon the food at once: fish soup and bread. The hot meal made me feel better for a while. It was the only food to have passed my lips for over two days. But it was over-salted and did not satisfy, causing the thirst to intensify because of the salt. The water I had brought had run out long since and not a drop

remained to assuage my dreadful thirst. My requests to be allowed to re-fill the water container were not answered. The engine sounded its whistle, making me shudder. The doors were closed again. But the train did not budge.

The train stood there for hours in that station, where there was water, but we were unable to get to it. The thirsty prisoners pushed utensils and bottles through openings in the carriages, begging passersby to fill them with what had become a precious commodity. But the sentries prevented anyone from approaching. Only one child managed to slip by. He took the empty utensil from my hand, and his fee of a few roubles, which we had collected in the carriage. He promised to bring water to us and to the owner of a big kettle who paid him separately. The boy never returned. We waited for him in vain until the train pulled out of the station. The owner of the kettle, a big-bodied man, shed tears, cursing the deceitful boy, his lost kettle, and the whole treacherous world that was treating us so harshly. He was attacked by stomach pains and convulsions, and vomited in the crowded car, adding to the filth and stench.

If I had had a sharp tool, I might have been able to cut through the bars on the hatchway. I tried to bend them, without success. Others in the car had been busy from the start, boring holes and making cracks in the walls of the train, to allow air to penetrate. But to break a hole the size of a man was impossible. I knew we were locked and bolted in without hope of escape.

Again the journey stretched out for days and nights. And again the train stopped on a side track where it stayed for hours. We knew neither where we were, nor why we had halted. We had to use bribery and repeated requests in order to be allowed down to get some boiling water from the engine's tap. I had nothing to give the sentries. The journey was suddenly resumed and as suddenly stopped to replace the engine, a procedure that shook all the carriages, wildly clashing them together. We were being transported on a freight train and were being treated accordingly, like sacks of potatoes, goods of minimal value, or beasts.

As a rule, the train did not halt in major centres, but on out of the way side-tracks, and always in deserted areas. We were only beginning to see the extent of the deportations, now. Thousands of men, women,

and children crouched in a field to relieve themselves, miserable and stunned.

And this long, hard road went endlessly on. We had been on the move for a week already, and still we had not arrived. I came across more and more deportees en route, most on their way northwards, like us, in the closed trains.

The Russians were solving two troublesome problems by the deportations: one was getting rid of the many refugees populating the area of Poland controlled by Russia; the other was the conquest of their wastelands, by means of the hundreds of thousands of people being sent there to work. From what I heard from other deportees, there were extremely tough times ahead of me. Despite this, I tried to keep my spirits up. I was young and strong. But what about the women and children? And the weaker men, my friend Margolin among them? I found it hard to comprehend and accept what was being done to us. The thought of escape was still with me. However, I understood, as we travelled on and on, that I would never escape from the train. The surroundings became more and more thinly populated as we moved northwards. The forests multiplied and became denser. The water rationing was severe. Thirst tormented us. We were passing through primeval landscapes, at which I gazed, through my little hatchway. The others inside the car would ask me what I could see, and where we were. I now began to see slant-eyed people, and realized we had come a long way.

The irritating, monotonous clacking of the wheels, the blast of the whistle that split the air like a scream of pain and terror, accompanied us, still forging northwards, on and on, for a week, and still we had not reached our unknown destination. We learned from deportees we met at one of the stopovers, that we were in the Republic of Karelia where, as I was informed by a round-faced fellow with prominent cheekbones, there were many forced labour camps here and that the bulk of the population was made up of prisoners.

Ten days of travel, and the wheels at last stopped pounding as we came to a halt at Miedvyejayagara station, where we were ordered out of the carriages. Blazing sunlight struck our eyes, after the days in the dimness of the carriage. The sentries ordered us to kneel to facilitate their watch over us, a method which greatly increased our humiliation.

We were taken to a deportees' selection camp. Here I met my friend Dr. Margolin. There were some one thousand men and I was appointed their spokesman, because of my command of Russian. We were issued prison garb: shirt, padded trousers, tire-soled shoes, and a personal sack for our belongings. We were made to stand in rows in front of the regional commander, who regarded the rows of men with a penetrating gaze. Going by his personal impressions, he separated them into groups according to the various jobs they would do.

He decided I was suited for woodcuttting. This was one of the hardest jobs. How did he decide that Margolin was also suited for it? I found it hard to understand. But it was obviously impossible to question the decree of the all-powerful commander, who felt that he was God Almighty in his position, toying with the destinies of the thousands of people who passed through the selection camp, at which we stayed for a few days.

Conditions were not as bad as I had thought they would be. We could wash ourselves, water was in unlimited supply. This was an encouraging improvement after the days in the Pinsk prison, and the ten day journey in the train. I hoped that the stories I had heard were exaggerated, after all. However, I was not given much time to entertain my illusions.

One morning we were given the order to prepare for our transfer to the Kwadrat 48 labour camp, where we were being sent to work at woodcutting. I tied my personal sack. Margolin had trouble closing his and I helped him. I had a lot of scouting experience from my days in the youth movement, and I instructed him how to close the sack with the aid of a stone, which stopped the cord from slipping.

It was night by the time those selected for woodcutting were loaded on the big raft that was to take us to the other side of Lake Onyega, one of the biggest lakes in the Soviet Union. The raft set sail on what seemed to be an endless surface of water. People of many nationalities and religions crowded together, united by dread of what awaited us on the opposite shore.

After the last few days, during which I had begun to feel that I was again a member of the human race, the humiliations were resumed. The journey by raft lasted for several hours and the sentry in charge was a little man suddenly invested with power. He organized a queue for defecation and urination:

"Two to piss!" he yelled. "And now, three to shit!"

The waiting men were thus sorted out. He allowed only a few prisoners to approach the spot, every now and then. It was a strange ceremony which he conducted with much importance and absolute seriousness. Were it not for my depression, I would have burst out laughing.

It was nightmarish. Inconceivable. Too absurd to be true. I, a young man whose consuming wish was to emigrate to Palestine, a person who always tried to do what was honest and correct, had been transported to the ends of the earth in order to be re-educated. Found guilty of a crime I had not committed. Deprived of my liberty. Human rights cancelled and dignity lost, trampled. Palestine was receding from me. I knew this was only the beginning, and my heart was very heavy.

As though to reinforce the feeling that this was a nightmare, a bad dream, suddenly, amid the sighs and laments of the prisoners and the commands to organize the lavatory parade, the sound of singing suddenly broke out. The singer was Rij, a young man with a tortured face, who was deeply in love and had left his beloved far away. Who knew when he would see her again. He sang sweetly and tearfully in Yiddish. The emotional words spread and echoed over the vast body of water, in the white northern night. A night that was illuminated with a golden light that never went out all day and night, a light that was in sharp contrast to my feelings. One of the things I have never forgotten is that song, which I present here in loose translation:

Love's what I feel for you—my heart full of joy,
And yet I have the feeling—we will live apart.
I'm always afraid—my heart full of pain —
that when I awaken—you'll be gone.
Remember well these three words:
Don't forget me!—wherever you may be.
If you forget—you'll take my soul away
wherever you may be—don't forget me!

The young man sang from yearning, and I saw tears in the eyes of some of the men near me. The simple folksong touched many there; however different, they shared those feelings. They sighed, their tears welled, and the young man continued to sing as though hoping that his love-cry and his longing would cross the vastness of the continent and find his beloved.

The crossing took all of that white, luminous night. I heard what we could expect when we reached the other shore, from the Soviet officer, whom I had engaged in conversation. And what I heard was bitter indeed.

Conditions on the raft were difficult and there was hardly any food or drink. We were assailed by anxiety about the future, which was being revealed as much worse than we had feared.

This was my state of mind when I began my labours as a woodcutter.

Autumn had come to the far north and the nights were already very cold. In the mornings we were led over the frozen swamps in the forest, before I had warmed up from the frosty night in the hut that let in the cold through every crack and opening.

We had now reached the woodcutting site in the forest. We began our hard labour. I had to leave my memories of childhood behind, and return to the hard present and the dread of the winter that lay ahead of me in all its cruelty.

6

DOCTOR'S ASSISTANT

WHAT I NOW had to do was to concentrate exclusively on work, to muster all my powers of mind and body to meet the quota imposed on us, and to exceed it, if possible. This was in order to obtain the voucher, actually a used railway ticket bearing the camp's rubber stamp, which was as valuable as gold. It enabled us to receive more food, or to obtain a new pair of shoes. My shoes were torn and I also needed some warm clothing for winter. The padded garment issued to me on arrival was absolutely ragged. Lice that I had been unable to get rid of swarmed in the rents in the cloth.

Sometimes on our return from the forest in the evening, we were allowed to take our turn in the showers and to disinfect our clothing. But the disinfection never managed to destroy the plague of lice, bugs and fleas which tormented us. While we were in the hot shower that only slightly thawed our frozen limbs, our clothes were taken for disinfection. I would rub my body thoroughly with some laundry soap I had received, doing as much as possible to cleanse myself of the

accumulated dirt from the sweat, crowding and rotten hygienic conditions.

On one occasion I wanted to prolong the warming, cleansing shower and stayed a few minutes longer, only to find, when I came out, that my clothes had vanished. Luckily, the ones that had been left instead of mine were a few sizes too big for me and it was easier to make do with them, than if they had been too small. I put on the trousers and tied them with a rope around my waist.

The rains began to pelt down. Summer had ended and autumn had arrived, turning everything into a muddy bog. Thunder roared and rolled with a terrifying, explosive sound. Lightning split the sky like a fiery brand. The wind screeched and wailed and at times a heavy fog would descend, making it very difficult to walk to and from work through the frozen, slippery mud.

However, all this was nothing compared to the northern winter which struck with all its formidable strength. The sun does not shine. It is one long night during which the temperature can drop to minus sixty degrees centigrade! Water freezes in the pipes. Packed ice causes people to slip and fall. Diseases of the skin, the stomach, the intestines, the eyes, the teeth, and pneumonia—virtually no part of the body was safe from damage by the cold.

If prison conditions were hard before, now, in the winter, they became intolerable. We went to work in the forest in temperatures of thirty degrees below zero. We had to jump around the tree we were going to fell, to tamp down the soft snow to prevent ourselves from slipping or sinking. Then we would have to saw or chop the trunk until it fell. Afterwards, we stripped the leaves and branches and piled them up. All this with frozen hands, in cold that pinched and whipped our faces, while the forest was in the grip of a snowstorm.

It was hard to believe that we would ever get out of there alive, healthy and sane, in view of the conditions under which we lived and worked. The meagre food led to vitamin and protein deficiencies, which weakened the body and caused the prisoners to fall ill with various diseases of body and mind. Some died. Others went crazy. Some cracked and became zombies, "dachadyaga," as they called prisoners who retreated into a state of indifference and withdrawal from their surroundings. Others suffered from a sickness known as "hen

blindness," a form of night blindness which was apparently caused by lack of vitamins. The prisoners stricken by this condition suffered greatly in the long dark winter nights, wandering around like blind men. Even husky fellows suffering from the sickness, who could work well in daylight and who received various perks and extra food, required help to guard their food and get around on the camp pathways, which they were unable to see.

The guards wore hefty sheepskin coats and warm hats, while we froze. Even the dogs, kept in a special hut, barked more in these nights of cold. The prisoners, having no fur of any kind for covering, were thus in a state of extreme hardship.

We went through a fierce winter in this white hell they called the Re-education Camp. The snow piled up in the forest. On days when it was impossible to leave the camp we huddled shivering in the hut, binding our legs, which were prone to freezing, with every scrap of cloth we could lay our hands on. Frost collected on the windowpanes, creating strange shapes. Looking at them I remembered how I loved to look at these scenes as a child, sitting in a heated house, content with my lot, observing enchanted worlds in the making. I found it hard to detect the magic now. The scenes on the hut's windowpanes looked nightmarish to me.

I was hungry and crawling with lice. However much I hunted and killed them, they continued to swarm in my hair and clothes. I lay freezing, surrounded by the heavy stench that issued from the lavatory buckets in the stifling hut. I sank into my nightmares until the roar of the malicious fellow in charge of the hut cut into my musings. He ordered me to go with Rij and fetch hot water for the others in the hut. Each descent from the upper bunk was a nuisance to those lying below and also held some danger of tripping or slipping on the infirm planks, so I climbed down very carefully, and went outside.

A snowstorm was in full force, icy flakes were flung at me, blasts of cold beat against my exposed face. The others who had turned out, like me, in the queue for the "kipyatok" shoved and quarrelled with each other. The long wait in the cold caused tension and irritation that led to fist fights, pushing and cursing. I held one handle of the pot and Rij held the other. When we had filled it, and while we were still able to stay on our feet, we took the steaming, boiling hot pot back to the mould-stinking airlessness of the hut.

I climbed back into my upper bunk. Here I was safer from being pushed, and out of reach of the cold wind that entered every time the door was opened. There was a hatch next to me through which I could watch the storm raging outside. It lasted all night. The wind whistled, trying to break its way into the hut, stealing in through every crack.

The weather improved only around morning. The temperature "rose" to twenty five degrees below zero. These were the conditions under which I was sent out to work. Margolin was also sent out to the forest. He was called by his title, Doctor, in the camp. The title was all he had left, now: neither dignity, nor freedom, nor strength remained to him. The educated younger men took pains to protect him. It was ridiculous to see one broken shadow of a man in ragged clothes, walking unsteadily, addressing his friend, as ragged and miserable as himself, by the title "Mr. Engineer," to be answered with "Dear Doctor." Titles were probably the only thing they could not take from a prisoner. We had even lost our desire for women, in that place.

Nevertheless, Rij spent all his time thinking about his distant love and wondering if she was still faithful to him. He wrote whenever possible and yearned for her sparse replies. I was happy to be spared this kind of pain, at least. I had not yet found my love. I could not know that the one meant for me had also been deported to the snowy wastes of Siberia and was undergoing the same suffering as I was, in a labour camp.

After the indescribable ferocity of the winter, our lot was not improved much when the thaw came. The snow turned into muddy slush as far as the eye could see, and we floundered in it on our way to work. The shoes I had received a few months earlier were of inferior quality and the rubber soles were now torn, forcing me to tie them with rope, a fact which made walking even more arduous and gave no protection against the wet. We dared not slacken our pace for fear of the dogs. There was a danger of sinking in the swamp, and I was careful to avoid this by stepping only on the fallen logs that were scattered over the forest floor. Margolin staggered after me, following my example, mumbling that I, with my physical strength and strong willpower, would get out alive, while he had not the slightest chance. He made me swear repeatedly that I would tell his family and others about the labour camp; reveal to the world what human beings were doing to other human beings, bringing such suffering to them, depriving them of their humanity; starving them and working them to death,

reducing them to nothing, and all because they held different opinions or religious beliefs. It is indeed hard to conceive of such things, but it was all happening, right there, and it was not punishment from heaven, but man's evil against his own kind.

I could not understand how the enlightened world could remain silent. Were they really unaware of what was going on in the labour camps!? I had to get out and raise the alarm on behalf of the prisoners rotting by the thousands in the Siberian wastes. Prisoners of all kinds, of totally different backgrounds. I was shocked to meet Jews, who had left Palestine in the early 'twenties, convinced that they had found a home and peace in Soviet Birobidjan. But during the period of the great purges in the 'thirties, they were also arrested as "enemies of the regime" and sentenced to twenty years hard labour in a concentration camp. My five years seemed like nothing by comparison. But I was not prepared to take any more suffering—including the hunger, and the hard work for which we were awakened while the moon was still in the sky. The inhabitants of the hut would drag from the bunks those who could not get up fast enough, shoving them to their feet, for fear of collective punishment. The latter was common in the camp, together with bribery, informing, deceit, theft and other methods dictated by the drive to survive.

"Re-education" was bringing people down to the lowest depths. Even decent people with a sense of right and wrong found it hard at times to resist the temptation to sin under the prevailing conditions. The word education had become a mockery.

In addition, anyone used to a warmer climate was transferred to the frozen north, while those from the north were sent to the hot zones. Everything was contrived to turn the prisoner into a vile animal. To humiliate and oppress him. As time passed it became more difficult to hold out. The body weakened. Endurance began to give way. Belief in the future diminished. Life became more than a human being could bear.

I did my utmost not to lose my humanity. But if it was hard for me, in my youth and strength, it was infinitely worse for the old, sick and weak. With the daily morning exit from the camp on the way to work, the duty officer would inspect those going out, and the doctor would occasionally turn up to check if anyone was unable to go out on the job. Indeed, people did go out in spite of illness or weakness so that they could receive the food ration the workers received at the end of

the workday. Both the officer and the doctor were not over-observant, and I do not remember many being taken out of the line for reasons of health.

The camp had to supply a fixed quota of cut trees. The work officer was responsible for this. We learned ways and means of faking the quantity we completed, thus earning various perks. We did so without any moral pangs about decieving the officers, and sometimes did so with their compliance. One way was to remove the stamp from trees already cut, thereby enabling us to count it several times over as a newly felled tree on consecutive days. There were many such logs lying about, and until the carts came to transport them to the river, they served us well for our increased quota. The overseer, also a prisoner, saw this as an "adequate supply," which brought him his share of perks, too.

I, on the other hand, went further. I did whatever I possibly could to assist the weak and sick prisoners as their spokesman. I tried to get one of them, a man who was incapable of cutting wood, a desirable job allocating bread. This allocation was made to prisoners who had exceeded the quota and the distributor was allowed to take his own additional share. I tried to get this extra allocation for the sick and weak who were not entitled to a food ration. I wanted to encourage mutual help and consideration. But there was not much I could do. We were all hungry, ragged, freezing humanoids. Swarming with lice, inadequately clothed. Many were serving life or long-term sentences. My fate was better than most, but I counted the endless days until my release.

Toothache added to my suffering, but it saved me in the end by giving me the first ideas for a change in my situation. The bad nutrition and low standards of hygiene caused a lot of tooth decay among the prisoners, including myself. One day, my pain was so intense that I was sent to the clinic. It was equipped with a dentists' chair that had seen better days, an antiquated drill operated by a foot pedal, and other worn-out old instruments. An elderly, stout dentist attended to me. I learned, as she worked on my teeth, that she had ended up as camp dentist after her husband was sentenced to life imprisonment: like the families of many prisoners in Russia, she had joined her husband in exile. She told me about her origins and background and as she worked it slowly became clear that she had been at school with my mother. We were both very excited to discover this, but could not continue our

conversation then. There was a long, impatient line of people awaiting treatment. The dentist furnished me with a note fixing an appointment for further treatment on the following day. As I left she gave me a valuable gift—an onion. Onions were thought to strengthen the gums, an opinion shared by dentists. Aware of the value of the gift, I thanked her with feeling. Later that evening, she added another onion and a little fat, a real treasure under our conditions in the camp.

Meeting the dentist gave me the idea of trying for a transfer to the clinic as her assistant. But despite her good will, my new friend was not able to help me. Even though she herself was not a prisoner, she was considered to be an inferior citizen, without equal rights, just because her husband was imprisoned. As for me, I was regarded as a superb woodcutter whose labour should be exploited to the utmost.

I continued doing hard labour, dreading the coming winter in case I would not be able to go on. My strength was running out. Constantly hovering over the camp was the threat that anyone dropping out of work would be executed. I did not know if this was indeed so, but I wanted to live, and to do so I had to carry on cutting wood. It was the only way to survive; to withstand the weather changes, hard labour, malnutrition, living conditions, imprisonment.

Only one year had passed since my arrival. It was summer again, but winter would return. I had another four winters ahead of me. I shuddered at the memory of the snowstorms and terrible cold I had still to live through.

One day the district doctor came to the camp in search of helpers for his clinic, which was in another camp. My desire to leave the woodcutting was so powerful that I decided to take a risk.

I knew the extent of the danger, should I be caught posing. But what was there to lose? Kwadrat 48 was one of the hardest camps. At worst, if I was caught, I would remain here. On the other hand—they might add years to my term of imprisonment!

Would they sentence me to death? I had no answer. But to endure another winter in camp was beyond me!

It was a summer evening. We had returned from our work in the forest and they assembled us to announce that all nurses, medical orderlies, or medics were to step forward on command. A few prisoners did so, myself among them, heart pounding.

I declared that I had been an orderly in the Polish army. I tried to sound calm and self-confident. To my surprise the whole matter was simpler than I had thought. I was immediately listed as a "medical worker," one of the plum jobs in the camps. I returned to the hut full of trepidation. I climbed into my bunk, wondering what would follow the daring step I had taken: improved conditions, or the opposite?

That night I was summoned to district headquarters. Was this a tactic to trip me up as a liar, so that they could double my prison term? I reached the headquarters full of fears. Here I had to confirm that I was an orderly, and then they photographed me. What for? I wondered.

I returned to my hut tense and excited, and had trouble falling asleep that night. I tossed from side to side on my hard bed, possessed by very disturbing thoughts and feelings.

We were again woken up earlier than usual by the hut-commander. This was a trick of his to upset the weary prisoners. He himself, because he was crippled, did not have to go out to cut wood, but he enjoyed the distress of the sleepy, exhausted men who had to get up immediately on hearing the sound of his stick banging against a tin.

I went to work hoping that it would relieve my tension concerning my future. But it did not. I was to remain in a state of nerves for several days. The Soviets were sly and devious. I knew them well, by now. I was deeply disappointed in the Russian regime; in Stalin, who was called "The Sun of Nations," but had darkened the sun forever for so many thousands of people, destroying families, bringing death and madness. I had seen the truth about the ideas I had held when I was a member of Hashomer Hatzair, and had continued to hold until only two years ago.

However, this time my suspicion and mistrust proved unfounded.

That week, in the camp newspaper, there was a photograph of me with the caption: "David Laumberg, a prisoner who chose a socially beneficial profession. When he gets his release he will be a decent citizen."

Success. I could hardly believe my good fortune. I had lied and won their praise, on top of it all. From now on I was a useful person, not a "parasite" anymore, no longer an "enemy of the people" I knew they would never let me out of Karelia, but at least I would live in a more comfortable camp, under more human conditions.

"Re-education" had succeeded as far I was concerned, for the time being. I was transferred to another camp, which had a big clinic, and I was appointed as Doctor Burov's assistant. In place of my ill-fitting rags, I was given new shoes and clothes and a white tunic. I was now a member of a medical team. But would I function as such? I knew I had to be very cautious.

I confessed to the doctor that although I was indeed an orderly, I had more practical than theoretical knowledge. I asked him to let me have a medical book, ostensibly to refresh my knowledge. I do not know if he suspected me, or not, but he let me have a volume called Introduction to Medical Science, which I read and studied in every free moment. I was given additional material as well as help from a Jewish doctor at the clinic—Dr. Herman. Among the doctors were some long-term prisoners and others who were in the area because, like the dentist, members of their families had been deported. The latter was true of most of the women doctors.

Even on their release the prisoners were not permitted to leave Karelia. Would this happen to me, also? Would I be released after five years, but forced to stay in this damned country, and for how long?

I longed to be free, away from here, but both the war and my imprisonment were dragging on. Only a year and a half had passed since my arrest and I still had to endure another four years, long months, many days, and endless hours in which I burned with impatience. Conditions here were indeed far better, but I remained a prisoner, robbed of my liberty, living in fear that the truth would be discovered, and then . . .

The equipment was meagre and old-fashioned: a few iron cots with thin, mouldy mattresses covered by tattered army blankets. Medicines were administered very sparingly and there was an extreme shortage of pads, cottonwool and bandages. Therefore, these were washed and re-used after a patient's recovery or death.

One day, the thing I had dreaded since my arrival at the clinic almost happened. An autopsy was performed on one of the prisoners, to discover the cause of death. When the operation was over, the doctor told me to replace the organs in the corpse and sew up the incisions. I should, as an orderly, have been familiar with the procedure. But, of course, I did not know the first thing about it. I was confused and

frightened—my ruse was about to be discovered! None of the books I had read had prepared me for this kind of practical work. I had fallen into the pit dug with my own hands. But luck was on my side again, just as it had been a few times in the past.

One of the doctors with whom I had become friendly saw my distress. She must have guessed what it was about, and offered to take over from me. I cannot begin to describe my gratitude. Even in this hell, there was room for human feeling, friendship, mutual help. Even love. Every time I came upon such phenomena, I would be encouraged and heartened in my belief in humanity.

I was not able to practice medicine, then, but I decided to study to be a doctor when I was released. To my sorrow, I have never fulfilled this goal.

Meanwhile, I tried in other ways to help the prisoners who came to the clinic. If not physically, at least mentally, or spiritually.

Winter. Extreme cold. I shuddered to recall what was going on at the woodcutters camp, where Margolin, Rij, Andrei and others I knew had remained. Prisoners from that camp and others like it arrived at the clinic, some mortally ill, some broken in spirit, beyond feeling, only wanting death. Some came with frozen limbs, dysentery, exhaustion, heart disease, pneumonia, rheumatism, and other ailments.

The food in the new camp was no better than in the last, but at least there was unlimited hot water to drink—which was very important under the circumstances.

I tried to encourage and comfort the patients; it was hard for a person to hold out on his own in this hell of human making. Every bit of mutual help was of utmost importance. I knew this and did my best, though it was not always appreciated.

I possessed a pocketknife—a priceless accessory. One day, I used it to cut open a bundle of laundered bandages to dress the wound of one of the patients, afterwards putting the knife back in my pocket. As I was bandaging his foot, I felt his hand in my pocket. I realized right away that he was trying to steal the knife and, without a word, I jerked the bandage too tight and he, taking the hint, withdrew his hand.

The patient had been wounded in a fight over some precious scrap paper that they used for rolling cigarettes. I was happy that we had been taught to condemn smoking in the youth movement. I saw the

control tobacco hunger exercised over people in the camp. Cigarette addicts would do anything to satisfy their craving; plotting, stealing, hitting. Perhaps I became fascinated by this addiction through witnessing its effects during my imprisonment, and that is why I became a smoker later in life. Though I was not "re-educated," I did learn things I would not have encountered elsewhere, and these influenced my future outlook and way of life.

I kept thinking of a fellow I had met in Pinsk, a member of Hashomer Hatzair's executive committee. He was from Vilna and had emigrated to Palestine, but he was deported to Poland for being a communist and spreading communist dogma. All this happened before the war, of course. Looking back, I was really amazed at his devotion to communism. I had grown up by much more than one year since my imprisonment. I was no longer the innocent I had been prior to my exile, having learned a lot, though not the kind of thing my jailers intended me to learn, here among the thousands accused of being bourgeois, and of other "sins" which, according to the Soviet regime, demanded that they be exiled to the remote north of the Soviet Union.

Another hard winter. Long, dark days, snowstorms, cold that dropped scores of degrees below zero centigrade. Conditions beyond what human beings could stand, particularly in the Russian concentration camps. It was now some months that I had been working in the clinic, still afraid of discovery and return to the old camp, with the possibility of having my sentence doubled or even trebled.

However, this seemingly endless winter also came to an end at last, bringing spring and the thaw, and then summer. At about that time, a Russian education-officer arrived and assembled us to listen to a loud and arrogant talk delivered by himself. Calling us offensive names—fascists, enemies of the regime, white Poles—and aiming unimaginable curses at us, he spat out that although we were slime, parasites, and such, the Russian government was treating us more decently than we deserved. He told us to remove our hats while he was speaking to us and gave us another of his crude "blessings." His whole style was very remote from the culture and philosophy he supposedly represented. This aroused our further speculation as to the nature of the "education" we were here to receive.

The lecturer had brought some old newspapers for the staff to roll some cigarettes with "mahorka" tobacco. The prisoners were not given

even torn old newspapers like these. I recalled the shop in the previous camp. There was never anything to be bought. A joke circulating in the camp said that there was a staff of two in the shop, one to organize the queue and another to announce that everything had run out. The situation here was not much better.

Things went on like this for me until the morning of the 22nd of June, 1941. A date I will never forget. It was not long after the inspiring talk by the Russian officer. I was lying down in the clinic, when one of the prisoner-doctors burst in, shouting at me to turn on the radio because they were making an important announcement.

The Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Molotov, was announcing that the German fascists had crossed into Soviet territory and their planes were bombing Kiev and other cities. The radio announcement concluded with the call: "Death to Fascists!," and patriotic songs.

Excitement gripped us. We wondered what was happening and how it would affect our fate. Some prisoner-doctors sent telegrams to the Red Army Command, asking to be included in the war effort, to be sent to the front. But they were turned down. In the eyes of the government they were still "enemies of the regime," not fighters. Guard on the concentration camps was reinforced.

What would the turn of events bring for us? Would we be released before time? I hoped so, as did all the others in my situation. We were Polish citizens, not Russians, perhaps that was hopeful . . .

Twenty-two months after the agreement between Russia and Germany, their pact had ended with Germany's sudden attack against Russia, bringing heavy losses to the Red Army, retreat, and the heavy bombardment of Russian cities. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Agreement had collapsed in the roar of planes, tanks and cannon, after half of Poland had been conquered by Germany.

Following the invasion of Russia, a new agreement was signed—this time between the Russians and the Allied forces who were fighting the Axis, as Germany and its allies were called. One of the conditions of the pact was that all Polish citizens should be released from Russian detention. The Polish Government in Exile was promised that all Polish citizens would be allowed to leave the Soviet Union, to enable the soldiers among them to join the Polish Army in Exile, which would fight side by side with the Allied Forces against the common German foe.

The boorish education-officer arrived again. However, this time his tone was a lot more cultured, completely different. He addressed us as his Dear Brothers, Slavs, declaring that for generations a blood alliance had existed between Russians and Poles, and now they would join forces to repel the damned invaders, may their name be blotted from memory. He now cursed the Germans, the erstwhile ally, with the same crude curses that had been directed at us, shortly before. He spoke enthusiastically, recalling the blood-bond between all Slavs, including us Poles.

Was I to be released, soon?! Maybe Jews would not be included in the agreement? That is what I feared, at first, and not for nothing. I learned later that the Poles were not too pleased about the idea of releasing Jewish citizens, in the beginning. But in the end we were also freed. What a great day! I would not have to go through another winter in the white hell. I was extremely happy and excited, but my joy was mixed with sadness because Margolin was not going to be released. He had lost his Polish citizenship when he emigrated to Palestine, and the agreement did not apply to him. I knew it was now my duty to reach his family, to tell his wife, son and all the others what the Russians were doing to prisoners in their camps.

I had been lucky again. I was one of the happy liberated ones. I believed my suffering was over and that I would soon reach Palestine. I never imagined what I had yet to undergo before I would finally fulfill my dream.

7

LIBERATION

I WAS TRANSFERRED from the camp to Solikamsk with the rest of the prisoners who held Polish citizenship. We were taken to command headquarters and told to indicate, on a map of Russia spread before us, where we wished to go after our release.

Where should I go? I was very excited as I contemplated the possibilities. The Russians did not allow released prisoners to go wherever they wanted in the Soviet Union. We were not permitted to go to Moscow or other big cities. Our freedom of movement was limited to certain undeveloped areas.

After all I had gone through, my desire was to go where I could meet free Jews. I hoped someone would be able to tell me what had befallen my family. I wanted to meet members of the youth movement and, of course, to leave this frozen place for a warmer climate before winter arrived.

I looked at the map in front of me and my eye fell on the name: Gorod-Mari. For some reason, it sounded like a warm, happy place to me. Another advantage was its location on the border—which I intended to cross as soon as I could, to get out of this country I now hated so much. I wanted to get away from everything that had happened to me, particularly from "The Sun of the Nations" and his tyranical rule, and every bitter memory I had.

The clerk wrote my particulars on the certificate of release she had ready in front of her. She was trying to hint something to me, but I did not catch what she meant. I was dizzy with my approaching freedom, delighted with certificate no. 699-60, which was issued to me. I examined it unbelievingly: it was written there in black and white that by order of the Supreme Soviet, citizen David Laumberg had been released, as a Polish citizen.

I was issued a half-loaf of bread, a salted herring and a small knife and fork. All of this seemed trivial, the main thing was that I was a free man, at liberty to move on, away from the fences with the watchtowers and armed sentries, away from the vicious dogs, the approaching winter, the hunger, humiliation, lice, my masquerade as an orderly and the fear of discovery—in short, everything that had been my lot for almost two years.

In the company of another freed Polish citizen, Dr. Herman, I took the train for the town that had sounded so tempting and full of promise when I saw it on the map. I was sure this was the best place for me.

I presented my certificate of release at the check point, but decided not to hand it over, as instructed. I knew I was taking a risk, but I had sworn that if I came out alive I would tell what had been done to me and what was still being done to others. Therefore, the certificate was important written evidence. I have that rare document to this day. When I look at it, the distant, bitter memories of that black period in my life come back to me.

I was travelling by train as an ordinary passenger, not a prisoner. It was a very different journey from the one that had brought me to Russia two years earlier!

However, when we reached our destination, Dr. Herman and I found ourselves in a desolate spot, where the Kazakhstani inhabitants spoke no Russian. They were slant-eyed and looked very foreign to us in their billowing trousers and caps.

Disappointed, we went into a little inn where we encountered two young women who were speaking Russian. Naturally, we immediately fell into conversation. It turned out that they were Russian students doing their year of national service in the area.

They lived in the town.

I had not been with a woman since my arrest. The two girls were very attractive, especially one of them, whose name was Sofia. Apparently she liked me too, since she invited me to her flat, welcomed me warmly, made supper for me and was most hospitable—in every way. That very night she announced that she liked me very much and suggested I live with her.

In response to my surprise that so lovely a girl had no boyfriend, she said with some asperity that in fact she did have someone who was persistently courting her, one of the local secret police, but she preferred me.

Her innocent reply sounded the alarm for me. I had had enough of the Russian secret police. I now wanted to get as far away from them as possible. This was all I needed—to get involved with them again because of a policeman's jealousy over a girl.

I stayed in her flat that night, having a pleasant time. But the next day, after Sofia had left for work, having put breakfast on the table for me, I knew I had to get out. I needed rest, good food and the company of a pretty young woman, but I knew that if I remained there I would be taking a risk. Regretfully, I left owner and flat with neither goodbye nor explanation. There was nothing else I could do. I never saw her again, and had no way of apologising . . .

Dr. Herman remained there and I went to the railway station, to continue my journey. I had not yet decided where to go or what to do. Should I re-enlist in the ranks of the Polish army, to fight the Germans? Should I search for my family? Or should I help the many Jewish refugees on the roads after their liberation from the camps? I considered these alternatives as the train made its way southwards.

I met a uniformed Russian officer in my carriage. He had a wooden spoon tucked into his boot, and explained to me that one never knew, these days, when soup might be dished out on the trains. Therefore he always had the spoon on him, lest he be caught without the right

equipment for so important an occasion. There were shortages in Russia and the army suffered from them, but civilians suffered even more, specially the southbound refugees, like myself. I wanted to get to Tashkent, known as "Bread City." There was food there, I heard, because of the surrounding fields of grain. With this hope in mind I moved around from station to station, but did not find enough food when I got to Tashkent. The streets were teeming with refugees, many of them Jews.

Evening came as I reached the station in Tashkent. I did not know anybody there, and had no address to turn to. I did what others in my situation did: I went to the city park, where men, women and children slept on and under the benches. I was very tired. I shut my eyes. Suddenly I heard two young men near me conversing in Hebrew. I sat up at once and went over to them.

They introduced themselves as Avraham and Yaacov. Among the things I heard from them was one which made me very happy. In Samarkand, some Polish members of Hashomer Hatzair, newly released from the Russian camps, were organising themselves as a group. They planned to cross the border of the Soviet Union soon, on their way to Palestine. After the years of longing to emigrate and delays caused by my mother's death, my enlistment, money problems, war and imprisonment—I would finally get there. So I hoped.

In spite of my tiredness, there was no sleep for me that night. The idea excited me. I left early in the morning and came to Samarkand. There were many refugees here, too. Among them were children both with and without their parents. The orphans, or those who had been abandoned, were concentrated in institutions specially established for the purpose, until some solution could be found for them. Poles were given absolute priority in the orphanages: I saw sick and hungry Jewish children wandering abandoned in the streets. It was a heartbreaking sight. I saw one of the local inhabitants gathering a few destitute children and teaching them to pick pockets. With the agility of hungry wolfcubs, these children spread out in the marketplaces and bread depots, snatching and grabbing food from other unfortunates. Turmoil and confusion prevailed in the city, everyone trying to survive, sometimes at the expense of others. Virtually the only government aid extended to the thousands of refugees, were soup kitchens set up at various points in the city. The portion of bread and soup they handed out was only enough to prevent death by starvation.

I looked for Vilna Jews in the tumultuous city. Fortunately, I found acquaintances who put me in touch with some relatives of my mother, who invited me to stay with them. They lived in one big room of an old house. The room had no flooring, but I was not exactly a pampered person, and I stretched out to sleep on the ground with everyone else, pleased with what I had. I was a free, liberated person. Maybe I would soon be in Palestine. I had been lucky so far. Were it not for the worry about my family, of whom I had no news, or the war raging in the world, I would have been content with my lot.

In Samarkand I searched for the members of Hashomer Hatzair, and I found them. But to my disappointment, there was nobody from my section in Vilna. Most of them had already emigrated to Palestine. The young men I had met joined the movement later.

I was placed on the list of candidates for emigration, to be put into effect under an agreement signed by the Jewish Agency and Poland's representatives in Russia. But it was far easier to plan emigration than to carry it out, crossing borders engulfed in the flames of war.

I stayed in Samarkand waiting for the right moment to cross the border and get out of Russia. Meanwhile, I did not sit with my hands folded.

Most of the masses of southbound immigrants were in need of help. I, educated in a movement that advocated mutual help and responsibility, undertook to help where I could. Meanwhile, a bond was formed between myself and some Jews who had been interned with the Polish General Sikorsky's sister-in-law and her mother. They had become friendly with the two women, who, on their release, had received a luxury flat and a shop. They were delighted to put the latter into the hands of one of their Jewish acquaintances, for management, in repayment for his care of them during their imprisonment and after their release.

The bond I formed with the Jewish ex-prisoner and his friends helped me to get food cheaply. I enjoyed it together with my Hashomer Hatzair friends, who were living in a commune in the suburbs under very difficult conditions. I helped where I could. I also met Rij in Samarkand and I gave him three loaves of bread in addition to my ration of four hundred grammes. He could not thank me enough. I was happy to be able to help him. He told me he was leaving soon to meet his beloved, for whom he had longed so deeply during the years of their separation.

But Rij never made it. Later that day I saw him in the custody of some Russian policemen. He had been arrested because of having an oversized ration of bread. He made signs to me to indicate that I need not worry; he would not reveal where he had acquired the bread. I assumed he was taken back to the "re-education camp" and fifteen years of hard labour. I never saw the poor fellow again and neither did his girl, I imagine.

I was very scared that I would meet the same fate as Rij. I was very tense for a few days, but no policemen turned up. I deduced that my name had been kept out of the incident, and I was grateful. I began to attend to my affairs again, despite the ever present threat of re-arrest that had become more concrete after my encounter with Rij and his subsequent arrest.

The great shortages that came with the war led people to seek every possible way of obtaining food, and to the development of a black market, of course. The refugees sold their belongings and the valuables they had managed to salvage, for the sake of getting something to eat. Others endangered their lives smuggling various products that had become hard to find, such as alcoholic drinks and tobacco. The Russian soldiers paid good prices for these.

The smugglers who were not caught earned a fortune in this way. It was very tempting. I started smuggling in spite of my fears of further imprisonment by the Russians, the marks of which were seared on my body and soul. It was the only way I could earn enough to live on and conduct my activities helping the refugees.

I had money in my pocket again. I bought new clothes, fine leather boots, a coat. Because I was close to the people running the shop, I was given a considerable discount. I now looked like a respectable, conventional young man and not a ragged, homeless refugee. This was significant in those days, since I made important contacts with people in local government circles. I got to know the clerk in charge of the harvests in the area and he promised to help me get a travel permit for the group. Without this permit it was impossible to travel within Russia.

We planned to reach a *kolkhoz* somewhere near the border and sneak across. The Russian clerk guessed our intentions, but agreed to help us anyway, and without taking a bribe, although this practice had become widespread. He was shocked by the attitude of the Polish refugees to the Jews among them. They treated their fellow-sufferers

with extreme hardness, discriminating against them every step of the way: in the allocation of food and the care of orphans, in not hesitating to throw Jews from trains to make space, or for any reason at all, and more.

In protest against the above, the Russian gave me the permit and wished us success. Document in hand, I happily returned to our commune only to find, to my horror, that the house was surrounded by Russian secret police. Without identifying myself I managed to find out that I was the one they were looking for. I had not the slightest doubt what this meant. I got away from there while I could. I had correctly assessed what awaited me because of my Zionist activities, considered a major sin by the Russian regime. Anyone engaging in such activities was an enemy of the people. Therefore, I decided to leave the city at once, without saying goodbye or taking my belongings.

That night I took the first train out of Samarkand, to Kermineh, where I knew the Polish Army in Exile was in the process of reorganising with the Polish soldiers who had been liberated together with their families. I decided to try this way of getting out. I would be safer as a soldier in the Polish army. I regretted that, yet again, I would have to postpone my emigration to Palestine, but I regarded this decision of mine as the lesser evil.

The Russians were in need of all the military help they could get after the Germans invaded Soviet Russia, which is why they signed the agreement with the Polish Government in Exile, undertaking to release Polish citizens on condition that a Polish Army in Exile was formed to help the Allies in their fight against the Germans. This was the agreement that had led to my release, and I now hoped that I could get out of this abhorrent, oppressive country by becoming part of the Polish military framework.

So I reached Kermineh, telling myself that I was young and strong and would be able to do my bit in the war against the Nazis and their allies. A big hut served as the mobilization centre. I stood in line with the Poles who were preparing to enlist. It was a long queue and I stood listening to the conversations of the people around me. There was an atmosphere of fierce anti-semitism, as usual, among the Poles. This was not new for me, but it aroused bitter memories which I would have preferred to forget. The Poles I knew all despised Jews and nothing had changed. Anti-semitism was in their blood, as though they

had absorbed it with their mothers' milk. Hatred welled up, here, too. The old jokes about the Jews who stank of onions did the rounds again. The insulting nickname for Jews—Moshek—accompanied by all synonyms and nuances of the word 'stinking' was clearly in evidence, too.

Anti-semitic bullying and provocation were manifested against the Jews who were standing in line to re-enlist, as well as against the Jewish refugees squatting with their bundles not far from the queue. Whole families who had come from the North. One of these was the Drexler family, with their daughter Rachel.

Our paths had crossed, as we discovered later, but we had not met. I could not know that a charming girl I had never seen was sitting so close to me, and was destined to become part of my life.

I reached the head of the queue, but suddenly regretted the whole business. What for? What did I have to do with the Polish army, in which I would always be a downtrodden soldier, no matter how hard I tried? It would be better for me to try to join up with the Palestinian Jewish soldiers, who must be fighting against the Germans, if I possibly could. That way, I would finally get to Palestine. I left the queue behind me, together with any idea of fighting in the Polish army.

On my way from the enlistment centre, I passed a tea house belonging to some local Uzbeks. I decided to go in and cheer myself up with a drink. I was a good-looking, elegantly dressed young man, and I always carried a bottle of vodka on me, a habit I had acquired from experience. The owner welcomed me and led me to a corner table. There I saw the two young men, Avraham and Yaacov, that I had met in the Tashkent park.

