The Holocaust Diaries

Songs of Hope

DUVID WERDYGER

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SONGS OF HOPE

DUVID WERDYGER

as told to
Avraham Yaakov Finkel

CIS
P·U·B·L·I·S·H·E·R·S
New York · London · Jerusalem

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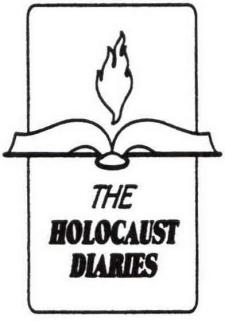

כָּל זֹאת בָּאַתְנוּ וְלֹא שְׁכַחֲנוּךָ

(תהלים מד:יח)

All this has befallen us
yet we have not forgotten You

(*Tehillim* 44:18)

Songs of Hope

ספר זה מוקדש
לזכר נשמת

אבי מורי
ישראל אריה בן מנחם מנדל הי"ד

אמי מורתי
גיטל בת אלטר דוד הי"ד

אחי
פנחס אליהו בן ישראל אריה הי"ד
חנוך הנוך בן ישראל אריה הי"ד

אחותי
שרה בת ישראל אריה הי"ד
חיה בת ישראל אריה הי"ד
רבקה מרים בת ישראל אריה הי"ד

ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

AS THE FIERY STORM OF THE HOLOCAUST SWEPT ACROSS Europe, it left six million innocent Jewish victims dead on the German killing fields and millions more scattered to the four corners of the earth. And at the same time, it uprooted and destroyed the venerable Jewish culture of Europe, a culture that had been nurtured and developed with loving care for a thousand years.

With fiendish cunning and brutality, the Germans focused their earliest efforts on eradicating the precious institutions and leadership around which Jewish life coalesced and from which it drew its vital sustenance. Even before the Germans set in motion the elaborate apparatus designed to murder an entire people, they hunted down and executed *roshei yeshivah, rabbanim, chassidic rebbes* and community lead-

ers wherever they could find them. *Yeshivos, shuls* and community centers were torched and demolished, and the practice of the Jewish religion was outlawed. With the "head" of the Jewish people cut off, the Germans reasoned, it would be easier to destroy the rest of the body.

To some extent, the Nazis were successful in their diabolical plan. Deprived of the underpinnings of their religious and cultural leaders and institutions, the Jewish people ensnared in the German trap were disoriented and demoralized. With the further impoverishment and dehumanization of the Jewish people by confiscation, deprivation and confinement to overcrowded and disease-ridden ghettoes, the Germans wore down the natural Jewish optimism and love of life, until death almost seemed like a welcome release.

But the precious sparks of Jewish life, which the Germans tried so desperately to extinguish, were too deeply ingrained in the soul of the Jewish people to be wiped out completely. During the war years, these precious sparks sustained the people in their darkest hours, and after the war, the pitiful remnant of survivors fanned these sparks and ignited a new flame of Judaism that illuminates the Jewish world of today with ever increasing brightness. The rebuilt world of *yeshivos* and Torah institutions flourishes, and many of the great *chassidic* communities are burgeoning once again. But that which has been lost can never be recaptured.

Songs of Hope, the seventh volume in the *Holocaust Diaries* collection, brings us a glimpse of the magnificent world of the Gerrer *chassidic* community that existed before the war, of the terrible devastation that nearly destroyed it and of the indestructible values and ideals it instilled into its *chassidim*. These values and ideals—a powerful love for Torah and prayer and an irrepressible joy, hope and unquestioning faith

in the eternal goodness of the Creator—sustained them through the worst suffering and ordeals in human history.

For the Werdyger family of Cracow, Poland, as for many thousands of other Gerrer *chassidim*, life before the war was a richly textured and profoundly fulfilling tapestry within the galaxy of the Gerrer *chassidic* community. Its focus was the court of the Imrei Emes, the saintly and world-renowned Gerrer Rebbe. Duvid Werdyger's earliest memories are of spending *Rosh Hashanah* together with tens of thousands of other awed *chassidim* in the cavernous *beis medrash* of Ger, of simple accommodations but an infinitely rewarding spiritual experience.

The highlight of Duvid Werdyger's childhood was his visit to the Gerrer Rebbe's court and his selection, at the tender age of six, to be part of the choir and to sing his own solo. It was a moment of great honor and excitement, and it set the tone for the rest of this remarkable man's life, a life dedicated to bringing joy to his people through the wonderful gift of his music.

Throughout the war years, this sense of joy and faith, and the endless attempts to recreate a microcosm of the lost world through Torah study, song and inspiring stories, helped the author survive his years of suffering with an unbroken spirit.