We were happy to meet again and sat together planning how to make a hasty exit from Russia. We decided that it would be best to go in the direction of the Caspian Sea and try to find a boat that would start us on our way to Palestine. We agreed that each of us individually would try to find out which trains went to the port, and when, and what papers we would need for the journey. We arranged to meet at the station that night.

I did not know them, nor did they know me. I knew I was taking a risk in trusting them. Maybe I would get into trouble with the authorities. Before my arrest, I had met Jews in Pinsk whose commitment to the Communist Party was much stronger than to their own people, and they did not hesitate to inform on them.

Nevertheless, I felt I could rely on those two. Also, I assumed they must have similar misgivings about me.

We parted, having arranged to meet that night at the station. As I sipped my tea and watched them walking out of the tea house, a Russian naval officer approached me. He had a limp, which was aggravated by his drunken state as he came over to me and sat down at my table, casting desirous glances at my new boots. He said he was due for military discharge because of his wound and hoped he would soon be able to buy wonderful boots like mine. An idea flashed through my mind. I suggested, with some hesitation, that we exchange clothes and boots. I was afraid of his response, but I could not resist the temptation. I knew that wearing a Russian uniform I would be able get to the Caspian Sea by train. I would be mistaken for a Russian soldier from one of the retreating units, on my way to join a new unit before returning to the front. Would he, an officer, agree? And what if I were caught in his uniform and interrogated? I was able to pretend to be a Russian soldier, even one of the lower ranks. But a captain? His rank?

I looked at him, and he—at my boots. The temptation was too great for both of us, apparently. We went to the toilet and there, in the narrow cubicle, we exchanged my clothes for his uniform. The only thing he refused to give me was his hat.

We shook hands, and I left the tea house with a pounding heart. I wandered around until it was dark and then went to the railway station as arranged. My two friends were momentarily stunned at the sight of me in my uniform. I told them what had happened and then we had to part again. They had decided to get to the border inside an empty petrol truck on its way to the port, but I decided to find a different way; I was afraid to soil my uniform in the oily tank. As a naval officer, I had to take care of my uniform, so as not to arouse the slightest suspicion. I said goodbye to them deciding to find a place on one of the trains passing through the station, and so make my way to the border. We arranged to meet at the port and went our separate ways. I settled down to wait for a train in which I could travel to the port in the company of Russian soldiers, and from there, out of Russia.

Luckily, there was a train that night, and some men wearing the same uniform as mine alighted from the train. I was delighted and thanked God for helping me. They had left the train in order to fill

their water containers with the boiling water, kipyatok, that the Russians drank. Without wasting a moment, and without asking any superfluous questions I joined them in their carriage. They were all in a special carriage with a "don't disturb" sign on it. They were the crew of the Dnieper fleet, and everyone seemed to know everyone else. I was scared to sit with them. I knew there was a risk they would find out that I was not one of them. I went into the adjoining carriage.

It was night, and I fell into a deep sleep until the train came to a sudden halt. A terrifying order rang out:

"Get your papers ready for inspection!"

I assumed they were searching for people like me. What should I do? I announced that I was going to the toilet, and went back to the adjoining carriage. I heard the guards' footsteps behind me as they carried out their inspection, drawing closer, at my heels. I had no choice but to lengthen my stride and go into "my" carriage. Facing me as I entered was a handsome officer preparing his soldiers' papers for inspection. He looked at me in surprise and, for a moment, I was speechless with fear and emotion. Apparently the officer understood who was standing in front of him and he asked, in a whisper:

"Are you a Polish Jew? Do you have papers?"

I stared at him. It was one of those moments when one's life hangs by a thread. Again, my instincts did not betray me. I felt he was to be trusted, that I could reveal everything to him, which I did. He whispered that he would try to help. He addressed a question to his men:

"Would anyone like to go to the toilet?"

The men in the carriage were tired from the long journey, and did not respond. Only one of them got up and prepared to go out. The officer gave the soldier an identification paper, in case he had to produce it, and told me to sit in the man's seat. I did so, luckily unnoticed by the others.

The officer indicated furtively that I should close my eyes and pretend to be asleep. He threw a coat over me, but my heart was thudding in terror beneath it. The minutes that passed until the inspection seemed to stretch like hours. I knew what to expect if I was discovered: at best, return to the camp for life imprisonment, at worst, a field court-martial and execution on the spot. Such things had happened.

I had seen, in every station on my travels since my release, notices calling on citizens to turn in hostile elements. I would surely be considered as such if I were to be caught masquerading as a Russian

officer. My life unfolded before my eyes and a Russian song hummed in my head:

"To die, it's much too soon, we still have much to do."

I loved life, I was young, tired of wandering, longing for Palestine, light, sun. Those were terrifying moments when the inspectors entered the carriage. They spoke casually to the officer, whom they seemed to know. His job was to collect Russian soldiers and transport them. I knew he was as scared as I was.

I heard him say that he was on the way to Krasnovodsk with the soldiers, mentioning the number of men in his charge as he handed them the papers for inspection. I hoped that the soldier who had gone to the toilet would not decide to come back right then. But they did not bother to count us. They returned the papers to the officer and went out. I felt as if I had been pulled back from the lip of an abyss at the last moment. Apparently the officer felt the same way. He took a deep breath when the soldier came back into the carriage. I knew I had to move on. The officer wished me luck, gave me a bottle of liquor and replenished the water in the kettle I had received with my change of clothing—it was part of a Russian soldier's gear. He also gave me some good advice: it would be best if I got off a few kilometres before the port on the Caspian Sea, at a station where the wounded were brought for evacuation by ship. In his opinion, they did not check papers very thoroughly at such points. Further, they had a serious water-shortage there and perhaps the precious liquid he had given me would be useful in helping me find a vessel to sail on. He also showed me how to stand in the space between the carriages, and how to jump out as we approached the station. I thanked him and said goodbye, deciding to do as he advised. It was dangerous, I knew, but I had no alternative. The soldiers in the carriage were fast asleep. Only the officer and I were awake. I clasped his outstretched hand before turning to take up my position between the carriages, in readiness for the jump.

It was difficult to stand there, just as he had warned me. This was certainly not first class travel. I felt a flood of gratitude to the stranger, the officer. I had encountered anti-semitism at the many stops along my way, as well as insensitivity, stupidity, cruelty and evil; but I had also found some kindness and a helping hand. There were people who had not lost their humanity in the prevailing darkness.

The long train forged southwards, crossing the deserts of Turkeman, the River Amu-Darya, on and on, to the arid zone around the port of

Krasnovodsk. Here it slowed down to enter the station and I jumped, to land rolling with the momentum. I immediately got to my feet unhurt, but the precious water had spilled.

I started walking in a hurry to get away from the railway tracks. Barren desert lay all around me, and the skies were clear blue, with a dazzling sun beating down. I followed the officer's directions and arrived, fairly soon, at the camp near the port, where Polish citizens awaited evacuation by sea to Persia. There were women and children among them, and wounded soldiers, but I also saw uniformed, uninjured Polish soldiers and Russian guards. These, naturally, scared me most. I decided that the first thing to do was to get rid of the uniform, since I would have no chance of evacuation while wearing it. It had become a serious disadvantage and I did not hesitate for a moment. I kicked off my boots, stripped half-naked and, in that condition, joined the queue in front of the water tank.

When my turn finally came, the people in charge of the water stared at me in amazement when they saw that I had not brought the usual huge container, or at least a bucket to be filled, like everyone else, but had only my little kettle. They cautioned me that one was not allowed to come around for a second time. I assured them that I would not come again. I did not argue with them. I hoped that the water I had, together with the bottle of liquor, would buy my way out of this hated country.

I went towards the camp with some others who had also come from the water-queue. What now? In the camp, Polish soldiers and their families were living in tents while they awaited their turn to be evacuated. A voice reading numbers echoed over the loudspeakers, informing people that it was their turn to leave and instructing them to prepare for inspection, collect their bundles and proceed to the port for embarkation.

What should I do? I was uncertain. Some Polish police were marching in my direction. If they arrested me they would hand me over to the Russians. I had no illusions about that. They might even regard me as a deserter from the Polish army. I was a refugee, had no papers, and was an ex-prisoner. To whom could I turn?

I looked around me and noticed that the police had stopped a girl for inspection. They were examining her papers, going through them attentively, and I exploited the moment to make myself scarce. I felt like an animal with the hunters closing in.

There was a large tent ahead of me, and I thrust my way into it. A woman who was standing inside stared at me in wonder. I looked directly at her. She was tall, blonde and pretty, about my age. Two children aged about four and five, wearing crosses on chains around their necks, stood beside her. There was also another, older, woman in the tent, apparently the children's grandmother. I took in the whole scene within the first few seconds. Four people in this spacious tent. They must be privileged, I decided. This was quickly confirmed. A Polish soldier came in, saluted the woman and addressing her as "Madame Polkovnikova" said:

"I have the honour to inform Madame-the-Brigade-Commander's-wife that within an hour we will be boarding the ship. Assistance with the luggage and the children will arrive shortly."

He bowed and extended a bundle of papers, her embarkation documents, I assumed. He saluted again and left without bothering me, probably because of the woman. I gathered that she was on her way out of Russia to join her high-ranking husband.

I now saw the police through the opening of the tent; they had finished checking the girl's papers and were following me to the tent, which they had seen me enter. They hesitated a moment, not wishing to disturb the officer's wife. I acted swiftly. I addressed the woman by her title and whispered that I was a Jew, a Polish soldier, and had been under Russian detention until recently. I asked her to help me get away.

The woman looked at me for a moment, shocked, undecided. I continued to plead with her, making clear what awaited me if I was caught. I urged her to help me, offering her my kettle of water. I added that my acquaintances, the family of Colonel Shikorsky in Samarkand, would soon be arriving and would certainly appreciate any help she would give me.

I do not know what convinced her most—my distress, the water, or my mention of the name of my important friends. She helped me. She asked my name and said that from now on I would be called Dadek, and would be considered a member of the family. Just then, the Polish police decided to come in to check my papers. They saluted the Brigade Commander's wife, but before they could come over to me, she addressed me familiarly in Polish, and asked me to take the children to the toilet before they boarded the ship. The older boy almost spoiled everything by saying he had only just come from there, and that he

refused to go with "the man." The little one, in contrast, willingly took my hand and we went to the camp lavatories, where a long queue had formed. While we waited I chatted with the boy, who was sweet and friendly. He told me that his father was in London. The family would sail to Persia and from there they would fly to England, to his father.

The Polish police were gone when we returned to the tent, and I breathed a sigh of relief. The soldiers detailed to carry the family's belongings and act as their escort on board ship came shortly afterwards. The woman's papers authorised four family members and two soldiers, as their escorts. She appointed me as one of the latter.

The Polish private was not at all happy to have me take his place, but he did not dare object and accepted his fate. He would be able to leave on another vessel in the near future. Groups were continuously leaving since the signing of the agreeement. For me, however, the way was blocked and it was a matter of life and death for me to take this opportunity to leave.

Apparently this was clearly perceived by the Polish woman, and she wanted to prove that not all Poles were anti-semites. This she told me as we left the tent.

There was great excitement and turmoil all around us. The voice broadcasting the numbers of those departing blended with the bitter protests of the disappointed ones. I gripped the suitcase, the little boy riding on my shoulders, and marched towards the port and my rescue. I was leaving the country I had been forced to enter, after yearning for and planning my escape from the day of my arrival.

I silently thanked the Polish woman. I could hardly see where I was walking because of the boy on my shoulders, who was blocking my vision. But that way my head was hidden by his body, and I thought there was some good in every bit of bad. Blindly, I felt my way, remembering the "hen blindness" that afflicted the prisoners in the labour camp. I hoped I was leaving the darkness in which I had been groping for so long, that I was on my way to the light, and a life of security and serenity.

I felt sorry for my friends who had remained behind—Margolin, Rij, Avraham and Yaacov, who had not turned up, and the many others left behind. Now I was only able to take care of myself, however, and I was not even sure of that, until the ship set sail with me on it.

The suitcase was big and heavy and I could barely carry it up the gangplank, so I hauled myself along with the aid of the rope handrail. On deck at last, I breathed freely. When the anchor was weighed the danger of being caught by the Russian police would be behind me, I hoped.

I found a place on the crowded deck for the family that had adopted me. Crowds of passengers, among them the sick and wounded, all tense and very irritable, were crushed together. I suggested to the Commander's wife that she sit on the big suitcase while I went to look for a more comfortable place for them. I pushed through the crowd, full of gratitude for the woman, even though she could not alter the fact of Polish anti-semitism by her generous act. Sadly, this was not enough to make me forgive all the hatred and viciousness I had encountered among the Poles.

My nerves were on edge as I waited for the ship to sail. I knew I would still be in some danger even after we departed, and that until we reached Pahlevi Port in Persia, arrest was still a possibility. The fearful thought that I could still be returned to the camp never left me. Nor did the thought of all the Jewish refugees still there in that hell. Those suffering members of my race who shared my dream of reaching our haven in Palestine.

One of them was Rachel, whom I had never met, but who was destined to follow the same path as the one I had embarked upon—to Teheran Station.

8

RACHEL

RACHEL WAS THE fair-haired, pampered daughter of Hannah and Yosef Drexler, who lived in a town named Viezbnik, where Yosef was a prosperous merchant. Rachel was born in 1923, and had a brother seven years her senior. His name was Yeshayahu—Shaya, as they called him. They lacked nothing and enjoyed a carefree childhood.

The town was in the central district of Poland, about an hour away from Warsaw, and most of its Polish population worked in the town's armaments factories and lived in the hilly outskirts. About half the town's inhabitants were Jewish shopkeepers and businessmen. Drexler and his two partners had a wholesale business, dealing in flour which they sold from their premises in the town and transported by rail to other towns, together with paraffin, sugar, and other products. He was a familiar and widely respected public figure in the active Jewish community, serving as the representative of the *Jewish National Fund* and engaging in other voluntary works.

The family devoted much to the children's education, and when Yosef went on business trips he sometimes took his daughter along during school holidays. He wanted her to become familiar with Poland and he used these occasions to instruct her. Rachel was a good student, liked by her schoolmates and teachers. Her Polish teacher chose her to compete in a recitation competition, and she won second place, although it was generally thought that she should have come first. It was a fairly clear case of anti-semitic discrimination, but she did not develop any complexes as a result. Her parents and everyone around her nurtured her confidence in herself and her talents.

Slender and agile on her shiny bicycle, or ice skating in ski pants and a special fur, she was happy and never began to imagine that things could be otherwise. She lived in a world that appeared to her and others as solid and stable. She admired her father for his strength and she admired him also as a man of culture; he always studied a page of *Gemarrah,* biblical commentary, in the evenings after work. And at his side was her mother, a practical, energetic woman blessed with great common sense.

Reading was encouraged and in addition to books, there was the Warsaw Yiddish newspaper, "Haint," which arrived every Thursday. People who were not subscribers to it would gather at the house to read the paper and discuss current topics. Every Sabbath there were stormy discussions around the dinner table, and the house was always lively and warm.

In this atmosphere, Rachel grew up as an alert, effervescent girl with a good understanding of things. She did not know Yiddish, however, and her parents spoke only Polish to her.

She was not fond of eating, no matter how the maid, or her parents urged her, sitting opposite her, wheedling her into tasting something. But she took every opportunity to pour the egg-enriched cocoa into the potted plant, or to pass the thickly buttered slice of babka, yeast cake, to her brother. What she actually liked was the simple food that never reached their table. Milk and sugar-water, a dish of potatoes and onions, sauerkraut, and sausage. Her devoted father, who knew her weaknesses, would bring her all kinds of sausage and salami when he returned from his business trips.

When Rachel completed her elementary school education she was sent, like her brother before her, to a private secondary school in

Radom, where she also studied Hebrew. In those days it was not usual to send a girl away from home to an expensive private school. The more so since there was a Polish secondary school in the village where the education cost nothing. But Yosef Drexler was primarily interested in a Jewish education for his daughter. Therefore he rented a room for her in the home of a childless couple who gave her devoted care, provided food and lodging and also took an interest in her studies. A warm relationship developed between the girl and the couple.

Rachel came home for holidays and vacations, but spent most of the year at Radom. It was there that she first fell in love—with the brother of a classmate, a student at the *Haifa Technion* who was home for the vacation. He was her senior by about ten years. Rachel enjoyed their meetings very much, and he was not indifferent to her. When he had to return to Palestine to continue his studies, they decided to keep in touch by letter and did so until the war broke out.

Despite the tension between Poland and Germany, Rachel's family continued to hope that things would not reach a state of actual war. With Hitler's ascent to power, restrictions and persecution went into effect against the Jews in Germany, followed by an increase in emigration from there to Palestine. Rachel's brother, Shaya, who had also planned to study at the Haifa Technion, remained in Poland: his father said regretfully that they had to let young German Jews have precedence. As a result, Shaya had to enlist in the Polish army.

Summer, 1939.

Every summer, when Rachel was on school vacation, the prosperous Drexler family used to go to the spa at Bosco, for the mud and sulphur baths. This summer, still very much in love, she had preferred to go with her classmate to his family's summer home in the hope that his student brother would again come on a visit. He did not, but she enjoyed herself, anyway. Lively and pretty, she never lacked attention from boys.

As the summer was coming to an end she received an urgent telegram from her father, calling her home. The much-discussed war was on the point of breaking out. The parents had decided to move from their town, which was in the industrial triangle where Poland's weapons industry was situated, an area which would certainly come under German bombardment.

As it happened, the Germans were interested in keeping these factories in good condition. When they invaded Poland, they gained control of the munitions plants with the help of citizens who were of German origin: these took over the factories, and the area was not bombarded. Therefore, the Drexler family returned, like most of the town's inhabitants. They feared the future, but nobody knew just how bad the situation would be.

Shortly after their return the Germans entered the town. The stamp of boots was heard, shooting. The fearful population shut themselves in their houses. The soldiers paraded through the streets in their round helmets and swastikas. The very next day they began to go from house to house, taking people to work in the munitions plants, which were idle because of the invasion. Rachel, sitting indoors, peered through the curtains and saw people being taken—for hard labour, it emerged. Rachel saw some girls, her friends, among them.

The soldiers burst into her house a few days later. Two Germans entered when she was alone at home, asking if she was Jewish. Although she nodded in confirmation, they thought she looked Polish and they left the house under the assumption that she had not understood their question.

Food-shortages began. Yosef Drexler and his two partners decided to hand out rations from the supplies in their storerooms.

The situation at the front was deteriorating. The Germans were in control of the western part of Poland. The Russians got hold of the area across the River Bug. There was no news from Shaya, the soldier-son. They were terribly worried about him at home. When a train passed on the tracks near the house, Rachel would go out and loudly call her brother's name. But there was no response.

One evening, the rabbi's daughter came running to their house and told Hannah that the Germans had a list of Jews they were going to arrest, and that Yosef Drexler was among them. Alarmed, Rachel's mother went into action. There was an orchard at the bottom of their garden and there she made a place for her husband to hide. From then on, she took over. In the morning, she went out and bought a horse and cart. These were hard to come by in those days when so many wanted to leave, but the Drexler family had the means and the necessary connections and Hannah succeeded. She started packing right away and sent Rachel to their neighbour, who made bras and girdles

for a living. There, on her mother's instructions, Rachel bought a padded whalebone corset with gathered, elasticized panels. Hannah stuffed this with money and valuables, and Rachel put it on.

The cart standing in front of their house was fairly big and had a rounded canvas roof. The mother was making up her mind about what to load onto the cart. Hannah still did not understand what was going on and was amazed to see her mother load a sack of soap, candles and matches, while she deliberated whether to take her valuable silver cutlery. Yosef objected to this, pushed the cutlery into a cupboard, locked the cupboard and put the key in his pocket. He was opposed to taking too many things, but Hannah, blessed with a practical nature and sound, almost prophetic instincts, insisted. She ran everything, while her husband found it hard to function. He was shattered, dejected. He still could not accept that a period in their life had come to an end and nothing would ever be the same again. From being a prosperous merchant, a respected man, a Zionist idealist, he was likely to become a nameless wanderer. He was depressed and immobilised by the sense of this. However, his wife busied herself with practicalities and did not allow herself to think about what the future held in store. As for Rachel, at first she regarded the whole thing as an adventure.

At noon, the parents and their daughter mounted the cart. Yosef urged the horse into motion and they were on their way, leaving misunderstanding and amazement behind them in the town, because of the drastic step they had taken.

All day, the wagon went along roads packed with refugees, some of them Jews, making their way to the Russian sector of Poland. The wagon reached a small village at sunset. Because they were very tired, and the wagon shaft had broken, they decided to stop overnight. The local blacksmith promised to repair their wagon by morning.

Mrs. Drexler went to a nearby thatch-roofed house, where chickens ran in and out and the cow was brought indoors to protect it from the frost. She bargained with a broad-beamed, sloppy Polish woman for a night's lodging. The woman regarded the well-dressed trio, and demanded a hefty sum. Rachel was shocked by the filth in the house. The peasant woman threw a mattress on the bare cement floor and the parents lay down, covering themselves with their furs. Rachel was given a place next to the woman. There was a heavy stench in the hut, slops and garbage littered wherever the girl's eyes came to rest in the

dim light of a paraffin lamp. She tried to protest at staying there, but her mother told her to be quiet and go to sleep. For lack of choice, Rachel crawled in beside the woman, shocked, confused and embarrassed. Her father suddenly seemed so different from the strong man she had known. Broken. He lay silent on the floor, as did her mother.

In the filthy bed beside the strange peasant woman, Rachel lay unable to fall asleep in spite of her fatigue. She felt as though something had snapped inside her. Roots had been cut off. All of a sudden she understood what was happening to them. They had become the owners of a cart. Homeless wanderers. From that night on, a night of hard contemplation, Rachel underwent a transformation: from the pampered girl, a new, different Rachel began to grow. The change was so sudden, so absolute. She knew that now, from the coming morning, she was going to have to cope with reality, perhaps depend on herself alone, and for this she was going to have to discover new powers within herself.

The next day they arose at first light, washed in cold water, without towels, in a stained and cracked enamel basin. Rachel and her parents used Rachel's scarf to dry their hands and faces.

Their cart had been repaired during the night and they drove on. The River Bug was now the border, beyond which the Russians were in control, and the closer they came to the river, the more refugees they encountered along the way.

There were also more and more German soldiers to be seen. They blocked the road and stopped the refugees for a close examination of their papers and transit permits. They were menacing in their swastika-bedecked uniforms and domed helmets, their high boots, issuing harsh, barking commands.

The cart ahead of the Drexler family was halted for inspection. Sitting beside her father, who was holding the reins, Rachel watched a couple with two girls about her own age as they climbed down when ordered to do so. She was horrified to see the two girls undressing in response to the sentries' command. In spite of the cold, they were then ordered to run naked into the field. They did so, having no alternative, terrified to death, ashamed and helpless. And so the two girls ran, their pale and virginal bodies providing amusement for the bored sentries, who watched with roars of laughter and evident pleasure.

Rachel looked on with revulsion. She whispered to her father that even if they ordered her to undress, she would not. Her mother, who was sitting among the bundles at the back of the cart, told her she must do what they told her to do. Not to argue. "There's no alternative," she explained, eyes downcast so as to avoid looking at the shameful sight. "To survive, you have to be prepared for humiliation."

Hannah was now as helpless as her husband, Yosef. Rachel found it hard to comprehend and accept. She began to cry, watching the naked girls who had finally been permitted to return to their cart. To add to their fun, the Germans overturned the cart, only then allowing them to continue. With a concerted effort the family righted the cart and drove away.

It was the Drexler family's turn to show their transit permits. Yosef drove the cart a few metres towards the sentries, and the Germans began roughly poking around among the bundles. They rummaged in the family's personal belongings, flinging them all over the place. They made fun of the amount of soap the family had brought, saying they would be needing it among the Russians.

But they did not harm the passengers, this time. Their transit permit was correctly stamped and in order. The family did not look particularly Jewish and perhaps that was why the Germans, who always followed orders, respected the documents they were shown. They were allowed to pass, continuing in the direction of the River Bug and what they thought were safer conditions under the Russians. During that period at the beginning of the war it was hard to know for sure which was the best way to escape and be saved.

If Rachel had thought at first that it was a mistake to leave home as they had, and if she had still hoped, during their first day on the road, that her father would understand this and turn the cart around and head for home, she now began to see that there was no way back.

They carried on until they reached Lublin, where Mr. Drexler had many business contacts and acquaintances. They arrived on the eve of Sabbath and stayed over. There were less Germans in Lublin than in their own town and on the roads, and the situation therefore seemed less menacing; perhaps things were not as serious as they had thought.

The Drexlers sat down to the Sabbath meal in the home of their friends. The blessing was recited, fine wine was poured into crystal glasses, and the traditional Sabbath food was served: stuffed fish, soup,

meat, the sweet white Sabbath loaf, and pudding. For lunch on the following day they ate cholent—a rich stew that is cooked for twenty-four hours—and other good food. The hosts tried to convince their guests that the Germans who had compiled the list of hostages with Yosef's name on it would never track them down in Lublin. However, Hannah again insisted that they had better get over to the Russian zone as soon as possible.

Yosef was still too stunned to argue with his wife and he let her decide. Thus, after the weekend, they resumed their journey to the River Bug.

The family was joined by Itke, a young relative. They planned that she and Rachel would cross the river in a boat and would then take the train to Lutzk, a town near the Russian border, where Drexler had business connections with the owner of the local flour mills. He would send someone to where Hannah and Yosef were waiting with their belongings, and the man would smuggle them across. Rachel dressed herself in layer upon layer of clothes in order to take them with her and also against the cold. Two furs covered the lot and under everything, she was still wearing the corset with the money and jewellery. The slender girl was suddenly huge and fat and ponderous; she had difficulty getting into the boat with Itke.

The two frightened, upset girls seated themselves in the little boat, which was rowed over the dark water by a peasant who had been well paid for the work. He got them safely across the river and they climbed up the riverbank in spite of the German and Russian guards on either side of the river. The night was completely dark and freezing cold, and the girls shivered despite the layers of clothing they had on them. They followed the peasant, who led them to a barn in his yard. There they huddled on the straw and shivered through the night.

Before daybreak they heard the sound of boots. A patrol of the German sentries who guarded this border town in conjunction with the Russians had arrived to find out if there were any Jews in the house. Their voices reached the two in the barn loft, filling them with dread. The peasant's wife went out to the patrol and assured them confidently and emphatically that there were no Jews on the premises. She convinced the sentries and they left. The peasant then came up to the loft and ordered the scared girls to accompany him. He led them to the station where they took the train to Lutzk in the Russian zone. "If we make it to Lutzk we'll be safe!" Rachel said to Itke, who, like

herself, was finding it hard to calm down after what they had been through.

Lutzk was fairly big, with wide, well-maintained streets. There were some horsedrawn cabs outside the railway station. Here the girls parted. Itke had decided to go to the house of a relative, who was a rabbi, and Rachel took a cab for the home of their family friends.

She looked around as the cab bore her along. She thought that her mother had probably been right to insist that they get to the Russian zone. Life seemed much calmer here. She saw stores with well-stocked windows as she passed through the main street. Serene people strolled around and there were no terrifying Germans here. She reached her destination feeling somewhat more encouraged, paid the driver, and mounted the broad marble stairs to the apartment. Only to find, to her shocked dismay, that two boards had been nailed across the heavy wooden door, which still bore the owner's name. Affixed to them was a notice saying that the family had been exiled for belonging to the bourgoisie. Enemies of the people.

Rachel stood in front of the blocked entrance, in a state of absolute shock. Only a minute before she had been sure she had finally reached a haven, with fear and danger behind her. She had even imagined herself telling her story over a glass of hot tea, with them listening and assuring her that she had nothing to fear now. Everything was going to be all right. Their friend would see to it that her parents crossed safely and they would soon be here to join her.

What was going to happen now? What could she do? Rachel sat sobbing on the steps, not knowing where to turn. She sat like that for a while with the tears streaming down her cheeks, until she realised that this was not going to do her any good. She went out into the street, rubbing away the traces of her tears with her gloved hand. She stopped a passing cab and decided she would go to the rabbi, like Itke. She did not know the address, so she asked the driver to take her to the town's rabbi. When he asked her which of the two town rabbis she wanted to reach, she was put out for a moment, but then said that he should take her to one of them, and if he was not the right person, they would ask for the address of the other and go there.

Rachel sat in the cab, her eyes filling with tears again. She felt entirely alone, abandoned and afraid. What was going to happen to her parents? Who would help them to get here? How could she let them know

that the plans had changed because their friends had been deported?! What would become of all of them? Night was coming and she was young and alone and far from her parents in a strange city. Until now, she had always been surrounded by familiar, loving people, secure in her warm home and good friends. And even when it had all collapsed, her parents had still been with her. Now she was alone.

Still sobbing, she noticed a young man standing with a girl in front of a display window. What had drawn her attention was the way the young man was dressed. He was wearing a ski suit exactly like the one she was wearing. How she had loved to ski . . . once. So little time had passed since she was a happy girl on her shiny bike, enjoying the exercise, or skating swiftly over the ice, to the amazement of everyone. The young man also had ski boots just like hers. He looked like . . . who? Like her brother Shaya! Could it be? No, it was not possible, she knew. It was only because of everything that had happened recently, she was hallucinating in her loneliness. But still . . . it was Shaya . . . and she decided in a split second to shout out his name, convinced all the time that it was an illusion. After all, her brother was a soldier in the defeated Polish army, perhaps lying wounded in some hospital . . . or even, God forbid . . . dead. Shaya could not possibly be here in this city, no matter how her mind played tricks because of her longing to alter things, to arrange them so that she could be with her brother again. They had been so close, she loved him so, he was her big, strong brother.

But as sometimes happens, reality was more wonderful than any illusion. Rachel jumped from the cab to find herself face to face with her brother Shaya and Eva, his girlfriend from their home town!

Now the tears flowed unchecked. Seconds before, she had been desperate and afraid in this strange city. Now she was bewildered and uncomprehending, but at the same time filled with a mighty sense of joyful relief. Here was her brother, right in front of her!

Shaya embraced her, quieting her incoherent sobbing, promising that everything was going to be all right, he would take care of everything, their parents would come, everything would be all right. Rachel was now trembling, laughing and crying at the same time. She felt that a miracle had befallen her. Such things happened only in fairy tales.

Shaya took her to where he was living. To her surprise, it was the rabbi's house, where Itke had gone. Scores of refugees were living there, like Shaya and Eva. How had they come here? Shaya told her that after the Polish army's defeat he had returned home, only to find

that the Germans had requisitioned their house. The neighbours told him that his parents and sister had left for the Russian zone, with the intention of reaching Lutzk. He decided to follow them, delaying only long enough to marry Eva. And here they were.

Rachel became one of the rabbi's many house guests, lying down to sleep on the floor together with them. She could not fall asleep, unable to believe what had happened. It was too wonderful to be true.

The next day, Shaya began arranging for his parents' crossing. This he succeeded in doing, and soon the Drexler family was united in a scene of great emotion.

The five of them proceeded in the direction of a town called Luninietz, near Pinsk, and there they settled. They did not live as well as they had in the past, but the atmosphere reminded them of home, the Jewish community in particular. The Drexlers had an acquaintance there, an ex-teacher. He helped them to find a place to live, which was not easy considering all the many refugees fleeing from the Germans. Shaya and his wife lived in one room of the small flat they eventually found, and Rachel and her parents lived in the other. Yosef began to work at whatever business came to hand, and they managed with frugality, but without real hardship.

Most of the refugees crowding into the Polesia district were Jews, who preferred Soviet to Nazi rule. Some had no identity documents. At first, it seemed that the Drexlers would be allowed to live in peace. Rachel enrolled in school where the language of instruction was now Russian, which she learned quickly and diligently, earning high marks. She also made friends and fitted in well. She danced at festivals, wearing her blue dress and attracting admiring glances. Boys were interested in her, but she did not respond to any of them. She was thinking about her friend's brother, the Technion student, her first love of the summer before. Rachel had not forgotten him although the war had interrupted their correspondence.

In this way, becoming accustomed to the different way of life and learning to be satisfied with the little they had, Rachel lived in the town near Pinsk as the weeks and months went by.

She finished tenth grade, which was the highest grade in that secondary school, and was awarded a certificate.

That was in the summer of 1940. One of Rachel's friends told the Drexlers that the secret police were soon coming to deport them, like

many other refugees, to Russia. And that is indeed what happened. Like all such arrests, theirs was carried out in the middle of the night. The sleeping family was awakened by Russian police, told to hurry up and get dressed. They did not need to ask where they were going. They were prepared for this, having already packed the possessions they knew they would be allowed to take with them: two suitcases per person.

Rachel's friends had pleaded with her to come and live with them. They tried to persuade her that this would help her parents, who were certainly candidates for deportation to Siberia. She would be able to send them parcels and money for their support. But the parents refused to separate from their daughter. They would face the future together. For better or worse, they must stay together. This was their guiding principle.

Rachel's friends came to say goodbye; her good friends, Alla, Halina and others she had met in the town came when they heard the sad news of the impending deportation, bringing provisions for the journey and crying as they said goodbye.

Now the night street was totally deserted as the Drexler family walked along in the dark. The shadows of the houses and trees were like black demons bringing evil tidings. But how strange the ways of destiny are! As the war progressed, most of the secondary school pupils perished in the bombardment of the town. Those who did not die in the flames of war were destroyed in the Holocaust. The ones who had remained behind had been so sad to part from the deportees, feeling that they were headed for destruction, yet many of them ultimately survived precisely because of their deportation.

That night, the police had asked Yosef Drexler where he wanted to go with his family, whether to America or some other country. He answered that they wished to go to Palestine. He knew perfectly well that they would be sent wherever the Russians saw fit to send them, but decided that it should at least be noted that they wanted to go to Palestine.

The Drexler family was sent neither to America nor to Palestine. Like many refugees before and after them, they were loaded at dead of night onto a freight train going north, to the desolate, cold wastes of Russia.

Rachel found herself again grieving over her uprooting and separation from familiar places and people, as she headed yet again for a new and unknown place. What was going to happen to them over there was something nobody could know.

9

IN EXILE

THE DREXLER FAMILY spent some two months on a northbound train, under the cramped conditions common to all refugees like themselves. They were worn out by the long journey, but Yosef Drexler's spirits, surprisingly, revived despite the exhausting conditions.

He wrapped himself in his prayer shawl and prayed, declaring that this was the way to Palestine. The other deportees in the carriage gazed at him in amazement, as if he had gone crazy. Even his wife motioned to him to stop behaving that way.

They did not reach the country of their dreams. Instead, they arrived in a Godforsaken northern waste. The Russian steppes are vast. Siberia is huge, with deserts and forests where no man has ever set foot. This is where the train finally halted and let off its passengers. Their provisions were depleted by the long journey and so were their belongings, the latter having been used to bribe the guards to give them water and other necessities. However, the Drexlers still possessed some items of

considerable worth, such as soap, salt, matches, tobacco and the clothes and jewellery they had on them.

The train pulled in at midnight of one of the white northern summer nights when the sun never sets. When they alighted, the refugees lit campfires and tried to fall asleep beside them, but the unfamiliar false daylight made this difficult.

When morning came they were conducted through a dense forest, their feet sinking into the deep moss during the long march. From time to time they heard the thud of a rotted tree falling, disturbing the forest stillness. To Rachel, it was like the sound of a whole world collapsing. Silence followed, to be filled by the weeping and groaning of the deportees. One of them, Sola, a pregnant young woman, could only advance with great difficulty. They marched among the gigantic trees with the grey sky overhead. A cloud of mosquitoes hovered around the marchers: big, stinging mosquitoes which pierced Rachel's flesh and caused her immense suffering.

They eventually reached two huts in a clearing. It was one of the many labour camps established all over Russia for the deportees and their families. Single men were housed in other, similar camps. The deportees were all subject to forced labour.

There were no fences or sentries, but there was no hope of escape from the camp. The families were told in which hut they were to live: Hannah, Yosef and Rachel were in one of the huts, while Shaya and his wife were in the other. Bunks were allocated according to the number of people in the family. Rachel's mother immediately hung a blanket and organised their family corner in the hut; an apartment in miniature. Throughout their long wanderings, Hannah Drexler always did this, making sure that any spot they happened to be in had a homelike atmosphere.

The very next day they began taking the detainees out to work in the forest. Yosef refused. He emphatically protested that he would not work for the Russians! What did they think!? Who could force him? By what right? True, anyone who did not work was not given food, but the family went into the forest to pick mushrooms and Hannah used them to make soups and pies.

But this would not last for very long. There was no way they could avoid going out to work. Yosef and Shaya drove carts hauling the felled trees from the forest to the river. Rachel, who had learned Russian

during her last year of study, was offered the job of keeping a record of the other detainees' work records: days missed, output and so forth. It was easy work and she would be paid in provisions. At first, when the director of the camp offered her the job, she was very pleased, but on further reflection, she realized that she was being asked to inform on her fellow detainees, and she would not agree to do that. She got out of it by claiming that her Russian was not adequate to the task. Now she had to think of ways to help her family.

As in the other forced labour camps all over Russia, workers were entitled to coupons, necessary for their subsistence, and living conditions could be improved for a worker who managed to raise his or her output beyond the quota. Only three of the Drexlers were able to work, since Mrs. Drexler had to stay in the hut to guard their belongings and Eva suffered from asthma. Therefore, the three others had to provide food for all five of them.

One morning, Rachel was led to a large, white horse and told to mount it. At first, she was frightened to the point of tears at the very idea. Her brother and father encouraged her, though, and helped her onto the back of the huge animal. She rode eight kilometres to the tree-felling site, where her job was to ride one of the horses that hauled sleds loaded with logs to the river, where they were floated downstream. From then on, she worked at this task, considered an easy one, from morning until night. She got used to the work and even learned to like the horse. She soon became an enthusiastic, brisk horsewoman.

Pampered from birth, living in a home where her shoes were polished for her until fairly recently, Rachel had now become an energetic worker. There were others of her age in the camp, and like all youngsters they found ways of amusing themselves, singing and playing. They tried to teach each other, because there was no high school framework in the camp, which Rachel regretted, since she loved studying. She also regretted that her youth was passing in that remote place. Why had this happened to her? Why was she being punished? With sadness, she also remembered and missed the student at the Haifa Technion, whom she loved.

In recognition of her diligent work, Rachel was appointed the leader of a team of workers, one of whom was Sola, the girl from Lodz. She was the wife of a Polish soldier who had been captured by the Russians six months before; she had not heard from him since then. With the help of some of the women, she had given birth in the crowded hut,

in front of everyone. After a week's leave, she was obliged to return to work, walking many kilometres and remaining far from the huts and her baby all day.

Rachel tried to make things easier for her. In the Russian secondary school, she had studied the Soviet Constitution and its references to the rights of workers, no matter who they were, and she had proved to the camp director, quoting examples and precedents and the letter of the law, that the young mother was entitled to maternity leave and to be near her baby. His reply was that they were not citizens, but deportees, forced labourers, and therefore the law did not apply to them. She persisted, even threatening to write and complain to the Central Authority of Camps. This, apparently, scared the director and he finally acquiesced. He considered Sola's rights according to his mood, which meant that sometimes he did not. Rachel was encouraged by her success and continued to look after the workers' interests.

Summer passed into autumn. One day the rains came, drenching the workers. Rachel remembered that the Soviet Constitution stated that workers were entitled to work in dry, wearable clothes, and so she ordered them back to the huts before the end of the workday.

The director was so incensed by this, that he revoked Sola's maternity leave and made her go out and produce her full work quota, forcing her to leave her small baby alone in the hut. The mother's breasts were dry and there was no other milk to be had; it was a precious commodity in the remote north. The only source of supply was from a kolkhoz ten kilometres away, and Sola had neither money nor the goods to trade. The baby weakened and finally died, aged four months. A few months earlier, when she was running away from Lodz, her three-year-old daughter had been killed by German pilots, who mowed down the fleeing refugees. And then her husband had vanished into Russian captivity. The small camp seethed with fury. If they had their way, they would have strangled the director, but they were afraid.

The only break in the hardship of the work-week was the brief rest on Sundays. Winter added to their misery. Temperatures fell to tens of degrees below zero. Only the extremely strong and healthy, or those with means, could withstand these conditions. Fortunately for the Drexler family, they still had commodities that were in great demand in the camp, such as bars of yellow soap which they cut into small

pieces that were worth a great deal. These could be traded for provisions at the kolkhoz, slightly alleviating the hardships of the winter. They also had the furs they had brought with them, which proved invaluable in keeping out the dreadful Siberian cold. However, they were running out of most of the things they had brought with them. Therefore, when they asked for volunteers among the outstanding workers, to take on some very difficult work forty kilometres distant from the camp, Rachel presented herself. These volunteers were promised payment for their work, and this was unusual. The worksite was near a kolkhoz where food could be acquired. Rachel decided to work there for a few months and earn some money to stock up on essential foodstuffs.

A group of ten workers left the huts, among them Rachel and two other girls. They laboured from morning to night, but since they were paid in goods, Rachel was able to go to the nearby kolkhoz every so often and trade for flour and sugar, which she stored in a sack for her family. The thought of their happiness when she came back with it caused her great pleasure and renewed her energy, enabling her to carry on with the back-breaking labour.

On this kolkhoz lived a young lawyer from Warsaw, a Jew by the name of Otto Levin, and his three-year-old daughter, Mira. They had fled from the ghetto, having no choice but to leave Otto's wife and baby behind. The father and daughter had crawled away in darkness and cold, by the light of the gleaming snow, under a rain of bullets. Then Otto had carried his little girl on his shoulders, along roads and through forests, sometimes at a run, sometimes walking or crawling, tripping and falling now and then, pressing onwards until finally he reached Bialistock, which was in Russian hands.

When Otto's attempts to bring his wife and baby to join him failed, he decided to return to Warsaw, and submitted a request to the Soviet authorities. The outcome was that, instead of granting his request—they deported him and his child to Siberia, to the kolkhoz. Here he lived and worked, taking care of Mira under difficult conditions in a little airless dugout, cut off from his fellow Jews. The loneliness was hard to bear, and he was particularly anguished by the lack of any information about the fate of his wife and baby in the Warsaw ghetto.

Also living without any news of his wife and two children, was Dr. Gellerstein, a dentist from Lublin who had been conscripted to the Polish army at the beginning of the war. He had been captured by the

Russians when the Poles were defeated and was in a prisoner of war camp at the edge of the forest, together with other officers. And there was Yehuda Klein, a shoemaker from Lublin, who had been parted from his wife, his two daughters and his son, and was being held in another prisoner of war camp. He had had a few letters from his family over the past year and a half, but he, like Otto, longed for them in his isolation.

It was hard for the families deported from Poland, but at least they were together and could help one another through the worst of the weather and other conditions. Ita, a widowed shopkeeper from Pinsk who had been deported on charges of black marketeering, lived in the camp with her two sons, Itzik and Elimelech. Friedman, the blacksmith, and his family had also been deported to Siberia. His only son, Haim, the eldest of his four children, worked at adult work, with his father, and was therefore excused from going to school at the nearby kolkhoz, where the small children were sent and where they had to live during the school term. The blacksmith's wife had hidden the youngest daughter, Sarah, to prevent them from taking her. The parents tried to keep the members of the family from being split up, but the little girl was found by the camp commander, and the mother was punished by having her bread ration cancelled, and was also fined for unproductive behaviour. The fear of imprisonment hung over her. Therefore, her son Haim worked double time and paid to release her from her sentence.

The Cohen family also found themselves in the Siberian wastes. They had two small daughters and one of thirteen, Genia, who had to sit on a bridge over the river, counting the logs that floated from the forest. She sat there as long as eighteen hours a day, after which she would return to the noisy, crowded hut, where ten families lived without any trace of privacy. Her eyes hurt, and her body ached and burned from the cold and the wind to which she was exposed through the long hours of the day and into the night.

All over Russia, hordes of detainees and exiles were fighting to survive. And these are but a few of the stories without number about the cruel living conditions, and the people who were forced to exist under them. People like Hengar Lesky, his wife and their son Yosef—their only surviving child, after their eldest, a daughter, had died in the hut where they lived with eight other families and where there was no privacy, even for the dying.

Elsewhere, in another camp, lived Dr. Lieberman, who had been a prosperous doctor in Cracow, his wife, who was a violinist, and their children Adam, Helena, and the two-year-old twins. Dr. Lieberman was the camp doctor, at first, and living conditions improved. But an infectious disease broke out among the prisoners, he caught it, and lay in his bunk shivering and burning with fever. He stopped working and the food ration for his family was cut accordingly. They endured days of frost and hunger, Mrs. Lieberman was at the end of her tether. From the time they left their luxurious home, she had been accustomed to lean on her strong, supportive husband. But now his illness was growing worse. Perhaps some milk would help him. She gave her good fur, her last remaining one, to her twelve-year-old son and asked him to go to the kolkhoz and exchange it for some fresh milk.

The boy set out in the frost and snow with the wind howling like a pack of wolves in the forest. As he was running along the snow-covered road, he saw bloodstains: wolves had wounded the guard and killed his dog. Terrified, Adam turned around and ran home. The snow creaked under his feet, branches raked his face like giant fingers. In a state of shock from the cold and terror, he made it back to the hut, but he was never the same again; his mind became confused and he would alternately laugh and scream, until eventually he withdrew into himself in a state of deep depression. His father's condition also became critical, and he lay with closed eyes and parched, drawn lips. His neighbours in the hut demanded that he be removed, for fear of spreading the disease, but his wife refused. She knew that anyone going to the miserably equipped dark camp hospital never came back. In the end, Dr. Lieberman died during the night. The sick all died at night. Mrs. Lieberman was left with her four children—the infant twins, Adam, who was out of his mind, and Helena, a compulsive eater engaged on an endless search for food. The mother had difficulty in coping with her widowhood and the weight that had fallen on her shoulders. She did not work and the family was starving. Her good friend, Mrs. Gellerstein, the dentist's wife, did her best to help, but she lacked the resources. She had her own children to take care of and had lost contact with her husband since the beginning of the war, when he was taken prisoner. She worried about him constantly and grieved that she might never see him again.

Little did she know that he was in the officers' prisoner of war camp, so close by, at the edge of the forest. And so it was, also, with the

family of Yehuda Klein the shoemaker, locked away in the other prisoner of war camp. Many families were living out strange destinies in the remote wastes of Siberia.

Rachel was preoccupied with a different problem: how to deliver her sack of provisions to her family, who needed it so badly. She was afraid it would be stolen while she was at work. Theft was widespread—starving people find it hard to resist temptation.

One day in the summer of 1941, a Soviet official arrived at the site where Rachel's group were working and, with a mysterious expression, asked for a volunteer to walk back to their base camp to deliver an important message in a sealed envelope. Rachel immediately volunteered and left with her sack of provisions on her shoulder, walking along the river bank, since she knew that the camp was close to the river, about twenty kilometres away.

She walked quickly, almost running, aware that there were dangerous animals in the forest: wolves and bears, and possibly even human beasts. There were stories about escaped criminals hiding among the trees. Rachel trembled with fear, but carried on, srengthened by her sense of duty and love for her family. It was a long way, through reeds that cut her face as she forged a way for herself along the riverbank. She hoped she was safer in the reeds than in the depths of the forest.

On and on she went, her clothes damp with the cold sweat of her fear. Blisters appeared on her feet, chafed by the wet shoes, but she did not stop. The daylight began to fade, and she saw something faintly glinting ahead of her in the undergrowth. She approached fearfully and saw a little shack in which sat a peculiar old man, who looked about a thousand years old to Rachel. What on earth was he doing here? How had he come? When she asked him if she could shelter in the hut overnight, he nodded. Her feet were bleeding when she removed her shoes. How was she going to be able to walk next day? It worried her. She huddled on the floor and fell asleep at once—she was no longer a pampered little girl.

She woke up early and started walking again. Her progress was slowed by her sore feet, and she choked down her pain. Fortunately, she noticed a boat on the river and she called loudly to the man sailing it, begging him to take her and promising him some of the provisions she was carrying. He guided the boat to the bank, Rachel got in, and

in this way sailed to the camp. Once there, she first went to the officials in charge and handed them the envelope.

The family were delighted and surprised when Rachel suddenly appeared. It was a heaven-sent event! They had just been informed that the Polish citizens were to be liberated, and their first concern had been to find a way of letting Rachel know, and here she was, and loaded with good things, too!

The Russo-Polish agreement affected the Drexler family as well as the other Polish detainees. As mentioned, the refugees were to be allowed to settle in specific areas of Asiatic Russia, which they could choose from a limited list of suggested places.

The camp was in the grip of great excitement. Only now did Rachel understand what message she had had to deliver so urgently: the release order!

Yosef Drexler sat beside a map he took from his bag, and began marking the route they would take southwards, in order to reach Astrakhan, a Russian port on the Caspian Sea. He hoped that they would be able to leave Russia for Persia via that port. However, they would first have to cross the whole of Russia to get there. How ?

Some of the detainees gathered around Yosef, looking at the map and the route he had drawn on it, believing the journey to be impossible. But Yosef Drexler believed and hoped they would succeed. It was essential that they leave at once, before the winter came and the rivers froze over. Otherwise they would have to suffer the terrible cold again, and wait for summer. They would not be given boats. This did not deter Yosef. His breakdown, brought on by the outbreak of war and subsequent events, had passed. He was again full of hope and confidence. Everything was turning out for the best. They had been released. Rachel had appeared at exactly the right time. They were all together again. They had pulled through. There had been some who had not survived, but they, the Drexler family, would move on, and would reach Palestine in the end.

Since they wanted to get out as quickly as possible, like everyone else, they began making a raft. They worked for a week until it was finally ready and then they set sail. The going was hard because of the logs being floated down the river, and Shaya and his father frequently had to get into the cold water to clear a way for their raft.

Working together, never tiring, they left the area of the camps. Every so often, they would come to a halt at one of the riverside kolkhozes

and stock up on provisions. Finally they reached Kotlas, the point from which they planned to continue their journey by train. When they reached the station, however, the trains were all full of soldiers. The Drexlers slept out in the open with the many others like themselves who had come here on their way south. They stayed in Kotlas until they bribed the station manager to find them a place in one of the crowded carriages. They were then able to continue their journey until they reached the Volga, where they took a boat.

In the midst of their long and exhausting journey, Eva fell ill and had to be taken to the hospital. Shaya accompanied his wife, first arranging to meet up with the rest of the family at a well-known railroad crossing, when she was well. They took it for granted, naively, that they would meet there as planned. But when Rachel and her parents arrived, the other two were not there, and they waited for a few days. In the meantime, Rachel also fell ill with a severe fever. She was in a bad state, alternately burning with the fever and shivering with cold. In her chilled spells, she was covered with all the furs, but then the burning, parching fever attacked again, to be followed by the chill, and so on.

Rachel lay at the roadside, very sick, with no quinine, without a roof over her head. The parents sat beside her, unable to do anything for her but wipe the perspiration from her forehead and hold her hand. Was this to be the end of the girl born with a silver spoon in her mouth? This girl with the clear skin and blue eyes, whose father had borne her on a silver tray to show her to all the guests at the party in celebration of her birth; who had grown into a talented, independent and lovely girl—though pampered and so somewhat capricious and strong-willed—secure in the goodness of the world and the love that encompassed her; replete with compliments?

Her parents looked at her with helpless tears in their eyes as she huddled, critically ill, like a sick animal on the barren ground, without medicines. Their provisions had come to an end. So had most of the belongings they could have traded, like jewellery and other valuables. Their money was also almost gone. What could they do?

They were almost in total despair, when help arrived from an unexpected quarter. A train stopped at the crossing and its passengers alighted to fetch boiling water. A small group passed the ailing girl and her parents. In the group were a few men wearing dark suits, the

height of elegance in Russia and a mark of status. They looked compassionately at the girl lying huddled and feverish.

Rachel felt that they were staring at her as though she were an animal and she voiced this feeling, in Hebrew, as it happened. She did indeed regard herself as a helpless animal that had succumbed in full view of everyone, a hunted creature at the end of her strength.

The men, who had already passed her, hesitated for a moment, wondering if the girl had really spoken in Hebrew. They retraced their steps to make sure, and in the ensuing conversation it emerged that these were Jewish writers who had been exiled by the Russians. They immediately extended their fraternal help. They obtained quinine, water and even some food, and encouraged the exhausted Rachel by telling her she would make it to Palestine yet, that she had a chance, but what of them? They asked her to write to them in Dombas, the mining district to which they had been exiled.

A single sentence in Hebrew had saved Rachel's life.

Rachel regained her strength, but Shaya and his wife had still not arrived, and the family still had cause for worry.

Finally, after days of waiting, nights of sleeping under the open sky, they decided there was no point in waiting any longer, they must move on—to Samarkand.

Otto Levin and his little girl were also making their way to Samarkand at that time, and so were Mrs. Lieberman and her four children, and Mrs. Gellerstein with her two. Still lonely, Yehuda Klein the shoemaker had gone along the same road only a little ahead of his wife and children. Others going to Samarkand included the Goldbergs and Berele, and Ita and her two boys.

As the news of liberation spread from village to village, camp to camp, the great movement of refugees began to flow through the Siberian wastes, Khazakstan, and Uzbekistan. The refugees encountered Uzbeks who lit their campfires along the way, dancing around them and leaping over them looking for omens of good luck—one was considered lucky if one was not burned. Otto Levin tried his luck, and failed. Tired, hungry, dejected, still carrying his little girl on his shoulders, he wondered if this was a bad omen. He told himself he did not

believe in such nonsense, and plodded onwards with the other refugees converging on the centres where the liberated Poles were gathering.

They were very thirsty, but the water they found was polluted. The arid countryside seethed with people, some failing, dropping by the way. This happened to Mrs. Lieberman, carrying a twin on each arm until she had no strength left, and fell, to be buried without a marker where she lay. She left Adam and Helena with the two infants to care for. They did not manage to do this, and the twins shortly followed their mother. They were not even buried, and their brother and sister trudged on.

Mrs. Gellerstein wept at the sight, but there was nothing she could do to help. She was tormented by anxiety over her husband, the dentist, and had her own two little ones to take care of.

Antek, who had been orphaned before the war, was completely on his own. He envied the Hengar children, Shlamek and Dita, for having parents to look after them. Other lucky ones were the Cohens, all five of whom were never separated for a moment, though there was no assurance that this situation would continue.

Typhus, other diseases and hunger took their toll. The bleak wasteland was dotted with graves. Those people who could still walk staggered on under the blazing sun, converging with others at crossroads. People walked for days, weeks, months, sometimes finding a ride on a passing cart, or taking a train, or a boat, if a place was available—pushing southwards however they could. There were men, women, children, Christians, Jews, liberated exiles and prisoners of war. Members of the free professions and labourers, men of renown and simple folk. Whole families, fragments of families, and isolated individuals. And all of them had but one goal—to get out of the wasteland and find a train that would take them into a populated district, a city, a port from which they could leave the country.

The Zuckermans, however, did not want to leave Siberia. A few months before the outbreak of war, in the spring of 1939, Mrs. Zuckerman's sister and brother-in-law had gone to Palestine, leaving their only child, Lilly, in the care of the Zuckermans. When the expulsion came, the three of them were deported to Siberia, but the girl, who did not have the same family name as the couple, was taken from them and sent to a special camp for children, where she remained for a year. There was another Jewish child there, Antek, but Lilly had not met

him yet. Now that they were free, Lilly's uncle and aunt began to search for her. Under no circumstances would they leave without her. She had been left in their care. Many long days were to pass until they finally found their Lilly. She was even thinner and smaller than she had been when they parted. Filthy, crawling with lice after an entire year without washing, she had also stopped talking since the shock of separation. Now, as the aunt washed her at the railway station, after the long silent months without a word or a cry, Lilly opened her mouth to sob and protest, at last. The aunt dressed her in one of her own dresses and wrapped a cloth around the girl's shaven head, and then, only then, did they move on, wandering until they came to Buchara.

Not finding a livelihood in the town, they went to a nearby kolkhoz where they shared a hut with the Friedman family and their four children.

Haim Friedman and Lilly started going to the kolkhoz school, but could not continue for very long. Haim's father fell ill and he had to go out to work in the cotton fields. His sister Sarah distributed anti-malaria medicine to the workers, walking long distances with her feet bound in rags because she had no shoes. Lilly had a pair of worn-out shoes in which she used to go to school every day. Her aunt made every effort to keep her at school, and her uncle worked day and night as a porter. Lilly and Haim became very close friends.

Then his father died of typhus, to be shortly followed by his mother. Haim, the eldest, together with his three little sisters, were thrown out of the kolkhoz because they could not pay their rent and there was nobody to help them. Everything was so hard that people could barely help themselves, let alone others.

Lilly longed for Haim now, as well as for her parents in Palestine. She was sure she would never see him again. And her parents? Would she ever see them again? She was frightened that her uncle and aunt would also be taken by typhus. Fortunately, they all remained healthy.

In the end, after great hardship and with much resilience, Haim Friedman managed to reach Samarkand with two of his sisters—the little one having died on the way. The three children were put into a Jewish orphanage that had been established in the city, and where Adam and Helena had already found shelter.

Because Shlamek and Dita were not full orphans, however, their mother did not succeed in placing them there. Their father had put up a shelter for the family on the outskirts of the city and had kept the

family going by doing odd jobs. But he fell ill and was sent to the hospital, leaving them without a means of earning their livelihood. The night he died, his son Shlamek, big and strong beyond his ten years, brought him to their shelter on a wagon. The mother sewed a shroud all night long, and the family buried the father with their own hands as dawn broke. Then the mother went to stand in the queue for bread and soup. In the crush, her food coupons for the month were stolen. She was in despair, now, and after being unable to place them in the orphanage, she told them to go out and beg in the streets for bread and shelter. This, too, was not a success and they ended the day walking behind a policeman, pleading with him for help, but he heard such stories every day and had hardened his heart. The desperate children returned to their shelter, but their mother refused to let them in. She had nothing to feed them with, and she knew they would all die of hunger if she softened. She hung big crosses on string around their necks and took them to the Polish orphanage, where she left them on the doorstep. They cried and pleaded with her not to leave them, but she had no alternative. She made Shlamek swear to look after his little sister, and disappeared into the darkness, praying that she would see her children again, that they would meet somewhere, and that if she did not make it, at least they would. She had no more strength.

The children stayed there in the dark all night long. They were famished. It was daybreak by the time a nun opened the door to find the two standing there, broken and weeping. She took them in, and they pretended to be Polish orphans. There were scores of children to a room in the orphanage. Little food was available. But they prayed a lot. Shlamek and Dita had to remember their Polish names and keep up the pretence of being Christians. Jewish children pretending to be Christians were ferreted out and expelled from the place. Shlamek pleaded with his sister not to cry, because they would know they were Jews if she did. The Poles only cried when they spoke to the Virgin Mary, whereas Jews sobbed in times of trouble and sighed "Oy Vay!"—which was forbidden!

And what if his Jewishness was discovered at bath time? Shlamek was afraid, and so he used to sneak into the shower at night, when nobody was there to see his circumcision, the sign of the Covenant with God that he bore on his flesh. That is how he came to meet another Jewish boy, who went by the Polish name, Antek. Antek had been in

the orphanage in Pinsk when they were all moved to the special camp for children, in Siberia. He had come here after the liberation, denying his Jewishness. The two boys became friends and went out together, stealing from the stalls in the market and from refugees in the soup and bread queue. A local adult took them under his protection and improved their methods of operation, taking his cut in return.

I, David, was living near that school for thieves. I observed their "lessons," but had not yet become acquainted with Shlamek and Antek. I had not met Lilly, Genia, Dita, Haim Friedman and his sisters, nor Rachel. We had marched along lines which occasionally crossed, but we had never met—not even in Samarkand, where the Drexler family finally arrived by train.

10

SEEKING A WAY OUT

AS SOON AS she reached Samarkand, Rachel decided to go to the depot where food coupons were issued to the refugees, to find out if her brother and his wife had arrived and were on the list. If not, she would leave a message for them that the family was in Samarkand and looking for them. Rachel was her old energetic and merry self, after her recovery from the illness. It was night already and she hoped the queue would not be too long and that she would manage to get bread coupons. Her parents had remained at the railway station with their bundles.

It was past midnight by the time she came to the depot, and she joined the long queue of people still waiting in front of the place. Daylight came and still she had not reached the hatch. She had noticed an elegant young man strutting around as if he owned the place, wearing a dark suit and carrying a small black bag, his whole appearance testifying to his importance. Sensing her gaze, he suddenly approached her and enquired if she was Rachel Drexler. Rachel was

alarmed at first. What did he want? Could he be from the secret police? She refused to identify herself until he had convinced her that he really did know her family from Luninietz, where they had lived before the expulsion. Rachel did not remember ever having met him, although he looked the same age as the friends she had had in the town. He declared bitterly that it was not surprising that she had not met him, since she was the daughter of a prosperous merchant, while he was a mere "proletarian." He recalled a school dance and described the blue georgette dress she had worn to it, two years before. She knew then that he must have seen her there; she used to have a dress exactly like the one he described. He claimed that she had danced a lot that evening, but when he had asked her for a dance she refused, saying she was too tired. She could see the hurt on his face, even now, and also the hope that now, in their changed circumstances, he might have better luck with her.

But Rachel was still longing for the Technion student, her friend's brother. Anyway, this fellow did not appeal to her in the least. She politely discouraged him, even though she was afraid that he would use his position—he was the depot manager—to take revenge on her.

He gallantly took her out of the queue, registered her on the refugee list and stocked her with bread and soup coupons. He also offered to go and fetch her parents from the railway station, which he did. He then found a room for them, something that was virtually impossible for anyone without connections in the refugee-packed city. Rachel's parents were delighted with him and the unexpected assistance he provided. But Rachel was afraid of him, she had a foreboding that no good would come of this young man's help. She felt that way even when he arranged a job for her at the depot, allocating food coupons. Even when he obtained unlimited food coupons for them. She doggedly rejected his advances, doing her best to keep him at a distance, but he became friendly with her father. Played chess with him. Had conversations with him. Did all he could to get close to the family. They had plenty to eat since Rachel began working at the depot, and they were able to help other, less fortunate, people.

There were many of these. Thirteen-year-old Genia, who had recently arrived with her parents and her two sisters, was one of them. She thought that life in the camp, and the sight of death, which she had encountered many times on the road, had inured her to shock, but what she saw here was infinitely worse; the streets were full of people

lying bloated with starvation, many of them dead. She walked swiftly in the early morning to find herself a place in the food queue. She kept the week's food coupons in a little bag around her neck. Early in the morning, the noisy queue was already a long black snake. Everyone shoved and shouted with hunger and impatience. The police, there to keep order, let in those people who could afford to bribe them. Mothers of small children were entitled to receive their ration without standing in line, and some people equipped themselves with small children for this purpose.

Genia only received the bread ration for her family of five in the evening. She was so famished that she took a pinch of bread, and another and another, unable to control herself, until the basket was empty! How could she face them? She wept bitterly, her knees shook, she pulled at her hair, and finally sank down in the darkening street, crying hysterically.

They found her like that, by then unable to utter a sound. She was taken to the hospital, where she remained for a week. Her healthy, strong body overcame her debility, but her mind did not recover: all she knew was her name. She was moved to the Samarkand Jewish orphanage, as a full orphan although her family were somewhere in the city. However, she did not relate to this fact, having lost her memory. Her worried family set out to look for her, but in vain. Their Genia had vanished without a trace!

Sola, who had come from Siberia and found work at the orphanage, took devoted care of Genia. She had not succeeded in finding her husband, her little girl and her baby were dead, and she now tended strange children, hoping all the while that she would find her man one day.

Yehuda Klein was lucky: after searching for them since his release, he found his wife and children in Samarkand. This reunion was brought about by means of a notice tacked up, with many others, in the food depot. Their joy and unity were now complete. Yehuda decided to re-enlist in the Polish army as a means of getting his family out of Russia. They all went to Kermineh which was an enlistment centre.

Rachel heard these and other stories as she stood distributing bread through the green hatchway at the depot. She took up her position there every day, and the thousand-headed monster that was the queue

faced her, fiery, panting, shouting, raging, trampling, never still, never silent for a moment. From first light until late at night, the famished mass of human beings strove towards the one hatchway, where Rachel stood searching every face to find her brother. She never stopped looking for him, in the streets, in queues, at the railway station, but Shaya and Eva did not come. What had become of them? Where were they? Rachel and her parents asked each other in anguish.

Yosef Drexler decided to go and search for them. He arrived at the Samarkand railway station with the required travel permit and, in his back pocket, some money he had acquired from the sale of a few items of jewellery. When he reached the ticket booth he was shocked to discover that his pocket was empty. The money and the papers had been stolen. This might well have been the work of the young pick-pockets, Shlamek and Antek, or other children roaming the city streets. There was not the faintest chance of catching them. He could not leave. He returned to the room where the family lived.

As time passed, Rachel and the depot manager began to develop differences of opinion, which erupted into open argument. He stopped giving her coupons. Worse still, in a rage, he tore the Drexler family's passports to shreds. What would they do without them? This was a new trouble, which they did not know how to handle.

They decided, therefore, to leave Samarkand for Kermineh.

Perhaps they would find Shaya there. But it was forbidden as well as dangerous to travel without documents. A handsome Polish officer, who was enchanted by Rachel, came to their assistance. He was a frequent visitor, despite the fact that Rachel rejected him. He pretended that he came to play chess with Yosef, but he never took his eyes off Rachel and even went so far as to ask Yosef's permission to marry her. Yosef replied evasively, saying that the girl was still young, but the officer did not give up hope.

Just then, he found that he had to leave the city, in the line of duty. He left a letter with the Drexlers, addressed to his friend Colonel Yanush who held an important position in the new Polish army. The letter was a request that the bearers be treated as if they were members of his own family. He left, expressing the hope that Rachel would consent to marry him when they met again.

Equipped with their letter, the Drexler family departed, fervently hoping that it would make up for their destroyed passports. It was out of the question for them to remain any longer in Samarkand because

of the circumstances surrounding Rachel's clash with the manager. Further, they had to take steps to find Shaya and his wife—this they wanted above all, and to leave this hard, hostile country.

They left Samarkand by train and travelled for a few hours until they came to an out of the way town. They were tired and Hannah suggested that they break their journey here, which was no better nor worse than anywhere else. Perhaps they could find some work and food here, maybe even their lost son . . . who could tell? . . . stranger things had happened. Rachel had met Shaya and Eva in Lutzk, the Russian border town, hadn't she?

The three of them alighted from the train, each carrying two suitcases containing all their worldly possessions. They stood wondering where they should go. Hannah, true to her philosophy of making a home wherever they stopped, set one suitcase on top of another, spread a towel in place of a tablecloth, and began to prepare a meal. Rachel lost no time and went to look for work and somewhere to live. She found a sandy lane, with huts on either side of it and one at the end which bore a sign "Job Registration Depot." Inside, she saw a clerk, wearing the Uzbek skullcap, seated at a table. He could barely be seen behind the huge pile of papers in front of him. Perhaps he needs an assistant, she thought hopefully. The eyes that now regarded her seemed kindly. The man was dark-skinned, square of face and, when he rose, she saw that he was crippled in both legs. As was fitting for a government representative, he was wearing a suit. In answer to his query, she told him that they were a family of liberated Polish citizens, presently looking for her brother and his wife. She admitted, because of his sympathetic look, that they had no passports or travel permits, and asked for his assistance in getting permission to stay in the town. Perhaps he could also help them find work and a place to stay. The clerk agreed and asked if she would like to be his secretary. Rachel was overjoyed. The Uzbek helped them find a room with some bunks in it.

They had arrived on Sabbath eve, and Hannah dug out a candle from one of her bundles, cut it in half and said the blessing on the Sabbath candles, at sundown. Then they ate their frugal meal.

They decided to stay for a while, save a little money from Rachel's earnings, and then set out again in search of Shaya. Yosef was hoping

they would find him in Kermineh. They reasoned that he would try to get there and join the other re-enlisting Polish soldiers, and that, like them, he would be sent to join the Polish Army in Exile in one of the other countries where it was mustering its forces. They hoped that they would be permitted to leave Russia with him, as the family of a Polish soldier. They wanted to get to Persia and from there, perhaps, travel to Palestine.

Meanwhile, they had food and a roof over their heads. Above all, they were filled with renewed hope that their wanderings were coming to an end.

Before long, a new problem arose. The polite Uzbek who had given them so much help, also fell head over heels in love with Rachel. He confronted her, confessed his burning love, and declared that he wanted her.

The bewildered girl returned to the family's little room in the evening and told her parents what had happened. They decided not to complicate matters and leave the next morning. Rachel said goodbye to the disappointed Uzbek, explaining that they were not suited to each other and therefore she was going away in the hope that he would soon forget her. The good-hearted fellow conceded that this was for the best and, to prove that he had no ill-feelings, he accompanied them to the station, pulling a handcart full of food for the family: a bag of rice, a sack of flour, raisins, and other scarce provisions. He had a bad limp and it was hard for him to walk, this little Uzbek with a big soul, who had so gracefully accepted Rachel's rejection, and who now parted from her and her parents without a trace of resentment or hostility. The Drexlers said goodbye to him with expressions of thanks and appreciation, entered the train, and continued their journey to Kermineh.

They arrived at the local railway station, a brick structure with a dirt road for access. There was some sparse greenery, but the countryside was mainly barren. It was a very hot summer. A few Uzbek houses were scattered here and there and further on there were two huts erected by the Polish army for its reorganisation activities. One housed the general command, and the second contained the enlistment offices. Hundreds of refugees squatted on their bundles in the open, in the desert near the railway station. The trees were few and far between,

bare in the yellow aridity, and the refugees tried to find a scrap of shade in vain. They had lit fires on which they cooked their food and around which they slept, ate and defecated. Here, too, under the open sky, they tended those suffering from typhus and other diseases. Some could be heard sobbing, bewailing their bitter fate, others were burying their dead by the wayside.

The Drexlers were fortunate in finding a ruin near the station, and this they rented with most of the money they possessed. The place was open to the wind and weather, but they were pleased to have it, for lack of anything else. Hannah immediately turned it into a home, hanging blankets for privacy and protection against the blazing sun.

They had almost nothing left of the possessions they had taken with them when first they began their wanderings. They had only a few clothes, some rings, a genuine amber and gold butterfly brooch, Yosef's valuable gold watch, and the provisions they had been given by the kind Uzbek. However, their hope of meeting Shaya remained intact, and of crossing the border with him and Eva.

From their shelter by the railway station they watched the carriages full of army families leaving each day for Krasnowotzk Port, where they set sail for Persia, away from Russia.

One of these contained the Klein family—Yehuda, his wife and the children, fourteen-year-old Hava, thirteen-year-old Haya, and little Yehuda. The father had indeed managed to get his family out of Russia by re-enlisting in the Polish army.

But the Drexlers still waited. The days passed and Shaya did not appear. They ran out of food and most of their possessions were gone. The gold watch was lost, maybe stolen. Yosef came down with severe dysentery and lay on a blanket in the heat of their hut, without medicine or proper food. His anxious wife and daughter could do nothing for him. Rachel could not find any work, but she made a few friends; a Polish woman, and her daughter of the same age as Rachel, and another plump lady named Marina, who had good relations with the Polish soldiers. Marina obtained food from them, which she shared with the Drexlers now and then. But this was of little help, and it was hard to keep body and soul together.

Hope began to fail. Their survival was now in question. Many refugees died in the sands, under the hot sun, of typhus, weakness and hunger. What was going to become of them?!

Rachel decided she had to act. There was no money to be had, but the Polish soldiers wanted their alcohol, which was hard to come by, and they paid high prices for vodka on the black market.

One morning, she set out with two empty suitcases and their few remaining gold rings, which she concealed on her person. Her destination was Samarkand, and she was aware of the risk she was taking, with no passport or travel permit. Further, if she was caught smuggling she would be sent to Siberia or some other place like the ones she had so recently left. But need dictated the means, despite her fear. The self-confidence instilled in her as a child strengthened and protected her now.

She left the train at Samarkand and went to the old city, where she was directed to a place where she could sell the rings and buy some vodka "for her brother's birthday." A young man accompanied her, helped her to sell the rings and buy the vodka. He helped her pack them in the suitcases, which he carried to the train for her. When Rachel had boarded the train, she found the inspector, gave him a bottle of vodka and repeated the tale about her brother's birthday party, which would be a flop without vodka. She asked him to help her and he agreed, because of the bribe he had received. He put her in an empty carriage with the suitcases on the rack above her head.

As she sat there with her heart pounding, a Russian officer entered, his red shoulder tabs indicating that he was in the secret police. Terrified, Rachel opened a conversation with the officer, who turned out to be a cultured, pleasant man. The first inspection team that entered the carriage made her blood run cold. But the inspector, who accompanied them, persuaded them that they would find no smugglers, deserters or people without documents in that compartment. He emphasised that there was no point in their searching a compartment occupied by a girl and an officer of the NKVD.

They moved on. The second inspection was conducted just before they came to Kermineh, where Rachel was to get off the train. The train came to a halt some distance away from the station and some policemen boarded. They were approaching Rachel's compartment. What could she do?

In her distress, she turned to her travelling companion and confessed that she was conveying some alcoholic drinks for her brother's birthday party. Her only brother, she told him. She asked for his assistance.

The officer looked sternly at her for a moment, amazed at her impudence, then he roared with laughter at the idea of an NKVD officer and a smuggler sharing a compartment. However, admonishing her to remember that a Russian had given her a helping hand, he took her suitcases and carried them himself as they alighted from the train. When her mother saw Rachel walking beside an officer of the secret police, who was carrying the suitcases, she clutched her head in despair: this was the end. . . But Rachel motioned to her that everything was all right. The Russian walked out of the station, set down the valuable load, and went right back to the train.

Hannah had been badly frightened and it was some time before she calmed down. She kissed her daughter tremulously, hardly believing that everything was safely over. They sold the vodka at once and bought medicine and food for Yosef on the black market. His condition improved, and the mother and daughter also had some food now. But they were stuck, apparently with no chance of leaving Russia. The Polish soldiers and their families had first priority, then came the Christian Polish citizens, and only then was it the turn of the Polish Jews, who had no civil rights and no organised body to look after their interests.

A few Jews succeeded in getting out of Russia in those days, and the children in the Samarkand Jewish orphanage were among them. They received notification that they would soon be put on a train bound for a port on the Caspian Sea, and from there would sail to Pahlevi, in Persia. Their excitement was tremendous. Even Adam, still mentally disturbed since his terror in the forest, smiled faintly, his depression lifting slightly. His sister Helena was delighted at the possibility of leaving and hoped she would finally be able to eat her fill.

The prevailing excitement so stirred Genia, that she suddenly regained her senses and remembered her family. She burst out of the orphanage and ran for her life to the hut where they lived, to request their permission to leave, to say goodbye, to explain what had happened to her, only to find them gone. Apparently, in search of her. She was full of anguish for them, what they had gone through, their hunger in addition to their worry about her. She did not know what she should do—could she leave without asking their forgiveness, without a proper parting? Should she try to find them, on her own, without much hope

of doing so? In the end she decided with a heavy heart to go with the group of orphans.

Itzik, whose mother Ita had died during their wanderings, and who had lost his brother Elimelech in the desert, was also one of those who were leaving, conscience-stricken that he had not taken care of his brother, as his mother had asked him to, and was leaving without him.

The fortunate ones boarded the train together with the orphanage staff—Mrs. Bros, Sola, and the others. The train moved out of the station, followed by the envious stares of the less fortunate refugees standing on the platforms to see it go.

Earlier, Otto Levin had stood holding his little girl, staring like the others at the train he had not been lucky enough to board. He had despaired of submitting requests, of pleading, he could not bear any more shoving and humiliation. Therefore he had dressed little Mira in her party dress, which he had washed in one of the open channels and ironed by lying on it, in honour of the little one's journey: he had decided to send her on her own. He lifted her up to a window of the carriage occupied by the orphanage children. One of the older girls, a stranger to Otto, had seemed to be charmed by the sweet little girl and Otto begged her to take her to Palestine. He gave her the address of his sister there.

Genia, for it was she, had hesitated. She knew she would risk losing her own chance of going if she took the child and was caught doing so. But she could not resist the father's pleas, and the child reminded her of her little sister, dressed in her party dress and patent leather shoes, with a big bow in her dark curls. Perhaps, she hoped, she could make up for leaving her family behind by taking the little girl. So she took her, promising to look after her, to take her out of Russia and deliver her to her aunt in Palestine. The train left with an extra passenger, hidden in the carriage by Genia.

Berele managed to board another train. He was an overgrown lad of fifteen, whose parents had persuaded him, despite his being their only son, to disguise himself as a Polish soldier. His father pushed him along, through the crowd to join the people going to the port. The

parents prayed that their son would make it out of that miserable country.

But the Drexlers still had not succeeded in getting onto one of the trains, and Rachel decided she would not sit idly waiting for things to change. They would never get out of Russia by doing nothing.

She woke up one morning with a plan and a decision. She wore the best clothes she had, combed her hair and left the shack they lived in, heading for the hut of the Polish army's local headquarters. She took with her the letter the Polish officer had written to his friend, Colonel Yanush, who was in charge of evacuating people from Russia.

When Rachel got there, she was stopped by the sentries, who would not let her in although she explained that she had a letter to the local commander. As she stood stubbornly refusing to leave until she had seen the Colonel, a silver-haired man, wearing slippers and an authoritative expression, came out onto the balcony. With a movement of the hand, he enquired of the girl standing out there in the sun, arguing with the sentries, if she had come to see him. On the assumption that he was the man she had come to see, Rachel nodded, her heart thudding. The Colonel beckoned to her and she went inside, to a hall where many officers sat around a big table. She handed the letter to the commander, and requested that he help her family to leave Russia. He was impressed by the pretty, courageous girl, but made it clear to her that they had not the slightest hope of getting out, however willing he was to help them, as long as they had the Jewish family name, Drexler. But maybe . . . if they changed their name and she wore a cross on her breast, he could try to help them, and maybe he would even succeed . . . maybe . . .

Rachel flatly refused to change her name and disguise herself as a Christian. She faced him, stubborn and erect. She was not ashamed of her Jewishness and did not feel inferior, having been instilled with pride in her people and religion from earliest childhood. She spoke perfect Polish and had Polish friends, indeed, but had never felt the slightest constraint about presenting herself as a Jewess. And now, naturally, yet as if by divine guidance, she assumed her proud stance as she confronted the commander.

He was most impressed by her dignity and declared that this was the first time he had ever come across a Jewess like her—who would be as much at home at a dance or at a religious ceremony; who could pass for a Pole, but proudly declared she was Jewish. He complimented

her on her looks and her mastery of his language. He suddenly became human, cultured, almost noble, as he, a man of over fifty, a colonel in the Polish army faced the pretty, fifteen-year-old Jewish girl and tried to convince her that she should change her surname and wear a cross. However, she was adamant. As she left the building he told her to discuss his suggestion with her family and come back the following day. But Rachel, disturbed by the encounter, decided she would not tell her parents where she had been and what had transpired. She found it hard to fall asleep that night.

The next day, Rachel again dressed up and went out. When her mother asked where she was going, Rachel evaded the question. She made her way to the military headquarters, followed by the stares of the other Jewish refugees, who lay on their bundles in the desert under the sparse trees, hoping for some shade and talking about their chances of getting out. Now they had a new topic of conversation: Where was she off to? What did a Jewish girl want with a colonel who was old enough to be her father? Rachel decided to ignore their whispered conjectures and remarks about her physical attributes.

When she reached the colonel's office, he again tried to explain that Jews who did not have an enlisted man in their family had no chance of getting out. He showed her lists and lists of names, on which all the Jewish names had been cancelled in red. He urged her again to change her name, but Rachel repeated that she would keep the name with which she had been born. She herself did not know from where she derived her courage, but she felt that she had to answer that way. Truthfully.

There was an army cot, covered by a blanket, in the room. The girl gave it a furtive glance. Did he plan to sleep with her? If not, why was he bothering with her? After all, he claimed that he had never heard of the Polish officer who had given her the letter of introduction—so he was certainly not taking all this trouble for him! What would she do if he was making his help conditional on her sleeping with him? Would she? Would it help if she did? She was young, a virgin, and she dreaded the moment the colonel would make his demand.

However, he did not. He merely made it clear that he was interested in helping her, but did not yet know how to do so. He would look for a way. She was to come again, the following day. As for now, he invited

her to have lunch with him and Rachel hungrily accepted. Afterwards, still keeping everything to herself, she returned to the family's shelter.

Next morning, as instructed, she returned to the army headquarters, where the colonel received her happily with the news that he had found a way of getting her parents out of Russia. But she would have to stay behind.

Rachel was alarmed. She now had no doubts about his intentions towards her. She tried to remain calm as she explained to the colonel that her father was ill, her mother was incapable of managing without her, and her parents had already lost their son, her brother. The colonel's pleasant face suddenly hardened. He lost patience and declared harshly that, if that was the case—let them also stay where they were! What did she want of his life, anyway?

Rachel took a deep breath, unable to restrain herself any longer. She flung out that she knew what he was after. He wanted her to be on her own so that he could make her his mistress.

The colonel, looking amazed, replied that she was mistaken. He was not short of women. He had quite enough of them. He confided in a whisper that she reminded him of his daughter, whom he had left at home in Poland, and whom he missed deeply. That was why he wanted to help her.

Rachel was ashamed of her outburst. She thanked him for his help and immediately went to give her parents the good news of their departure—due to take place the very next day!

They were stunned, very reluctant to part from their child. How could they go without her? They were in two minds about leaving. Her father would not calm down until she took him to the colonel. There he burst into tears and pleaded with him to consider the parents, the inexperienced girl who had never been left on her own, not to part them. He had already lost touch with his son, and who knew if they would ever meet again?

The colonel reassured Yosef, telling him that he understood his feelings since he himself had a daughter; he promised to look after Rachel, but repeated that he had no way of arranging for them to leave Russia together.

Yosef became sufficiently composed to return to their shelter together with Rachel. Their pending separation was extremely hard for them

to accept, and none of them shut an eye all night. The only time they had been parted since the beginning of their wanderings had been when Rachel went out to work with the horse, near the kolkhoz, and that had only been a few kilometres away. But what now, when they were to be separated by borders, the sea, the war?!

Their Polish friend, the woman with the girl of the same age as Rachel, promised to look after Rachel. In return, they offered her the shelter, on which they had paid a few months' rent in advance. They could move in with Rachel.

She accompanied her parents to the railway station in the morning. The Drexlers were exhausted after a sleepless, emotional night. At the station, they were most surprised to meet the colonel himself, who had come to say goodbye to them, bringing some provisions carried by soldiers. Hannah kissed his hands in thanks and begged him to take good care of her daughter. All around them, evil tongues wagged, wondering if Rachel was really the Drexler's daughter. If so, how could they leave her here? Some regretted that she was not their daughter, and wondered what she had done to win such attention from the Colonel. What more would he do for her, maybe she could extend her help to others, too?

The old engine emitted a great cloud of smoke, blasted its whistle and moved off with Hannah and Yosef Drexler, weeping and torn by their decision, on board. Rachel stood on the platform, also drenched in tears, watching the train bearing her parents out of sight before she slowly returned to the shelter. The Polish woman and her daughter were already installed there, and Rachel felt very much alone.

A soldier came with some food from the colonel, that evening. He turned up again a few days later, informing her that she had to report to the colonel. When she arrived at the army headquarters, by now familiar, she saw a uniform of the Polish Women's Forces on the army cot. The colonel told her that the clothes were hers. He was enlisting her as his secretary and they would be going to Moscow, on duty. Rachel emphatically refused this offer. She was shocked, again convinced that he was trying to make her his mistress, not his secretary. Again, he denied this, assuring her that Maria, who worked for him, was his for the asking.

Terrified that she would be sent to Siberia for refusing, she walked out. She simply could not accept his suggestion. The Polish woman thought she was taking an unnecessary risk in being so stubborn. She

wondered why Rachel was against going to Moscow and what was so terrible about sleeping with the colonel? Such things were known to happen, after all.

Rachel was not sure about what to do, how to act. She would not go to Moscow, whatever happened. Her supportive upbringing, the confidence everyone had always placed in her, the love she had always received, now surrounded her like a protective fence. Perhaps, too, she still believed in her heart of hearts that the colonel was really her friend and would help her as he had promised her father.

A week of anxiety and trepidation went by, and then the Polish soldier appeared again, summoning her to the colonel. Very tense, fearful, she presented herself at headquarters. The colonel informed her that the last batch of Polish citizens was leaving in the morning for Kasnovochek Port, and she would be among them.

Rachel thanked him with feeling. She tried to explain why she could not go to Moscow with him; promised that she and her parents would never forget the help he had given them; even confided her hope of meeting her student again, one day, in Palestine.

The colonel, in turn, told her that he had dreamed he had come with the Polish army to Tel Aviv, where he had met her in the street and she had told him she was married and the mother of a girl.

Rachel promised him again, very moved, that she would never forget what he had done for her; she knew the risks he was taking, knew that some army personnel, even high-ranking officers, had been sent to Siberia for such actions. She left him and ran to pack her belongings. She could not believe she was finally leaving. Perhaps the colonel would have second thoughts? Anything could happen.

Only when she boarded the train bound for the port on the Caspian Sea, did she begin to believe that the unbelievable was really happening. She was on her way. She would see her beloved parents again. Nevertheless, experience had made her realistic enough to foresee that until she met them in Persia, which had remained neutral in the war, many dangers lay ahead and her future was obscure.

11

LEAVING THE VALE OF TEARS

I RETURN TO my own story now, to the day I found myself standing on the deck of the ship still anchored in the Russian port, tensely anticipating the raising of the anchor.

I was surrounded by a crowd of people typical of the masses of refugees filling the roads and paths of Russia at that time. The people pressing around me were mainly Poles and included many Jews, all expelled by the Russians, all seeking a way out of the country, but encountering difficulties because of the sealed borders. Polish soldiers and their families, as mentioned earlier, were transported to neutral Persia and then on to India, Africa and other countries until such time as they could return home, or so they thought at the time. There were some Jews among the latter, too.