In one of the more remarkable juxtapositions of events in this book, we see the author's life spared in the Plaszow concentration camp when he sang *Keil Malei Rachamim* on the commandant's orders at a time when the Jewish world was in flames. Fifty years later, we see the author offering a memorial rendition of the same song at the ninth annual *siyum hashas* of Daf Yomi in front of twenty thousand Jews in Madison Square Garden in New York. It was a memorable

event, a strong confirmation of the ultimate failure of the German attempt to destroy the Jewish people.

In the latter part of the book, we see the author bringing his special talents to the revitalization of the Jewish people. As one of the most important pioneers in the field of recorded Jewish music, the author released numerous records of the precious songs of the Gerrer *chassidim* he remembered from his youth, as well as recordings of the songs of other *chassidic* groups such as Melitz, Bobov and Skulen. These warm and joyous songs filled thousands of homes with the music of holiness and hope and played a vital role in the rebirth of a vibrant and dynamic worldwide Jewish community. In this part of the book, we also witness the phenomenal regeneration of the Gerrer *chassidic* community, which once again numbers in the tens of thousands.

Songs of Hope was written in collaboration with Rabbi Avraham Yaakov Finkel, who had previously translated *Dare to Survive* and *Itzik, Be Strong* for the *Holocaust Diaries* collection. As always, the completed work bears eloquent testimony to Rabbi Finkel's outstanding literary skills. In this particular work, he not only recorded the author's experiences and thoughts faithfully, he actually was able to capture the flavor of the author's exuberant personality.

At this time, several more volumes in the Holocaust Diaries collection are in preparation, including *Counterfeit Lives* by Avraham Krakowski. We would be honored to review submissions from other holocaust survivors for possible inclusion in the collection, even if it would involve considerable editorial effort on our part. Because we seek to make the collection as broadly representative as possible, we are particularly interested in autobiographical accounts set in the Warsaw Ghetto, Holland, France, Germany, the

Scandinavian countries and Shanghai. Nonetheless, an inspiring account of hope and faith in any setting is always of interest to us and to our readers.

In closing, we would like to acknowledge the efforts of all those who contributed to the successful completion of this book: Editorial Director Raizy Kaufman who conceived this project and continues to guide it with consummate skill; Staff Editor Gita Grossman for her deft editorial work; Art Director Deenee Cohen for her thoughtful original designs; Typographer Nechamie Miller for her professional handling of the production of the book; and all the other members of our staff who contributed their skills and talents. May the *Ribono Shel Olam* reward them all in bounteous measure, and may He grant that we can all continue to bring honor to His Name and inspiration to His people.

Y.Y.R.
Kislev, 5754 (1993)
Lakewood, New Jersey

Songs of Hope

PROLOGUE

IT WAS A COLD, BLEAK, WINTER NIGHT IN THE DREADFUL Mauthausen concentration camp. As I lay on my hard wooden bunk, hungry and chilled to the bone, my body throbbing with pain, I made a pledge. If Hashem would protect me and allow me to survive this valley of death, I would write a memoir describing my years of anguish and expressing my heartfelt gratitude to Him. Miraculously, I was able to elude the Angel of Death on numerous occasions. Hashem watched over me, and death was powerless in the face of my fervent songs of hope and faith.

Today, fifty years after that sleepless night in Mauthausen, I am redeeming that pledge. I hope my story will be a source of inspiration to my children and grandchildren and to all those who read these pages. I want them to know that, in spite

of relentless and brutal persecution, we remained faithful to the *Ribono Shel Olam*, and even in the valley of the shadow of death, we maintained our joyous spirit and our unwavering trust in Hashem. The enemy could break our bodies, but the strength of our faith made us invincible.

Many holocaust survivors are reluctant to speak about their experiences; the memories are simply too painful for them to recall. However, there are many people today who, unable to believe the gruesome facts of the holocaust, are simply turning their backs on the truth; some even deny that it ever occurred. It is therefore the solemn duty of every holocaust survivor to tell the world what Germany, the incarnation of Amalek, has done to the Jewish people. The world must remember the millions of innocent Jews that were tortured, terrorized and massacred and pay tribute to the holy souls that were brutally taken from us. And above all, we must tell our children of the countless prisoners who went to their deaths with *Shema Yisrael* on their lips.

It is incumbent on me to convey my story for posterity, in the spirit of "*vehigadeta levincha*" (*Shemos* 13:8), the Torah's directive which commands us to tell our children about their past. Moreover, it is written, "*Zachor eis asher asah lecha Amalek*. Remember what Amalek did to you." (*Devarim* 25:17) That *parshah*, which speaks of Amalek's cowardly attack, ends with the words "*lo sishkach*, you must not forget."

Now, as we, the survivors, enter our twilight years, the burdens of the past pass to the precious young children who are the promise of the future, the replacement for the thousands of holy martyrs whose lives were snuffed out. Their unwavering observance of Torah and *mitzvos* will avenge their ancestors' blood and eventually triumph over all forces of darkness.