The refugees on the deck were a pitiful sight. Particularly the children, whose distressful condition had made an impression on me wherever I saw them—in the Russian wastelands and in towns and

cities. They were pale, gaunt and famished. They had a haunted expression in their eyes. They suffered cruelly from various diseases, which took a heavy toll of death among them. They were like little battle-weary soldiers, exhausted by gunfire, expulsion, imprisonment and wandering across Siberia's endless, forgotten wastelands to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and other places whose names they had never heard until they were dragged through them like beasts in cattle trucks. Man, nature and disease all vented their cruelties upon them.

A rheumy-eyed horde, bleary with the inflammations that were wreaking havoc with them; riddled with boils, ringworm, scabies—I saw them defecating in public, unable to control their bowels because of intestinal and stomach diseases. I saw them standing in the long queues for a piece of bread, a little soup. Supporting a father or mother too weak to carry on. Shuffling along, in the rows of displaced people straggling from the internment camps in the north to Central Russia. Clinging to each other's hands, trying to maintain contact with a brother, a sister, a parent—even when the hand had long since grown icy in death. I saw the children stealing for the sake of a bit of food, telling barefaced lies, just for another helping of water-soup.

My attention was caught by an orderly, well-organised group of children and adults on the deck of the ship. I was told that these were the staff and one hundred and fifty children from the Samarkand Jewish Orphanage. Also on board were Hannah and Yosef Drexler, whom I did not know yet.

At long last, the ship raised anchor with a grinding screech, and left the dock for the open sea. I felt a little better, although my sense of oppression and the tension were still with me. My benefactress had no further need of me as there were other willing hands to assist the wife and children of the Polish officer. No such eager help was forthcoming for the other children crowded on the deck, however.

One of these was an infant I had noticed as soon as I boarded the ship. She seemed well cared-for. Prettily and cleanly dressed, she had obviously been lovingly prepared for her journey. Her shoes were polished until they shone, her socks, dress and hair ribbon all matched the colour of her eyes. But she was wailing incessantly with stomach-ache and the shame of having soiled her panties. With her was a rather big, heavy-breasted girl, dressed in an old yellow coat despite the heat,

who was tending the child as best she could. The girl looked too young to be the child's mother, perhaps they were sisters? When I asked, she told me that the child had been handed to her by the father at a station on the way to the port. The girl, Genia was her name, had cared for little Mira with devotion all the way to the port.

A blue, summer sea stretched before us, as calm as I hoped this new phase of my life was going to be. I was determined to find my way to Palestine from Persia, perhaps with Avraham and Yaacov, the two with whom I had made plans to leave Russia. I made enquiries and looked for them, but they were nowhere to be found. I learned only afterwards that they had had a terrible accident on the way to the port. A Polish eye-witness related how the two of them had climbed into the empty tank of a petrol truck, but had not been able to get out before workers at the terminal filled it with petrol. They had perished there. The Pole could not understand what they were doing inside the tank. I knew that it was their desperation to leave Russia that had placed them there.

I noticed a boy who had sneaked on board ship; a lad with a chalk-white face in startling contrast to his black eyes and his dark hair, which grew in patches on his scalp riddled with festering sores. He wore a few layers of torn and patched garments, apparently afraid some of them might be stolen from him. The Siberian cold must have taught him the value of anything at all that would serve to cover him. He was protectively clutching a skimpy bundle. I saw him gazing intently at the boards of the deck. Addressing him in whispered Yiddish, I asked him what he was looking at. I had no doubt at all that he was a Jew. The boy was momentarily afraid, and then, after raising the huge, dark eyes that stared out of his gaunt and skeletal face, he told me he had seen a mouse.

"A mouse?" I said, surprised, "what's so interesting in a mouse?"

"Mommy told me once," he explained, "about people who turned into mice. And then she died. She just didn't get up one morning. I think she died of hunger. That's what happened to my big sister, before. And Daddy. He wrapped himself in his prayer shawl and died."

He told me how he had managed to get onto the ship, just like me, how he was praying to turn into a mouse until we came to land. He seemed to trust me and confessed to being on board without a permit. He was terrified they would discover him. And, to justify his fears, a sudden shout was heard:

"Here's a little stowaway Jew!" The boy quickly brandished the big silver cross he was wearing on his chest, to prove he was not Jewish. But it did not help him. He was flung into a closed cell in the ship's hold, to be handed over to the authorities on arrival. I hurried away in alarm, losing myself in the crowds on the deck.

The outline of the continent diminished and blurred in the distance. We were leaving the Russian port behind, leaving the country I had been forced to enter against my will, to which I vowed I would never return. I stood gripping the iron railing, breathing deeply. I'm free. At liberty! But I could not rejoice wholeheartedly. I was still afraid of being caught.

I pitied the poor orphaned boy. The truth was, I felt drawn to the children on the boat. As though their fate was my responsibility. I again met the girl with the child in her care.

I now noticed that Genia was also sick. She was suffering very much from inflamed eyes. The little one still had diarrhea and she cried during the whole journey. She removed her panties and squatted on the deck, sobbing with pain and shame. I also noticed a brother and sister, the boy withdrawn and depressed and the girl engaged in an endless search for food. I learned that their names were Adam and Helena. And I saw a boy named Haim, who carried his little sister in his arms all the time we were at sea, with another sister tagging along behind him. And I saw a man die, and saw his body thrown overboard.

We sailed for a full day and night until the ship approached the shores of Persia. The passengers were packed together, sleeping, eating, standing, sitting, vomiting and defecating where they stood. Only the hope that everything would soon be different made it possible to endure that unbearable crossing.

Finally, the ship docked at Pahlevi Port, in Persia. Little boats with tanned, well-dressed, smiling people in them were sailing around. It was an entirely different world from the one we had just left. I had arrived safely, my exile had ended. I was about to begin a new phase. How excited I was!

But what about the boy who had sneaked aboard? I saw the coast guard boat arriving. Some Jews who had been caught leaving Russia illegally climbed down a rope ladder from our ship to the coast guard vessel. Among them was the little boy I had spoken to. Would they be handed over to the Russians, sent back to Russia to be tried and sent to Siberia?

I looked at these unfortunates. One of them felt ill. He was having a heart attack. Was there no mercy? There had to be a way to help them. How? I was also one of the illegal ones, I dared not risk exposure. I decided that once I had landed, I was going to do what I could to help. Especially these poor children. If the adults were helpless, how much more so these miserable children.

The bitter weeping of the boy who was put off the ship beat at my ears.

Some people had come to meet the orphanage children. Among them was Mr. Rudnitzky, the lawyer, who was a friend of my uncle Yosef. I waved to him, wondering if he would recognise me. He did, although much time had passed since we last met. I was happy to see him and learned that, at first, the Jewish Agency had not had one single representative or office in Persia and that a committee was elected from among the newly arrived Jews, with Rudnitzky at its head. Rudnitzky had gone into action, assisting Jews arriving from Russia. I told him at once about those who had been arrested by the coast guard, including the boy. I was pleased to discover that the Polish government official would give them the same treatment he gave all Polish citizens.

I parted from the Polish lady, whom I had not seen for the whole journey, with expressions of gratitude. She told me they were being flown to her husband in London. She had no further need of my assistance, so I was free to help the children from the orphanage. They were accompanied by a devoted woman by the name of Mrs. Bros. She was holding a baby, a critically ill little orphan. Sola, the bereaved woman who had drifted from Siberia to Samarkand, was carrying Meirke, whose mother had handed him to her as she was boarding the ship with her charges from the orphanage.

I joined the small group of adults conducting the children to the transit camp near the port. Here the refugees waited, in straw huts and tents, until they were transferred. Conditions were extremely difficult. It was a blazing hot summer. The half-naked, barefooted children were put down on the hot sand, to lie under torn rush-mat roofs, with the sun beating down on them.

No better conditions had been found for these sick, feverish children. There was a hospital tent in the camp, but it was full. The good tents were reserved exclusively for Christian children, who were better clothed, looked healthy and sun-tanned and were accompanied by their parents or group leaders on outings to swim in the fine blue sea

near the camp. These Christian Polish citizens had a concerned government and families to look after their interests, unlike our Jewish children, who were alone and at the mercy of their neighbours, who yelled "Jewboy" and threw stones at them.

I heard baby Meirke crying when he was struck by a stone. His sobs were greeted by wild laughter from a group of Polish adults sharing their children's fun. The Polish officer responsible for keeping order was not annoyed with the stone-throwers, but with little Meirke, whose crying irritated him.

"Shut up, zhid!" he screamed at him. This officer also made everyone turn out at sundown, including the sick Jewish children, to pray to the Holy Virgin.

There were some young people at the camp who had been in the Zionist youth movement before the war, and with their help I started working to improve conditions for the little refugees. None of us had anything. We were all barefoot and ragged. Clothes were distributed to the refugees, it is true, but the Jews were last in line. I went about shoeless, with nothing but a singlet and shorts to wear, not even a belt.

On arrival, the children fell upon the food they were given. They gobbled down tins of cold bully beef. I saw Helena wolfing down meat and dates, followed by white cheese, first her portion and then that of her brother who sat staring apathetically at his surroundings. Helena then suffered sharp stomach pains from gorging herself after her long famine. Her condition grew so serious that she had to be hospitalized in the Pahlevi hospital, where sick children were taken. And there were many. Adam was also hospitalized. He was found to be suffering from malnutrition, severe inflammation of the eyes and, most serious of all, he was totally spiritless: he did not eat, did not respond. He was blighted. Sola attempted to feed him, but he ignored her efforts. He had to be taken to the hospital. Haim's little sister, who had malaria, and little Meirke, whose eye was injured by the stone, in addition to his having a severe cough, were also taken to the hospital. So were others. Little Mira should have been hospitalized, but Genia continued to take care of her herself. She fed her, washed her soiled clothes and spread them to dry in the blazing sun. I tried to persuade her to send the sick child to the hospital, but she insisted on nursing her, at first, to keep her promise to the child's father. Like many other refugees, Genia had no faith in the hospitals, an attitude that was founded on bitter past experience: in Russia new patients were hospitalized by the

hour, and the corpses were removed every evening. Death was the victor in many, too many, of the battles for life. The doctors were powerless against the diseases that struck everyone, regardless of age, sex, status or religion. Naturally, the first victims were the weak, the helpless, those shoved to the back of the line.

Genia had seen all this, and that was why she was afraid to hand over her little charge. The child looked nothing like she had looked at the beginning of her journey. She was pale, unkempt, foul-smelling and, when her head was shaven, she looked like a boy. Her plump arms and legs became skinny. She was like a walking skeleton. Genia received medicines for her at the hospital tent and took care of her alone and with great devotion—a child she had known for only a month, daughter of strangers. Such tender relationships were formed, it is true, but there were also others, of a different nature. Man in relation to man and even to child, turned wolf, snatching whatever could be snatched, from anyone, anywhere. Nevertheless, even in this human jungle, there shone bonds of fellowship, friendship and family, wherein people aided each other in the battle for survival everyone still had to wage, although the wasteland was behind them.

Mira's diarrhea developed into dysentery and she lost a lot of fluid, but Genia's dedicated nursing prevailed and she recovered. Not everyone was as fortunate. Eighteen children died in the first month of our stay in the camp, and several score were in the hospital with typhus, scabies, ringworm, tetanus, dysentery and other diseases contracted as they wandered through Russia. Most were in serious condition. They had arrived sick, wounded, feverish, swollen with starvation, suffering from severe eye inflamations; every morning brought the wails of those unable to open their eyes because the lids were stuck together. Genia's eyes were now red and swollen from crying for the family she had abandoned, as well as from her infection. Haim and his two little sisters also had bad eye infections. The medical care available was minimal, and the condition was highly infectious. Lice, too, swarmed on many heads, which were shaven, making it hard to distinguish girl from boy. Ringworm and lice infestation defeated our efforts to wipe them out, and so did scabies, which made the children tear at their flesh because of the itch it created.

We waited impatiently for the day we would be able to leave the transit camp, where the difficult conditions were even worse for Jews.

Further, even though their situation was better than ours, the Polish Christians were given precedence in leaving the camp for more comfortable quarters or other countries, such as India and parts of Africa. We stayed on. In fact, our number was growing by the day, due to new arrivals who had heard that the camp was a centre for refugee Jewish children. They came drifting in—alone, or with members of their families, some of whom had pretended to be "real" Poles in order to get out of Russia.

Among these new arrivals were Berele, who arrived in Persia with a contingent of Polish soldiers, Shlamek and his sister Dita, and Antek.

The dark little stowaway I had met on the ship did not want to join us, however. He had been freed from custody by claiming he was a Polish citizen, an identity he preferred to maintain despite the fact that he was clearly Jewish, as he had admitted to me on the ship. Now he pretended not to understand Yiddish when I addressed him, and staunchly asserted that he was Catholic and that his name was Yozef Chefsky. By this, obviously, he hoped to benefit from the privileges granted to the Polish children, including the chance of a quick transfer. Meanwhile, he earned a few pence by stealing and selling empty bottles.

That same summer of 1942, the Polish consul in Teheran authorised the establishment of a Jewish orphanage in that city. I was appointed director of the program on the recommendation of Mr. Rudentzky, who knew of my background and experience as a group leader in the youth movement. I was issued khaki clothes, which I regarded as the uniform of a sort of rescue army, and I became officially part of a team working to aid Jewish children. I was told to introduce myself to the Polish and British authorities as an emmissary from Palestine, and to refrain from speaking Polish or Russian.

I could relinquish my status as a helpless refugee, having become a representative of Palestine. I knew I had been entrusted with a heavy, responsible mission, and I was prepared for it, even at the cost of again delaying my own departure. A new phase had begun in my life.

Suddenly I remembered what the fortune teller had said on the eve of my enlistment in the Polish army. It is just as well that he had not foreseen the terrible war, and the imprisonment and humiliation that lay in store for me. But now I believed that the worst was over and looked forward to the future and an end to the dark road I had been forced to tread. A road that these children had also been forced to

tread, suffering hardships that were too great even for healthy adults to bear.

We focused our efforts on gathering the children in preparation for departure from Pahlevi, but we could not reach all of them. Some preferred not to listen to us, and hung crosses around their necks, swearing they were Poles and belonged in the Polish section of the camp. The other counsellors and I spoke to these children in every language at our disposal, including Hebrew and Yiddish, which I could now speak openly, trying to reach them, without success. They refused to identify themselves as Jews, for fear of coming to harm.

These little ones had learned the hard way that it was better to be a Pole, a Russian, a Christian—anything but a Jew, the lowest of the low. These children had but one goal, and that was to survive. For this they would do things that had been considered sins in that old, remote framework of family, school, and kindergarten which had been so brutally shattered. They had been forced to learn to hit, lie, steal—to trample the dead, even—in their scramble for life. They had lost faith in adults. They treated all suggestions with cynical suspicion. They cared only for themselves and those to whom they were bound by ties of family or fate. As they went through the circles of hell, they discovered that their chances of survival were faintly higher in groups of two or three. Some were carrying out their promise to a dying parent in taking care of a brother or sister, and felt that they could best do so by impersonating Poles.

They were aided in this impersonation by priests and nuns who had left Russia with groups of orphans, including Jewish children, whom they planned to baptise. They regarded this as the holy duty of saving souls. Jewish children were listed as Christians in the prevailing disorder of official records.

Nevertheless, we managed to trace a number of Jewish children in the transit camp, and to transfer them to our group. Our most efficient method was to ask the Poles, especially the little ones, if they knew of any Jewish children among them. They were usually very willing to point out the "Jewboys," the "dirty zhids stinking of onions."

It was interesting that the image of the Jew as someone reeking of onions persisted even in times when that vegetable was a rare luxury. The children hardly knew what an onion was, but they had imbibed anti-semitism with their mothers' milk.

The small children were hardest to locate. The Polish clergy were fairly willing to give up the older ones, since they knew these would be harder to convert to their way of thinking, but they tried to cling to the babies, many of whom had been handed to them by their parents in an effort to save their lives.

At the end of August the Polish authorities finally gave us permission to transfer the children from Pahlevi to Camp 2, the Polish camp on the outskirts of Teheran, where we planned to establish the Jewish orphanage.

But as we began planning the move, we had to confront problems in addition to that of the "Christianity" of some of the children. We met with resistance on the part of a child who would have to leave a hospitalized brother or a sister behind in Pahlevi, such as Shlamek, who had been sitting for days on end at the entrance to the ward where his sister lay. He refused, with bitter tears, to leave without her. We tried persuasion, promising that she would follow as soon as she was well—but he said he had promised his mother never to part from his sister. He ran away and hid and we could not find him.

Itzik also refused to go until his brother Elimelech, lost during their wanderings, was found. He hoped his brother would arrive in Pahlevi, the gateway to Persia, with Poles leaving Russia. No amount of arguing or persuasion could make this twelve-year-old boy trust us. He had learned not to have faith in promises, having been disillusioned so often, as when the Russians had said they would allow them to go back to their homes in Poland, but had sent them to Siberia instead. Or when they said they would distribute bread, but kept the hatch shut. Even his mother, who had been both mother and father to him since his babyhood, and had promised never to leave her children, had died and abandoned them. And Elimelech, too, getting lost like that, his only brother. He burst into tears that aggravated his inflamed eyes, making him cry even more. He was thin and pale, his belly distended with hunger, and he was wild, dirty, barefoot and ragged, but he had a fair complexion and looked Slavic, and I thought, as I looked at him, that if his brother resembled him the priests might have taken him in, and it was possible that they might never see each other again. Itzik was finally persuaded to come with us to Teheran, where we would combine our efforts to trace Elimelech.

Trucks had arrived to transport us, but our problems were still unsolved. All the sick children were put into one truck, leading to outbursts from Haim, who would not be parted from his sister, and Mira, who would not leave Genia. She had formed a deep attachment to her big friend and cried hysterically, crying out her name, kicking and punching until she was allowed to take the place of a healthy child on Genia's truck. There were many such incidents.

I still did not know all the children by name, but there were some who stood out; here and there, in the sea of pale faces, some were becoming familiar. Sad-eyed Itzik. Adam, of the confused mind. His sister Helena, the compulsive eater. Antek the nimble pickpocket, who had to be watched every moment. And Genia—so conscientious and responsible—with her ward. Robust Berele who, like Haim, showed leadership qualities. And there was two-year-old Meirke, entrusted by his mother to Sola, who took him with her and the orphans on the ship out of Russia. His sight had been saved, as if by a miracle, after he was injured by the stone. Sola had now convinced herself that he was indeed her child, restored to her after she had been told he was dead. I was afraid for her, wondering what would happen if she were forced to part from him. I foresaw trouble.

Even getting the children onto the trucks brought a host of problems. This one wanted to travel with that one, these were not prepared to be separated, or were afraid of the journey; they hung onto their little bundles, clutched the bread and jam we had given them, some hoarding it, or lying to get more, guarding the bread-bags they wore on strings around their necks. They were suspicious of us, the adults, not believing that we would provide something to eat on the next day, too. We would have to invest so much effort, still, to return their faith in humanity, put back the sparkle in their dull eyes.

Eventually, after much pleading and persuading, we got them all onto the trucks and we set out on the steep, winding road to Teheran. We took care to cover the trucks with canvas, so that the children would not see and be frightened by the chasms at the sides of the road. They had suffered enough terror already.

I sat among the infants and teenagers, listening to their stories: the bad experiences; encounters with beasts of prey in forests; with bestial humans in the detention camps, on the roads, in cities, on trains, and

even in the orphanages where they were persecuted by Polish children for being Jews.

I told them that in the Jewish orphanage we were going to establish nobody would mock them or call them insulting names, or raise a hand to them. And soon, I promised, we would all go to Palestine and then everything would be fine. But they were not comforted. Genia was grieving over her parents. I told her we would try to find them, but I wondered how this could be done. She had no address. And there were others like her—all they knew was that they had lived near a canal, or at number 150 in Buchara or in a park in Tashkent. Haim Friedman remembered the numbers of his father's and mother's graves—317 and 937. His mother had died within days of his father, and those were the only addresses he had made the effort to remember. The numbers were an indication of the merciless death toll. His sister spoke of how their father had dropped dead in the street, of how their mother had not woken up one morning, and how their baby sister had stopped breathing as she held her, somewhere between Buchara and Samarkand. They spoke about neighbours who had died and some, even the infants, asked: "Why did it happen to us? To me? Why was it me that stayed alive?"

None of us knew what to answer.

The journey continued.

Helena hallucinated about having a loaf of white bread, all to herself. All Haim wanted was his idea of a home—a roof, and a floor to sleep on—for his sisters and himself, before the summer ended. Adam stared in total silence all the way. Genia, who had forgotten what school was all about, found it hard to believe that we would teach them in an organised manner, once the orphanage was established. I wished we were already at our destination so that we could begin compensating them, alleviating their distress, healing these poor children who were guilty of nothing but falling into the line of fire. We had to restore their faith in humanity, we had to feed and bathe them, treat their poor eyes, heal the trachoma that was rife among them, which they had picked up in the deserts they crossed. We had to dry their tears. Wipe out their bitter memories. Was it possible?

Through a crack in the canvas covering, I peered at the terrifying view. I hoped none of the children would look out and experience fear of falling down one of the precipitous slopes into the abyss, onto the sharp rocks that reared below us like weird monsters. There were sheep and goats at the bottom of a canyon, and I also saw a train of donkeys down there. The sun was setting behind a red horizon and I silently prayed that we would arrive before dark. The idea of continuing such a journey at night was terrifying.

Up and up we climbed. Was this symbolic of our rising out of the vale of tears, out of the dark abyss in which we were living, up and into the light?

"We ascend and sing, above death and ruin," one of the counsellors started to sing the Hashomer Hatzair anthem, and a few of us, who knew the song, joined in:

"We ascend and sing, above death and ruins, we walk through darkness and light, knowing and not knowing, we walk the path, we ascend and sing, sing and ascend."

Itzik, the boy who had lost his brother, woke out of sleep and listened to us. His tears had dried, but his eyes were still sorrowful, devoid of hope. Genia had the same expression.

Helena hummed the melody through a mouthful of bread. Haim clasped his sisters on either side of him, listening to the unfamiliar tune. Antek took the opportunity to look for something to steal. My glance, coming to rest on him, delayed his plans, but not for long, I knew.

And Shlamek, who had stayed at the entrance to the hospital in Pahlevi? What about him? And Yosef, self-named Yozef Chefsky, the newly created Pole? What about all the other children disguised as Christians, either by their own doing, or by the will of others? And what of these, here?

It was going to take more than good intentions to help them: they were going to need food, clothing, medicines, re-education, love, warmth. We passed a small village, a cornfield, sunflowers, a little wood whose trees drooped their branches over the sandy soil. Sandy hills indicated that we were approaching the Capital and then, at last, we came to the place we had been given on the outskirts of Teheran.

I saw a hut and some tents, barren, stony ground, and snowy peaks towering in the background, under a cloudy sky.

I hoped we would not have to remain here long. Hoped that summer's end would find us in Palestine. Meanwhile, I prayed that we would be able to do what we had to do—to erect a shelter, however temporary, in this foreign place, for these small wanderers. To bring light back to their deadened eyes, to bestow childhood on them.

12

TEHERAN STATION

AFTER THE EXHAUSTING, precarious ascent, which lasted an entire day, we came to a halt outside Camp 2—our destination. We saw tall buildings, storerooms, rows of huts and the military barracks which housed Polish refugees from Russia. The camp was situated next to a Persian Air Force base outside Teheran, and in it we had been given premises for our children's shelter. I was the principal, Shmuel Ferliebter was my assistant, and Rabbi Dr. Hirshberg was the educational supervisor. Our team of counsellors, all fluent Hebrew-speakers, consisted of Zwi Netzer, Meier Ohad and other experienced youth leaders. They had in common a love of children and the desire to help them. Decades later, I still remember them with gratitude, although I have not mentioned each of them by name. There were many of them, each with his or her own story. Earning no more than pocket money, enough for cigarettes and a cup of tea, they did work that was truly in the nature of a sacred

task, tending the children, drawing them closer to their roots and to Palestine.

The counsellors were assisted by Eliyahu Dobkin, head of the Immigration Department of the Jewish Agency in Palestine, who joined us in Persia, and others.

From spring until autumn, 1942, some 25,000 Polish refugees arrived in Pahlevi from Russia, of whom some 2,000 were Jews—half of them children. We concentrated a number of these children in our orphanage. A big hut, a room with a narrow verandah, and six army tents pitched on the barren, stony, ground were placed at our disposal.

As soon as we arrived we helped the tired children to alight from the trucks. They were bewildered, hungry, dirty, and their bones ached from the strain of the long journey. The toilets were next to the camp fence, in a rickety structure with a wooden floor that opened over a big pit in the ground. There was no running water, sanitary conditions were inadequate, and the many children who suffered from intestinal disease of one sort or another had to take their place with the others in the long line that immediately formed outside the lavatories; those who could not restrain themselves squatted outside, as they had learned to do by then. The flies that infested the camp soon found a new source from which to spread disease.

We postponed washing the children until morning, because no water was available. We were told we could have water twice a week, and we hoped to have some by morning. It was the end of summer and the evenings were already chilly, making me think anxiously that we should leave before winter struck.

One of our first tasks was to separate the sick from the healthy children. The seriously ill were sent to the hospitals in Teheran: including baby Meirke, suffering from an inflammation of the lungs, and scores of others who had caught TB, which was, fortunately for them, still in the early stages. Indeed, the malnutrition, hardship and homelessness of three years of war had inflicted a wide range of physical and mental illnesses on them. Most were stunted, weak and pale.

The big hut was partitioned to form an infirmary for children not sick enough to be hospitalized. Genia was put there, because of her severe eye inflammation, so was Mira, because of her recurrent diarrhea, and Adam, like some others, was put there because of his debility

and mental confusion. Everyone in the sick-bay was given a blanket and there were mats and mattresses on the floor for them to lie on. The more seriously sick were also given sheets.

The healthy children aged eight and over were given three blankets and a straw mat in a tent. They shivered and complained of the cold. Haim and his sisters lay in each others' arms under their pooled blankets; it was warmer for the lucky ones who had a friend or sibling to curl up with, but most had nobody.

Supper came from the camp kitchen, and this brought the huddled children scrambling from their tents. They had already been issued with eating utensils and they pushed and shoved until they received the food, at which they immediately sat down in their tents and started eating. The meal consisted of bread, a few grammes of butter, some jam and some tea. They wolfed it all down. That evening, Haim's six-year-old sister Tova said her first Hebrew sentence, which was to ask for a little more food, because she was hungry. I was shaken by the intensity of the appeal in her words. She fixed her dark, sunken eyes on me, staring out of her tortured white face, her shaven head making her look more like a boy than a girl. Haim wavered, but he was too hungry to give his portion to his whimpering sister. Antek did not cry. He was busy looking for ways to augment his portion. He indignantly claimed that someone had stolen his jam when he was not looking. There was nothing left from which to give him another helping. So he began to complain that whoever had stolen his jam, had also stolen his blanket. Antek sounded so convincing that he received another blanket and, in the end, an additional half-portion of jam.

The tents were in upheaval after the children had finished their frugal meal. It was no easy thing to settle them down in preparation for lights out. We had noticed in Pahlevi that they were frightened of the dark, maybe because they had had too much of darkness in the months-long northern nights in Russia, or because the starless and moonless wandering in the wastelands had left its mark on them. The night hours were very hard, but the lights-out rule applied to the entire camp, and had to be obeyed.

The counsellors told stories, trying to put some heart into the children. They told them about Palestine, which was full of sun and oranges, promising that we would all go there, where it was so good, telling them that all they needed was a little more patience.

But they had neither patience, nor strength, nor faith. In the end, tired out, they fell asleep. The adults were also exhausted, but we had to have a staff meeting at once, to work out a framework of activities. I also had to give them some important information.

The Jewish Agency did not have an official representative in Persia, at the time, but there was a Palestine Office and a Jewish refugee committee. The Jewish Agency had furnished me with a special permit entitling us to receive food, shoes and clothing and other necessities from the Polish government, which provided such assistance to the other Polish refugees.

We had to pay one Palestine Pound for each of the children we had sent to the Teheran hospitals, but we received a total of only four Palestine Pounds a month per child from the Polish government. We were promised additional help from the small but wealthy Teheran Jewish community. The *Hadassah Women's Organisation*, the Jewish welfare society and the *Joint Distribution Committee (Joint)* also assisted us. They helped us with all their hearts and deserve special thanks and recognition for their efforts, particularly Henrietta Szold's youth-immigration organisation. In those trying times, they were like a loving, concerned family to us.

We decided to organise ourselves along the lines of a scouts' camp. The children would take part in various activities and studies. We divided them into four age groups tended by teams of adults. The babies and infants had a special nurse, since the weak and very young needed individual care and feeding. We knew, too, that more than physical nutrition was required; our charges desperately needed reassurance. They needed the security of knowing that they would not go hungry, and this was no easy task when dealing with little refugees who had trouble believing in a better tomorrow. Experience had taught them that everything was false, a lie.

Adam, whose mental condition has already been described, was typical of some others who had become unstable as a result of their experiences. His long, apathetic silences were broken by attacks of fear, when he screamed like a terrified animal, and we were powerless to calm him. His sister Helena's compulsive eating now brought on severe stomach cramps, which we also were powerless to cure.

We worked late into the night discussing ways to cope with cultural, administrative and health problems, until we had no strength left and the counsellors went to their tents, hoping for some sleep. Before I

joined them, however, I decided to make a last round of our camp, to check that everything was in order. As I was walking among the tents, in the dark, I spotted Antek, wrapped to the ears in his blanket, making a beeline for the lavatories. After a short time, he returned, but without the blanket. When I expressed my surprise, he said the blanket had fallen through the hole in the floor. His story aroused my anxiety at the danger of one of the little ones also falling into the lavatory pit. We would have to supervise the place, I thought. I did not suspect him of lying, perhaps because I was so tired. Antek ran back to his tent, after getting another blanket from me. Only then did I begin to suspect that there was something wrong with his story, particularly since he had already received two additional blankets under one pretext or another.

My suspicions were confirmed when, after waiting around for a while, I again saw Antek, wrapped in his blanket, dashing off to the lavatories. He had not complained of having an upset stomach, so what was going on? I followed him and saw him approaching some Persian soldiers who were standing on the other side of the fence. Taught by experience, he demanded "money first!" making sure he would not be cheated. I saw his outstretched hand receiving the money before he pulled off the blanket and handed it over. I wanted to put a stop to this, but just then something more serious demanded my intervention.

Haim had just arrived at the lavatories, and I heard the persuasive whisper of one of the Persian soldiers, inviting Haim to come and spend the night with him, for "good money." I saw the boy look hesitantly at the hand full of coins that was stretched out to him, and I could imagine his sisters' hungry whimpers echoing in his ears. I stepped forward and told the soldiers that I would lodge a complaint against them if they did not go away. They retreated a little distance, but did not leave. As soon as Antek saw me he bolted into his tent. Haim went into the lavatory and I waited outside for him and accompanied him back to his tent.

I realised that I had not solved the problem. Other children would come with blankets and they would find buyers for them and any other goods they had for sale. The selling habit was like a plague among the refugee children, who had seen their parents selling whatever they had in order to survive, or buying something which they immediately resold for a half-rouble profit: bread, milk, whatever came

to hand, for survival. There was a heavy punishment for black-marketeering in Russia, but this did not deter anyone. How were we to convince the children that there was no longer any need for such trading? How could we warn them against the Persian soldiers' homosexual advances? How could we persuade them that we had taken responsibility for them and that they need not fear hunger anymore?

I had a short night ahead of me, stretched out on the ground, huddled in my blanket, but unable to sleep. The cry of a child having a nightmare would occasionally cut through the night, to be joined by others, disturbed by the sound. They had reason enough to cry. Hard and cruel memories. Fierce longing for their lost families, combined with pangs of conscience at having fled Russia and left them behind.

The counsellors hurried to the crying children, soothing, holding them, explaining that the hunger and wandering, the fears and persecution were at an end. From now on, everything was going to be better. But they could not promise Berele that he would see his parents again. Nor could they comfort Itzik for his lost brother, or his dead parents. Nor reassure Genia about her parents and sister, whose address she had lost, who must be worrying about her. Her tears, which she tried to master, aggravated the pain in her eyes. Adam was back in the forest, chased by wolves and bears. Helena suffered her pangs. It was difficult to assuage their anguish that first night, and on the many nights to follow.

The snow-capped mountains indicated how cold it would soon be, here. We had to provide warm clothing and shoes for the children. I would begin the very next day. I tossed and turned on the hard ground. They had to be put into an educational framework at once. Hebrew books had to be obtained, and writing materials. A preliminary survey had shown that some of the children had never had any schooling at all, and those that had gone to school, had done so for only a short time before the war interrupted. About fifty children knew Hebrew; others came from totally assimilated families and knew nothing about Judaism and Zionism. We had to provide some cultural activities, we had, also, to establish order and hygienic conditions, or else our sanitation situation would be very bad. These problems kept me awake, that first night.

I got up early and the counsellors began waking the children, who washed themselves at an outside tap, with cold water, impatient for

the breakfast which was brought at seven thirty. Each child received a day's ration of half a kilo of bread. Of course, some could not restrain themselves and they ate their whole portion at once, while others hid their bread in their blankets, in bags around their necks and other places, for fear it would be stolen. I knew that those who had eaten their whole portion would have problems later in the day.

After breakfast we showed the children how to tidy their tents and fold their blankets, at which we noticed that several blankets were missing, having been smuggled out and sold to the Persians during the night.

Haim decided to arrange a table and chairs so that they could eat in a civilized manner. It was uncomfortable to eat sitting on the floor. I had noticed his painstaking ways in Pahlevi; he had golden hands and was very agile, ready to do any job. But they were not all prepared to work, like him, especially without pay. Itzik, for example, was interested in only one thing, which was to look for his brother. Helena asked if there would be extra food after work.

Since we were in a Polish army camp, we had to maintain order, indeed we had been told to do so by the authorities. But most of the children were not prepared to do anything for the general good. They dropped out in the middle of a task, ran off, and it took a great deal of energy to persuade them to do the necessary jobs, and to imbue them with a sense of responsibility for order and cleanliness.

Haim, who was distinguished by his energy and leadership qualities, got some of the other children to help him. He roped them in and exerted his influence on them, all the while tending his sisters. The youngest child, aged four, had sickened and died before reaching Persia, and he looked after the remaining two, who were his only family, with absolute devotion. He was like a mother and father to them, feeling for them, comforting them and taking care of all their needs. To my surprise, I discovered that he even gave them sex-instruction, based on the little he had managed to learn from his father before the war.

Our first period at the camp was crammed with endless work. I was slowly learning to know more of the children by name, especially those who stood out for good—or bad—behaviour.

Some of the adults who had accompanied the children from the Samarkand orphanage did not fit in with the atmosphere of Zionism

and Hebrew which we were trying to create. Like Sola, who was absolutely devoted to Meirke, but knew no Hebrew. She was remote from Zionism and, what's more, she showed signs of mental disturbance. I knew she would have to go. We were always on the lookout for new counsellors among the refugees arriving in Teheran. We wanted Hebrew speakers who had some counselling experience, but we never rejected anyone who was filled with the urge to help the children.

New children turned up every day. Mrs. Klein, whose husband Yehuda had re-enlisted in the Polish army and was now posted in Iraq, had been sent to the Polish refugee camp with her two daughters. The youngest, four-year-old Yehuda, had been lost in Pahlevi. Weeping bitterly, Mrs. Klein said that he had been hospitalized with diarrhea in a local field hospital, and had never been seen since. She entrusted her two older children to us and set out in search of him. She had managed to care for all three children by herself, throughout the worst period in Russia, only to lose her boy now. What would she tell her husband!? I promised to look after her children as if they were my own. I accepted them even though they were not orphans. Hava, fourteen, was a lovely girl who soon became an outstanding personality in the camp and contributed a great deal. Her thirteen-year-old sister, who was small for her age, and somewhat childish because of what she had been through, clung to Hava as if she had taken the place of her mother. Hava, on the other hand, had been matured by her experiences into a captivating young woman.

About a fortnight after we arrived in Teheran with a hundred and seventy children, our number had risen to hundreds. When I was preparing the records for the Youth Immigration offices in Palestine, I found it hard to believe. But when I finished, the numbers spoke for themselves:

Healthy children in the camp	527
Hospitalized in Teheran	24
Hospitalized in the camp	19
In the camp convalescent home	15
In quarantine	40
TOTAL	625

The new additions were children who had come with transports from Russia to Pahlevi, and from the nearby Polish camp, where they had just learned of our institution, or had at last decided to admit to being Jews. The sound of Hebrew songs had reached their ears and they had come in its wake.

A boy of about thirteen turned up one day, dressed in the good clothes provided by the Polish authorities to the citizens they were about to send to Africa, or elsewhere, until the war was over. He looked good, and I did not recognise him until he told me he was Yosef Lesky, the boy stowaway I had met on the boat. The one who had insisted he was a Pole, refusing to join us. He removed the cross from his neck, apologized for pretending he did not know Yiddish and for denying he was a Jew. Speaking Yiddish now, he explained that he had thought it would be better for him as a Christian. His troubles would be over. But the Poles had rejected him. He was teased and abused. He would always be a Jew to them, even after converting to Christianity. One of the Polish boys had called him a "Filthy Jew" and when he had responded by calling him a "Filthy Pollack" they had tried him and sentenced him to lashes. Everyone had gathered around to see a Jew being lashed, yelling that he was the Christ-killer and deserved to be punished. There were other Jewish children there, but none dared to come to his aid. His life became unbearable in the Polish camp. Now, having heard that the Jewish children were soon to leave for Palestine, their homeland, he wanted to go with them, and not to Africa, where the Poles planned to send him. He had relatives in Haifa, he said, his eyes sparkling. "Their names are Yaacov and Sara, and they live next to Mount Carmel." He became very excited, and so did I, even though I knew how hard it would be to find his relatives in the city, with neither family name nor address.

Yosef felt he had at last reached a haven. His problems were over. He told me that the Polish children were envious of the Jewish children, because they were going to their own country. They would have to wait till the war was over before returning home. He also told me that there were other Jewish children in the Polish camp, but they did not wish to come over to us and needed to be persuaded. They were convinced that there was nothing but "Jewish filth" here! Let them come and see! He looked around him with glowing eyes.

And indeed, our camp had improved much since our arrival. Haim and some other children had found some paving stones and they had laid paths and made a border around our parade ground, which had a flag on a pole. The flag, embroidered by the children, bore the name "The Teheran Home for Jewish Children." They had not called it an orphanage, because they were not all orphans. Every morning, the children formed an open square and sang the song they had adopted:

"We ascend and sing, above death and ruin!"

The words, so true to the reality of our lives, had soared to reach the neighbouring camp, and Yosef, bringing him back to us as I hoped it would bring the others. The morning after his arrival, Yosef stood on parade with the rest of the children, ready to undertake anything he was told, to prove his sincerity.

He teamed up with Haim and contributed much to the camp, helping with the daily bulletin written and illustrated by the children, participating in the preparations for the Sabbath party, and taking the position of top man at the apex of the "living pyramid" which the children formed in their exercise sessions. He even started smiling.

We experienced great difficulty in getting the supplies we were supposed to get. We did not receive any clothes, underwear or shoes, and I went again and again to the Polish headquarters at Camp 2 in order to find out when we would be getting the items we were entitled to receive. One day, at Camp 2, I discovered a stock of parcels sent from the USA for refugees. I enquired why we never received any of these parcels and was told by the Pole in charge of distribution that they had to take care of their own children first, in preparation for their departure. Only after all those due to leave for Africa had been outfitted, would we have our turn. As I was standing there arguing with him, since I was not satisfied with his answer, I saw one of the workers in the storeroom opening a parcel. As he did so, a note written in English and Yiddish fell out of it. I picked up the slip of paper, and read the message:

"Wear this in good health, Jewish children."

There it was—in black and white. It emerged that these parcels had been sent to us by Jews in the USA. This lent force to my requests for supplies and, after much haggling, we managed to get part of the desperately needed equipment. With the aid of some of the counsellors and our own quartermaster, Emmanuel, the precious load was carried to our camp.

The rumour that clothes were to be distributed flew ahead of us and everyone came running to get their share. This was another of the habits that had taken root among the children: something was being distributed? Never mind what it was—grab! However unsuitable or unnecesary, take it—you could always sell it!

Yosef, who was properly shod and clothed, shoved with all the rest of them. He claimed he was sick and should be the first to receive. All of a sudden, he was attacked by severe stomach cramps. He claimed that he had to go to the clinic, but would not leave the line until he had a coat, or at least a sweater, or shoes.

Emmanuel tried his best to supply those who had not received any clothes or shoes until then, and those whose clothes were in the worst condition. It was extremely difficult, virtually impossible, to ensure fair distribution in the crush of pleading children. One small boy stood barefoot while the quartermaster tried to find a pair of shoes to fit him, but most of the items of clothing were in large sizes. Emmanuel insisted on looking for shoes for the child, and while doing so asked him what his name was. He learned, to his surprise, that the child's surname was the same as his own—Gleiher. The child said he was from Galicia and told Emmanuel the names of his parents. The quartermaster was stunned by the realization that this was his brother's son. Both uncle and nephew were deeply moved and excited to have found each other after the years of separation since the outbreak of the war. There were other such happy meetings, but they were few and far between. The cases of separated families who would never meet again were far more frequent.

The clothes and shoes were all distributed that day, but there were still children left barefoot and ragged, and we had already been at the camp for weeks.

The youth immigration services, Aliyat Hanoar, continued to put pressure on the various bodies and committees to ensure aid for our charges. The Jewish welfare organisation, Joint, did whatever was possible. The Zionist women's organisation, Hadassah, contributed an additional two pounds per child, and the Persian Jewish community donated medicines, which were supplied by a Jewish pharmacist named Nissimtov, and many children are indebted to him for their eyesight. He supplied ointments for the treatment of trachoma, without payment. The community also gave us fruit and vegetables, and they

even obtained a sewing machine for us, causing a great stir among the children. Many attempted to sew on it and to look after it, ending in its ruin. Three others were provided by the Jewish Agency, and a sewing workshop was set up in the camp, under the guidance of Moshe Zaltzman.

We bought material and promised young seamstresses that the first items they made would be for themselves, after which they would be expected to sew for the other children. This gave impetus to our home industry and helped us to solve our clothing problem, to some extent, as winter approached. Some of the girls knew how to knit and they taught others. Wool was available, but knitting needles were too expensive for our meagre budget, so they knitted with needles improvised from toothbrushes, producing sweaters, socks and gloves. Genia tried to sew herself a bra, but her untutored attempt produced an oversized garment which provoked the rowdy laughter of her friends. Insulted, Genia swore never to touch a sewing machine again.

We continued to hope that we would leave Teheran soon, before the rains came. The nights were now very cold, causing many children to catch cold, and bringing new sicknesses. During the weeks since our arrival, we had managed to overcome some of the illnesses that the children had brought with them, but it was most difficult to eradicate the lice, ringworm and scabies that afflicted many of the children. The eye diseases also persisted. Every morning, a row of children with inflamed eyes made its way to the clinic, earning the nickname "The Blind Army." Whenever I looked at them I recalled the "hen blindness" from which the prisoners in the Russian internment camps had suffered.

Like my charges, I still bore the scars of my past, the painful, humiliating memories, the anxiety about those we had left behind in Russia and Poland. I constantly worried about my father, my sister and her family, my grandmother, my uncle—but I was preoccupied day and night with the children who had been entrusted to my care, and this distracted me a little. I was unable to help my own family, but I did everything in my power to help ease the lot of the children in our camp. When I placed Haim's six-year-old sister in quarantine, she had jaundice, I thought of my sister's boy, Mottele, who was about the same age. No doubt all the counsellors and attendants had their

memories, too, and saw their work as a sacred task and a compensation for not being able to help their own dear ones.

Yosef was taken to the hospital with a burst appendix. He never recovered. He had managed to get to us, to the very threshold, and then he died. I felt such sorrow over him: the last of his family, full of the hope of meeting his relatives in Palestine, but never to arrive there. But I could not allow myself regrets over the dead, I had to turn my efforts to the living.

Our need was great and our spiritual and material situation was difficult. We wanted to create a Jewish, Zionist atmosphere for the children, to teach them Hebrew, to have talks with them, to establish study circles and regular classes. To prepare them for Palestine. However, the British would not allow instructors to leave Palestine for Persia and we had to make do with the people we had, while keeping our eyes open for suitable additions to the staff among the newcomers.

We had been at the camp for a few weeks. I was busy day and night, and to top it all, had caught jaundice, like several of the children. I felt very bad, looked yellow, but could not permit myself to go to bed. There was too much to be done, endless work, and a shortage of counsellors.

One morning, a lovely girl walked into my office. She had rosy cheeks, blue eyes, fair hair, an upturned nose and radiated youth and energy. She came straight to the point, introduced herself as Rachel Drexler, and said she had just arrived from Russia to join her parents, who had come ahead of her. Her father had enlisted in the Polish army, her mother was in Camp 2. She had heard that we needed Hebrew-speaking counsellors. She spoke Hebrew as fluently as if it was her mother tongue. I looked at her and fell in love. I had had relationships with women and girls in the past, but what I was now feeling for Rachel was something different, unique. I told myself that I was ready to offer her much more than a passing job as a counsellor, I was prepared to spend a lifetime with her. But of course I remained businesslike, not revealing what was going on in my heart.

Rachel told me she wanted to work with the oldest group of boys. I did not agree to this. How would she handle people so close to her own age? There were some very tough boys in that group, made cynical

by what they had been through in the last few years. They had been and still were dealers on the black market. They had done things that were not done in decent society. How could this young girl cope with them?

I argued with her, but had difficulty in persuading her. I could see she was stubborn, dynamic, one of a kind. She said only what she believed. She did not try to be nice, or to impress me, as others did when looking for work. I asked her how she had come to Persia, and she told me that she had flatly refused to change her name and wear a cross in order to get out of Russia. I realized then that she was a hard nut to crack. She related how she had met her two best friends in Pahlevi, wearing the crosses that had helped them to get out of Russia, and how she had torn the crosses off their necks. I understood that she had the qualities required to handle the difficult mission she had set for herself.

But I carried on arguing with her, trying to persuade her to work with younger children. In the end we compromised, and she accepted the job of working with a group of ten to fifteen-year-old boys. For her, a new phase had begun and for me, too, a whole new stage of my life was opening before me.

13

FATHER'S SPIRIT

LIFE IN THE camp slowly assumed a pattern and a daily routine. We began to achieve results, though we worked under difficult conditions. The children received three meals a day and none went hungry; in the morning they had an apple and bread and butter with jam, for lunch there was soup, porridge and meat, and in the evening, tea and an egg. The sick and weak were given an additional apple, some salami, white cheese and a tomato. The children were assured their basic requirements, however minimal; nobody was forced to sleep in the streets, at least. They started to study, after having had no contact with a school for years. Rabbi Hirshberg taught Hebrew and bible studies, assisted by Einzigger and other counsellors. Other subjects, such as general knowledge and geography of Palestine, spelling, and arithmetic were also taught. In the evenings, communal singing and talk sessions were conducted. The counsellors played with the children and told them stories. They did their utmost to give them back their childhood, but this was far from

simple because of their memories and the longing for their families, which increased with every passing day.

It was the eve of Yom Kippur, and I had arranged with the Teheran Jewish Community to bring the children to the opening Service, *Kol Nidrei*, at the synagogue. On my way to supervise the departure from the camp, I heard the sound of heartbroken weeping coming from one of the tents. It was Genia, overcome by remorse and longing and memories of other times. Helena, who was in the same tent, also began crying, and in no time the sad sounds began to come from the other tents, too. Itzik wept for his dead parents and the brother he had lost, Berele sobbed for his parents, who had vanished ever since he had entered the train at Kermineh. Haim and his sisters whimpered, and even Antek, who had never been seen to shed a tear, now cried with the others. The sound of this dreadful weeping mounted, as the children bitterly mourned their lost years of war and wandering and sickness and deprivation. Everyone was disturbed, drawn in to the weeping, including the counsellors and staff, like Sola, who lamented for their dead loved ones, and suffered pangs of remorse at their own lonely survival.

Rumours had begun to infiltrate neutral Persia in the last quarter of 1942, concerning the bitter fate of Polish Jews under the Nazi conquest. Every one of us had left relatives in Poland. News from all fronts was distressing; General Rommel's forces had reached Egypt and there was danger of a German invasion of Palestine. And here, in the childrens' camp near Teheran, the spontaneous, grief-stricken weeping, the concerted sound of bitter anguish, swelled as Yom Kippur approached.

To this day, the memory of that Yom Kippur Eve gives me gooseflesh.

The counsellors and staff moved among the tents to soothe and comfort, but it was difficult. Their eyes brimmed with tears as they stroked and murmured to give the children some hope. I looked at Rachel, who was consoling Haim, promising Berele that she would trace his parents, telling Itzik we would spare no effort to find Elimelech, herself deeply moved.

In fact, we never ceased our efforts to find their relatives: we gathered information, addresses, names of parents and relatives in Russia—whatever they could remember—passing the data on to Shaul Meirov and his Teheran representatives. This was a group of Palestinians who

had been specially trained for their mission, which was to help Jews arriving from Russia. They did so at considerable personal risk, performing the near-impossible in acts of rescue and assistance. Zwi Netzer, formerly Melnitzer, one of our counsellors, was also involved in this sacred task of helping families to reunite. However, as mentioned, most of the children did not know, or had forgotten their family's address, or they had only a confused idea, such as number 10 near the Kermineh River, which Mira insisted was where her father lived. We had not succeeded in finding him, just as we had trouble finding or helping to trace so many other families.

We set out together on that Yom Kippur Eve, walking to the synagogue where the Teheran Congregation gave us a warm reception and distributed little gifts to the children, to cheer them up, sitting beside them during the prayers. When the Kol Nidrei was recited, they joined the weeping that surged anew, raising the hair on their flesh, as it had ours.

The children constantly spoke about their distant families; eating, they thought about their families' hunger, and sleeping, dreamed of reunion. I was sure that the same was true of Lilly, a recent arrival, aged thirteen. But she insisted that her parents were in Palestine! At first I thought she was out of her mind, because of the hardships she had experienced. We had such cases. But Lilly was adamant—her father and mother were in Palestine! I regarded this tough child with the large, glowing eyes, and found myself listening to a story that was totally different from those I had heard so far: she told me how her parents had emigrated to Palestine, leaving her in the care of an aunt until they had settled down in their new country. Then the war had broken out, trapping her in Europe. She had been separated from her aunt, deported to Siberia, sent to a children's detention camp, released, and then found again by her aunt, with whom she had wandered to Buchara and then to a kolkhoz. They endured the hard climate, to which they were unaccustomed, suffering in the heat and humidity after the Siberian cold. Food was scarce, and they had to share a hut with another family, all of whom caught typhus and died. Her uncle had worked as a porter, supporting the distressed little family with difficulty while they looked for a way to leave Russia.

A way was found. They sold everything they had and bought false papers, with which they passed as a Polish soldier's family. Their ruse

was discovered by the Russians when they conducted an inspection of the train on which they were planning to travel to the port. Before getting off the train, as ordered, her mother's sister had managed to push Lilly under a seat occupied by a Christian family. The girl found herself completely on her own, at the mercy of strangers. They took pity on her and she arrived together with them at the Russian port. She sailed to Pahlevi where, she had heard, there was a centre for Jewish children. It was Shlamek, who had stayed behind with his sick sister, who told her that the children had moved to Teheran. Lilly sneaked onto a truck that was taking the winding ascent to Teheran and came to us the same as other children had started to come every day. I hoped we would be able to leave soon; I felt that Lilly was running out of the strength she needed to bear her powerful longing for her parents, whom she had not seen for three years.

Our numbers continued to grow. Children turned up in pairs, sometimes, or in family groups, or by themselves. This is how Shlamek came, suddenly, from Pahlevi one day. The sister he had refused to leave when she was in the hospital had disappeared. He was very worried about her, and told me that one day when he came for his daily visit, as he had done for the past month, she was gone.

She simply was not there and nobody could, or would, tell him where she was. I presumed that Dita, the sister, was dead, but Shlamek refused to believe this. He continued to look for her, repeating that his mother had commanded him to take care of her.

Although children were not allowed out of the camp without permission, Shlamek slipped out and went to the adjoining Polish camp in search of Dita, only to return in a hail of stones that were flung at him by the gentiles, and wounded by a blow from a stick. While he was being bandaged in the clinic, he burst into tears, his pain over his missing sister overcoming the pain of his wounds.

I forbade him to leave the camp, promising to search for his sister. Such searches for Jewish children were a regular activity of ours, but this was complicated because some children were still afraid to admit they were Jews, in case they would be sent back to Russia. When we did find them, we worked hard to convince them that they would not be sent back to the country they hated. We promised to take them to Palestine. We explained that if they kept up the pretence of being

Christians, they would be transferred, like the Polish children, to Africa. Then they would have no hope of ever reuniting with their families and people.

But they were hard to convince. They believed no one, and relied only on themselves, their instincts, and the ability to survive that had kept them alive until now. They whispered in my ear that it was best not to be identified as a Jew in these crazy times. This was the lesson they had learned. They feared that their food would be cut if they were exposed as Jews. They hoped their families would also be allowed to join them as Christians.

Under the circumstances, we had to work fast to show them that we—their brothers and fellow Jews—were the ones who could and really wanted to save them. In this way, at the last moment, Moshik was taken off a train that was about to leave Persia. We had found out in the Palestine office in Teheran that Moshik was Jewish, the son of a rabbi from Cracow. But Moshik was strong and stubborn and a troublemaker from the moment he arrived. Apart from declaring that he was religious, the son of a rabbi, in order to get *kosher* food, he gave away nothing about himself; not how he had come to be on that train, nor what had happened to him during the war. He would confide in nobody. But we were happy to have returned him to the fold.

Success was not always easily won. As in the case of little Meirke, who had to be hospitalised as soon as he arrived. Sola visited him every day. He was two years old and was born after the family had been deported to Russia, therefore he was uncircumcised. When he recovered and Sola wanted to take him from the hospital, they refused to hand him over to her on the grounds that he was not a Jewish child. They pointed out that he now wore a cross and that he had no sign on his flesh to prove he was a Jew. We eventually got him back, but only after a tremendous effort. Then we intensified our search for his mother. But she did not come to Teheran. Would she ever appear and rejoin her son? Meirke had begun to call Sola "Mama." Then, one day, his mother came! The three of them were a heartbreaking sight. The child neither remembered nor wanted his mother, and the two of them sobbed bitterly, but for different reasons. Sola was also crying, bereft for the third time of a beloved child! She left the children's home, inconsolable in her grief.

Shlamek's sister was not found, despite all our efforts, and it was most likely that she had died, like Mrs. Klein's son who vanished without a trace from the Pahlevi hospital. Mrs. Klein accepted that she would never see her child again, unlike Shlamek, who would not give up.

No matter how hard we tried to make him face the sad fact that she had probably died in the hospital, some hidden sense told him his sister was alive, possibly somewhere close at hand. We tried to distract him, to interest him in other things, to draw him into the program of work and studies we had established. Einzigger went around with a handbell, calling the children to take part in the day's activities, but Shlamek would have none of it.

We posted a list of new arrivals on the wall of the hut every so often. Shlamek, Itzik and Genia would be among those who scanned it for the names of their dear ones, but in vain. However, there were cases of people finding each other, against all odds, such as Meirke and his Mother, and Haim, Lilly's long lost friend from Buchara, whom she had never expected to see again.

One day, we heard that Polish refugees had arrived at Ashabad, and that there were some Jewish children with them. We acted at once. Zwi went there, but there was not one Jewish child among the hundred refugees.

As for Shlamek, he repeated that he was absolutely sure Dita was somewhere close by.

I was making my way towards the Polish camp, to arrange some matters, when I anxiously noted the cloudy skies warning of impending rain. We would have to get more blankets for the children, especially since those we had were in the habit of disappearing, and we would also need mattresses so that the children would not have to lie down on the cold ground. We could not begin to hope for beds, but perhaps we could at least get those two items for the winter. I had come to terms with the fact that we would not be leaving for Palestine within the week, as we had been initially promised, and that we would not be spending the winter in our homeland. We also had problems with the children's laundry, and I was going to see if we could hire a woman from the Polish camp to do the washing a few times a week.

On the way, I passed the big tent where Rachel's group of older boys lived. Voices were raised in loud argument, and I glanced inside

to see what was going on. Rachel stood facing Moshik, who was already a man, a head taller than the girl; he seemed about to hit her. I understood that there was an argument about some bread Moshik had hidden under his blankets. Rachel had repeatedly explained that there was no need to do this, since nobody here would ever again go hungry. This struggle had been going on for a month already, from the very first day, and we had no success in stamping out the compulsive hoarding of bread, often smeared with jam and margarine. They hid the bread under their blankets where it grew mouldy and attracted flies and mice and was the cause of thefts and fights.

Rachel was trying to explain, yet again, that it was illogical to hoard. Moshik disagreed and, to my surprise, so did Haim. He, so attached to his charming counsellor, had become embittered since his sister's hospitalisation. Worry had made him aggressive. He was sure she had fallen ill through malnutrition. Rachel reminded him that the weak and sickly children had received additional food, and that his sister's jaundice had begun in the past. Haim refused to accept this. He was deeply worried about her condition and refused to study, could not concentrate, and was angry with the whole world. He was from a religious background and had seen to it that his sisters ate only kosher food, and now he was furious with God Himself.

Itzik, who had accepted the loss of his brother by now, and had come to terms with the fact that he was alone in the world, was sitting in a corner, beating some sugar into the white of an egg. This was a great delicacy among the children, taking the place of candy, sweetening their bitter lives a little.

When things calmed down, Rachel resumed her lesson. She was trying to teach them *Bialik's* poem—*"Hamatmid"*—about a diligent Yeshiva student. In the absence of books to study from, she was quoting it by heart and trying to awaken their interest. This was proving difficult. Moshik asserted that this was no time to study romantic poems, what they needed to learn was how to shoot, fight and make money. Haim was preoccupied with his sister's serious condition. Itzik was sunk in longing for his brother. None of the others had any time to spare for poetry either. However, Rachel did not despair.

I thought about her as I walked on, and decided that if I found the time, I would have a chat with her tonight. Perhaps I would even let her know that I liked her. If only I had some time for myself, for love! I was so busy now, though, that I was afraid I would not be able to

take even a few moments tonight, to get closer to Rachel. With a sense of regret, I quickened my steps in the direction of the Polish camp.

I received a half-hearted promise of a few more blankets from the Poles, and a flat refusal of any mattresses. I then went in search of a washerwoman. I met a stout woman on the way and asked her if she knew anyone who would be interested in working as a washerwoman at the Jewish childrens' home. She promptly suggested herself for the job and we arranged that she would start the next day. The girl who was with her pulled a face and muttered something about stinking Jews. Her mother, who wanted the job, told her to be quiet. But the daughter, a pert blonde, persisted, "It's a fact," she said, "last week, a Jewish girl came to our home in Teheran, and she stank of onions, she got on everybody's nerves!"

The mother again told her to be quiet, but my suspicions had been aroused and I decided to check further. I received no response to my questions about the exact location of the onion-smelly girl. The Polish girl evaded us, but I persisted.

We conducted feverish enquiries at the Christian institutions in Teheran over the next few days and discovered a beautiful little girl of six, whose name was Christina and who, according to Shlamek's description, was his little sister Dita. She had a bright ribbon in her fair hair, and she was wearing a pretty blue dress that matched her eyes. She had new shoes. These were signs I had come to recognise: they were doing everything they could to Christianize her, including bribing her with presents of clothes and sweets. She would be baptized soon and we had to act fast.

I spoke to the priest and showed him a permit from the Polish authorities allowing me to transfer Jewish children to our camp. The priest emphatically denied that the child was Jewish. It was out of the question! Like the other adults in the institution, he was charmed by the little girl. I decided that the best thing to do was to confront the child directly. I addressed her in Yiddish, but she answered me in fluent Polish that she did not understand what I was saying. She pulled away from me. I spoke to her in Polish, telling her that her brother Shlamek was in our camp, and that he missed her very much and was very worried about her since she disappeared from the hospital. But

the child continued to deny being Jewish, said she had no brother, insisted she was Polish.

I had not told Shlamek that we may have found his sister, for fear of a possible mistake. At first, I considered arranging a surprise meeting between the two children. However, things had become complicated and I now needed his help. I told him. He was moved to tears and eagerly agreed to accompany me and, if the girl was indeed Dita, persuade her to come with us. We set out together for Teheran.

At the time, Teheran was the espionage centre for the three powers, who strove to exploit Persia's neutral status for their information gathering activities. They stopped at nothing, including kidnapping children and adults, to acquire inside information. The Americans and British sniffed around every nook and cranny, but the Russians were the most efficient. They had secret agents who had even infiltrated into Russian Jewish families in Teheran. The "Devuyka," the well-known Polish Investigation Department 2, were also all over the city, looking for deserters from the Polish Army who had illegally slipped in and vanished among the masses of refugees. I was aware that if they discovered me, I would be forced to re-join the army. But I now had a more important, vital task. For this reason and also because I did not have much spare time, I seldom went into the city. Now, however, I had to make the trip.

Shlamek was very excited and I shared his feelings, although I was apprehensive. As we travelled I noticed a sight that was familiar to me, but new in Teheran—bread queues, with irritable, shoving people shouting: "Who's last?" and "I'm next!" I had heard about the deteriorating economic situation in the country, which the Persians blamed on the influx of Polish refugees. They were looking for ways to get rid of them. Apart from the bread queues, I saw no other signs of serious shortages. The shops in the main streets of Teheran were full of the best of everything.

We came to the institution. Shlamek identified his sister at once, but when he ran to embrace her, she scornfully shoved him away and declared:

"I hate stinking Jews who crucified Jesus!"

Shlamek, stunned, could not believe his ears. He cajoled and pleaded with his sister to accompany him, but she refused absolutely. In the end, we persuaded her to come for a visit.

She turned up one day, wrinkled her little nose and complained of the Jewish smell, insisting on being taken back to the Christian place. Shlamek was shocked and depressed. How had this happened? Why? he found it hard to understand or believe. But that was the reality—Dita denied both him and her Jewishness. We knew she was due to be sent to Africa in the near future. We would lose her. Something had to be done! We sent Genia to her with the story that her brother was critically ill, that she must visit him. But the child continued to insist that she had no brother.

Then Shlamek had the idea of appealing to her in the name of their dead father. We took him in secret to the Christian institution, at night, and he sneaked into her room, wrapped in a sheet like the shroud the family had made for their father when they buried him in Samarkand. He crept to her bed and whispered:

"I am your father's spirit come to remind you that you are a Jewess! A JEEEEWESSSSS!"

The little girl burst into tears and covered her head with her blanket. But her brother did not relent. He berated her in the name of their father. Reminded her that she was a Jewess and scared her so much that she began to shout in Yiddish for her brother to come and save her. Then he removed his disguise. Dita flung herself into his arms with a terrible cry, sobbing as she told him she had had an awful dream about their father, who had come to her from the land of the dead and told her he would throttle her if she converted to Christianity. Shlamek comforted her and told her he would come in the morning to fetch her. She remained trembling in her bed, and we returned to the camp so that we could return the next day and legally reclaim Dita. Although we were afraid she would change her mind, we thought it best to act within the law.

When we returned the next day, Dita consented to come back with us, but on condition that her room-mate and best friend could come as well. This child, apparently, was also Jewish. But she, Sofia, flatly refused to go with us. Like Dita, she denied all connection with Judaism. She pulled out her cross and swore she was Christian. As she waved the cross excitedly before us, a slip of paper fell out of it. I picked up the folded paper, opened it and saw that it was a note written in Yiddish declaring that the child, Sofia Gellerstein, was Jewish—it was signed by her mother. Sofia could no longer deny being Jewish.

But the priest said we had written the note ourselves and would not allow us to take Sofia back to our camp with Dita.

We decided to kidnap Sofia, and we did. We came to the institution after dark and with the aid of a bribe, threats and agility, we managed to get the little one out.

Next morning, the Polish police arrived and charged us with kidnapping a child from the Polish institution.

We argued with them, saying it was a lie, a blood-libel, meanwhile gaining time while we arranged matters. We had just received news that Haim's sister Tova had died in the hospital. We transferred Sofia's name to the dead girl's documents, including the certificate granting permission to immigrate to Palestine, which all the children had received. We could now brandish these documents as proof in black and white that the child, Sofia Gellerstein, was a ward of the Jewish Children's home and the whole matter was a fabrication and a libel.

That problem was solved. Now we had to attend to Haim, who had fallen into a state of apathy in his grief over the death of his sister, and as a result of his stricken conscience at having failed in his promise to take care of her. His dejection and apathy were completely uncharacteristic of this dynamic lad. We had difficulty in persuading him that he should pull himself together for the sake of Sarah, his remaining sister. This was the only argument that worked, however, and he roused himself to take part in the bar mitzvah celebrations we were preparing for Antek, his classmate and protégé.

Dita and Sofia were placed with their own age group and, like all the other little girls, they attached themselves to their counsellor, Hannka, Meirke's mother, who sang to them in the kind of gentle voice they remembered from their own homes. They were hungry for family warmth, the touch of their lost mothers' hands.

Hannka told them stories, carressed them, comforted them. They deluged her with questions about Palestine and life over there. Now, no longer hungry for bread, no longer preoccupied with surviving from day to day, they could tearfully indulge in memories of beloved relatives and they could also weave dreams of a better future. Haim and Sarah had some family photographs, guarded through thick and thin, which they looked at constantly, showing the counsellors what

beautiful parents they had had, what clothes! How many relatives. And now, they and most of the others found themselves here, alone in the world.

Adam, always so deep in his withdrawal, was overcome by emotion when he met Sofia and recognised her as the daughter of his parents' friends. He seemed to have become his old self, but his emergence was short-lived and he soon sank into apathy again. Helena also turned her back on the child, after a brief show of happiness at meeting her, in favour of her food obsession.

We waited on tenterhooks for the exit permit that would see us on our way to Palestine. But it was repeatedly delayed. A plan to move the children via Iraq was blocked by the Iraqis, who were not interested in encouraging Jewish immigration to Palestine. For this and other reasons, the Turks joined in this refusal to allow the children passage through their country. It was suggested that the children be flown to Palestine, but no planes were available, owing to the war. So we stayed put, under difficult conditions, making every effort to keep the children's spirits up.

We took every opportunity to have a party, and the fruit we received from the Jewish community was a staple of our Sabbath and other celebrations. One such party was in honour of Lilly's fourteenth birthday. Her tent was decorated, a muslin curtain was draped over the entrance, and the blankets were neatly folded. Haim made her a table for a present. It was spread with a sheet from the infirmary, and a bowl of fruit and nuts was placed in the centre. The girls in Lilly's group, with several invited guests and counsellors, myself among them, seated themselves in a circle, and there were so many that a makeshift table had to be set up outside. Both tables were decorated with wildflowers in tin cans. Lilly, glowing with pleasure, sat in the seat of honour. Genia, her newfound friend, wished her a happy birthday and added that she hoped she would spend the next one with her parents in Palestine. Her friends gave her drawings and wrote greetings in her diary—a notebook adorned with a picture of the Persian Royal Family. After the songs and recitations, Lilly received her present of a box of coloured crayons, which she immediately used to begin drawing strongly coloured pictures in her notebook.

She loved drawing and writing, and was active in producing the camp bulletin. These activities helped her to cope with her powerful longing to be reunited with her parents in Palestine. She would have been even happier had Haim been present at the party, but the boy, mourning his sister, refused to attend any parties.

In the middle of it all, I was urgently summoned to the main gate. A carriage had arrived, which I thought contained fruit and vegetables from the Jewish community. Instead, a woman with somewhat slanted eyes, her dark hair drawn back in a knot, alighted. She introduced herself as Zippora Shertok (later, Sharett) and explained that she had come from Palestine to help us. I was very surprised at the arrival of this lady, who was the wife of Moshe Shertok, head of the political department of the Jewish Agency, and wondered how she had managed to come to Persia, since the British were not allowing Palestinian Jewish emmissaries to come here.

The Allies were suffering many defeats in the Far East, at the time, and Shertok was active in mobilising a brigade of Palestinian Jews for the British army. Mrs. Shertok explained that she felt the need to help us, and her husband had personally asked the British High Commissioner to Palestine to allow her to come. This permission had been granted, and Zipporah Shertok left her small daughter and two sons to come to the aid of the Teheran Children, in the conviction that they needed her. She was, indeed, a great help. She took an active part in the long, drawn-out negotiations with the English, the Poles and the Persians concerning our transfer to Palestine; but she did not leave it at that, she tended the children with her own hands and handled any big or small problem that arose. We shared the hope of leaving before the winter, which we feared because of the inadequate housing and living conditions.

One Friday, we set out on a long-anticipated outing with the children. We went hiking in the mountains, and it was our first outing since our arrival. Some of the children were barefoot, since we did not have shoes for everyone. But their eyes shone happily and they sang the new Hebrew songs they had learned. Shlamek and Dita walked hand-in-hand, talking loudly about how they would soon sail for Palestine. How good that would be! They would go wherever they liked in their very own country, and they would never be hungry, never be cold, because they had grown accustomed to all that in Russia.

On the way, we passed the Polish camp and our party of hikers drew envious looks. They knew that the Jewish children would soon be on their way to Palestine, their homeland. Whereas they had left a defeated homeland and would soon be sent to another exile, never knowing when they would return home.

This was a different, new, encouraging feeling—Poles envying Jews!

A new date was set for our departure—the end of October. A special headquarters had been set up in Palestine, under *Henrietta Szold*, to help the Teheran Children and to facilitate their absorption once they arrived. I was in touch with her, by mail, and she expressed her appreciation of my work with the children. She knew that none of the counsellors had a background or training in education, and that despite this lack of qualifications, much had been achieved by all of us.

One sentence, in her last letter, surprised me. She enquired whether I planned to come to Palestine with the children, or remain in Persia. I would most certainly immigrate with them. I regarded it as my duty to see them safely home. I had been dreaming of going to Palestine for years, and now the time had finally come. It was obvious that there was no other place in the world for me. Apart from which, I had become very attached to my charges and wanted nothing more than to arrive with them at the last stop on their journey of hardship and grief; they needed me all day and every day, and I would be there to care for them, specially on the last lap of their journey to Palestine. After all, we had already planned how we would march when we landed, neatly and tidily dressed, celebrating the return from exile.

We exerted ourselves to find suitable clothing and shoes for each and every child, as we counted the days until our departure.

14

THE TEHERAN JEWISH CHILDREN'S HOME

THERE WERE REPEATED delays and exhausting negotiations concerning our departure, but nothing seemed to lead to a firm promise. Moshe Shertok kept his wife informed about developments, using a special code, and she relayed the information to me.

Eventually, we were notified that the first group of children would be able to leave for Iraq on the 10th of November, 1942, and that the Iraqis would "look the other way" if the children were transported in American, British or Polish trucks. We began to make preparations, only to be told that the date had been changed to the end of November.

Meanwhile, a cold, rainy autumn was in full force, which complicated matters even further for us.

The sewing detachment, headed by Zaltzman, one of the counsellors, numbered some seventy children who had been trained to sew on the three machines donated by the Jewish Agency. The sewing workshop operated in several shifts and we sold the day shift's products in order to buy necessities. The night shift was devoted to production for our own requirements.

Quantities of sweaters were knitted, too, for the oncoming winter, which we realized would be spent in the camp, at least in the beginning. The chilly nights were an indication of what we could expect: frost at night and freezing mornings. Already, the children found it hard to go out to the lavatories, which were a long way from the tents. To add to their other hardships, they now also suffered from chilblains on their fingers and toes. They began to linger under their blankets in the morning, delaying the moment when they would have to get up. We had to hurry them, shivering with cold, to get their morning meal from the central kitchens and to attend the morning parade, which we continued to hold every day in spite of the wintery weather.

More and more children were joining our ranks, some of them left with us by parents living in the Polish camp, and we did our best to merit their trust in us.

Our games and sports events also continued in spite of the overcast weather, and we practised our marching tempo, because it was important to us that we march ashore with style when we arrived in Palestine. Our days were still organised on the lines of a scout camp, with lessons every day until noon. These lessons were often disrupted, not only by the weather, but also by visiting committees of one kind or another, sent by the Polish Government in Exile, or the British.

Nevertheless, we tried to keep the children at their books, in spite of the shortage of teachers and equipment. They were at different levels, having stopped learning at different stages, if they had ever learned at all, or having forgotten much of what they had learned. Many had trouble concentrating. Most wanted to study, but had other things on their minds, such as the constant anticipation of the next meal. They would burst out in the middle of a lesson at the slightest hint that something was being distributed. At such times, a spirit of madness would sweep through the camp, shaking the delicate emotional balance of the children, and they would drop everything and dash to stand in line as they had learned to do in Russia. The long queue would surge

and sway, and everybody would quarrel with everybody else, shouting and shoving.

I stood watching Haim's sister, who had brought him along to fight for her and see that she got her share of whatever was going. He did not hesitate to use force and, glaring violently, demanded that his sister be given what was due to her. He was quite prepared to lie and cheat for her. I could hardly recognise the constructive, decent boy I knew, and it was the same with Shlamek and Dita. And all of them—pushing their way in through windows, doors, cracks, to where the distribution was being made. Their most powerful urge was to acquire the basics of food, clothing and shoes. This drive was so fierce that one could not leave a pot of coffee or a slice of bread on an office desk without it disappearing immediately, taken by someone who, while not hungry at the moment, needed to hoard it for the future. Even the smallest children hoarded whatever came to hand: napkins, tubes of toothpaste, clothing, shoes, even rags.

Another plague we could not cure was their black market dealings. They exchanged tomatoes for apples, saved the eggs they received in order to sell them for a few pence to any comer—inmates of the neighbouring camps, Persians, Poles, whoever came to the fence. At times it seemed that our whole camp was nothing but a vast market. Whatever we handed out, they took. Something's being given—Take! Whether you need it or not. This was their motto. And they discarded nothing. Instead of throwing away old clothes when issued with new ones, they hid them in their bundles. Sometimes they would sell the new clothes or shoes over the fence.

Even Adam behaved that way: he hoarded bread. Moshik, the tough guy, wept copiously and swore that he had not been given shoes; he walked barefoot in the bitter cold even though he had two pairs of shoes, extorted from other children. Shlamek and Dita prepared a supply of rusks for themselves, drying bread and storing it in their blankets, until rain penetrated the tent and they discovered that their whole stock had gone mouldy. The two of them cried heartbrokenly over their loss, no matter how we tried to console them and reassure them, and the others, that there was no need to hoard food. We pointed out that whatever was not spoiled was stolen, anyway.

Some of the children had managed to keep a piece of jewellery, a photograph, or some other memento from home. They guarded these

objects fiercely, but sometimes without success. Antek had ways of getting in wherever he wished; no lock or hiding place could foil him. He also visited our little storeroom, when nobody was around.

Some of the children still had the little bread bags they had sewn for themselves out of rags and tied around their necks, for keeping the bits of bread they received or bought, to ensure themselves against hunger. They would not part with these bags, even when they showered, and even though they attracted flies and mice.

There was always a long queue next to the clothes closet in our small storeroom; the children would come to receive or exchange, to ask, plead, or argue. The closet contained a sack of shoes, some blankets, torches, and other items that filled it to bursting. Most of this stuff was not suitable for us. Clothes that were too big could be altered in the sewing workshop, but shoes could not be made to fit. There were many who came and pleaded for a pair of shoes, which they needed badly now in the rainy season.

I would sit in my small office, in the midst of the turmoil, trying to organize the distribution of shoes among the ever-increasing population of children in this camp of ours, hoping all the time that the end was in sight and we would finally be on our way. But however great the difficulties, we derived enormous satisfaction from our achievements.

Everyone was tensely anticipating the departure, although some of the children were ambivalent about it. They knew that once we left, they would be even further away from their families who had remained in Russia, and whose fate was unknown. Genia, for example, and Berele. And Itzik, too, who was afraid we would leave before his brother was found, although, with the passage of time, the hope of finding him grew slimmer and slimmer. Still, we did not stop searching for him.

One day, I shared the carriage ride to Teheran with Tzippora Shertok. I had an appointment with Mr. Vitiles, who was officially the head of Barclays Bank, but who also worked for the Jewish Agency, aiding Jewish refugees. Vitiles was trying to expedite our departure.

The main street of Teheran, along which we were now driving, cut straight down the whole length of the city. We passed some primitively

built houses, saw labourers, ragged and barefoot children among them, carrying sacks of cement and hauling them up scaffolding in baskets. When they were thirsty they darted to a channel of cold water that flowed from icy springs and melting snows, and in which they also did their laundry. There was a combination of abject poverty and sumptuous wealth in Teheran. Scenes of indigence were paired with magnificent hotels, shops, and restaurants from which issued the strains of orchestras. The villas of the rich adorned the hilltops like little marble palaces surrounded by blooming gardens. Teheran was very lively. It was an important crossroads in the passage to and from Russia. The city was full of military personnel.

I got off in the centre of the city, and Tzippora went on to get the medicines and ointments we needed. We arranged that she would pick me up in an hour, and we would return to the camp together. I went into the hotel where Mr. Vitiles was staying. I knew he was also interested in hearing some details about Soviet Russia, to facilitate his handling of the immigrants coming fom there.

The first thing I did when I arrived at his room was to find out about the families of some of the children in our care. I enquired about Itzik's brother, the Klein boy, Genia's parents, and Shlamek and Dita's mother. I came up with nothing, however.

Then he asked me for various details, such as the price of soap in Russia, what coupons looked like etc. and I answered him to the best of my ability. But I did not like the fact that he wrote down everything I said. I knew all about the long arm of the Russian secret police, and experience had taught me to fear it, so I asked him to stop taking notes. He told me not to worry and continued to write. While I was talking and he writing, there was a knock on the door. One of the hotel staff said there was a phone call for Mr. Vitiles, in the lobby. Excusing himself, Mr. Vitiles rose and left, leaving his papers and the notes he had made of my answers on the table.

I waited for a while, but he did not return. I left without saying goodbye, because it was time for Tzippora to come by and pick me up. She could not wait for me, since she had to get the medical supplies back to the camp as soon as possible and I hurried because it would be a pity to waste money on a special cab for me to get back. I assumed I had answered most of Mr. Vitiles' questions, and if not, we would probably meet again.

When I went downstairs, Tzippora was already there, waiting in the carriage, with the medicines donated to the camp by the Jewish pharmacist. I was very pleased to have the supply of ointments for eye infections and other diseases that afflicted the children, in addition to some smallpox vaccine, which we needed preparatory to the journey to Palestine.

Back at the camp, I faced the task of telling Itzik yet again that I had not been able to garner any information concerning his brother, and the boy went away sad and disappointed. I immersed myself in unfinished work from the night before, which I had ended with a short nap on my office desk—not for the first time. To my regret, I still had not approached Rachel. I hardly saw her in these busy times; I made up my mind to go over to her tent, and that is what I did.

Her group, with the special sense that children have, had noticed the relationship that was developing between their counsellor and myself. They greeted me sadly, saying that Rachel was not there. This was conveyed with an expression of shared inside information and regret at our failure to meet. They later reported to Rachel that the Director had come looking for her.

I dearly wanted to be with her and could feel that she was not indifferent to me. I used to hope that she would be present when inspection or other business brought me to their tent. Our duties, however, consumed the time we would otherwise have spent together. She was ever on call for her charges, bandaging their real or imagined wounds, teaching, carressing and encouraging them. Personal attention was very important to the children; they had lived through adult experiences and were like old people, but with the souls of infants in need of exclusive attention.

In common with other counsellors, Rachel had gone through the same kind of experiences as the children and therefore she absolutely identified with them, particularly since some of them were only a few years her juniors. They regarded her as a mother, friend, big sister and were very attached to her.

Next morning, as I left the tent, I met Tzippora Shertok, who had arrived from her hotel as she did every morning. She was furious, and asked me:

"David, why did you do it!"

I had no idea what she was referring to. She told me that Mr. Vitiles suspected that, because of my suspicions about the Russians, I had taken his notes of our conversation when he left the room. I denied this emphatically, although the amount of caution I had to employ in those days would have justified such an act on my part. To my regret I did not succeed in convincing her, or the man himself, of my innocence. It was difficult to clear my name, but I did not have the time to spare in order to go into the matter thoroughly, but it left a bitter taste in my mouth.

Only years later, when I met Mr. Vitiles again, did he apologise to me, explaining that he had discovered that it was the Russians who stole the papers, after arranging for him to be called from the room. He had had other such incidents, when the Russian secret police had intrigued against him and found excuses to get him out of the way, so that they could go through his papers and even steal some of them.

The appearance of the camp had greatly improved in the months we had been living there: the paths had been paved, and the children had learned to keep the tents tidy. Much of this was due to Haim and some other boys, who had led the other children in projects of improvement with such success that our camp was mentioned as the best maintained of all the refugee camps in the area, a fact which gave all of us much pleasure and pride. When I announced it at the morning parade, they burst into a spontaneous and enthusiastic rendition of our anthem, "We arise and sing." The children stood tall and their eyes sparkled. "We came first!"—it was a stirring sensation, after all the years of being the last and on the fringe of life.

As the date of departure drew closer, excitement mounted. The plan was to cross Iraq in relays, by truck. Everybody wanted to be in the first batch to leave, experience having made them wary and afraid that their turn to leave would never come. As we made our lists, the old problems arose about brothers and sisters and others who refused to be parted. They crowded into my little office with requests, demands, pleas, explanations.

The children had been vaccinated against smallpox and their arms swelled and developed the characteristicly pussy, red, and painful sore. We were not able to supply enough gauze to cover the vaccinations; our little clinic at the end of the corridor had three overworked nurses

who found it hard to cope with this new problem. The vaccination was particularly painful for those with skin diseases, of whom there were quite a few. Scabies and ringworm were rampant among the children and they literally tore at their skin to ease the maddening itch. Even the black ointment we had brought was not much good. The itching kept them awake at night and restless all day, and it hurt me to see them—blackened by the ointment, which had a strong, unpleasant smell and looked like a blemish singling them out and testifying to a life of deprivation, dirt and homelessness. These were infectious diseases, and we could not stamp them out.

Nor the lice. These also infested Lilly, whose stubble had begun to grow into lovely, smooth, brown hair. She now wept bitterly because of the infestation, and she reeked of paraffin. I tried to encourage her, saying we would soon be out of here and she would join her parents in Palestine before long. The tears in her big, sad eyes dried and, looking at the dark, menacing mountains that ringed the horizon, she repeated how much she longed to fly to her dear mother and father.

A misunderstanding with the Iraqi government arose while we were waiting to leave. Contradictory telegrams flew back and forth. The sum of money demanded by the parties involved kept rising. The possibility of leaving by that route vanished and another suggestion was made: to transfer the children on English ships being used by the Poles for troop transports—but a transit permit would have to be obtained from Turkey. Again, the nerve-racking, drawn-out negotiations began. Further, it emerged that a permit from the Russians would be necessary to get the children over the Turkish border, since they controlled the northern region of Persia. They were in no hurry to provide the permit. Trucks, too, were proving difficult to obtain and, in addition, the roads were in bad repair, with many accidents and the danger of being attacked by bandits.

A suggestion that the children should be dressed in uniform and conveyed as Polish army personnel turned out to be impractical, to say the least. Who would believe that two-year-old Meirke, four-year-old Mira, and the other infants were soldiers! Even the older ones—like Haya, Antek, Haim, Helena, Lilly—were too small and thin for their age to pass as conscripts of army age.

It was not only the refugees, exhausted by exile and wandering, who were pressing for departure, the strain of such a great concentration

of people was making itself felt on the Persian economy and the locals were adding their demands for the refugees to leave. Food shortages were becoming acute and the press blamed this on the British and the refugees, whom they dubbed the "parasites of the English."

It was decided that the refugees would have to leave within six months. Of the 25,000 Polish citizens in Persia, some 2,000 were Jews, over half of them children. We had received only 150 certificates of entry to Palestine, whereas there were about 700 children in our camp, with the number growing day by day. We wanted to include the children's families, if they were in Teheran, as well as the counsellors. This meant Hava and Haya's mother, still suffering from the pain of her little son's death. And Rachel's mother, Meirke's mother, and others. We needed five times as many certificates, and since we had not received them yet, we remained in the camp, to everyone's great disappointment.

I knew that Rachel was also dejected because of the additional delay. I went over to their tent that evening. I saw her in a corner. The sweet girl was attending to Itzik, who was suffering from a severe ear-inflammation. She covered him with a blanket, sat beside him and told him about warm, beautiful Palestine, which we would certainly reach. The suffering boy tried to take comfort in the future that awaited him. His past was hard and painful, and to add to his disappointment over our delayed departure, his life was embittered by waiting for his brother to be found. Rachel had no comfort to offer him on this point. She knew as well as he did how faint a chance it was that the boy would be found. But hope dies hard, as Rachel said, and one must not give up. Berele's parents were living proof of this—they had arrived the night before, to the joy of their son.

I saw that I would not be able to talk to Rachel, she was too busy. As before, I left without making any progress.

Winter was now at its height and some of the children were still inadequately clothed. Iraq had once and for all revoked its agreement to allow us transit. Turkey was also closed to us. New enquiries were underway, concerning the use of British planes to fly the children directly to Palestine. Meanwhile, news of this latest delay was a severe blow to the children, confirming their attitude that nobody and nothing on earth was to be trusted, that disappointment was the keynote of their lives.

Tzippora Shertok sent urgent cables to the Jewish Agency, and to Henrietta Szold, describing the severe hardship of prevailing conditions. In spite of all this, we were stuck in Teheran. Tzippora did her utmost to alleviate our distress. She spoke to counsellors and children, trying to lift their spirits and give them the feeling that she was their direct link with Palestinian Jewry, who cared about us, wanted us, and were doing everything in their power to help us. She did not confine her activities to weighty matters, but tended also to many small, practical details. She moved around the camp with her flit pump, spraying everything against vermin and insects. She gave the little ones special care, checking to see which were in greatest need, washing, binding, applying ointments. Her devotion was endless, although she was missing her own children. She managed to obtain various donations from Palestine, not a great sum, but useful. This gave rise to the question of what to buy first.