In *Parshas Haazinu*, Hashem proclaims, "If I crushed, I will heal." (*Devarim* 32:39) Although our people have been injured, maimed and killed, Hashem, in His compassion, is binding our wounds. The spiritual reawakening that is evident in today's burgeoning Torah institutions, the worldwide movement of *teshuvah*, the resurgence of the *chassidic* movement and the proliferation of ***kollelim*** in Eretz Yisrael and America are all signs that Hashem is comforting us and restoring the glory of His people.

The Rebbe of Alexander would often quote the *pasuk* in *Yeshayahuu* (55:12), "*Ki vesimchah seitzeiu.* For you shall go out with joy." A person who is always joyous, he explained, can overcome all afflictions and tribulations.

This was the thought that sustained our hopes in the darkest hours and nurtured our spirits when our bodies were racked with pain and hunger. And this is the theme I hope to convey in the chapters that follow.

BOOK ONE

Songs of Tradition

CHAPTER 1

Beginnings of a Chazan

IT WAS A BRIGHT, SUNNY *SHABBOS* MORNING, AND THE magnificent Eizik Yeikeles Shul in Cracow was filled to capacity. The famous *chazan* David Dym was officiating, and people had come from far and wide to hear him *bentch Rosh Chodesh.* Accompanied by a choir of twenty-five singers, he chanted the opening passage in a very powerful tenor voice.

"Mi she'asah nissim . . ." he intoned in a rousing melody. "He Who performed miracles for our forefathers . . ." The harmonious cadences of the choir reverberated throughout the cavernous *shul.*

I stepped forward timidly, taking the position in full view of the congregation. I was just a little boy at the time, and I

was dressed in the traditional style of the Gerrer *chassidim*, my face framed by long, curled *peyos*. As I stood in the front row of the choir and began to sing, a hush fell over the worshippers.

"*Hu yigal osanu bekarov*," I chanted in a clear voice that radiated childlike purity and innocence. "May He redeem us soon . . ." My clear, innocent timbre reached out to the congregation and touched their hearts.

At six years of age, I had become the new soloist in the choir of the Eizik Yeikeles Shul. Upon the persistent urging of *chazan* David Dym, who was a distant relative, my father had reluctantly agreed to allow me to sing in the choir of the large synagogue. He would have preferred to see me *daven* with him in the Gerrer *shtiebel*, but after the *chazan* promised that he would keep an eye on me, he knew he had made the right decision. Thus began my career as a *chazan*.

I grew up in Poland, in a family of well-known Gerrer *chassidim*. I was the youngest of eight children, four boys and four girls. We were a happy family, and my memories of home are filled with laughter and singing.

The Werdygers were all known for their melodious voices and were often called upon to lead the *davening* or sing at the Rebbe's *tisch* and other festive occasions. Therefore, when I began to show an aptitude for singing at the age of three or four, no one was surprised.

Soon after I was born, my family moved to Cracow. There, I attended Yeshivah Yesodei Hatorah and Yeshivah Beis Meir, and later on, I studied in the Gerrer *shtiebel*. Even as I lived in Cracow, my way of life was shaped by the Gerrer communal life and the Gerrer Rebbe's thoughts and Torah insights. The Rebbe's presence pervaded our home.

My earliest memories are intertwined with the *chassidus* of Ger. I remember my grandfather, Reb Menachem Mendel, describing to me how he used to travel to Ger to spend *Shabbos* at the court of the Sfas Emes. They would travel in a horse-drawn coach over snow-covered country roads, spending the nights in roadside inns. The journey was a difficult one and would often take several days.

Every *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov*, thousands of *chassidim* would converge on Ger to spend the holy days near their beloved Rebbe, to be inspired by his Torah thoughts and receive a *berachah* or advice on personal problems. In Ger, they were uplifted by the warm atmosphere and cheered by the singing and dancing. Their spirits were restored by the warmth and camaraderie of sitting at the Rebbe's *tisch*, where they would listen to his *divrei Torah* and eagerly reach for *shirayim*, the treasured morsel from the Rebbe's platter.

Like my grandfather, my father Reb Yisrael Aryeh would occasionally journey to Ger for a *Shabbos* to be near the Rebbe, the Imrei Emes, son of the renowned Sfas Emes. Upon his return, he would describe the Rebbe's *tisch* and relate to us how honored he felt to be invited to sit at the main table, close to the Rebbe, while thousands had to be content standing in the crowded hall, craning their necks to get a glimpse of the Rebbe and straining to hear his voice. We would all wait impatiently for Father to sing us the latest Gerrer *niggunim*.

Usually, after hearing a *niggun* twice, I was able to repeat it faultlessly. I could barely wait until the next morning when I would proudly teach the new *niggunim* to my *cheder* classmates. Even the *melamed* listened eagerly and sang along with the young students.