The Polish authorities had, indeed, promised sufficient clothing and shoes before winter, but we had so far received only 300 pairs of shoes, with no firm promise of the balance. This applied to other clothing as well. When we bought part of the most urgently needed items with the money from Palestine, the Poles claimed that, since we had already received help, they were not obliged to give us any more.

One day, when I dropped in to the sewing workshop to see how the mending was progressing, I met Berele's father, who was a tailor and was helping us to alter the clothes we received. As he worked he told me that one of the boys from the Polish camp had asked him to alter his uniform—the Poles had formed a cadet corps to train youngsters for military service. The boy had blue eyes and blond hair, but Berele's father felt, for some reason or other, that he was a Jew. Itzik heard this, and became extremely agitated. He said the description fitted his brother and he asked for permission to go to the other camp and meet the boy. I did not allow him to go alone, but promised that we would go together as soon as I finished attending to some pressing business. Itzik could not wait, he pleaded with me until I went with him, equipped with the authorization from the Polish authorities that gave me the right to reclaim Jewish children.

After trudging around the Polish camp, being sent from pillar to post, crudely and disrespectfully treated, as usual, we finally found the cadet camp. Not only was the boy a Jew, but—he was Elimelech,

Itzik's lost brother. It was another of those unimaginable encounters, and further proof that one should never despair.

The two brothers fell into each other's arms, kissed, wept and spoke together in Polish, while Itzik pleaded with his brother to join us in our camp and the other refused, on the grounds that he was better off where he was. On the contrary, he tried to persuade his big brother to join him. Elimelech, tall, erect, handsome in his uniform sounded eloquent, witty and intelligent. He told his brother about the wonderful cadets, the military training, and all that went with it. He compared himself to his ragged brother, pleaded so convincingly that I began to be afraid he would succeed. I suggested to Itzik that we return to our camp, and to Elimelech that he think things over.

Itzik was in tears as we returned, repeating that his mother had entrusted him with the care of his brother, had entreated him not to leave him. I sensed that Itzik had been impressed by the sight of his brother in uniform. It took a lot of energy and many long talks, with Rachel's participation, to convince him that his place was with us. But we did not manage to persuade Elimelech, and each remained where he was, with the fence between them.

Itzik threw himself into activities around the camp. There was always plenty to do for anyone with initiative: food had to be brought and served, there were lessons to attend, afternoon activities. The children played games and Itzik was a champion at pick-up-stones, which was popular because of the availability of the required equipment! He also played hopscotch. He joined the gym group. We felt that he was doing his best to tire himself out so that he could fall asleep without having to think about things. Most of them behaved like that, escaping from problems, taking their minds off the anticipated departure, by becoming excessively active, sometimes positively, sometimes not. Genia, Haim and Lilly were busy organizing a big farewell party, though we had no departure date as yet, and could only hope that it would be early in 1943. They had decided to invite people from the Jewish community and from the Jewish Agency to the party and preparations were at their height.

In the afternoons there was the sound of singing, and even of laughter—which was coming back to them after years when it seemed to have deserted them forever. On Saturday nights, the culture committee arranged entertainments with programs of songs, dances and gymnastics created exclusively by the children. But the farewell party was

going to be the greatest. Lilly drew decorations for the hall, Moshik was top man on the living pyramid, Genia edited the bulletin, the choir practiced. Only sorrowful Itzik walked around torn in two, and his anxiety doubled when he heard that the cadets were soon to be transferred to Africa.

I went to the Polish camp with him again, in another attempt to persuade Elimelech, but again we failed. Even the argument that they would be parted forever if he went to Africa, had no effect. Elimelech said that this was an additional reason in favour of his brother joining him. Itzik raged and pleaded, they almost came to blows, but neither could convince the other. I was upset by their quarrel and separated them, literally dragging Itzik back to camp.

Elimelech was due to leave the following week, I knew, and I wondered if anything could be done to change the situation. Meanwhile, we continued to anticipate our departure. November had passed and we were in December—the last days of 1942. Would it be soon?

Palestinian Jewish soldiers serving in the British army came to visit us with gifts of candy, treating the children with the tenderness and warmth they all needed so much. The soldiers spoke about Palestine and all of us listened eagerly, children and counsellors, for none of us had ever been there.

Our educational program suffered from the repeated delays. The children thought they had been deceived again, disillusion set in. They did not understand or know the facts about our feverish negotiations. We repeatedly explained that the move to Palestine had always involved difficulties, but it was hard to convince them. If only we had had a few counsellors from Palestine, but the Mandatory Government would not let them come, and we had to cope with our troubles on our own. Problems mounted, such as the question of bathing. In the summer, we had washed in water brought from a tap near the office. Rachel and two of her friends, for example, had constructed a little blanket-cubicle in a corner of their tent, where they washed. But now it was far too cold to wash like that, and the children refused to do so under any circumstances. This created serious hygiene and health problems. It was urgent that we get out soon.

Moshe Shertok was in London at the time, and he made every effort to obtain permission for the children to travel by ship. If he succeeded, and if ships were available, what route would we take? Sea passage

was dangerous then, when the war was in full fury and the seas were swarming with enemy submarines and mines. They even suggested that we should wait until the Mediterranean was clear of mines and submarines, for safety's sake.

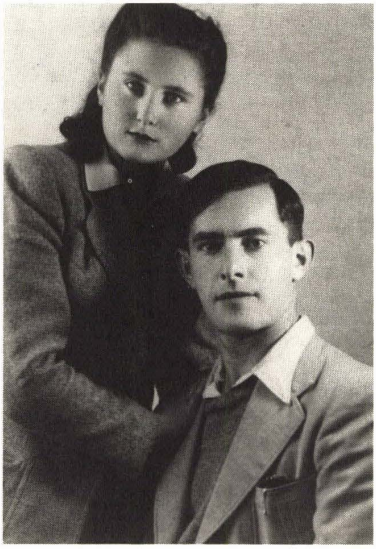
In the autumn of 1942, the Allied forces, under the command of General Montgomery, had defeated the German General Rommel's forces at El Alamein near the Egyptian-Tunisian border on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, and British and American troops had landed in North Africa. The wheel had turned. After their earlier losses and defeats the Allies now had the upper hand in the Near East. The Soviets opened a counter-offensive in Russia after breaking the German siege of Stalingrad. It seemed that the war, which had already lasted three years, was about to end. We wondered if we would have to wait until it did, before we could go to Palestine.

At a meeting between Tzippora Shertok and Colonel Ross, who was in charge of refugees, he suggested that until we finally left, the children should at least be moved from the tents. But with all his good intentions, he had no alternative accomodation to offer us in Teheran, and we refused his suggestion that we move to one of the remote country towns. In Teheran we at least had the help of the Jewish community, and we knew that in a small town the objection to refugees in general, and Jews in particular, would be stronger and would only add to our problems.

Tzippora Shertok kept up her efforts, making contacts, meeting with the British Consul in Teheran, and with a Polish Minister who was living in Persia. They told us to be patient. This was easier said than done, considering our living conditions and the past we had endured. The children were freezing cold, tired and irascible. And so was I, so were the rest of the staff. Unable to play outdoors, everyone crowded into the tents and the noise and crush were unbearable. How many stories could one tell to distract them? We were hoarse from answering their questions about Palestine. They wanted to know if there would be enough food there, if they were really wanted there, when they would see their families again. The staff had difficulty in answering these questions, particularly the last one. They showed pictures of Palestine, doing what they could to create a feeling of belonging and identification with the homeland. They seemed to succeed in doing so,

too. Even Adam, silent and detached, began to show a flicker of interest. Promises of departure and talk about Palestine were the only subjects that brought a faint smile to his lips.

The first week of December went by, cold and hard, followed by the passage of the second week, and we were still in Teheran.



Rachel and David Laor in 1943.

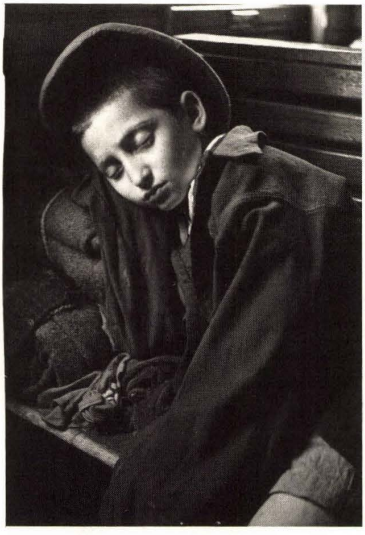


Group of instructors at the Rehabilitation Centre in Teheran.



Release form of prisoner David Laor from the labour camp in the Soviet Union.





Complexions of a childhood cut short by war.







Still a long way to go before reaching the final home.







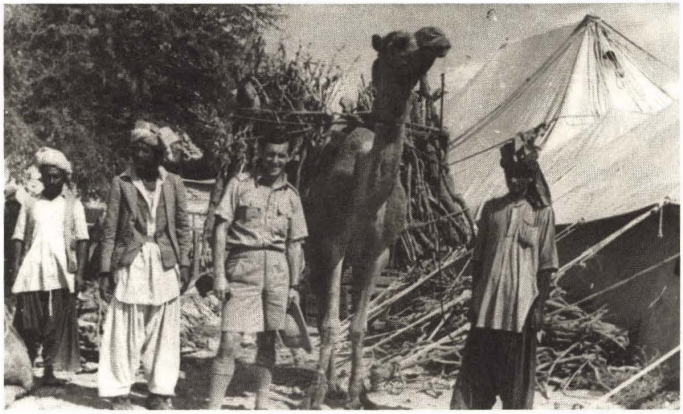
Group of children and wardens of the Rehabilitation Centre in Teheran.

Children and nurses next to the makeshift hospital in Teheran.

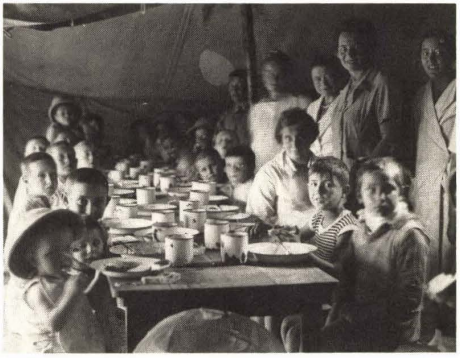




Morning exercises in India.



David Laor next to Hindi workers and their original means of transportation.



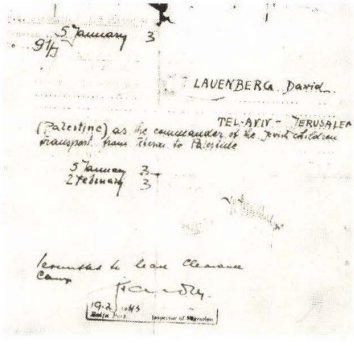
Children eating lunch at the camp infirmary in Karachi.



The president of Aliyat Hanoar, Henrietta Szold, welcomes the children upon their arrival in Israel.



The captain and officers of the ship that brought the children safe and sound to their destination.


5 January 3

LAUENBERG David

TEL-AVIV - JERUSALEM

(Palestine) as the commander of the Jewish children transport from Tehran to Palestine

5 January 3
2 February 3

19.2 1943

Document issued by the Polish army, officially charging David Laor (then Laumberg) with the transportation of the children from Teheran to Israel.



The arrival in Israel: the end of the nightmare, the first smiles.







The children who arrive and the children who await them. Soon they will be brothers and sisters.



David Laor on his arrival in Atlit, Israel, in 1943. He is greeted by Henrietta Szold and David Umansky.



The people of Israel extended a warm welcome to the children upon their arrival in their new home.

15

TWO GOLDEN RINGS

LATE IN DECEMBER, 1942, I was working in my office when a tall fellow in the uniform of a Polish officer came in and addressed me in Yiddish. He introduced himself as Dr. Gellerstein, an army dentist, and told me that he was taken captive by the Russians after the Polish army was defeated, and sent to the far north, where he was put into a POW camp some 250 kilometres from Smolensk. He had undergone many hardships. With the German invasion of Russia, at the end of 1941, the camp was turned over to the prisoners and the officers in it were called up again to serve in the Polish army. After a long, harrowing journey, he had arrived in Teheran where he was posted to the hospital. He had come to me for help in his search for his wife and two children, whom he had not seen for about two years. The name Gellerstein sounded familiar. Of course, I did not know the names of all of the hundreds of children in my care, but I helped him go through the register and he found his daughter's name—Sofia!

The little girl and her father did not recognise one another. But according to the details she had given us—the names of her mother and brother—and by the resemblance they bore to each other, it was obvious that these two belonged together. Their meeting was heart-rending; father and daughter wept, and so did we, to see them. The joy and excitement of the reunion were veiled in sadness at the absence of the doctor's wife and son. Sofia did not know where they were. She told her father how her mother had given all her money and jewels to get the children onto the train carrying the Buchara Polish orphans to the port on their way out of Russia. Sofia and her brother were allowed on the train, as the mother had hung crosses around their necks before parting from them. They had made themselves inconspicuous, but her brother had carelessly spoken to her in Yiddish, revealing his Jewish identity, at which he was thrown from the train. Little Sofia had pretended not to know him and had remained on the train, alone.

Now she was in her father's arms, both of them crying, and there was nothing we could do to help them. Nothing was known of the fate of the little boy, or his mother. We could only hope they would be found, though we knew this might never happen. Parents and children were seeking each other all over—millions of people had been taken and shaken and torn from family and home.

Dr. Gellerstein left Sofia in the camp with us. He came to visit her every day, and on these visits he also spent time with Adam and Helena, his friend's children, whom he took under his wing. He continued his search for his wife and son. Although I could not do much, I promised I would keep my ears and eyes open and let him know if I heard anything of use. Miracles were rare, but they had been known to happen.

About then, Tzippora Shertok told me that she wanted to introduce me to her brother, Shaul Meirov, who was the Teheran representative of a big Palestinian Jewish construction cooperative, *Solel Boneh.* Apparently he wanted to get some information from me. She did not go into details, but I could guess what it was about and planned to take the opportunity to get some information myself, regarding the missing relatives of my charges.

Working in Teheran as managers of banks, construction companies, or in other jobs, agents and emissaries from Palestine carried out undercover activities, mainly to help Jewish refugees who had been aban-

doned by the Polish government and were still in Russia. At first, this help had been in the form of parcels of food and other necessities to help the Jewish refugees survive. At the head of these operations stood Shaul Meirov.

Tzippora and I went together to his office. He surveyed me from head to toe and, still looking me over, offered me a cup of tea. I sat facing him. I watched him sip his tea through a cube of sugar, true to his Russian origins. On his desk were pages of addresses of refugees who had reached Teheran, and were trying to trace their families. Among these were the names and addresses of some of our children, among them Genia, who was looking for her parents and the lawyer, Levin, who had entrusted his little girl to her; Shlamek and Dita, who were trying to find their mother; and others who wanted to establish contact with their relatives in Russia and help them to get out.

Leaving me with Meirov, Tzipporah went off to visit our children in the hospitals, to buy fruit and vegetables in the local market, to get medicines from the pharmacy, and, of course, to make her regular visit to the Jewish Agency's Teheran office, to ask whether the final date of departure had been set. She also planned, on this occasion, to visit the British Consul and Colonel Ross concerning the same matter. We arranged that I would join her later.

After his thorough inspection of me, Meirov apparently decided I could be trusted, and asked how I would feel were I to be asked to go back to Russia, to help the Jewish refugees over there. I was momentarily shocked by his question. He added that, to the best of his knowledge, there were still thousands of Jewish children wandering the roads of Russia and they had to be helped.

I must confess that this was a difficult question for me. I had extricated myself by the skin of my teeth from that place and there was nothing to draw me back there. But I answered that I was prepared to return, if he could prove that it would really do some good and that he was authorised to send me. I was not being difficult. I was intimately aware, without his needing to tell me, of the hardships of the Jewish refugees in Russia, and I knew that most helpless of all were the children. If the Jewish Agency could come to their aid, and they wanted me to play my part, I could not evade it even if this meant that I was likely to be thrown back into a detention camp when I got there. But our Children's Home would be leaving Teheran soon, this winter, or spring at the latest. We were supposed to be going to Palestine and I

had been waiting for this for years. Nevertheless, if I had to send them off without me—I would consider it my duty to do so.

I would be turning twenty-eight the following month. I wanted to start a family of my own, with Rachel. By now, I was certain that she was the woman with whom I wanted to build my life. I planned to ask her to marry me, soon, and hoped she would agree. I had no time for courting or for declarations of love, but I thought she sensed my feelings towards her, without the need of smooth talk and compliments, which did not come easily to me.

After all the hardships that had been the lot of the counsellors and children in our camp, the anguish and homeless wandering that had consumed what should have been the carefree years of their lives, love was beginning to bloom: they were returning to life, to adolescence. They had begun to pair off.

But I could barely find a moment for myself, to speak my heart to Rachel. And here I was, sitting in front of this man, who was levelling his gaze at me and suggesting that I return to Russia to become part of the rescue operations among the Jewish refugees still caught there.

I parted from Shaul Meirov, who informed that I would be summoned when and if the time came. I went to the Jewish Agency office, where I heard that we had finally recieved permission to leave Persia by sea, via Karachi. From there, another ship would take us to the Suez Canal. Departure was set for the 3rd of January, 1943. I was overcome with excitement, despite my fears of yet another postponement.

On my return to camp I encountered a young Polish officer who informed me that he had come to see Rachel. He claimed to be a good friend of hers from Samarkand, and that he had helped her to get here by giving her a personal letter to a certain Polish Colonel. Rachel refused to see him. I told him to leave the premises and not come back. He left in a rage, and I had the feeling he would not easily give up, and that we would be hearing from him again.

We began our preparations for departure, which was due to take place the following week. I hoped I would also be able to leave and not have to stay behind in order to go to Russia. Because the number of certificates was limited and we wanted to get out as many children and adults as possible, Tzippora Shertok suggested that the counsellors

should pair off in fictional marriages, since one certificate would then serve for two people, enabling over a thousand people to leave.

The counsellors arranged themselves into pairs and the list of couples who were "married" for the duration of the journey was posted on the notice board. Of course, I listed Rachel as my "wife" and went about my business. However, on passing the board later on to check if everyone had put their names down, I was surprised to see that Rachel had erased her name from where it had been, beside mine, and was listed as the "wife" of one of the counsellors. I did not like this in the least. In my capacity as Director, I substituted my name for the other fellow's and then went to Rachel's tent to have a talk with her.

It was night already. I saw a pair of army boots at the entrance to the tent. I knew what that meant: one of the counsellors was having another night visit from her boyfriend, a Polish soldier. I had asked her more than once to stop receiving him when the others were present in the tent, and she had promised she would be with him only when the tent was empty. Apparently she was not keeping this promise. Feelings were running riot in those who had spent that last few years starving and freezing, instead of loving. For example, a Persian boy had come to Lilly's tent and had spent the night with one of the counsellors, in full view of the girl lying next to them, causing her to wonder if she would ever be loved that way, and giving her a live demonstration of the facts of life.

It was very difficult to handle such incidents. One of the counsellors had fallen pregnant, a situation which had demanded a specially sensitive approach, to add to everything else I had to cope with.

That night, I decided to take some time off for my personal affairs. I stationed myself outside the tent flap, calling her in a whisper, so as not wake the others. Apparently she was very tired, and did not answer my first call. She only came out after I had whispered her name a second time, sleepy, wanting to know what had happened. I expressed my surprise that she had paired herself with someone else. She said she wanted it that way. She was too young to get involved seriously. I insisted that we should leave as a couple, and Rachel, who never took anything as a matter of course and could argue stubbornly—now surprised me by giving her tacit consent, by her silence. She wished me goodnight and went back inside to sleep. I regarded this as a good

sign. But tonight, too, I had not been free to be alone with her for any length of time.

We were planning a day of independence. The children were to be left without any adults in the camp, and would be free to run their lives as they saw fit from the morning until the evening. I knew this contained a certain risk, but we decided to support the institutions and rules they had chosen. The management committee, which included representatives of the children themselves, did not always agree with the way the camp was run. Nor did the internal disciplinary court. But I had faith in our charges, and had special confidence in the integrity of Haim, Hava, Berele, Genia, Lilly, Itzik—if only he would overcome his bad mood—and others. On the other hand, I was nervous about Antek, who continued to pilfer whatever he could lay his hands on, and I had some doubts about Moshik, who was unpredictable. And I was uneasy about Helena, who was likely to gorge herself in the absence of adult control, and I worried about something happening to upset Adam, who had slightly improved and was speaking a little. Then there were all the little ones, like Meirke, to think about.

But the day began in an orderly fashion; the children rose promptly, despite the cold, and hurried to the morning assembly. I heard them singing the anthem as I left for Teheran with Rachel and some of the other counsellors.

Clearly, I had a few qualms, but I hoped that the months of study and education by example would bear fruit; that the better elements among the children would set the tone and complications would be avoided; that nobody would leave the camp without permission, including Itzik, who used to sneak over to the other camp to try and persuade his brother to join us. Perhaps today he would go to his brother, and the latter would succeed in winning him over? I had seen the boy's inner struggles as he tried to choose between loyalty to his people and his unseen homeland, and his need for his only brother, the sole remaining member of his family. Also, I hoped the allowance I had entrusted to Haim would be properly spent and would not be stolen by Antek or someone else, and that everything would go according to plan.

As the carriage took us towards Teheran, I looked at the snow capped Taurus Mountains rising in the background of the camp where the morning lessons were beginning. According to the program, they had

to revise the material they had been studying until now. Then the older boys were going to go and fetch the food from the central kitchens, as usual. I hoped Moshik would not get involved in any quarrels, because there was nobody to get him out of trouble today. The washerwoman was coming and had to be paid. Who would chase away the Persian soldiers, if they decided to exploit our absence by trying to lure the little ones over to the other side of the fence? I was full of such persistent anxieties, and so were the others, as the horse slowly pulled us further and further away from the camp.

The real test would come after lunch, when the children had free time; this was when they went wild, usually, even with the counsellors present.

I attempted to shut my mind to what might be going on. I had a few hours of leisure, the first I had had for a long time, and there was something of great importance that I had to accomplish today. It was time I proposed to Rachel. I wondered how I should go about it. We finally had some time to ourselves, but my hopes of spending them alone with her were dashed. We were joined by Alla and Halina, Rachel's two good friends from Luninietz, where she had fled to get away from the Germans, and then some other counsellors also tagged along with us. They all wanted to have fun together in Teheran. We strolled along the crowded streets, gazing into the showcases of the many jewellery shops, where the jewellery glittered as though there was no war anywhere in the world. At one of the shops I stopped and asked Rachel to come inside with me, to help me choose a watch for my brother in Palestine. The idea of buying a present for Zwi, whom I had not seen for so long, and whom I would be seeing soon, sounded good to her and she agreed to help me. I hoped her friends would stay outside, and this hope was granted. The two girls left us with mysterious expressions, and went into another jewellery shop. When we were inside, I asked to be shown some watches and two gold rings. For my family in Palestine, I explained to my companion, asking her to help me choose the rings, and try one on for size. Rachel was not impressed with the rings we were shown, so we left the shop and continued our stroll. I fervently hoped the others would stay away and give me a chance to ask her to marry me.

I suggested that we go to a restaurant, and she pointed to one which, she had been told, had excellent food as well as an orchestra. I would ask her to marry me there, during our meal, I decided.

I did not usually use my salary for personal ends. I spent money only on essentials and entrusted the rest of it to Tzippora Shertok, so that she could buy those things our budget did not cover: vegetables from the market, sewing thread, wool, etc. Today, however, I had decided to break my rules of self-denial and spend some money on a present for my brother, a meal in a restaurant and—two gold wedding rings! But, instead of the intimate meal and important private conversation I was planning to have with Rachel, when we entered the place Rachel had indicated we found a group of friends and counsellors, and a few Jewish Agency people and emissaries from Palestine, all sitting around one long table. Obviously, I really did not want to see them just then, but Rachel was delighted and dragged me over to join them. I began to scheme ways of getting her alone after the meal. Maybe we could look for some more rings. I had to finally get around to letting her know what was on my mind.

It was a very grand restaurant, luxuriantly illuminated by a big chandelier. We were waiting for the meal to be served, when a young Polish officer came in, swaying as he walked. He noticed us and began to head for our table. I recognised him as the fellow from Samarkand who was interested in Rachel. He clicked his heels as he stood happily in front of her, and invited her to dance with him, slurring his words drunkenly.

Rachel refused him once or twice. When he persisted, she told him she did not dance with drunkards. He was hurt. He began to accuse her of avoiding him, reminded her that he had helped her family, and said I was the reason for her behaviour. He was angry that I had not allowed him into the camp, and became so drunkenly incensed that he pulled out his revolver and fired a shot at the chandelier. It exploded, plunging the restaurant into darkness. The place was in turmoil until some Polish military police arrived and arrested the officer. We took advantage of the upheaval to leave without waiting for the meal we had ordered. We thought it best to get away from there as quickly as possible. I was delighted to find myself alone with Rachel in the darkening street. We made our way back to the jewellery shop and this time we found a watch and two rings that we both liked. Outside, I gave one of the rings to Rachel and told her that I had bought it for her. My meaning was very clear.

Rachel looked shy and somewhat confused. She did not say anything and I took this to indicate consent. I asked her to wear the ring, and said I would speak to her mother.

I was happy to find that everything had gone as planned during our absence from the camp, nothing but a few loaves of bread had disappeared. The day of independence had worked out well. The patients in the sick bays had been looked after, lessons had gone ahead as usual, meals had been served, and rehearsals for the farewell party performance had been held. Spirits were high and I was satisfied. Even Adam received us with a smile, saying that everything was fine. This was an achievement in itself. The "Teheran Children" had certainly come a long way in the months since they had come to us.

Another pleasure was in store for me that night. Rachel's friends Alla and Halina presented me with a gift for my birthday, which was on the 7th of December. That explained their mysterious air as they slipped into the jewellery shop during our day in town. They had bought me a silver-plated cigarette case engraved with the words: To the Director, from friends.

I was very moved by the gift and assumed that Rachel had something to do with it, as she knew the date of my birthday. I have kept the case ever since, although I have never smoked. It is very dear to me.

Preparations for departure gained momentum. As was to be expected, a new, serious problem arose. The Polish authorities were demanding that seven of our counsellors enlist in the Polish army, claiming that they had only been "lent" to us to help with the refugee children and, now that the children were being transferred, the men were obliged to do their military service.

None of us wanted to enlist in the anti-semitic Polish army, but the authorities were adamant.

Shaul Meirov then entered the picture. With his assistance six of the counsellors were smuggled onto the train to Iraq. The journey to Baghdad was dangerous because joint squads of Polish and Iraqi soldiers searched every train for deserters. The counsellors crossed the border on a night train, escorted by a young Iraqi Jew who was a member of the Zionist movement. They stood in the dark corridor with their coats over their heads, and their escort explained to anyone who seemed

curious that they were deaf-mutes on their way to a doctor in Baghdad. The journey lasted for thirty-six hours, and when they arrived a porter took their bags and indicated that they should follow him. He conducted them to a basement, where they hid.

The porter was none other than Enzo Sereni of Kibbutz Givat Brenner. After six weeks in Baghdad, during which they were aided by the Jewish community, the group left, wearing British uniforms and pretending to be employees of Solel Boneh headed for a vacation in Palestine. They crossed the desert to Amman and then went over the Allenby Bridge and completed the last lap of their saga—to Jerusalem.

I only heard the story of the adventures and dangers they encountered on this journey at a much later date. I was the seventh man on the Polish list. I could not join the others, because I had to supervise the preparations for the children's departure at that crucial, final stage. But the fear of an imminent visit from the Poles never left me. Tzippora Shertok, aided by the Jewish Agency in Teheran, applied for my release on the grounds of my position as director of the camp. There was no answer.

I was afraid to stay in camp in case they sent their "recruit" squad to get me, so I suggested to Tzippora that I should move in to a hospital while we awaited their reply. For a suitable sum, we obtained permission for my hospitalization. Thus, though I was in perfect health, I donned pyjamas and took to my bed in a Teheran hospital. It was difficult to be away from the camp just then, but I hoped that the requested permission would arrive in a few days. I also knew that there was a good chance that the request would be refused. I wondered what I would do if that happened.

Rachel visited me daily and kept me informed about camp matters and the difficulties that arose from my absence. She also kept me up to date about the negotiations for my release; the reply had still not come.

One night, she arrived with the news that difficulties had arisen and that I would most likely have to go into the army. Should this be so, she had a plan: one of her friends had a Persian Jewish boyfriend, and Rachel had arranged for me to hide in his house. He would assist my escape from Persia after a while. With the determination and practicality I had come to recognise in her, Rachel had attended to every detail, and I consented. I was preparing myself for the difficult moment

of parting from her and my charges, in the hope that all of us would meet in Palestine, where I assumed they would arrive before me.

That night, I asked Rachel to begin setting up our home when she reached Palestine. I knew without the shadow of a doubt that this was what I wanted. But Rachel was still unsure about our relationship. She had spent her youth in a labour camp, in hardship and wandering. She was very young and she was hesitant about committing herself to marriage; she felt she was not ready for it. She told me this, that night, before she went back to camp. I believed I would be able to convince her to marry me in the end. Meanwhile, I still hoped I would travel to Palestine together with her and the children.

I hid the clothes she had brought for me, so that I could put them on immediately if the news came and I had to slip out of the hospital.

Tzippora Shertok turned up the next morning with good news: through the intervention of important people in the Jewish Agency, my request had been referred to the upper echelons of the Polish army, and our activities had at last borne fruit. Within two days I would be officially appointed as the Polish army officer in charge of the children's transfer leaving Teheran for India, and from there to Palestine. On our arrival, Tzippora suggested, I should apply for a discharge from the Polish army. It was fairly certain that I would be granted a long leave, with the help of the welfare authorities, so that I could continue to aid the children through the stages of settling down in Palestine. I was very encouraged by what she told me. My optimism was bolstered: I would have success with Rachel, too.

There was no need for me to hide anymore. I was issued a Polish uniform, and I left the hospital wearing it, heading straight for our camp, where I was eagerly awaited, as Rachel had told me. Most of the counsellors had already departed to evade the draft and the remaining ones, mainly girls, were having trouble getting our food ration and coping with red tape which only I could handle.

I was moved by the welcome the children gave me. Moshik, Haim, Itzik, and all the rest of Rachel's group, very impressed by my uniform, ran off to tell her that the director had arrived. Rachel, who had not expected me to come that day, was very suprised and happy to see me. This was heartwarming. I felt I had returned home, to my family.

We had two days in which to get ready. Great preparations were afoot. Moshik and Antek, sure that it would be hot in India and that we would not be needing blankets, immediately went into business. I repeatedly chased prospective buyers away from the fence. The guard had to be strengthened and Haim, Hava, Itzik, Genia, Lilly and some others took shifts. The children were so excited, so stirred up, that the daily routine was hard to maintain.

The children packed their meagre belongings, not prepared to relinquish even the smallest rag. We suggested that everyone should make a little bundle of their most important possessions to take with them, and the rest would be sent separately. They packed and unpacked their little bundles over and over again, agonizing over decisions about what to take, what to send, afraid they would lose something on the way.

There was sadness during those last days in camp, too. They cried over the further separation from families left behind in Russia, and they were apprehensive about what lay in store for them on the journey and after their arrival in Palestine.

Itzik was suffering because of his impending separation from Elimelech. Shlamek refused to travel to the port unless he and Dita were in the same truck. Haim and his sister also refused to separate. Again I saw this clever, well-balanced boy become hysterical with the fear of losing the only one of his three sisters left to him. He yelled, ran wild, became abusive.

Genia refused to leave Mira, whom she had protected and nurtured all these months, although the little one was in another group, according to her age. Berele, after his reunion with his parents, would not be parted from them for one moment. Lilly wanted to travel with Haim, her best friend. Moshik was in love with pretty Hava, and did his best so that they would travel together. Dr. Gellerstein was still wavering, unsure whether to separate from his little girl, or to keep her with him. What was best for her? Sofia wept heartbrokenly at the thought of being parted from him again.

The last few nights were filled with the sound of weeping, such as we had not heard for a long time. Lilly was wild with the expectation of seeing her parents soon. She had managed to restrain herself so far, but now her patience ran out. She could not contain herself. Genia begged me to write, to send parcels, to inform her parents that she was going to Palestine, to make contact with Mira's father, but none of this could be done because we did not have the address of anyone

in Russia, in spite of the enquiries and efforts of Shaul Meirov's people. This also applied to Dita and Shlamek's mother and so many others. Rachel's mother joined her. Her father was in Iraq with the Polish army. Shaya and Eva had neither arrived nor been heard from. It was with these mixed feelings of loss and joy that we finally reached the day of our departure.

We were to be taken by trucks to the Persian port. There were about seven hundred children in the camp and the total, including the adults, was one thousand people.

We had waived the arrangements for travelling, to avoid confrontations and trouble. Therefore, the children arranged themselves as they wished and not according to age groups. The infants were accompanied by their nurses and we also had a number of eighteen-year-old boys, who left with us under the pretence of being younger, to avoid conscription. They all had their bundles in their hands, containing all their possessions despite our instructions. We preferred to overlook this, too.

And then, as we stood waiting for the trucks, a blond, blue-eyed boy in the uniform of a Polish cadet burst from the Polish camp, crying that he wanted to go with us. Elimelech! The two brothers clung to each other, weeping and laughing, and every one of us shared their emotion. It was sheer luck that the transfer of the cadets had been delayed and we were leaving first, and Elimelech with us. Not far off, Dr. Gellerstein stood with Sofia in his arms. He had come to the decision to send her with us and we promised to care for her as we had until now, and to continue our search for his wife and son. He had trouble persuading his daughter to let go of him; the parting was extremely hard on her, accompanied as it was by memories of having been torn from her mother, whom she had not seen since. Adam also reacted very strongly to his separation from Dr. Gellerstein, to whom he now clung, sure that the doctor was his own father.

The convoy arrived and everybody began to push to be first on the trucks, for fear that they would not find a place. However much we tried to explain and convince them that there was room for everybody and that they would all reach the port, their disbelief was more powerful. They were terrified of being left behind.

Tzippora Shertok accompanied us through the whole whirlpool of the departure from the Teheran Jewish Children's Home, our camp. She was scared that our departure would be complicated for other reasons: the pressure from the Persians, who did not want the tens of thousands of refugees flooding their country, had expedited our leaving. We would get to India as had the other Polish refugees sent there, but there was still the possibility that we would not be able to continue to Palestine. This worry had robbed her of sleep. Only I shared her awareness of the danger, but I tried to hope for the best, and I had faith in Tzippora's dedication to our cause. And so, on that cold winter morning we left Teheran in the convoy of trucks winding away from the camp. The abandoned tents, the empty hut, lay behind us with the snowy mountains in the background. A new chapter had begun in our lives. We had left this important and decisive station on the long road that we had travelled, that still had not come to an end.

Ahead of us lay yet another station on the journey to our final destination—Palestine. Eretz Yisrael.

16

ANCHORS AWEIGH!

THE CONVOY BROUGHT us to Bandarshapur, our point of departure for Karachi, where we remained for a few days, waiting for the SS Donora. During this time, we celebrated Shlamek's birthday. For lack of a table, we spread a sheet on top of a pile of folded blankets and the children seated around it were treated to fruit, nuts and sweets. Lilly drew a picture for Shlamek and he also received a new tube of toothpaste, which pleased him greatly. The children sang and recited for him, and swung the beaming lad high on their crossed arms. His little sister sat next to him and they looked like two bright blossoms. Such fine children, I thought, but where were the parents to enjoy them? I guessed that Shlamek was also thinking about his mother. If she could have been at his birthday, his joy would have been complete. But she was not there. She was most probably dead, with their father and the many thousands who had died in the past few years.

While we were waiting to board the ship the rumour spread that our destination was Palestine, and a number of refugees attempted to join us. Many of them were women without papers, and one of these was Sola, who had cared for Meirke and had left us so sadly. She begged to be allowed to go with us.

We had no extra certificates, but I remembered my own desperation when I was trying to board the ship to Persia, less than a year ago. I could not refuse Sola, I felt the need to help her as the Polish officer's wife had helped me at the time. Adam, whose depression had lifted somewhat since we left Teheran, suddenly offered to help. But I still hesitated to rely on him.

I looked around and saw Berele about to go on board. He was sixteen, and I knew him to be a strong, energetic boy who could be roped in to help if he was caught in the right mood and approached in the right way. After a moment's hesitation, I beckoned to him. I knew the risks involved in the plan I had in mind, but he was the right one for the task, assuming he would agree to do it.

I asked him if he was prepared to sneak on board and lose himself in the crowd on deck. This would allow Sola to go on board with his certificate. He did not need any explanations. He boarded without being detected and hid in a lifeboat. Even his parents had no idea where he was. He was perfectly aware of the dangers, should he be caught, but he had no hesitation about doing what he did to help someone who was a stranger to him. Our charges had really come a long way. I was proud of him, our efforts with the children had not been in vain.

Sola boarded the Donora as one of the staff; luckily the inspection was carried out according to the number of passengers compared to the number of certificates, and there was no name check. Berele remained hidden, with the intention of waiting until we were at sea before emerging. Tzippora Shertok was due to leave Persia after seeing us safely on our way. We knew by experience that there could be last-minute complications and so she stayed until we were on board, coming on deck with us and introducing me to the Captain as the Officer-in-Charge of the transport. This increased my status in his eyes, and he offered me a small cabin of my own. There were very few cabins, this being a cargo ship, and it was a privilege to have one to myself. He wanted to know if I had a family.

Tzippora asked if she could introduce Rachel and her mother as my family. Hanna Drexler, who had long since accepted me, nodded, but Rachel hesitated and said we were not married yet. The Captain then offered to exercise his legal right to marry us, if we wished, but Rachel demurred.

It was time to weigh anchor. Tzippora was deeply moved as she said goodbye and went ashore, saying we would meet again in Palestine. I looked at her as the ship moved off. Small, devoted, resourceful, she had given herself utterly to our cause, and I sometimes wondered from where she drew her physical and spiritual strength. It is not easy to find a few concise words to depict the central role she played in the Teheran Jewish Children's Home and in bringing the children to Palestine; that book has yet to be written. I stood on deck gazing at her until she was out of sight.

Our precious cargo of more than seven hundred children of all ages from babies to youths, and their accompanying adults—plus two women in the advanced stages of pregnancy—put out to sea. The war was at its height and the waters were full of mines and enemy submarines. I fervently hoped to see my charges safely ashore.

As mentioned, we were not able to take the short, overland route to Palestine from Teheran via Iraq to Jerusalem, nor the more roundabout one through Turkey, Syria and Northern Palestine. The war made it impossible to go by plane; the British needed every plane they had. That is why we found ourselves sailing the long way around from the Persian Gulf, on a planned route through the Gulf of Oman into the Arabian Sea and on to Karachi. After a short stopover there, we would sail to Aden and through the Red Sea to the Suez Canal, from where we would take the train to Palestine. A long, devious route, but the only one open to us.

Our ship was big, with a few cabins for the crew and some passengers. Below deck there was a spacious hall next to some storage areas and a limited number of toilets. There were no showers. This space was crammed with children and adults, and a throng of people milled about in the confined space on the deck. It was important to direct the flow at once, to control the energy and activity before it got out of hand. Antek, of course, was already on the lookout for some unattended item he could make his own. Adam was having hysterics,

looking for his father, Helena was crying. Haim wanted to check if there was kosher food on board. Genia was looking for Mira who was looking for Genia and wailing. Haya followed her mother like a shadow, terrified to lose sight of her. Shlamek was irritating Dita. Meirke cried inconsolably, and so did Sofia, who cried often since parting from her father. Lilly looked for a quiet corner where she could write. Hava had lost her good blouse, her last memento from home. Moshik volunteered to look for it and rummaged in everybody's bundles ignoring their vociferous protests. He would do anything to get the girl's attention. Elimelech was demonstrating a drill he had learned in the cadet camp. Berele's parents were looking for him, and I revealed that he was carrying out a secret mission, without going into details.

The Donora hugged the coastline at first and we could see palm trees on land. Lilly stood near me, gripping her diary and staring passionately at the palm trees. She mumbled that she had never thought she would ever see such trees, or go to India. She was very excited. She would be seeing her parents soon. Meanwhile, she was a little jealous of Berele, who had his parents with him, and of Hava and Haya, whose mother was on the ship. Meirke was also with his mother, at last, and there were a few other happy children like them. But not many, alas. Of course, Shlamek and Dita, Haim and Sara, Itzik and Elimelech, Helena and Adam had each other, but most were alone—Moshik, Antek, Genia, and Mira, for example, who had no idea where their families were, nor when they would see them again, if ever. Lilly buried herself in her diary and drawings to take her mind off her own uncertainties about the future. Little Sofia tried to draw warmth from Adam and Helena, who were like family to her, but they had none to spare, being needful themselves.

They were all interested in the hammocks that had been strung up for them to sleep in below deck. But despite their fatigue, they ran about restlessly instead of going to sleep. They raised a deafening, nerve-shattering row.

The ship slowly moved out to sea, and once it was well away from the shore Berele emerged from his hiding place to join the children running wildly around the deck, shoving their heads into cabins and exclaiming at everything they saw. The Donora sailed calmly in the light breeze, surrounded by silvery waves. The children who had sneaked into some vacant cabins were chased out to join the rest in the big hall.

Over the ear-splitting din of their voices, we detected the sound of a motor. Everyone rushed excitedly to see the approaching boat, which made my heart beat faster for fear they would conduct a check of passengers and find out that we had one extra. I calmed down when the boat veered away leaving the sea serene and quiet again. But I knew that we could not be sure the danger had passed.

On that first day of our journey, the sea was calm and the children were stormy. They leaped and bounded and even climbed to the Bridge. I hoped the sea would stay calm the whole time and that the children would also settle down. The sun was slowly setting on a red and gold horizon. It was a breathtaking sight. Lilly, with her sensitivity to colour, stared in fascination at the sinking ball of the sun.

I was remembering other times, another journey by sea. It was less than a year since I had left the Russian port on the Caspian Sea, yet so much had changed. I was no longer the barefoot, desperate refugee without any papers or rights. I was wearing the khaki uniform of the Polish army: knee-length trousers, long socks, a belt, and a shirt with a pocket where I kept the documents attesting to the fact that I was Officer-in-Charge of the Transport. I also had a three-cornered cap with a shiny badge. With Mr. Rudnitzky, the lawyer, I was the offical representative of the transport and together with my satisfaction at holding this respected position, I felt the weight of the responsibility I was carrying.

The moon was reflected in the dark sea. Below deck, the passengers were climbing into their hammocks. There were not enough hammocks for everyone, so some of the children lay down on blankets, which was nothing new for them, since they had all slept that way in the camp. But it soon became evident that, in spite of our instructions, some of the older boys had sold their blankets, and were now left without any. Antek and Moshik were among these, of course, but I was surprised that Hava and her sister Haya had also sold theirs.

I considered punishing them by making them sleep on the bare floor, which they fully deserved, but I also knew that they were not to blame for an attitude bred by their situation. It was hard to undo in a matter of months what they had learned during the years when survival was the prime imperative. The real blame lay with those who had forced them into this situation. Therefore, we handed out blankets from a

supply I had brought with me, while I thought about the amount of work that still had to be done to educate these children, to bring them back to normality. Life in Russia had instilled them with bad habits, as I had had ample opportunity to see in the camp. Life on board ship did not promise to be any easier, and I knew that all the counsellors, like myself, were exhausted—especially since most of the men had gone ahead to escape conscription.