The singing of these *niggunim* played an important part

in the world of Gerrer *chassidus*, for song uplifts the spirit and transforms gloom into *simchah*. The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of *chassidus*, would always say, "Serve Hashem with gladness, for the world can be redeemed through joy."

CHAPTER 2

Singing Solo

I VIVIDLY RECALL MY FIRST VISIT TO GER. I MUST HAVE BEEN six or seven years old when my father took me along for a *Shabbos*. The radiant face of the Gerrer Rebbe, surrounded by a huge throng of *chassidim* as he presided over the *tisch*, made an indelible imprint on my young mind. But what impressed me most was the harmonious singing of the Gerrer *niggunim* by a chorus of thousands of ardent *chassidim*. The *niggunim* alternated between plaintive, soulful melodies and rousing, military-style marches, frequently punctuated by waltz-like tunes. Since I knew most of the *niggunim*, I sang along lustily, my high-pitched youthful soprano blending with the mature voices of the older men.

One *chassid* sitting at that *tisch* paid more than cursory attention to my singing. Listening closely, he stared at me

with fascination, and slowly, a charmed smile spread across his face. He was none other than the renowned Reb Yankel Talmud, the virtuoso leader of the choir of the Gerrer *beis midrash* and brilliant composer of hundreds of Gerrer *niggunim*.

Reb Yankel had been a child prodigy and had sung under the famous Reb Yisrael Moshe Eckstein and Reb Kalman Yonah. As the legendary leader of the Gerrer choir, he composed more than fifteen hundred *niggunim*, most of which became instant favorites. Some of these are wordless melodies, while others are adapted to specific *tefillos*, but all carry the unmistakable earmark of a Yankel Talmud composition. Gerrer *chassidim*, returning home from a visit with the Rebbe, would sing these melodies in their communities, and before long, everyone was humming the latest composition of Reb Yankel Talmud. Even today, many of these *niggunim* are sung universally and played at weddings without anyone knowing their origin.

One unforgettable Friday night in 1931, I went to *daven* with my father in the Gerrer *shtiebel* in Cracow. I was a youngster at the time, and I remember the *shtiebel* buzzing with excitement.

"Reb Yankel Talmud is in town, and he's coming to *daven* with us tonight," my friends told me as we entered. "The *gabbai* will ask him to *daven Kabbalas Shabbos*. It's so exciting!"

I was a member of the official choir in our *shtiebel*, where it was customary, before *davening*, for the choir leader to decide which pieces we were going to sing. We were still discussing the various *niggunim* when Reb Yankel Talmud made his entrance. He looked impressive with his neat white beard ringing his sensitive face.

"*Shalom aleichem*, Reb Yankel," everyone called out as the

gabbai escorted him to a seat of honor on the *mizrach vant*, the eastern wall.

"Reb Yankel," the *gabbai* said respectfully, "we would like you to *daven Kabbalas Shabbos* for us."

Reb Yankel modestly turned down the offer, pointing out that there were other qualified *baalei tefillah* present, but when the *gabbai* insisted, he relented.

The choir began to sing, my soprano voice ringing out above the others. I noticed Reb Yankel frequently turning around, his eyes surveying the choir throughout the *davening*.

After *davening*, Reb Yankel approached me.

"Tell me, *yingele*," he said, smiling, "how would you like to sing in the Gerrer Rebbe's choir?"

Singing in the Rebbe's choir was the greatest honor to which a boy who loved to sing could aspire.

"Why not?" I replied, my eyes betraying my eagerness.

Reb Yankel gave me a friendly pinch on the cheek and approached my father.

"*Gut Shabbos*, Reb Yisrael Aryeh," Reb Yankel said. "I must tell you that your boy has an outstanding voice. In my career, I have heard many child prodigies, but your Duvid's voice has a unique quality of *mesikus*. Listening to this child is truly a moving experience."

Nothing further was said, but my father sensed that there was more to come. It seemed obvious that Reb Yankel had something on his mind.

My father did not have to wait long to find out. On *Motzei Shabbos*, the doorbell rang, and the famous choir master entered. After exchanging the usual pleasantries, Reb Yankel came down to business.

"Reb Yisrael Aryeh," he said, "while I enjoy visiting with

you, the actual purpose of my being here tonight is to discuss an important matter with you. I have listened to your Duvid sing, and I have a proposal to make to you. I'd like to ask your permission to have him sing in the Gerrer choir for the forthcoming *Yamim Noraim*. We have a choir of thirty magnificent voices, and I would like Duvid to sing the solo in the *beis midrash* of the Imrei Emes."

My parents were thunderstruck by the offer. Several of my brothers and sisters, who had been eavesdropping on the conversation, came running to tell me the exciting news.

"Imagine, Duvid, he wants you to be the soloist in the Gerrer choir on the *Yamim Noraim*!" they exclaimed.

It did not take long for my father to be persuaded, but my mother was very reluctant to let me go.

"He's only a youngster," she protested. "He'll get crushed among the thousands of *chassidim* cramming to see the Rebbe."

After Father assured her that he would not let me out of his sight, Mother finally relented. An appointment was made for me to come to Ger on *Rosh Chodesh Elul* to start rehearsals.

It wasn't long before I became an official soloist in the Gerrer choir. That *Rosh Hashanah*, only weeks after I had joined the group of outstanding singers, I had the honor of singing in the presence of the Imrei Emes and thousands of his *chassidim*.

The *tefillah* I sang was *Kevakaras Roeh Edro*, one of the most moving passages of *Mussaf*. "Like a shepherd pasturing his flock, passing the sheep under his staff, so shall You cause to pass . . . and consider the souls of all the living . . ." Set to an exquisite melody, the song made it seem as if the heavens were opening and enveloping the worshippers with *chessed* and *rachamim*.

When the choir was not singing, I stood next to my father in front of the *beis midrash*, with a clear view of the saintly Imrei Emes.

The praise I received from the *chassidim* who heard my singing was very exciting, but the *berachah* I received from the Rebbe meant more to me than all the compliments.

Years later, when I found myself at the edge of despair, surrounded by violence, agony and death, I was sustained by the inspiring Gerrer *niggunim* I had sung as a little boy. At night, when I could no longer stand the hunger pains, and the agony of my frost-bitten feet robbed me of any sleep, I conjured up the image of the Gerrer *beis midrash* on *Rosh Hashanah*, filled from wall to wall with *mispallelim*, totally immersed in *tefillos*. In my mind's eye, I saw the Rebbe concluding the silent *Shemoneh Esrei* and the *baal tefillah* intoning the *Chazaras Hashatz*. Oh, how clearly I remembered those heavenly *niggunim* and the solos I used to sing.

At these moments, the words "*mi yichyeh umi yamus, mi va'eish umi vamayim*," took on the ring of grim reality. "Who will live and who will die, who by water and who by fire, who by sword and who by beast . . ." Tears came to my eyes as I pictured the *chazan* and the choir proclaiming the final words, "*Vechol harishah kulah ke'ashan tichleh* . . . And all wickedness will evaporate like smoke, when You will remove evil's domination from the earth." Over and over, the melody rang in my ears, and as I softly hummed the moving words, my agony was replaced by confidence and hope.

CHAPTER 3

The World of Ger

IT HAS BEEN SAID THAT EVERY *CHASSID* HAS BUT ONE Rebbe, and every Rebbe has but one *chassid*. This is certainly true of the Gerrer *chassidim* and their Rebbe. A Gerrer *chassid* is totally devoted to his Rebbe, and he follows no other. Often, a *chassid* would leave his village for *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov* to celebrate with the Rebbe and seek his advice on all types of matters. When meeting privately with the Rebbe, a *chassid* could confide the most personal matters and somehow feel as if he was the only *chassid* of his *rebbe*. The Rebbe's words soothed the wounds of his soul, and with seemingly supernatural wisdom and insight, the Rebbe could penetrate a *chassid's neshamah*. He would guide him lovingly, patiently showing him where he had erred and relieving him of his burdens. Like a father speaking to his son, the Rebbe

would encourage him, strengthening his faith and replacing his despondency with *simchah*. It was no wonder that Ger was the most popular *chassidic* movement in Poland, numbering well over a hundred thousand adherents, all of whom were faithful followers of their Rebbe.

In truth, the power of the Gerrer movement and the extraordinary devotion of its followers can only be understood by examining the towering personalities that founded it. Each Rebbe was a great leader in his own right, and each one maintained a powerful hold on thousands of *chassidim*.

The patriarch of the Gerrer dynasty was the illustrious Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter, better known as the Chiddushei Harim, after the title of the *sefer* he wrote. A towering *gaon*, he was a descendant of the celebrated Maharam of Rothenburg. At that time, Polish *chassidus* was dominated by two eminent leaders: Rabbi Simchah Bunim of P'shischa and Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk. These two Torah giants pioneered a new direction in *chassidus* which stressed a synthesis of in-depth Torah study and fervent *tefillah*. The Chiddushei Harim, who was a brother-in-law of the Kotzker Rebbe, was an ardent follower of these two pioneers of *chassidus*. While he stressed intensive study of *Gemara* and *poskim*, he infused the Gerrer *chassidus* with a genuine spirit of *simchah*, boundless *emunah* and cheerful optimism. He firmly believed that one must always be happy, for whatever Hashem does is ultimately for our benefit. Although it is often difficult to view life in this manner, a true Gerrer *chassid* believes it wholeheartedly and is *sameiach bichelko*, happy with his lot.

The Chiddushei Harim used this concept to explain the words in *Neelah, "Merubim tzarchei amcha vedaatam ketzarah.*

The needs of Your people are many, but their wisdom is inadequate."