The tumult had not abated since we boarded ship; weeping, naughtiness, wild behaviour was the order of the day. It would be impossible to continue our camp routine here, but some kind of framework had to be found. The worn out children finally fell asleep that night, but the struggle was renewed when they woke in the morning. The counsellors tried to direct their activities with games and songs and the like, but it was a Herculean task.

We had acquired another two sewing machines just before we left Teheran, bringing the number to nine. We had also bought cloth before leaving and now announced a sewing competition. Thirty children sewed various garments, including underwear, on a production line system. It was important to us to arrive in Palestine dressed properly, so as not to arouse pity. This aim spurred us to exert ourselves, and the sewing provided an activity for some of the children, but most had nothing to do. The counsellors continued to make a tremendous effort to keep a semblance of order. Under these difficult conditions they worked without any thought of reward, even their salaries were only nominal.

Experience had taught us that the best way to unify the children was to plan a party. We began rehearsing for a celebration in honour of our departure from Persia and our arrival in India. The children working on a dance performance spun in circles and couples on the deck, doing the polka and the krakowiak. Another way of imposing some semblance of order was to keep to a roster of duties, as in camp, whereby the children served their own food, washed dishes, swabbed the decks and did other jobs.

Now and then the ship's alarm would sound and everybody would have to come on deck. To avoid panic, we told them this was only regular ship's drill, never revealing that there was a real danger of mines and attack by enemy ships or submarines. Further, there was some danger of sinking should there be a storm, because the ship was

loaded beyond capacity. We were made even more anxious by the fact that there were not enough lifebelts for everyone on board. I prayed that everything would be all right and encouraged the children, Rachel, her mother and all the others to believe that, indeed, it would be. At heart, I was aware of the reality of the danger.

The ship was divided into sections, each of which could be hermetically sealed, if hit, to prevent water flooding other parts of the ship. The Captain insisted that every time there was the danger of an attack, passengers had to ascend to the upper deck. As mentioned, we tried to keep up the pretence that these drills, during which I led them up the stairs, were nothing but a game. It took great restraint and strong nerves to carry on functioning in the crush on board, the yelling and shouting and quarrelling, the ailments, and the childish pranks, which were often far from funny.

Adam ran amok. This had happened in Teheran, when he had looked for his father and, not finding him, had tried to commit suicide. He knew his father had died, but refused to accept the fact. He shouted that his father had not left him, begged him to come back, all in heartrending tones, and we were constantly afraid that he would throw himself into the sea. Helena vomited her heart out from over-eating. But she could not defeat her compulsive appetite.

The arrangements for distribution of meals on the ship were completely different from those we were accustomed to, and so was the quality and type of food. We received mainly canned food, with plenty of bullybeef. The children did not attack the food as they had done on arrival in Pahlevi. Nobody was as hungry now as they had been then. Now and then, someone would even forgo a meal because of seasickness. But they were pleased with the opportunity to eat at a table after such a long time. Most pleasing of all were the sweets they received with every meal. I was concerned about the unbalanced diet, particularly the shortage of fruit and vegetables. We also had no way of reinforcing the diet of the ailing and weak.

I noticed that some of the children continued to hoard bread they had kept since leaving Teheran. They shared this treasure only with those closest to them, and kept the rest against the day that hunger would strike again, heaven forbid. No amount of reasoning could influence them.

The ship continued on the open sea, in the direction of the Gulf of Oman, dipping and swaying and causing seasickness among the pas-

sengers. Haim took care of his little sister and Dita looked after Shlamek. Lilly had Genia to care for her; the two girls had become friends. Whenever she felt well enough, Lilly wrote in her diary and drew pictures with the colours she had received for her birthday. These were her most precious possession. She was depressed in addition to her seasickness, even though the ship was bringing her closer to her parents. She had outbursts of bitter tears when she could not be pacified. Genia scolded her and supported her, unable to comprehend. What had she to be sad about? She was going to her parents! Genia envied her, consoled her.

If our camp had been a pressure pot on the point of exploding, the ship was now an overflowing cauldron. Youthful energy boiled in it, and passionate loves and hatreds. New couples formed, others broke up. The counsellors kept me informed about the joys and disappointments; high spirits and depression swayed the volatile youngsters, as they did most people of that age everywhere. But everything was more intense here, owing to the crowded conditions, lack of privacy and constant physical contact.

Meanwhile, we continued to rehearse, spending hours at it. I stood looking at the dancers, like pretty Hava, whose movements were marvelous. Moshik was also enchanted by her and joined the dancers because of her. As for Lilly, when I complimented her on her drawings she shrugged, uncertain as to how to receive compliments and kind words.

We were due to reach Karachi soon, but the Captain warned me that we could not rely on the regular timetable; delays and complications were likely. Nevertheless, we fixed the day of the party for the 20th of January, 1943 on the assumption that we would dock at Karachi on the following day.

We had been at sea for over a fortnight and I hoped there would not be a storm. The children were not as organized and disciplined as they had been when they boarded the ship. Their clothes had become dirty from the lack of proper hygienic conditions and overcrowding, and they could not wash properly. Many of them were soiled by their own vomit, or other people's.

Lice became a problem again. This plague had not been completely eradicated by the time we sailed, but we had had it under control.

Again, we saw the familiar sight of children delousing one another and scratching themselves frantically. One of these was Antek. When I noticed that his hat was swarming with lice I suggested that he throw it into the sea, but he emphatically refused to do so. I thought this was the usual inability to part with anything, but Antek informed me that it was because he was religious and could not go bareheaded. I was surprised to hear this. There were some children from religious families, but Antek was not one of them. He had only agreed to celebrate his bar mitzvah in order to have a party and refreshments. I promised him a new hat, and even brought him one, but he clung to the old one. I knew he was harming others in addition to himself by hanging on to the infested hat and, ignoring his protests, I snatched the filthy hat from him and flung it into the sea. Antek went crazy. He began shouting and screaming. He refused to wear the new hat and looked for a long stick to fish the old one out of the sea, but it soon disappeared in the waves.

Antek was now hysterical, banging his head on the deck rail, shouting. It slowly dawned on me what the real problem was. He had hidden all his black market earnings in the hat. He was bewailing his treasure and I had trouble extracting from him how much money there had been in the hat. At first he said there were five "greens" that he had brought out of Russia. Then he raised the sum to ten, forty, fifty and a hundred. I did not know how much there had been, but it was clear to me that he had worked long and hard to amass it, and not always honestly. He had even deprived himself of food so that he could sell it. He had hoarded the green bills that he had learned to appreciate as a means of protection, a way of escape, survival.

He cried for hours, and would not be calmed even when I told him that he need not worry, that all his needs would be taken care of by us, that we would take him to Palestine and there he would go to a good boarding school where they would look after him well. It was hard for him to believe this, or to calm down, his past experiences had shaken his belief in people and events. He sat in his new hat, wailing and lamenting his loss, scratching himself and scheming how to get more money, by hook or by crook.

He and the others were tortured not only by lice, but also by scabies, which we had also brought under control in Teheran only to see it flare up again now. The dedicated medical team that had come on board with us, a doctor and a few nurses, did their best, but with little

effect. The condition of the sick and weak children worsened owing to the unbalanced and inadequate diet, sea-sickness and other hardships. I looked at Helena. She was smeared with the black, strong-smelling ointment, which added its torment to that of the lice, the itching, and the pangs in her stomach. But more serious than these was the severe depression which attacked her. I feared for her when I saw her bending as low as she could over the ship's railing, as though looking for something—death, perhaps? The death that had claimed her mother, father, twin brothers? I knew she remembered everything she had lost: her father, the respected doctor; the rest of her family; their fine home. She was alone in the world except for her mentally disturbed brother. I was afraid that she might seek escape into the serene arms of the sea and nothingness. That same nothingness that had brought peace to her mother's eyes as she died in Helena's arms in the wastes of Russia.

I tried to shake Helena out of her state of mind, to get her to talk to me. She confessed that she had no more strength to bear her destiny. That she was sure the deep sea promised ultimate calm. A moment's suffering—and it was over!

The boat pushed on through endless hours, days and weeks. The nocturnal weeping began again. Symptoms we thought had vanished resurfaced. Hava still desperately sought her blouse, which was more than a garment to her—it was her last link with home, and she bewailed its loss with bitter tears. Even dancing gave her no comfort. Her mother was also in great distress, grieving over the son she had lost. She was tormented by guilt at having managed to get out, while he had stayed behind, who knew where? What would she tell her husband when they met again? And when would that be? She was too weary to fill the role of both father and mother. She looked to her oldest daughter for support, but the girl was unable to help her. Hava also ignored her sister Haya, so obsessed with her blouse, deep in bitter speculation about its loss and about the whole rotten world!

The children were suffering from the trauma of leaving the place they had lived in for six months in comparative security. Another wrench. Another step further away from the families in Russia. Another journey into the unknown. Dangers accumulating on the horizon. The terrifying future. They longed to arrive, but were full of anxieties. They were afraid of the *kibbutz* to which they would possibly be sent. Some

of them were familiar with the Russian kolkhozes, to which they and their families had been banished, where they had been a handful of Jews among gentiles, working hard and in isolation. They recoiled from the idea of a communal farm. They were afraid the kibbutz would be the same as the kolkhoz. Some were afraid that the people in Palestine would not understand them and would find it hard to respond to their questions and requests. Above all, they feared that Palestine meant the final separation from their loved ones; that brothers and sisters, friends, would be separated.

Itzik and Elimelech, inseparable since the latter had left the cadet camp to join his brother, announced that under no circumstances would they allow anyone to come between them. Dita dissolved in tears at the very thought of parting from Shlamek. Haim became aggressive if anyone mentioned that he and his sister might be sent to different places. Genia suffered from the idea of her double loss: Lilly would go to her parents and little Mira to her aunt and uncle. As for Lilly, she was sorrowfully anticipating her separation from Haim.

I knew there was no magic wand awaiting us at our destination.

The journey dragged on, amid the cries and vomiting, the unhygienic conditions. I asked the Captain why the leftover food was not thrown overboard and he replied that they were keeping it for the dock-workers, as payment for cleaning and other services to the ship when we arrived. I hoped that the food, which was spoiled from being kept for weeks, would not cause an epidemic on board.

With Mr. Rudnitzky, I made use of the time at our disposal on the journey to organize our camp in Karachi, should we be forced to stay there for any length of time. We had to put a stop to the chaotic behaviour that had become habitual on board ship. We had to impose an organized way of life on the children as soon as we landed.

Despite the anguish and difficulties, we all felt that the journey from Persia to India was an indescribable experience. As we sailed on the open sea, headed for Karachi, we were hit by a storm more powerful than any we had hitherto experienced. We had been through some rather rough weather, enough to lay many of us low with seasickness, but the storm we encountered after being at sea for several weeks was worst of all, maybe because we were at the end of our tether, by then.

By now, the children were filthy and ragged. When I went down to the big hall in which they slept, I was assailed by the pungent odour

of vomit. There was no way of washing the children, the clothes or the blankets. In one corner, I found Lilly lying and crying with Genia beside her, comforting her. This big, plain girl had become strong and confident since she joined us. She was a source of comfort to her weak little friend, speaking in a gentle, motherly voice and, when this did not help, taking a firmer tone.

As I passed, Lilly raised her suffering face and asked when we would get there. She waited for my answer and I dared not tell her what the Captain had told me about possible complications that would delay our arrival. I knew exactly what he meant. There were dangers ahead, both natural and manmade, and to add to this, the ship was overloaded.

The terrible storm raged as we approached the coast. I went on deck, which see-sawed under a sky as grey as the surrounding sea. Waves battered the deck as though intent on shattering it. As I regarded the hellish scene, various thoughts passed through my head; thoughts, it seems to me, that can be understood only by someone who has endured such an experience and has had the sense of imminent death. I saw my life: childhood in the Ukrainian town, the pogrom, youth in Vilna, first love, the Polish army, the war, imprisonment, deportation, and so on. I had managed so far to cope with all the difficulties and get safely through the mishaps and dangers along the way. I wondered if I was going to end up in the stormy depths of the sea, never to set up a home with Rachel. I thought about her, her mother, all the others on this ship, and the hundreds of children placed in my care.

Suddenly, as in other difficult situations, I remembered the words of the fortune teller on the eve of my enlistment. To my amazement, he had been right about everything. He had foreseen that I would help the children, predicted the stay in an exotic country—I wondered whether he meant Persia or India—and he had spoken of long service in the army of the Jewish state. So, according to his prediction, I still had tasks to fulfill in the promised land. I was amazed at myself for seeking comfort in such irrational musings. Nevertheless, they were a great help to me just then.

There was an awful magnificence in the scene of the ship being tossed about like a peel on the wild sea. I stood there for hours until the storm ended as suddenly as it had begun. I went swaying down to the cabin I shared with Hannah Drexler and Rachel. To my disappointment, Rachel was not there. I needed to see her, to speak to her

and share my feelings. But this had proved almost impossible during the voyage. We saw very little of each other, as Rachel was busy day and night with her children and I was also constantly involved with their problems. Perhaps when we reached India we would have more time to be together. Rachel still owed me a final answer.

As I entered the cabin, I was surprised yet again at the way Hannah had managed to turn even this small space into a home. There was a cloth on the little table. Everything was neatly arranged. She now asked me in a concerned, motherly way whether I had eaten. She arranged some of our ration of canned food on the table and I realized that I had not eaten anything all day. My appetite had vanished in the malaise and worry caused by the dreadful storm. I was suddenly very hungry and I sat down and finished whatever was on the table. I did not notice Hannah's amazed and disapproving looks. It was some time before I discovered that this had worked against me in her estimation of me as a cultured person. It is fortunate that I did not know this. Hannah had championed my cause with Rachel until then. Anyway, I was too preoccupied and worried to pay much attention to it at the time. After eating, I went below immediately to check how the children had weathered the storm. I wanted to encourage them and cheer them up and so I informed them that we would have our leaving-Persia party the very next day.

Exhausted and weak from the storm and the voyage, the children lifted shining eyes to me, and some even began to pack their belongings. Berele got everything into perfect order. Hava did what she could to freshen her clothes. Genia regretted that she did not have a dress like she used to have at home. Three years had passed since she left home and they seemed like a generation to her. It would have been easier for her if she were loved, but she was not, she had nothing. No parents, no brothers or sisters. But still, she tried to keep her spirits up by promising herself and the others that soon, in Palestine, everything would be different. How she wanted to believe this! I was amazed by her courageous spirit when I spoke to her sometimes. I hoped she would yet meet her parents and sisters, prayed she would not be disappointed.

I, too, thought about my family who had remained in the flames of war. I knew I would meet my brother Zwi in Palestine, but wondered if I would ever see the others again. I tried to imagine my meeting

with Zwi after so many years. Also, I wondered what would become of my plans to marry Rachel. I hoped for the best, but many of the others had trouble sharing my optimism.

I was aware that they had hard times ahead of them. I was older than them, more experienced, strong. I had spent my childhood and youth in the midst of my warm family, while these children were wounded and scarred. I had faith in the powers of Henrietta Szold and her movement, Aliyat Hanoar, to rehabilitate these youngsters; and in the other Jewish institutions in Palestine, who would know how to make a warm home for these little warriors wrung out by hunger and wandering. I had done all I could for them. I would soon be passing the responsibility to others with more experience in education. But I would keep track of them and be there for them whenever they needed me.

We held the final rehearsal for the party, which was to take place the following evening. The children danced in the heaving ship, and every so often somebody broke the circle to vomit, which is how Hava suddenly found herself without Moshik, her partner in the polka. In her torn shoes, she danced on gracefully, alone. Genia, in a dress still damp from her attempts to clean it, danced with ungainly movements. Haim and Lilly also danced, but she gave up, too weak to withstand the tossing of the boat.

We anchored in Karachi two days later. The half-naked, brown, port workers came aboard with outstretched hands to receive the packets of leftovers prepared by the crew. We all left the ship: Genia, in her yellow coat, dropped her bundle and slices of hoarded bread tumbled out. Even she!? She had also kept some rags, which she now picked up with flaming cheeks. She was ashamed, but had not the strength to throw anything away. To believe in tomorrow. She was wearing her coat despite the fierce heat, in case it was stolen.

We were in India. I could still feel the earth tilting under my feet.

17

THE CAMP IN KARACHI

A CONVOY OF TRUCKS arrived at the port and we were driven, escorted by a contingent of Indian soldiers serving under the English, to a British army camp near Karachi. We saw a great many tents arranged in rows facing each other to form streets with foreign-sounding names. All around the camp lay an expanse of sand under a blazing sun. It was freezing, wet winter in Teheran, and here—a heatwave.

Karachi looked exotic and colourful in the distance. We were in India. Never in my wildest imaginings had I expected to find myself here. Was this the place the fortune teller had referred to? I had travelled a long road since then, and at last the end was in sight. I would soon be home. But we still had a long voyage ahead of us, to the Suez Canal; a voyage made perilous by the war, with a cargo that was precious beyond words.

The children again resembled the gaunt, ragged waifs they were when they came to Pahlevi the previous summer. They were crawling

with lice. The seasickness and other ailments on board had kept the medical team hard at work, and the doctor and nurses were still vitally necessary to us in the camp at Karachi.

On our first night in camp, Antek said he had been bitten by a dog. I did not take him very seriously at first. I had not seen any dogs in the area, and I thought it was one of his tricks to get something or other until he showed me the bite on his leg. I took him to our improvised clinic, where he received an injection. One of the brown-skinned Indian soldiers, a young corporal, looked at Antek's wound and whispered to me that he thought it looked like a jackal-bite. I was horrified. Jackals in our camp!! That was all we needed!

The corporal reassured me, promising to deal with the matter. He then introduced himself as our liaison man. He displayed a genuine interest in us, even an emotional involvement. I wondered who he was, and if he could really be only a corporal. There was something authoratitive about his personality that intrigued me.

He arranged for some of the soldiers to stand guard and to chase the jackals from the camp. The children were somewhat calmed by this, after the rumour of the jackals and Antek's bite had flown through the camp, terrifying them.

The jackals, now outside the perimeter of the camp, filled the darkness with their lost, sorrowful wailing, and some of the younger children joined them, sobbing with their own share of the universal anguish. The older ones were also drawn in and the unrest mounted as the children, as always when they were uprooted and removed from a familiar routine, sank into bewilderment and shock.

We organised them into units again, since some of the groups had disintegrated during the voyage, preparatory to their first night of sleep in the new camp. We had decided to postpone the tasks of disinfection, bathing and laundry until morning. We were, one and all, utterly exhausted.

With our depleted staff, owing to the early departure of those evading conscription, as mentioned, the load on the remaining people was heavy, and we were happy to enlist the help of the adults accompanying their children. Sola had been recruited to care for the infants right at the beginning of the voyage, and Berele's parents, Meirke's mother and anyone else who was prepared to lend a hand were welcome reinforcements. Peter, the corporal, was a great help, telling us we could rely on him for anything we needed. I saw that he could

indeed be relied on; because of his special attitude to us I began to suspect that he was Jewish. This was confirmed when he told me that he was born in Germany in 1922, leaving that country with his family when the Nazis came to power. The family had moved to London, where he had studied. On the outbreak of war he had enlisted in the British army and was posted to India. These were the details he gave me, but I had a feeling that there was much more to know. I had liked him from the start and my immediate feeling that he could be trusted proved to be correct.

I was happy to see that there were army cots in the tents, such as we had not merited in Teheran, except for the seriously ill. Despite the improved sleeping conditions, however, the nightly crying from fear and loneliness again arose and the counsellors moved about with words of comfort and reassurance, which did not always help. Late at night, after taking care of all the necessary arrangements, I also lay down, but tired as I was, I could not fall asleep because my cot was infested with bedbugs and I had to bed down on the ground.

I was up early. This was our first day in Karachi. I had no idea how long we would have to stay here and it was best to plan for a lengthy stay and organize accordingly. The camp was deeply asleep and silent. I noticed the dedicated corporal, who had arrived with an Indian barber. There had been no need to ask him to arrange this, he had perceived our situation as soon as we arrived.

After breakfast the counsellors inspected everyone in their groups personally and every head infected with scabies or lice was noted. The children were seated in rows, with their heads bowed, and the barber passed among them, razor in hand, shaving them one by one. The rows of white scalps gleamed in the morning air and I hoped we could rid ourselves of the plague before we reached Palestine.

However, not all the infested children agreed to be shaved. Antek fled and hid until it was all over. Others also refused to listen to reason and made the work more difficult and prevented us from overcoming the problem in its entirety. Scabies, which we had fought in Teheran, had appeared again. To add to everything, we were faced with another trial: bedbugs. They were in all the beds, which had seemed such a boon at first sight. Most of us returned to our hard beds on the ground, to which we had grown accustomed before we came here.

However valiantly we fought these infestations, despite all the cleaning and disinfecting, we did not make much progress; the filthy rags the children wore and the hoarded bread added to the hopelessness of our struggle.

Concerning the clothing problem, at least, a satisfactory solution was found. A swarthy, short fellow turned up one day and introduced himself as the representative of the Bombay Jewish community. He took one look at the children and asked me for a list of every boy and girl, and how old they were, promising to outfit each and every one of them with new clothes, underwear, shoes, and a pith helmet against the sun.

I was delighted with this contribution from the local Jewish community, headed by the affluent Sassoon family. Haim, who overheard the promise, immediately spread the word, to the children's great joy. I nervously hoped their fragile faith, which we had tried so hard to restore, would not again be put to the test and that the promise would be kept.

After a few days it was indeed kept to the last detail. They had also thought of sending us some cloth and our sewing brigade turned out some clothes and even sheets. The children, who had not slept on bed linen for so long, reacted happily to this bonus. The clothes they had received were scout uniforms, which they wore proudly, and their joy was complete when they donned their pith helmets. Now, in their new shoes and knee length socks, they suddenly looked quite different.

Alas, the old problem appeared again. Some of the children refused to part with their old clothes, tying them in bundles and hanging onto them for dear life. It was essential that we destroy the source of the infestations by burning them. But we did not succeed in getting everyone to comply. It was hard enough to explain this to some of the older ones, like Itzik, Genia, Haim and the rest, but it was even more difficult in the case of Shlamek, Dita, Sofia and other little ones. Antek and Moshik, of course, loudly resisted any attempt to deprive them of their property. There was no point in arguing. There were more important, basic things to attend to: life had to be organized, chores had to be shared, duties fulfilled, we had to get a routine going. So, meanwhile, some of the children continued to hug their bundles.

A week went by in the hope of news of a vessel to carry us further along our way. But no news came.

We settled into a way of life similar to the one we had observed in Teheran, despite the impatience and irritability of the wait for news. At the beginning of the week they had informed us that we were going to sail on Thursday, but I thought it wiser not to convey this information to the children until it was absolutely certain we would sail.

Our second week in Karachi. The children had calmed down a little. Their appearance had improved, in their new clothes, but the clothes did not fit everyone, particularly the smaller ones who had to cope with a dress or trousers that were far too wide and long for them. The sewing brigade made alterations. The knitters continued to knit although it was warm here, because we estimated that it would be winter in Palestine when we arrived.

Apart from the usefulness of the occupation, it also helped pass the time.

I noticed Genia knitting as though possessed. She filled every free moment she had by knitting. She had even managed to involve Helena. No longer ravenously hungry, this girl was now gripped by pessimism. She cynically confided to me that she would probably be old before she managed to finish the sweater. There was a note of self-pity in her voice, too. It would soon be her twelfth birthday and she was looking forward to the party, to which Adam was also invited.

At the party Adam went wild, grabbing the knife they were using to cut the cake, and threatening to kill himself. His counsellor got the knife away from him after a struggle, then Adam began running about in search of his father again, yelling that he had abandoned them; his terrible screams put an end to the party. Helena broke down and wept because her parents were not there and her brother did not even know they were dead. We soothed her as best we could, promising that everything would be much better in Palestine. She refused to be consoled. Could her scars ever be healed? I was not sure, and I was even more doubtful about Adam.

Our community of children was increased by the birth of two babies. As mentioned, we adopted the same routine as the one we had lived by in Teheran, starting with the morning parade, followed by exercises—for which the little ones wore only their underpants and pith helmets. They were very enthusiastic and it was a pleasure for me to watch little Dita and Shlamek, who were very supple and charming,

but my pleasure was, as usual, tinged with sad thoughts about their absent mother. I wondered if they would ever be reunited.

Of the older children, some were playing football and others were sewing or knitting in preparation for yet another anticipated departure and, once again, the children were practicing folkdancing. The daily routines of tidying tents and serving meals were reintroduced. The older boys were appointed as prefects to maintain order in the camp and to keep an eye on the jackals. Big, strong Moshik, who loved bossing people around and who wielded a big stick against the jackals, was a great success at this job.

His energies, thus constructively directed, were generally beneficial.

Life began to run smoothly, as far as possible. We were experienced by then. In their scout uniforms, the children looked as if they were at a Zionist youth summer camp, which could not have been further from the reality of our situation.

When I thanked Mr. Sassoon for the generosity of his donation of clothing, he replied that the "House of Israel must take care of its own." This was not mere flowery speech. We all felt that way. People who were strangers to these children a few months previously, were doing their utmost to help them, and this applied to institutions handling our affairs, and to the young corporal, Peter, with whom I struck up a friendship. He suddenly became interested in Palestine and asked me about the situation in the country, Jewish settlement, and many other details. I told him whatever I had learned from being in the Hashomer Hatzair movement and from being a counsellor, but it was sometimes difficult for me to answer because, like him, I had never been there. I did my best to answer because his interest grew with everything he heard.

He, on his part, told me about India. I was very interested in the country. When he invited me to join him on a short trip to the city, I was delighted. I could not allow myself a longer tour since I was never free of my responsibilities, day or night. He suggested I invite a friend to come along, and I asked Rachel. True to form, we had not had much time together since leaving the ship, owing to our duties, which were made more intense by the need to occupy the children all the time to prevent quarrels, thieving, black marketeering, introspection and all the ills of idleness. However, our relationship was an open secret and I think Peter was also aware that we were a couple.

The first sight that struck me when we left the camp together was the tremendous crowd. A human river flowing in a landscape of palm trees. Beggars with outstretched hands immediately blocked our path and surrounded us, perceiving that we were foreigners. To my amazement Peter assertively cleared a path in the surging human sea, even lashing out with his whip at a sari-clad woman with two children when she held out her hand for alms. She would not leave us alone and was particularly bothersome, but I did not like my friend's rough treatment of her. He said that unless one was acquainted with the local mentality, it was hard to understand, and continued to clear the way until, at last, the beggars let us proceed in peace.

I had never seen such sights in all my life. Hundreds of heads, wherever I looked, black ones, brown ones, some pale ones; shaven, unshaven or partly shaven, braids, locks that had never known a barber's razor. Turbans, caps and kerchiefs abounded. Men in suits walked beside others in rags, or half naked, or wrapped in blankets, despite the heat. The corporal explained that the variety of styles of dress was mainly due to the number of different religious sects in India—some twenty thousand, serving about thirty thousand gods and goddesses. Here I was, in Karachi, and it had to be the exotic place the fortune teller had seen in my future! I was bewildered by the movement and the colour of the great crowd and I asked our guide if there was some happening that had brought everybody out into the streets, to which he replied that this was just a regular weekday crowd.

The women walked silently, with lowered eyes, trailing the sweet, heavy, unfamiliar smell of the flowers in their hair, moving along in the mighty current of people that flowed in an orderly, almost silent stream. Bare feet and sandals passed soundlessly over the pavements, as though in a silent film. The contrast between the densely packed, moving crowd and the near-silence was impressive, strange, like everything else here.

Peter told us that an estimated four hundred million people live in India, in the snowy Himalayas, the valleys of Kashmir, the open spaces of Bengal, barren deserts, and lush green coasts.

We walked single-file on the narrow pavement, noticing how bodies managed never to touch in spite of the crush of people. Nobody walked arm in arm with anybody else; Peter said that Indians did not shake hands or clap one another on the shoulder. Instead, on meeting, they

raised their palms at chest level, keeping even lovers and family at a distance.

We entered a restaurant, at the invitation of our friend, Peter. There was a gift counter inside, and I bought a chess set and a few other souvenirs, which I still have.

The waiter, clad in gleaming white which contrasted with his tar-black hair, came to take our order. We were at a loss what to order, so our host took over and asked the waiter to bring the first course. A heaped bowl of rice strewn with bits of white meat arrived. We were not exactly pampered eaters, in those days, and we immediately piled our plates, Rachel and I, with the appetizing food. As we chewed we enquired what ingredients were in the dish. Unhesitatingly, Peter informed us that we were eating a great delicacy: rice and white mice. Rachel responded immediately by disgustedly spitting out everything she had in her mouth. Nor could I carry on eating. That was the end of our festive meal.

We left the restaurant in embarrassment.

When we were walking in the crowd once more, I mentioned my regret at not being able to understand anything that was being said around me, despite the fact that I spoke Yiddish, Russian, Polish and Hebrew. Our corporal smiled and said that he spoke eight languages, including Persian and Arabic, having taken a degree in Semitic languages at his university in England.

A glance at my watch told me that we had been away from the camp for an hour and a half. I was suddenly uneasy. I had confidence in our counsellors and the older children: Haim, Moshik, Genia, as well as Elimelech who had become a very positive influence in the camp. Nevertheless, I decided that it was time to go back. On the way, Peter asked, as usual, if everything was all right at the camp, and whether he could help us in any way.

I had promised Henrietta Szold, while we were still in Teheran, that I would send her some photographs of the children. I had kept this promise, and we had also made an album. I now wanted a memento of Karachi, as well. Peter promised to arrange this, and kept his promise, as he always did: the next day he arrived with a photographer and recorded the children with their counsellors, at their exercises, on parade and in other scenes and poses. The photographs are among my dearest possessions.

In one of the photographs, Peter stands next to me, warmly hugging a small child that he is holding in his arms. He is clearly not merely posing for a photograph. Whenever possible, this young fellow would warmly embrace the children, who were so starved for warmth and tenderness. Aware of this, he gave them affection at every opportunity.

It was through this photograph that I was able to identify him some twenty years later, when I saw a picture of him in the evening paper "Maariv" with the caption: "Secret Agent *Burned*."

Reading on, I learned that our young corporal, whom I had known by the name of Peter, and who had seemed somewhat mysterious to me, had been arrested in Baghdad under the name of Meir Ben Shaul, charged with spying for Israel and sentenced to death. However, he was released and died in Germany. In 1950 his remains were brought to Israel for reinterment. I assumed that the assimilated young Jew, of the high forehead and the pipe that never left his mouth, had become a Zionist owing to his encounter with our children in Karachi. As I had guessed, he was not just a corporal, but a graduate of an officers' school, with the rank of major, and was a commando in the intelligence service. After his service in India, he had made contact with the Jewish underground in Palestine and had worked for Haganah intelligence. I was very impressed by him in India and was proud, all those years later, to remember that his first contact with Judaism and Zionism had been through me, when we met in Karachi, and it was more than likely that he—the son of an affluent, assimilated German Jew—played some part in encouraging Indian Jews to immigrate to Palestine.

I also became friendly with a young Indian, he was about seventeen, who took a great interest in us and helped us in many ways. One day he revealed that he, too, was a Jew. He disclosed a Magen David on a chain around his neck and urged me to visit his home, which I could not do, for lack of time. But I did go with him to some relatives of his who lived close to the camp.

This was my second trip away from the camp. It was also the first time I ever came face to face with a camel, an event that was recorded for posterity in a photograph. It is now one of a collection of photographs taken by myself, some of the counsellors and others, usually with a small box camera, photographs without which I might be tempted to think I had dreamed some of the scenes and events of those strange times.

When I returned to the camp after my brief absence, I was met by the kind of turmoil I always dreaded. Apparently it had begun with an old quarrel over Moshik's objection to having to take out the clinic's garbage—after all, he said, it was not his garbage! He would attend to his garbage and let others attend to theirs. This was a recurrent complaint, because the children could not understand why they had to do things for each other. Itzik was on Moshik's side. His brother, Elimelech, however, thought otherwise. There was a terrible row and hands were raised. It was difficult to calm the flaring tempers, and the heatwave was of no help, either. Conditions were really difficult, nerves were frayed by the endlessly delayed arrival at our final destination, and this led to some strange situations. One night, Berele dreamed that Yosef Lesky, who had died in Teheran, had appeared to him and told him they would only arrive in Palestine on *Passover*, the following spring, and this had cast him into a state of despair. In his distress, he began to believe in omens and in the power of the dead boy whose father, the cantor, had supposedly foreseen his death. Other children tended to believe the story and they, too, lost heart.

This time the fracas came to an end when someone shouted: "They're giving things!" and everyone began running to stand in line, where they pushed, punched and shoved each other hysterically. When I tried to break up the fights, the culprits were capable of looking me straight in the eye and lying blandly about their part in the disturbance.

How could anyone disbelieve Dita when she claimed that she had not been given a pith helmet. "I didn't get one," said she gazing at me with her angelic blue eyes, backed to the hilt by her brother Shlamek. He extended his patronage to Sofia, his sister's friend from the convent days, and tried to obtain an additional hat for her, too. Such close alliances were fairly common, not only between blood relatives, but also between an older child and a younger one.

At this point, Elimelech and Itzik found out that Moshik was some sort of relative of theirs. A third or fourth cousin. This was enough to forge a bond that was like a fortress wall, at times, and united them in their efforts to ensure them of their due. Moshik set the tone and they followed, causing quite a few problems. "It's a lousy world!" Moshik declared, and it did not take much to convince some of the children that this was so. In such a world, it was best to grab what

you could, or somebody else was going to grab what was yours. The trio became very influential and powerful. No lock or bar could withstand them. They walked about with their hands in their pockets, evaded their obligations, and ignored the authority of those who insisted that they do what they had to do.

Genia, who had taken Lilly under her wing as well as little Mira, had her own problems to cope with. She insisted that we write to Mira's father, who had been left behind in Russia, and to the child's aunt and uncle in Palestine. She furiously claimed that the little one was the victim of discrimination, that the clothes she had received were unsuitable, and had to be altered to fit her, how could she turn up at her aunt's, dressed like that?

And Lilly? She also had to look her best when she met her parents. Genia, however, continued to go around looking sloppy in her eternal yellow coat, stooped as though her large breasts were too heavy for her. She met suggestions that she tidy herself by saying that nobody would be there to meet her, but the other two would be met, so they had to look good. Moshik also did not look very attractive, with his rotten teeth, and Antek's mouth was studded with distinctly unbeautiful shiny metal fillings and caps.

It was hard for me to conceal my especially warm feelings towards Shlamek, Dita and some of the other beautiful children. Nor could I hide my affectionate response to the loving nature of little Mira. On the other hand, I had to fight not to recoil from some poor child afflicted with scabies or lice. Nevertheless, we knew that we had to treat them all equally.

If only we could leave soon, get out of this blazing furnace of a place!

Peter, who would turn up every morning, with one of his large collection of pipes firmly clamped between his teeth, was conducting negotiations with a cool head, and he promised us that it would not be long before we left. I was afraid that he was merely trying to keep us calm, but this was not so. A date of departure was fixed after we had spent about a fortnight in Karachi. At last, we were going to sail away from Karachi, bound for the Suez Canal and from there to Palestine.

18

VIA INDIA TO PALESTINE

DURING OUR TWO week stopover in Karachi, despite the exhausting heat, we kept to our routine and even rehearsed our planned march through Tel Aviv. What an exciting moment that would be for all of us! I thought about my reunion with my brother Zwi, after our seven-year separation. So much had happened to me since then, it seemed as if a lifetime had passed. And he, little more than a boy when we parted, was now an adult and a member of a Hashomer Hatzair kibbutz. I had the watch I bought for him in Teheran in my pocket.

As a parting gesture, the corporal, Peter, arranged a concert for the children. They were entranced by the strange, exotic instruments of the local orchestra. I saw delicate little Lilly sketching the musicians in her diary. I understood that her diary was her means of escape from the growing excitement and tension she was feeling as the time of her meeting with her parents approached.

The pre-voyage unrest was at its height, the children going through their packing-hoarding-guarding pattern again; again refusing to part with rags and broken shoes. Moshik spoke for all of them when he argued that the torn old things were part of him, he himself, and that there was no question of his relinquishing them.

The other familiar problems raised their heads again: Genia and Lilly, the inseparable friends, insisted on travelling together to the port. They would be parted soon and they wanted to spend as much time together as they could. Genia also carried little Mira with her wherever she went. And so it was with the other brothers and sisters and friends who still did not dare to trust fate by travelling on separate trucks. A new slant to the old problem was added by Adam, who had attached himself to little Sofia, calling her "Mother." Experience had taught me not to aggravate matters by interfering. The children were not the only ones to have learned and drawn conclusions over the months.

We were driven in the opposite direction, this time. Karachi receded behind us and the tent city with the strange street names was soon out of sight. We had embarked on yet another stage of our long journey.

Hava had bought herself a small mirror with some coins her mother gave her, and she changed her hairstyle, earning the admiration of the adoring Moshik, who never left her side. Helena sobbed that she had nobody, not even a lame dog, she could call her own. Adam was now in a quiet state, but gazed emptily ahead. I wanted to tell Helena that she was not alone and that I cared what happened to her and would make sure that she was well taken care of, but like the rest of the adults, I was so busy with arrangements for the voyage, that I did not get around to talking to her. I knew that the refreshments the children had received would pacify her for a while, but not for long. She had returned to her compulsive eating habits. I kept an eye on the trio, Itzik, Elimelech and Moshik, who had now been joined by Antek, a development that definitely warranted close supervision. I was surprised at Itzik and Elimelech for having come under Moshik's influence.

The SS Noralea awaited us at the port. Once on board we gathered all the children in the big hall below decks, to the accompaniment of the usual unbearable din. The same symptoms of their anxiety arose here, too, and when Shlamek searched everyone's belongings for the dress his sister said she had lost, he received a punch from Moshik when he tried to go through his bundle. The boy joined his sister's wailing and this soon spread like wildfire among the children.

Meirke could not be consoled even by his mother, Sofia was alarmed by Adam's weird behaviour and began to cry loudly, Berele wanted a hammock and screamed that he had a right to one. His parents, sailing with us, supported this claim. Lilly sat on the sidelines, as usual, losing herself in her writing. She, of all of them, had reason to be happy—unlike so many of the other's, whose parents were lost to them forever.

All of our children had enough reason to be sorrowful and desperate and anxious.

The crossing was made under conditions of crowding, dreadful noise and increased fears: where were they going to be sent in Palestine? Would brothers and sisters, relatives, friends be separated? Were they wanted there, in Palestine?

A hair-pulling fight developed when Genia made fun of Haya for hanging onto her doll, at her age, and Hava came to her sister's defence.

This time I did not have a cabin to myself and Rachel, her mother and I joined the others in the bedlam below deck. Again, to keep a semblance of order, we adhered to our usual routine and rehearsed our celebrations for our arrival in the promised land, where we hoped life would be kinder to us.

The food was uninteresting and meagre. The ship rolled and dipped in the stormy sea. It was a hardship for close to a thousand people to be crammed under such conditions in so small a vessel. Nevertheless, we strictly enforced the duty rosters for dishwashing and mopping the floors. Meanwhile, the human whirlpool spun with the emotions of the densely-packed voyagers: love, feuds, disappointments, tears, joy, fears, and of course, tentative hope.

It was hot and Genia finally took off her scruffy yellow coat—only to have it disappear. Stolen, apparently, to tease her. Her lamentations went beyond any reasonable connection to the loss of the coat. She had found a good excuse to allow the pent up tears to gush forth. She bewailed her coat, her lost parents and her fate. Little Mira joined her, sobbing desperately. I had never seen Genia cry, she was the one who supported others. But now she broke down. Moshik offered her a deal—he would give her a coat of his in exchange for something of hers. But Genia had nothing to offer. Hava, bored with her mirror, swapped it for a bag of rusks. Haim showed Adam, the only one who had not seen them, his family photographs. But the sick boy ignored him.

The air was stifling and sweat ran in rivulets. I preferred to sleep on deck. It was cooler up there, and some of the other passengers were stretched out to get some air and relief from the noise of screaming infants and general pandemonium that reigned below deck.

Through it all, Lilly wrote and sketched in her diary. She would show it to her parents and they would see what she had endured, they would understand, they would love her and comfort her. Meanwhile, the boat tossed and heaved, writing was difficult, and she did not really have much to record. She was nervous and irritable and decided to go on deck to sleep. She hoped nobody would take her pillow and hammock. She had no blanket, and this contributed to a sense of being badly treated, although it was too hot to sleep under covers. She began to feel hungry; her stomach rumbled and growled, and she hoped sleep would ease her pangs. She closed her eyes. I looked at her as she lay near me, her little face full of suffering, the long lashes stirring restlessly as she fought, and failed, to fall asleep.

Lilly was on duty the following morning. She was tired. How many dishes there were! What a dirty floor!

We were celebrating Antek's bar mitzvah that day and he was enjoying all the attention—positive, for a change—that was being showered on him. Haim, who remembered the religious laws from home, insisted on arranging a suitable ceremony. He borrowed a prayer shawl and phylacteries from one of the adult passengers and although the bar mitzvah boy did not read his portion of the law, they all sang together and ate sweets. Haim asked his sister if she remembered how the women in the synagogue used to rain sweets down on the bar mitzvah boy from the Women's Gallery, but she remembered nothing, and listened to him with bated breath. Then she begged him to write to their parents, but they were no longer among the living.

A few days later, we reached Aden. It was a breathtakingly beautiful port against a wonderful backdrop of mountains, with seagulls wheeling above sailboats and ships.

I stood on deck, watching a group of local children playing football on shore. A mother hugging her daughter. The children were the same age as ours, but they lived in a completely different world. I stood rooted to the deck until the Captain reminded me to go below. We were not permitted to come on deck in Aden, for fear of problems with the local Arab population. The girls, in particular, were warned to

remain out of sight, since women in Yemen could not appear in public without the long veil demanded by Islamic law.

A birthday party was in progress when I came below—Moshik was fifteen. He was very happy with the pair of socks he was given for a birthday present and with the party candies everyone was enjoying. I had always thought that this boy, who had seen and suffered so much in his young life, could not be moved by anything. I was wrong; he was obviously touched by this show of affection on the part of his fellow voyagers.

But the little party was held in conditions that were close to intolerable because of the intense heat and crowding, the stifling, foul air in which hundreds of perspiring infants, children and adults waited below deck until the ship could again put out to sea.

It was a great relief when we were at last allowed on deck, to breathe and bask in the clear sea air as the boat ploughed through the waves, into the open sea. Now and then the ship's sirens would sound and everyone had to don life-jackets, which were uncomfortably hot and restrictive. We again told the children that this was only a drill, but they intuitively sensed the dangers lurking in the wide open sea all around us. We knew the water was strewn with mines and that enemy submarines were on the hunt below the surface. Death, on our heels for years, had not let go; it was still reaching out to get us, so close to our haven.

Helena said that she was not afraid, all she needed was one mine to remove her from this world, unmourned and unremembered. Her pessimism scared me. Her only comfort was in eating, and food was scarce on the ship. For her brother Adam there was no comfort. His fixation on Sofia scared the little girl, who fled to Helena, but Helena rejected her.