"Because their wisdom is inadequate," he would say, "their needs are many."

The Chiddushei Harim was succeeded by his grandson, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, better known as the Sfas Emes, after the title of the *sefer* he wrote.

Since the Sfas Emes was only eight years old when his father Rabbi Avraham Mordechai died, he was brought up by his grandfather. An extremely diligent student, he spent eighteen hours each day immersed in the study of *Gemara*, Kabbalah and *chassidus*. Even as a young man, he was recognized as an outstanding *talmid chacham* in the revealed and mystical aspects of Torah.

When the Chiddushei Harim passed away, the *chassidim* wanted to appoint the Sfas Emes as his successor. He declined, however, preferring to remain a *chassid* of Rabbi Chanoch Henoch, the Alexander Rebbe. Only after the Alexander Rebbe's passing did Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib reluctantly agree to become the next Gerrer Rebbe.

Under the inspired leadership of this Torah giant, the Gerrer *chassidus* swelled to over a hundred thousand followers. Even as a leader of so large a movement, the Sfas Emes remained the epitome of *anivus*, genuine self-effacing humility. He never sat at the head of the table, always preferring to sit among his *chassidim*. A man of absolute integrity, he demanded truth, honesty and sincerity from his followers. "Look beneath the *shtreimel* and into the head," he used to say.

His life exemplified complete dedication to *avodah*. Commenting on the *pasuk*, "*Vehevel heivi gam hu* . . . And Hevel, he also brought a sacrifice . . ." the Sfas Emes

explained, "Hevel brought himself as a *korban*. Because he offered his self, his ego, Hashem paid heed to Hevel and his offering."

This leader of gigantic spirit and vision sparked a fresh excitement for Torah and *mitzvos* and kindled a burning enthusiasm for *chassidus* in the hearts of Jews everywhere. His brilliant Torah insights are quoted daily, and his writings on *Halachah* are indispensable for Talmudic research and can be found in virtually every Torah library.

After the *petirah* of the Sfas Emes, his son Rabbi Avraham Mordechai became the new Gerrer Rebbe. He is popularly known as the Imrei Emes, after the title of his work.

Under his leadership, Gerrer *chassidus* continued to grow, and a new, larger *beis midrash* was erected in Ger. This was the *beis midrash* where, as a little boy, I sang my solo on the *Yamim Noraim*. While the Imrei Emes was Rebbe, so many *chassidim* travelled to Ger that, before every *Yom Tov*, the Polish National Railroad ran numerous special trains to accommodate the huge throngs.

The new *beis midrash* had a vast second floor and was surrounded by two large courtyards. There was sufficient room in the spacious halls for the thousands of *chassidim* to *daven*, learn and attend the Rebbe's *tischen*. When it came to finding lodging for the multitudes of *Yom Tov* guests, however, a solution had to be found.

Therefore, it became customary for the residents of Ger to rent their houses or apartments to *chassidim* who had come to be near their Rebbe. The citizens of the town gave up their rooms and cheerfully bedded down in their cellars or attics. Most of the local Jews were very poor, and renting out their homes brought in enough money to sustain them for the entire year.

The *beis midrash* in Ger had no seats or benches; everyone had to stand. On the *Yamim Noraim*, the vast *beis midrash* was so crammed with ardent *mispallelim* that even standing room was hard to find. As the *davening* progressed, the heat would become oppressive, but the *chassidim* would not even seem to notice. After all, they were standing in the presence of the revered Gerrer Rebbe, surrounded by *kedushah*, *taharah* and pure *ruchnius*. The *tefillos*, led by the *sheliach tzibbur* and the choir, lifted the *chassidim* to a high sphere of closeness to Hashem. As they *davened*, they were suffused with ardent love for every fellow Jew.

"*Ashreinu mah tov chelkeinu*," were the words that seemed to be on everyone's lips. The people who were gathered there felt so fortunate to be Jews, to be Gerrer *chassidim* and have the Imrei Emes as a Rebbe, a caring, guiding shepherd whose *tefillos* rose straight to the *Kissei Hakavod*.

With hearts full of *ahavas Hashem*, the *chassidim* prayed for a good year, one that would be free of personal and financial difficulties. Naturally, in such exalted frames of mind, the *chassidim* did not notice the heat.

However, as soon as the *davening* was over, everyone emerged from the *beis midrash*, dripping with perspiration and craving a cold drink. Since the *beis midrash* had no running water, the householders in Ger would prepare barrels of cold tea in front of their doors. The parched worshippers eagerly drank the cool beverages.

Naturally, every *chassid* yearned to spend a few minutes in private with the Rebbe when he visited Ger. However, on *Yamim Tovim*, when thousands of followers vied for an audience, some restrictions had to be made in order to allow as many people as possible to speak to the Rebbe. Therefore, rules were established limiting the time a petitioner could

stay with the Rebbe to no more than one or two minutes.

Before entering the Rebbe's chamber, a *chassid* would often hesitate for several anxious moments in front of the door, knowing that he was about to behold an *ish kadosh*, a man of utmost holiness and purity. He was aware that the eyes of the Imrei Emes could pierce his soul and penetrate to his innermost thoughts and aspirations. Reverently, the *chassid* would finally enter the sparsely furnished chamber that was lined with *sefarim* from floor to ceiling. Trembling, he would place his *kvittel* before the Rebbe. On his *kvittel* were listed the names of all the members of the *chassid's* family. Near each name was a specific prayer request, such as *refuah sheleimah*, *parnassah*, the right *zivug* or the solution to a specific problem.

With one quick glance, the Rebbe would scan the long list of names, answering all requests within moments. Those close to the Rebbe were familiar with his uncanny speed of comprehension, but strangers, encountering the Rebbe for the first time, were frequently baffled. Occasionally, one would muster up the courage to ask if the Rebbe had indeed read his *kvittel*. The Rebbe would reply with a knowing smile. "I answered all your questions, didn't I?" Reassured, the *chassid* would confidently return home. A dynamic personality, the Imrei Emes was recognized as the leader of all Poland's Torah-observant Jewry. He was like a father to all his *chassidim*, sharing their joys and their anguish and taking a personal interest in all their problems. He relieved their plight with encouraging words, and, often, he would provide material support to those who were in need.

CHAPTER 4

The Dynasty Continues

THE IMREI EMES WAS THE REBBE OF GER WHEN THE Germans began their mass persecution of the Jews of Europe. As a prominent Jewish leader, the Imrei Emes was an obvious target for the Nazis, and therefore, he immediately left Ger to seek refuge in Warsaw, a larger city where he would not be easily detected. This eminent scholar was forced to go into hiding disguised as a shoemaker, and he spent his time working in a shop while, in countries around the world, large sums of money were raised to effect his escape.

Because it was so important to keep the Rebbe's identity secret, he frequently moved from place to place. At one point, we heard that the Rebbe was staying in Cracow, but strict orders were issued that no one was to attempt to contact

him. Later, it was learned that through the intervention of the American *charge d'affaires*, the Rebbe had left Poland together with his son Rabbi Yisrael and other members of his family. They made their way to Trieste, Italy, where they boarded a ship bound for Palestine. Arriving in Haifa on *Chol Hamoed Pesach*, 1940, they were welcomed by thousands of ecstatic *chassidim*.

In Eretz Yisrael, the Imrei Emes immediately set to the task of rebuilding Ger. Tragically, most of the Gerrer *chassidim* in Poland perished at the hands of the Germans, but in Yerushalayim, the seeds of rebirth began to sprout. Large crowds were always the hallmark of Ger, and in the *beis midrash* that the Imrei Emes built in Yerushalayim, throngs of *chassidim* would converge eagerly, hoping to get a glimpse of their beloved leader.

When the Imrei Emes passed away in 1948, his son, Rabbi Yisrael, who studied under the tutelage of his father and grandfather, assumed the leadership of the Gerrer *chassidim*. Known as the Beis Yisrael, after the title of the *sefer* he wrote, he soon gained a reputation as an outstanding *talmid chacham* in his own right.

Under his guidance, Ger rose from the ashes to become, once again, a vibrant *chassidic* movement with *batei midrash* and *yeshivos* in all the major Jewish centers throughout the world.

When the broken-hearted survivors of the holocaust began to arrive in Eretz Yisrael, they turned to the Beis Yisrael for material assistance and spiritual inspiration. He was like a father to them, and as they sat at his *tisch*, these war-torn refugees felt like they had a family once again. The Beis Yisrael established a magnificent *yeshivah* in the Geulah section of Yerushalayim that continues to produce hundreds

of *talmidei chachamim* of the highest caliber even today.

Reb Simchah Bunim, the fourth son of the Imrei Emes, accepted the mantle of leadership in 1977, after the passing of the Beis Yisrael. A humble, self-effacing leader, he was an outstanding *talmid chacham*, thoroughly familiar with *Shas* and *poskim*. He was loved for his gentle character and the kindness he displayed to every Jew.

Reb Simchah Bunim was married in Europe, but when several years went by and he was not blessed with any children, his father suggested that the couple settle in Eretz Yisrael, in the hope that the *zechus* of the Holy Land would help them. Following his father's advice, Reb Simchah Bunim and his wife moved to Eretz Yisrael, where soon afterwards they had a child. In 1936, he established the Yeshivah Chiddushei Harim in Tel Aviv and saw it grow into one of the foremost Torah institutions in Eretz Yisrael.

Reb Simchah Bunim was on an ill-timed visit to Poland when World War II broke out, but he and his family miraculously escaped Poland together with the Imrei Emes and the Beis Yisrael, eventually returning to Eretz Yisrael.