Healing these children and giving them back their joy of life was going to be a mighty task. Those like Berele, Lilly, Meirke, the Klein sisters and others, might more easily cope with their scars, because they had parents. Right now, the children were tense and difficult, wary about the future, torn between their longing to arrive and their apprehension that the world might be about to deal them yet another blow in Palestine.

They had learned to hate work in Russia. They had seen the workers deprived of everything, labouring away while the bosses and super-

visors had all they needed. They were preoccupied with the anxiety that they would be sent to a kibbutz where they would be put to work. The counsellors tried to tell them about the kibbutz way of life, painting this in a very different light from the much-hated Russian kolkhoz, but they did not have any notable success in allaying the children's fears. Basic disbelief and mistrust, fear of the future and, now, terror of the menacing sea gripped them, one and all.

Slowly, the ship moved through the Red Sea, in the direction of the Suez Canal.

One evening, the Captain called me to his cabin. I was on good terms with him, as with the rest of the crew, including the ship's doctor, who had been of great help to our medical team.

The Captain told me that we had entered a floating minefield. The danger was no less because the mines had been laid by the Allied Forces. Contact with one of them would mean an explosion and the sinking of the ship. He told me to ensure that all the children put on lifejackets and stayed below. I needed no further explanations. I realized that the situation was critical. I was confronted with one of the most difficult problems of my life: whether to tell the counsellors, thus making sure that they would act more alertly in handling the children, or to save them the anxiety. They would not really be able to do much, and they were themselves so tired and tense.

I looked at Rachel, so young and blooming, and could not trouble her. She radiated energy, glowing with the thought of docking in Suez. She had been through enough in her young life.

Her mother was oppressed by worry over her husband serving in Iraq, and about her missing son and daughter-in-law. At least she could console herself with the thought that they would all soon be reunited in Palestine. She needed to believe this and I could not disillusion her.

I considered talking to Mr. Rudnitzky, after all, he was the representative of the Jewish Agency and the refugees—but I had to be practical, however hard I found it to bear the whole responsibility alone and in silence. Nobody could help. I would not reveal the danger to anyone. It was better that way. Therefore, I merely announced that everyone had to go below deck, where the holds had hermetically sealed compartments. If one section of the ship was hit, the incoming water could be contained. I also instructed them to keep their life-jackets on all night, saying this was another drill.

That was one of the longest nights I have ever lived through. I did not close an eye for a moment. I expected the worst—an explosion, the violent heave, the sinking and loss of the vessel. I peered through the porthole all night long, waiting for morning, which seemed as if it would never come.

At long last, the first rays of light began to appear. I wondered if the danger had passed. I did not want to delude myself. As dawn broke I mounted the steps to the Captain's cabin and he told me that we were safely through. He was exhausted by the long night's vigil and said that it was no less than a miracle, perhaps because of the Jewish children on board, that the ship had sailed in the dark of night through a dense minefield without coming to harm. At any rate, we were now clear of it. I breathed a sigh of relief. I was pleased that I had not told anyone, and felt that I could straighten up now that the weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

It seemed like a good dream, that the ship was still on course for the Suez Canal. Closer and closer to our destination. I could hardly believe it and prayed there would be no further danger. I reflected that I had come very close to immigration a few times in the past, but it had been delayed time and again because of my mother's illness, our declining financial security, my enlistment in the Polish army, the war, my deportation and imprisonment. I hoped with all my heart that I would make it this time. I did not know that an enemy submarine with orders to sink the Noralea was on our trail. I only learned of this much later. But I was aware of the dangers that still lay in wait for us.

Once out of the minefield, we renewed our rehearsals of the dances we were going to perform during our parade through Tel Aviv. We had had scores of rehearsals in our eagerness to make the best possible impression. We had been told that we were to arrive in Suez on the coming Wednesday, and would proceed by train to Palestine. The children got their scout uniforms ready and packed away the rest of their belongings, accompanied by the usual anxieties.

There were rumours that they would be put into a concentration camp in Palestine, that their belongings would be burned. The excitement swelled as the time approached to anchor in Egypt. It all seemed too good to be true, dreamlike, but still they floundered in their anxious clinging to possessions and dear ones, their fears that they would be

left behind or separated if they were not first on shore, first aboard the train, etc.

We hoisted our flag emblazoned with the Magen David and the words "Teheran Jewish Children's Home." Mr. Rudnitzky delivered a speech. He spoke of the homeland and the flag with tears in his eyes, bringing tears to the eyes of his listeners, as well.

Lilly said she was only crying because everyone cried when a flag was raised; Genia was again amazed that she should cry when she was so close to meeting her parents, unlike Genia herself! Then this strong and usually self-contained girl burst into tears for the second time. She was depressed at the thought of her impending separation from her dear friend. She swore that nobody would ever be able to read her feelings once she arrived in Palestine, but now the tears flowed without restraint.

The ship sailed ahead in a winter grey sea, while we peered ahead to see the entrance to the Canal. And there it was. The flag was lowered, folded and handed to the senior group, who would carry it when we made our triumphal entry into Tel Aviv.

I was still apprehensive, unsure that we were out of danger, aware of the great responsibility I bore without being able to share it with anyone. I was on tenterhooks for the boat to dock. The sea made me nervous, I knew that it still held many dangers.

Then we were in Suez, the gateway to our destination. Boats drew alongside the Noralea, and the children began to descend into them, clutching their bundles. First of all, the boatload of infants and their attendants were taken ashore, while the others anxiously elbowed their way to the front of the line awaiting the arrival of the next boat. When it came, the seniors climbed down the ladder first, followed by the rest of the children and their counsellors, and after them, the adults.

We urged the excited passengers to sing as we approached the shore, and they opened their mouths and sang, at first tremulously:

"We ascend and sing, above death and ruins . . ."

Their voices rose and the song flew ahead of them to the shore.

The long weeks at sea and in Karachi, the seven months in Teheran, the months and years of banishment, detention, suffering and loss—was this indeed the end of our terrible, seemingly endless saga? We had arrived at the gateway to the promised land and at last it lay within reach.

Genia was holding Mira's hand. Mira looked nothing like the carefully groomed little girl who had come aboard in the Russian port less than a year ago. Thin, sorrowful and pale, smeared with the greasy black ointment against scabies, her head shaven to the scalp because of the lice, she was dressed in an oversized, torn dress that revealed the gaunt white body beneath. She was clutching her bundle, a black blanket tied with rope. She was not quite four years old.

Wordlessly, uncomplaining, she went ashore. She listened obediently to the instructions of the people waiting to receive us, but would not part with her bundle under any circumstances.

Genia and Lilly were feverish with excitement. They also looked ill, tearful, their clothes shabby and creased.

As for Antek, he looked terrible: he looked as if his hair would never grow back, because of the scabies, and he was wearing ragged trousers of indeterminate length, a scruffy shirt, women's shoes in which he staggered ashore. He was carrying two bundles, in which I assumed he had packed his better clothes. Before we reached Palestine we would have to persuade the children to wear the clothes they had been given in Karachi. I saw the shocked expressions on the faces of the soldiers waiting to recieve us. Moshik was barefoot. I wondered what he had done with his shoes. I knew he had a pair.

We were welcomed by representatives of the Immigration Office of the Zionist Labour Union and by Henrietta Szold's deputy, Hans Beit, from Aliyat Hanoar. They had organized two special trains to carry us to Palestine. Also waiting to welcome us were some Palestinian Jewish soldiers serving in the British army. They were from a special company of men drawn from the Solel Boneh construction cooperative. They welcomed us like returning sons and daughters. But we had not yet returned to home and hearth. The children were exhausted, scruffy and neglected in appearance, after the high expectations that had prevailed on the Noralea.

As the column lengthened, the soldiers stood watching with tears in their eyes, looks of pity on their faces: Sarah, her sockless feet in her brother Haim's big shoes, which had no laces and flopped as she walked; Hava whose parcel became undone; Adam in a frenzy because of the turmoil of disembarkation; Helena crying and stuffing food into her mouth by turns; all the other upset and tired waifs. The children sat down to await the other boatloads, when the soldiers told them to do so, and when everyone had come, we all went into a nearby building

to have something to eat. The soldiers attended to us like loving older brothers, like tender fathers. Their shoulder tags bore the Magen David and the word Palestine, which moved most of the children, even though the sight of any uniform made them apprehensive. Slowly, they began to make tentative contact with the soldiers, who gently encouraged them and wept as the children told their shocking stories.

We were surprised to hear, for the first time, Moshik's story: The Germans had shot his father in front of his eyes, as they fired haphazardly into houses. The family had buried him with their own hands, not even having the chance to recite the Mourners' Prayer, the *Kaddish*, because the curfew bell was tolling and anyone caught outdoors would be shot. They had not managed to reach home in time and the Germans had ordered the mother and six children into a pit they made them dig. They were then buried alive. As he spoke to the weeping soldier, Moshik said that he wondered why he of all of them had survived. This boy had never confided his tragedy to a soul until now, when he spilled it out to the horrified soldier.

One of the officers picked up Sofia and she clung to his neck as if he were her father, also an officer, who had remained with the Polish army in Teheran. She was pining for him. Speaking Polish, she told the officer that her father was a dentist in the Polish army. The officer did not understand a word, but kissed and hugged her over and over again. Other soldiers were also holding children close, and the children were climbing all over them. There was great emotion on both sides.

Lilly went among the uniformed men, asking after her father; for some reason she had convinced herself that he had enlisted and was somewhere among the Palestinian soldiers who had come to welcome us. She was deeply disappointed when she did not find him.

Hava, her sister and their mother also entertained the hope that Yehuda Klein was among the men in uniform. But he was not, nor did they find the son who had disappeared, apparently forever, in the hospital in Pahlevi. Sola's hopes of finding her husband were left unfulfilled. Mira went about telling anyone who would listen that her aunt lived in Tel Aviv, by the sea. I hoped Genia remembered the address of the child's family.

I grieved for the children who had died on the way, not living to see this day.

We numbered one thousand two hundred and thirty souls. The soldiers escorted us to the waiting trains that were to take us to Palestine. They had prepared presents for the children—bags of candy inscribed with the words "And the Sons Returned to their Borders." Every child received a little blue and white flag, too. The faces were no longer sorrowful, smiles and laughter began to be heard. I looked for Rachel and saw her with her group, immersed body and soul in their problems and needs. Soon, soon we would be in Palestine, and the work we had taken on ourselves would come to an end. It would be time to establish our own family. Children who would be born under the skies of their own country. Happy and content. I knew that I had to convince her that this was the right time, even though she was so young.

The first of the trains lent to us by the Egyptians began to move slowly forward, northwards to the Egyptian-Palestinian border. It was a cold winter day. Beyond the closed windows lay a desert landscape of blue skies and sand. I was impatient to arrive. Memories of another train arose in my mind, the one that had carried me from Pinsk to the Russian wastelands. The journey was over—in a few hours we would be home! The train clattered and raced towards the border.

The song of the wheels rang in my ears like the sweet sound of revived hope. It was the song of release from darkness into light.

19

HOMECOMING

THERE IT WAS, in bold letters, right in front of our eyes: EGYPT-PALESTINE. We went wild with joy. Children and counsellors alike wept, laughed, danced and cheered. I looked at Rachel standing beside me. She looked at me. Words were superfluous.

We crossed the Egyptian border during the morning and I looked out at the barren reaches of the desert, which slowly turned to green as we moved northward. Then orchards with yellow-gold oranges began to appear.

Now everything was green, the fields were untilled, and well-tended trees flourished in rows. The peaceful settlements, white and beautiful in the morning light, were an exhilirating sight. This was our country, the Land of Israel. We were home safe!

We passed Rehovoth, going in the direction of Lydda, which was then a major railway junction. We were met at Lydda station by rep-

resentatives of the *Jewish Agency* and the *Jewish National Fund,* but I only had eyes for Tzippora Shertok, standing among the dignitaries. I was deeply moved to see her again. She had played an inestimable part in bringing us here and I knew how many fears and anxieties she had endured until this moment when, at long last, she stood face to face with us.

There was also a surprise awaiting us, which brought joy to many hearts on that train: hundreds of letters! A small number came from Russia, but most were from Palestine. One of the happy ones to hear from Russia was little Mira, who had a letter from her father, read to her by faithful Genia. For Genia, herself, however, there was nothing, although Shaul Meirov and his people had been searching intensively for the girl's parents during the last few months. But Genia was unrestrainedly happy for her little ward, although she would soon have to part from her, since Mira now had the exact address of her relatives in Haifa. There was a letter for Yosef Lesky from his family in Israel. They wanted to adopt him. Too late to save him, alas!

Shlamek sobbed in disappointment at not hearing from his mother; for some reason he had been certain that a letter would be waiting for him. Antek and his friend Haim also had no letters waiting for them, but they were overjoyed that they had finally reached the promised land.

As the train moved off again, bound for Atlit, near Haifa, where the the children would be staying until final arrangements were made, the carriages resounded with the mixed sounds of sorrow and happiness. Suddenly, Hava pointed at a man in Polish army uniform who had just come onto the platform. She screamed in Yiddish: "Tatte!—Daddy!" She was sure it was her father and shouted "Stop the train!" Then she cried to her mother to come and see! I was afraid she might be mistaken, but when Mrs. Klein came to the window and looked out, she collapsed in a faint. The man in uniform ran after the departing train, while everyone leaned out and waved excitedly. I reassured the woman and her two daughters that Klein would come to Atlit; they would soon meet. It will be recalled that they had parted in Persia, months before, when Yehuda Klein enlisted in the Polish army and was posted to Iraq. The family was about to be reunited, but their son had vanished without a trace in the hospital in Pahlevi. Mrs. Klein now sobbed in renewed anguish over the little boy. The father did not know yet that their son, born in their middle age, had disappeared. It

was no comfort to the family that four of the five of them had survived to reach Palestine together.

The children waved their little blue and white flags and poked their heads out of the windows of the speeding train. Our next stop was Hadera, where the population of the settlement and its surroundings had turned out to welcome us. They distributed sandwiches, fruit and cakes. Thousands of deeply moved people were milling around on the platform. I noticed a group of youngsters who were very impressed with Rachel, wanting to know if she was on her own. She replied that she was with her mother and her boyfriend, David Laumberg.

"Laumberg!" someone shouted, but he's a member of our kibbutz!"

In no time, my brother Zwi was there, summoned from his kibbutz not far away. He was only a boy when he left Vilna; now I stood gazing at a broad-shouldered man, taller than myself, both of us inarticulate under the onslaught of our feelings. As we stood on that railway platform, we had still to learn that we were the only survivors of our big family—our father, grandmothers, uncles and aunts, our sister and her son—all of them, had already perished in the Holocaust.

My brother and his friends suggested that Rachel and I come to their kibbutz, there and then. Of course, we could not. We had to accompany the children to the last station.

Mira's aunt and uncle also turned up at the station in Hadera, ready to take her with them on the spot. But it was not yet time.

Every station on the way to Atlit was filled with welcoming crowds, who showered oranges and candies on the homecoming children—the little exiles returning to the homeland. The abundance of citrus fruit, so rare in Europe and Russia, amazed the children; oranges over here were as common as potatoes over there! If only their families in Russia could have a little of this plenty! They could hardly believe their eyes and, as they stared, they felt a mixture of guilt and longing.

Shlamek could not pull himself together. He and his sister had arrived, but where was their mother?! She had remained behind, lost in the vast distance. Crying, he started coughing heavily, and I was worried about him. The Klein girls searched for their father at the Hadera station, but he was not there. I had to calm them and their mother with promises that they would see him soon.

The children bunched at the windows, shoving one another for a better view of the country they had yearned for, for so long. They

could not get over the uniformed Jewish policemen, and were amazed at the sight of Jewish workers on the land. Was this possible!? And Jewish orchards and fields!? The train slowed down to enter Atlit station. The moment it halted, an agitated man burst into the carriage and asked about his daughter Lilly. In a flash the child was in his arms, laughing and crying.

Many eyes followed this emotional meeting. Lilly asked him where her mother was, and he said she was at the Atlit camp, waiting. Lilly could not believe that their long separation was over, and that her mother was waiting nearby. Maybe something had happened to her and Lilly would not manage to see her? She was very afraid and anxious. She said she would not be able to bear it if she did not see her mother immediately.

Henrietta Szold had come to welcome us at Atlit. Until now, our contact had been by letter, and this first actual meeting was a moving event. I saw an elderly woman with a dark hat, big, worried eyes, and a sorrow-lined face. Henrietta Szold was born in the USA, and was one of the founders of the Hadassah Women's Movement. When she settled in Palestine she took over the welfare department of the movement and was elected to the national committee. During World War II, this wonderful woman saved thousands of homeless, uprooted refugee Jewish children and youth, in her capacity as head of *Aliyat Hanoar*. She installed them in Aliyat Hanoar Homes, where they received education and culture in a homely atmosphere. She had never established a family of her own, and these projects were her whole life.

With Henrietta Szold at Atlit, there were representatives from the Jewish Agency, the Labour Federation, the City of Haifa, and many others from Atlit and the surrounding settlements. The children were inundated with flowers, candies and toys. Crowds of people ran to and fro amid placards reading "WELCOME!" Scores of counsellors sent by Aliyat Hanoar were there to tend to the children and so were medical teams wearing armbands with the Magen David Adom badge. There were ambulances, too, indicating the organizers' fears about the condition of the children. But the Teheran Children, despite their fatigue, stepped out of the train by themselves, on their own two feet. The waiting stretchers were not required.

Only a few of the children were wearing their good clothes when they alighted from the train. The rest were dressed in their shabby old

rags. Some were wearing their pith helmets from Karachi. Each and every one of this motley crowd of children of all ages clutched his or her bundle.

The older children assembled with their counsellors to pay their respects to Henrietta Szold. Afterwards we were taken by bus to the transit camp that had been placed at our disposal. The camp was a collection of huts surrounded by a barbed wire fence. Moshik recoiled at being closed in again, Genia was afraid of the disinfection procedure, Antek resisted when he heard about the planned burning of everyone's belongings. Yehuda Klein leaped out of a taxi and came running at last to meet his wife and daughters, in a reunion that words can only fail to describe.

The search for relatives and acquaintances was in full swing, now. Some recognised names or faces, but most of the children continued to be alone, even here.

Women volunteers wearing aprons welcomed the children with glowing faces. Beds with snowy sheets, pillows and blankets were arranged in the big hall. Beneath every pillow was a printed card, reading WELCOME HOME. The children were full of wonder at the sight of the bedding and could not believe that they were allowed to sleep between such snow white sheets. Two kitchens were set up in the camp, one for meat and one for dairy meals, according to religious dietary laws. A store of clothes had been arranged in advance under the initiative of the Helping Committee for Polish Jewry. Everyone was given a glass of fresh milk, and sent off for a hot shower and a change of clothing. The little girls held the dolls they had been given. Everyone pleaded to be given new, well-fitting clothes, and as far as possible, this was accomplished.

I had arrived on the first train. The second train arrived a little later, and its passengers were given the same enthusiastic reception. In fact, at the Rehovoth station, thousands of adults and children had stood waiting stolidly for three hours to demonstrate their sympathy and welcome, because the train had arrived at noon instead of nine in the morning. But now we were all together again—for the last time.

The children were placed in the hands of counsellors and staff from Aliyat Hanoar. The transferral was carried out firmly and quickly, and many of us felt sad and depressed when it was effected. To add to our depression, we were informed that the children would not be allowed

to have their grand parade and our painful sense of having been dismissed was reinforced.

It was with a strange feeling that we made our way over to the adults' quarters. Until now, the counsellors had spent every waking and sleeping moment of the day with their charges, performing the tasks which others had now taken over. They would have to cope with Shlamek's cough and Helena's stomach pains. She had gorged herself without restraint since we arrived. Moshik, upset by the barbed-wire fence, was determined to run away to Haifa. He said he was sick of being fenced-in and I understood what he meant.

To each, his or her own problem. Antek refused to dispose of his rags and tatters. Adam had not eaten anything for ages and he had one of his attacks of frenzy, running around in the rain, which had begun to fall when we arrived, and rolling in the mud. He was not alone in this; many of the children ran frantically out into the rain at every announcement that something or other was being distributed.

The announcement that the small children were being moved away from the camp raised the protests to near-rebellion. It was not a question of siblings refusing to be separated; Moshik, Berele and some of the others felt they had to protect those younger than themselves and they fought furiously against the idea of being separated from them. It was repeatedly explained to them that the move was for the good of the little ones, that they needed special care under better conditions than those at the Atlit camp. Making them understand was a heavy task.

Men and boys were accomodated in the lefthand row of huts and women and girls were in the one on the right, giving rise to the same old problems: Shlamek and Dita, Haim and Sarah, and others refusing to be parted. Haim put a skullcap on his sister's shaven head, disguising her as a religious boy, and smuggled her into the boys' hut. Shlamek and Dita stayed outside, refusing to enter any hut at all. I watched from the sidelines.

The transit camp at Atlit was still not Palestine-proper as far as we were concerned. Not yet. It was merely the last of our many stations on the way to the homeland. I knew, however, that even when the children were sent to their appointed places, it would take a long time before they reached a place they could call home. A great deal of care would have to be invested in them before they became true sons and

daughters of this country. Before they would look and feel like others their age. They carried within them a sediment of memories and, on their shoulders, the weight of their horrific past. These would not easily be dissipated.

I knew from the way we had been welcomed that everything possible would be done to help the Teheran Children. There were about sixty adults accompanying the children on arrival at Atlit. Some of us sat with the Aliyat Hanoar people on the night of our arrival. We told them what we had been through, put them in the picture and helped them to draw their own conclusions. We had done what we could. We had successfully brought the Teheran Children to Atlit. They would be given medical examinations, their standard of education would be ascertained, they would be sorted into those from religious and those from secular backgrounds, they would be questioned about the possibility of their having relatives in the country, and so on. They would then be moved to the places most suitable for each one of them.

Some requests from prospective adoptive parents had already been received, and the possibility of matching children to new families would also be explored here.

It was late at night when Rachel and I made our way to our huts. The sound of frightened crying, so familiar to us, could be heard. They cried for a light in the dark, cried to be kept safe from the jackals. Cried in lonely fear of the unknown. We were so tired. We knew the children were in good, faithful hands. We now had to address ourselves to our own lives.

Rachel and I had hardly spoken lately, under the pressure of recent events. We had not yet confronted the question of whether we would go on from here together. Nor where we would go. Nothing had been finalized between us. I wanted us to get married at once, but she was still hesitant. We parted with a "Goodnight!" which left me depressed and uncertain. I was very tired. I stretched out between the white sheets and fell asleep immediately.

I awoke early the next morning to a grey, wintry day. Children of all ages were running around within the barbed-wire confines of the Atlit transit camp. They were going through a little gate to the central square, which was thronged with people. I went to the women's quarters to look for Rachel, but she was not there. I wanted her badly, but

I knew that we might not end up together. I was both realistic and optimistic, in keeping with my character.

A pile of oranges in a ditch had been drawing the children like a magnet since early morning. They were rummaging about in the pile of golden fruit, filling their pith helmets, pockets, and bags with as many as they could, rushing back to the huts to hide their booty, and returning to the pile. Sarah, in her boys' clothes, was among them, and so were Dita, Sofia, and even little Meirke. They were thrashing about in the mud, barefooted, or in torn shoes or sandals, going back and forth between the huts and the pile of oranges, wolfing them down on the way. We could not convince them that there was enough fruit for the future. In any case, it was not my job anymore to tell them so. Still, I found it very hard to cut myself off from them at one stroke. I tried to draw their attention to Mt. Carmel, facing us, to the sea behind us. They looked for a moment. Antek remarked that the mountain was not as big as he had thought, and returned to crouch over the oranges in the rain.

Sarah was shaking like a leaf in the cold rain, but carried on digging into the pile. She was not shivering from the winter cold alone, I recognized the signs from other times: she was having an attack of malaria. Her brother led her to the hut and covered her with a pile of blankets, crouching over her to keep her warm. Suddenly he remembered, and mumbled: "This month it's a year since Daddy died."

Mira, who had received a doll from her aunt the day before, was busily digging a grave for it. She said it had fallen ill and died. She told me this when I passed by, and no matter how I tried to convince her that the doll was all right, she remained fixed in her own idea. Sofia also had a doll, and she was sitting with her leg across it. She explained that this was what her mother used to do to let her know she was not alone, that she was there with her.

I went to the girls' hut to find out how they were getting on and to ask them where they wanted to be sent. They had a few alternatives: they could join a kibbutz, go to one of the Aliyat Hanoar institutions, or to agricultural schools. They were uncertain about what to choose. They took into consideration the possible arrival of their families from Russia. Perhaps it would be best to find them work and a place to live, Genia mused aloud.

As mentioned, the kibbutz scared them because of their experiences on the kolkhoz. I again explained the difference between the two forms of communal farm. I did so with the boys as well. As we spoke, Shlamek again began to cough violently. He scared me by beginning to spit blood and I became more anxious when he said he did not care what became of him. All that mattered was his sister. He said he had lived longer than many other children he knew. He was delighted with Dita. How gifted she was, and so beautiful! If only their parents could have seen her.

Haim assumed that his parents would have been angry with him had they known that only Sarah had remained alive of his three sisters. Would they have blamed him? He had done whatever he could. I knew that this was true.

Itzik was also proud of his brother. He was sure that Elimelech would go far, if he would put his mind to it and study well. He hoped that he would now manage to catch up. Therefore, he decided that their place was on a kibbutz, where Elimelech would have the right conditions for study. Elimelech agreed. Others refused to even consider anything to do with socialistic principles and the red flag, but some changed their minds after they were taken on a tour of a few kibbutzim and the positive aspects of such a life became apparent. They were excited at the prospect of returning to school and organised studies, but they were also a little afraid of it. And, of course, they thought endlessly about ways and means of bringing their parents to Palestine, saving them from the hell they were in. They would do everything in their power to get them here . . .

Moshik was not involved in such thoughts, since not a single member of his family had survived. He was planning to make a break from the camp with some of his friends, the threesome, having persuaded them to come to Tel Aviv with him. I opposed this and he argued with me, claiming that I no longer had the authority to stop him, that he was not a little kid, that Atlit was not a concentration camp, that he was allowed to go, and even if he was not, he would go. He resisted everything that went on in the camp, and invested his energy in the football games he organised.

They began moving the children to their new places. Lilly said goodbye to all of us and left with her parents. So did Berele and his mother,

and the Klein girls with their mother and father, Meirke and his mother left, and anyone who had relatives in the country went off to visit them, any kin, however distant, were of utmost importance to the Teheran children. They never gave up the search for someone of their own. Mira was lucky. Her mother's sister lived in Palestine, and soon came to fetch her.

The children who had nobody in the country were the main problem, like Haim and Sarah, who chose to be sent to a religious institution. Moshik, the son of a rabbi, was also sent to one.

A special committee formed by Aliyat Hanoar discussed long and hard what to do with each individual child, according to what they knew about the background of each. They argued about criteria for defining the child's rights and needs. Moshik, for example, was not interested in the religious institution they suggested for him. To my surprise, he decided to join the group of ten boys and girls, including Hava, Itzik and Elimelech, who were going to be sent to a kibbutz. Hava, of course, was the main attraction for him. Helena was to go to a Jerusalem children's home. Her brother Adam was in very bad condition and had stopped eating altogether. He was in a state of malnutrition and had to be force-fed. One morning, two days after our arrival, the poor child did not wake up. He had closed his eyes never to open them again.

Shlamek looked everywhere for a relative and rescuer. He was even prepared to settle for an acquaintance of his parents, but did not find anyone. He clung to his sister Dita and absolutely refused to be parted from her. When he had to be hospitalized with suspected tuberculosis, he said they could cut him to bits, but he would not agree to leave Dita. He rhapsodized about her beauty. His problem was also that he wanted to go to a kibbutz, while his sister wanted to be sent to the same institution as her dear friend Sofia.

Haim wanted to go to a *yeshiva*, but what would become of his sister? It was very hard for him to part from Sarah, who cried bitterly at the idea. He was in a great dilemma.

The children were all trying to decide which would be the best place for them. They would decide and then change their minds. Be persuaded and then resist. The whole camp was full of an atmosphere of tears, anxiety, and anguished decision-making. The Aliyat Hanoar committee acted as guides and counsellors. It was a very tense and difficult job. The young immigrants were also given Hebrew names.

I stayed on at Atlit for a few days, observing what was going on, but I was not allowed to make decisions or change anything. I felt, like all of the counsellors, that what we had done was not properly appreciated. We encountered insensitivity and lack of understanding for what we had been through and the conditions under which we had been forced to operate.

Some of Rachel's group were now orthodox religious. They wore skullcaps, carried prayer shawls and she was no longer able even to speak to them. She found this estrangement difficult. She had nothing more to do here, and decided to go with her mother to relatives in Haifa. In answer to my eternal question: "When are we going to get married?" she replied that she had still not made up her mind. It was hard for her to commit herself. She offered to keep some of my poor belongings at her cousin's place in Haifa. I gave them to her, she took them, and then she said goodbye and left with her mother.

My work at Atlit was also done. I went to Jerusalem, to see Henrietta Szold, who appointed me consultant on matters concerning the Teheran Children. A new group of young immigrants had begun to collect in Teheran. They also needed to be brought over. I agreed to help, but my heart was heavy: I was preoccupied with my personal problems. I knew that Rachel's first love, my rival, was in Haifa. I remembered that he had been studying at the Technion before the war broke out, when they met, and knew he must have finished by now. I assumed that she wanted to see him. I had become accustomed to seeing her every day, even though I had seldom had time to speak to her, and I now missed her painfully.

Also, I was certain that the cousin would introduce her to people, and with her charm and beauty she would easily attract many admirers. I had noticed how men looked at her. I had more than the Technion student to contend with when it came to competition!

Meanwhile, I threw myself into my work in Jerusalem.

After a few weeks I went to Haifa to collect my belongings from Rachel. I did not have much hope, but I really needed to see her. When I arrived, to my great surprise, she received me with a warmth and excitement and embraces which bore ample witness to her feelings for me and to the conclusions she had reached in the month since we parted.

Rachel had linked her life to mine. We decided to get married and settle down in Kibbutz Mishmar Haemek, where there was a large group of Teheran Children, some of whom had been in Rachel's group.

My own Hashomer Hatzair group, who had immigrated before the war, had established Kibbutz Mesillot. My brother suggested we join him at Yakkum. There were other suggestions and offers. I wanted to join one of the Hashomer kibbutzim. In the end, we decided that our place was with our former charges on Mishmar Haemek.

But there were things we had to do first. Until the time came for us to go the Kibbutz, we moved to Tel Aviv, where we stayed with relatives of Rachel, who arranged our wedding party for us. Their apartment was in the Caucasian quarter, near the central bus station. One day, as Rachel and I were walking and talking to each other in Polish, a woman stopped us. Looking very excited, she asked if we had any connection with the Teheran Children, and when I said that we had, she told us that she had made an oath that the moment she met anyone of the first Holocaust survivors to come to Palestine, she would give him or her a room in her apartment and work to support them. She was not wealthy, but would do everything she could for such a person, she declared. I was very moved and saw the incident as proof of the positive feelings of the local population towards us. I explained that we were not in need of her touching generosity, since we planned to join a kibbutz. She pleaded with me to give her the address of someone in need of help. I told her about Shlamek and Dita, and their search for a rescuer, and told her how to get in touch with them.

There was another important mission I had to fulfil before we went to the kibbutz. I had to pay a visit to Dr. Margolin's wife, as I had promised him. He was still being held in the Soviet detention camp in Karelia, serving his sentence of fifteen years of hard labour. He had not been freed, since he had Palestinian citizenship, not Polish, and as such the liberation agreement did not apply to him. Rachel and I walked to Shenkin Street, where Mrs. Margolin was living with their son. Mrs. Margolin, her dark hair drawn back from her face, invited us in and listened in sorrow as I told her everything that had happened to her husband until the day I parted from him. I transmitted his request that she educate their son to hate the regime that had trampled,

humiliated and abused him. I related all this in the presence of their son, a boy of about ten, who listened intently and with pain to every word I said, as did his mother. Later, Mrs. Margolin gave us tea in beautiful cups as we sat together in the spacious living room of the Margolin apartment.

When we left, Rachel wondered if we would have a gracious, well-appointed home like that one day. But neither of us had a penny to our name and in this state, a few days later, we arrived at the kibbutz. There, we met our group of children and noticed that they were already beginning to acclimatize, although their longing for their families hampered their complete recovery. They continued to write endless letters to uncertain or non-existent addresses. Now and then, via the Jewish Agency, a cable or letter would arrive, but this was rare and often contained tragic information about death, starvation, illness and the inability to leave the country. The days when letters from Russia arrived were usually days of grief. Even those letters that did not bring bad news were distressing because they intensified the longing for reunion. Following such a mail-day the anguished, hopeful letter-writing would begin again.

Although the boys and girls had adjusted to the kibbutz school, their distress gave them no rest. The war was still being fought.

Genia's family had been traced, and her mother wrote that it was impossible to leave Russia. Then her letters stopped and Genia was afraid that she was dead. Much later this fear was confirmed. Now Genia lived in the hope of seeing her father and sisters. Other children, who had nothing but a few family photographs, spent much time gazing at them, and clutched at relationships with anyone who had even the slightest connection with them and their families.

This anxious preoccupation with their lost families caused some of the children to leave the kibbutz. They left in order to make money so that they could prepare a home for their parents, if they came. Some of these families only came after many long years, some not at all.

I was not close to the Teheran Children on the kibbutz. Some wanted to forget, to live like everyone else in the country, to obliterate their past. Rachel and I spent three and a half years as members of the kibbutz. Edna, our first child, was born there. It was a time of change and re-orientation. We had some absorption problems, particularly on

Rachel's part, since she had never belonged to Hashomer Hatzair and did not have the same ideological outlook as the other kibbutz members. Nevertheless, she participated in the work and social life.

I was satisfied with my time on the kibbutz, apart from one thing, which was the members' sympathetic attitude to Russia and the Soviets. I could not bear it. I had once thought as they did, until I had a taste of that regime. For this reason, we left the kibbutz and went to Tel Aviv.

Aliyat Hanoar had offered me a study grant, but I rejected it. I did not want it. I worked at whatever I could to support my family, and was active in the Haganah. We lived in one room with Rachel's parents, who helped us to look after little Edna while Rachel studied at the nursery school teachers' training school. She had decided to devote herself to education after her experience with the Teheran Children. She studied with single-minded determination and qualified, despite our difficult economic situation and uncomfortable conditions. In time, she completed her B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. Her central theme was value-oriented education and re-education.

When we had been in the country for a few years, we received our first news of Rachel's brother, Shaya, and his wife Eva. They had reached Germany after the war, together with masses of Jewish refugees. Some time later, they came to Palestine.

After the establishment of the State of Israel, when the War of Independence broke out, I joined the Israeli army at the request of Shaul Avigur (Meirov) who was Deputy Minister of Defence in the new Israeli government. I was one of the founders of *Mahal* and *Gahal*—the Overseas Volunteers unit and the Overseas Conscripts unit, respectively. I served as an officer in the Israeli army for twenty-five years, precisely as the fortune teller had said I would, long ago in Poland, on the eve of my enlistment in the Polish army.

Rachel and I have established a family in Israel, with our daughter Edna and our son Nahman, named after my late father. I never again saw my sister, who was murdered with her little boy in Poland, nor any of my large family.

I have travelled a long road filled with horror and hardship, and I feel the need to describe it in order to ensure that what I and so many

others like me have endured will not go unrecorded and be forgotten. I changed my name from Laumberg to Laor, which has intimations of exit from the darkness into the light. It is a light I share with those of my generation who emerged from the darkness of the Holocaust to build a new life in this country.

A few months after our arrival, one hundred and fifty of the Teheran Children who had remained in Persia for health and other reasons, followed us. Most of the children from the Teheran Jewish Children's Home settled down well. The number who left Israel was negligible. But they did not all achieve a long, happy life. Some, after having been plucked from the dangers and tribulations of war and homelessness, died soon after making it to this haven, as a result of the sufferings inflicted on them in the past. Death ultimately tracked down others among them, too: forty-five Teheran Children have been killed in Israel's wars. One of them was awarded the "Hero of Israel" medal after he fell in the War of Independence.

Some of them joined the permanent force of the Israeli army, like myself, perhaps motivated by the determination that we would never again be helpless victims, and many became high ranking officers. Others, like Rachel, turned to education as a way of life, extending a supportive, helping hand to the young, including new immigrants, just as they had been encouraged and helped when they came here.

The Teheran Children have made their mark in Israel in many fields: science and medicine, the rabbinate, the law, the arts and architecture, diplomacy, commerce, industry, agriculture and settlement, to mention but a few.

I have not been able to tell each and every story within the scope of this book, but I believe that this record of my personal story will stand as a memorial candle to those who never came, those who fell by the way. I believe, too, that it faithfully documents the spirit of the anguished saga of so many as they strove to reach Israel, the promised homeland.

They have come, they have built and they have become true sons and daughters of Israel.

GLOSSARY

Aliyat Hanoar: Organization founded by Henrietta Szold in 1923, in order to absorb the many young refugees arriving from Europe. More than 30,000 of them received their education at Aliyat Hanoar boarding schools.

Mordechai Anilewitz: Leader of the Warsaw ghetto uprising in 1943. Although doomed from its very beginning, this revolt against the Nazi exterminators is regarded as a symbol of Jewish heroism during World War II. Anilewitz took his own life at the age of 23, and, with him, other leaders of the revolt, while Nazi tanks surrounded their hiding place.

Bar Mitzvah: ceremony of religious confirmation which every Jewish boy celebrates upon reaching the age of thirteen.

Bialik: Chaim Nachman Bialik, considered the most important Hebrew poet.

Cholent: traditional Jewish dish from Eastern Europe. Made of meat, beans, potatoes and vegetables, cooked together for about 4 hours. Traditionally prepared on Fridays.

Gemarrah: religious text studied extensively in rabbinical seminaries.

Goyim: commonly used and unflattering reference to non-Jews.

Hachsharah: a farm where members of the Zionist youth movements acquired agricultural skills while in Europe, in preparation for their future life in the kibbutz.

Hadassah Women's Organization: Zionist-Jewish American charitable organization, devoted to fostering social, cultural and educational advancement.

Haifa Technion: Institute of Technology in the city of Haifa, Israel.

Haint: Yiddish newspaper published in those days in Warsaw.

"Hamatmid" (Hebrew): "He who perseveres." Famous poem by Chaim Nachman Bialik about the faith and diligence of a young Jewish seminarist.

Hanukkah: an eight day festival which commemorates the liberation of the Jews from Seleucid domination in the second century B.C.E.

Hapoel: sports league sponsored by the Histadrut, Israel workers' organization.

Hashomer Hatzair: Zionist youth movement of socialist orientation. Its members founded kibbutzim, where many of them still live.

Hehalutz: Zionist association.

Theodor Herzl: founder of the modern Zionist Movement.

Histadrut: founded in 1920, it is the main organization of all the workers' unions in Israel. It offers its members a wide range of medical and social services, besides its responsibilities and activities as a union.

Jewish Agency: The principal Zionist institution in Palestine, founded in 1929. It administered all aspects of Jewish life in Palestine and in the Zionist movement throughout the world—politics, finance, colonization and immigration—before the State of Israel was established.

Jewish National Fund: created in 1901 in order to buy land in Israel. The Fund rehabilitated hundreds of thousands of acres, built roads and planted some 150 million trees, as part of its reforestation program.

Joint Distribution Committee (Joint or JDC): philanthropic organization, active in assisting Jewish refugees before, during and after World War II.

Kaddish: Jewish prayer for the dead.

Kibbutz: cooperative community, voluntary, egalitarian and self sufficient. Its members own no individual property and receive no salary. However, in exchange for work, all their needs are seen to in the kibbutz budget: housing, education, medical assistance, vacations and personal expenses. Decisions concerning the community are reached by the members in a direct and democratic way. More than 100,000 people live today in some 260 kibbutzim. The first ones were founded at the beginning of this century by young Jewish immigrants, from Russia, inspired by socialist and humanist ideals.

Kipyatok: (Russian) boiled water for tea.

Kolkhoz: (Russian) collective farms in the Soviet Union, established by the Bolsheviks following the revolution of 1917.

Kol Nidrei: name of the main prayer recited during Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), whereby the Jews ask the Lord to annul all promises made guilelessly or under coercion.

Kosher: refers to food prepared according to Jewish dietary laws.

Maccabi: international Jewish institution, dedicated to fostering sports and recreational activities.

Mahal and Gahal: military units formed by Jewish volunteers from the Diaspora, after the establishment of the State of Israel.

Mikve Israel: the first agricultural school. It was founded in 1870 by the Zionist movement, when Palestine was under Ottoman rule.

Mizrachi: Zionist political party, of religious orientation.

Passover: Jewish holiday that commemorates the liberation of the Sons of Israel from Egyptian bondage. It lasts a week and is probably the most widely observed Jewish holiday. It is a family event, during which the importance of freedom is recalled and enhanced.

Pogrom: (Russian) the name given to the sporadic massacres of Jews at the hands of mobs organized by the Czarist authorities. Later, it came to designate the massive murder of Jews anywhere in Europe.

Rubashka: popular Russian shirt.

Sabbath: a day of rest, which has been observed by the Jews since biblical times.

Shaigetzim or Shkotzim: violent idle loafers.

Solel Boneh: building company, sponsored by the Histadrut, the workers' organization of Israel.

Henrietta Szold: founder and first president of Aliyat Hanoar.

Yeshiva: seminary for Jewish religious studies.

Devora Omer is one of Israel's foremost writers. Her work has won a wide audience, and she has been awarded many literary prizes in Israel and abroad. Among them: The Ministry of Culture and Education Prize, 1973; The Prime Minister's Prize, 1979; The Ze'ev Prize, 1981; The Andersen International Award of Honor, 1986; The Korchak Medal, 1987.

With skillfully evocative descriptions, Devora Omer recounts the suffering of David and Rachel and the awful events that lead from the battlefields of Poland, across Russia's frozen wastes and primeval Siberian forests, enduring conditions of forced labour, hunger, disease and mortal danger until they reach – Teheran.

David and Rachel are the two young Jews who separately endure their anguish until they meet and fall in love in Teheran, where he is the director of the Teheran Children's Refugee Station and she is a counsellor at the Jewish orphanage established to receive destitute refugee children arriving in Persia. This is the story of the Teheran Children whom David led on a perilous sea journey to Palestine, the haven and homeland they longed for.

"Forty-eight years have passed since the Teheran Children arrived in Israel. 780 tender children cruelly separated from their parents, snatched from the very crematoria of the Holocaust, in a unique rescue operation, made their long and tortuous way to Israel. The path of their redemption from Holocaust to rehabilitation symbolizes the fate of the Jewish nation – the dramatic transition from Auschwitz to Jerusalem.

Bringing the story of the Teheran Children to the consciousness of the general public and the youth in particular is, in fact, an important contribution to the recognition and appreciation of national independence. It is important that the young generation realize that life in an independent state cannot be taken for granted but is achieved only by overcoming many obstacles."

Chaim Herzog
President of the State of Israel

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