An unassuming man, he spent most of his years as a businessman, conducting successful financial and real estate transactions of major proportions. However, when he became the Gerrer Rebbe at seventy-nine years of age, the *chassidim* realized immediately that this unpretentious "businessman" was a very wise and vigorous leader. He took an active part in all aspects of the Torah-observant community in Eretz Yisrael and fostered the growth of Gerrer institutions, establishing new *yeshivos* and *kollelim* across Eretz Yisrael and throughout the world.

In the summer of 1985, the Rebbe suddenly fell ill and had to undergo surgery. Visibly weakened and in constant

pain, the Rebbe still received requests for advice and *berachos* whenever he could.

Reb Simchah Bunim suffered many personal tragedies and much pain in his life. He would say ironically that there were two things he was never short of–money and *tzaros*. Nevertheless, he was always *besimchah* and was never heard to complain. He lived by the rule, "A *chassid* has *simchah* on his face and keeps sorrow in his heart."

The illustrious leader passed away on the seventh of *Tammuz*, 5752/1992. He was laid to rest in a *levayah* attended by nearly two hundred thousand grieving mourners, and he was succeeded by his brother, Rabbi Pinchas Menachem Alter, the *rosh yeshivah* of the Sfas Emes Yeshivah.

The center of Gerrer *chassidus* remains in Yerushalayim, where the Rebbe lives, and till today, each *Yom Tov* is marked by the swarms of *chassidim* who flock to the large *beis midrash* to get a glimpse of their leader. Experienced devotees wear special inexpensive caftans on these occasions, knowing that in the crowding, pushing and shoving, these garments are often torn. To protect the Rebbe from these spontaneous displays of enthusiasm, a group of young *chassidim* lock arms to cordon off a wide area around the Rebbe's seat. Special seats that are shielded from the crowding are reserved for guests who may not be used to such fervor, and they are treated with utmost courtesy.

This was the world in which I grew up. This was the world that nurtured and sustained me. It was a world so powerful and dynamic that the slaughter of most of its adherents could not crush it. Its rebirth and phenomenal growth bear witness to the magnificent greatness that was Ger.

BOOK TWO

Songs of Trepidation

CHAPTER 5

Jewish Cracow

CRACOW, THE CITY WHERE I GREW UP, WAS A TEEMING metropolis in southern Poland with a total population of three hundred thousand. Before World War II, it was a major Jewish center, pulsating with vibrant Torah life. Cracow's eighty thousand Jews were predominantly observant, and a large percentage of them were *chassidic*. In fact, Cracow could be called an *ir ve'eim b'Yisrael*, a Jewish mother city that nurtured her children with Torah and *yiras shamayim* through her many *yeshivos, shtieblach, shuls* and *chessed* institutions.

Many of Cracow's Jews lived in Kazimierz, the Jewish quarter, located in the southern sector of the city, on the western bank of the Vistula River. This neighborhood was named after King Kazimir the Great, who established it in

1335 as a refuge for Jewish immigrants.

The Jews of Cracow took great pride in their heritage and their *chassidus*, and as in most Jewish communities, life revolved around the *beis haknesses* and the *shtiebel*. Cracow boasted four ancient *shuls*: the Alte Shul, dating back to the fourteenth century, the Rema Shul, built in the sixteenth century, the Hoiche Shul, erected in the seventeenth century, and Reb Eizik Yeikeles' Shul, named after the philanthropist who donated the funds for its construction.

The Rema Shul bears the name of the illustrious Rabbi Moshe Isserles of Cracow, who is famous for his glosses on the *Shulchan Aruch*. So respected was his work that he has been called "the Rambam of Polish Jewry." A prolific writer, he is said to have written thirty-three *sefarim*, corresponding to the day of his death, which was on *Lag Baomer*, the thirty-third day of the *Omer*. His father, Reb Isser, a wealthy man and leading figure in the Cracow Jewish community, built the Rema Shul as a memorial to his late wife. Astonishingly, it has survived the holocaust and still stands today.

Fascinating legends surrounded each of the old edifices that housed the four *shuls*. As children, we never grew tired of hearing these tales, and they remain vivid in my mind.

I clearly remember Reb Mendel Katz, an elderly *chassid* who *davened* in our *shul*, telling us the thrilling tale of Reb Eizik Yeikeles' Shul.

According to the legend, Reb Eizik Yeikeles had been a poor, unlearned Jew living unpretentiously in Cracow. One night, he had a dream in which he was told that underneath one of the bridges across the Vistula he would find a buried treasure. When the same dream recurred several nights in a row, he swung his pickax and shovel onto his shoulder, went to the bridge and proceeded to dig. As he was digging, a

Polish peasant approached him.

"What are you expecting to find here?" the peasant asked.

Reb Eizik told him about his dreams.

"That's strange," replied the peasant. "I, too, had a dream. I dreamed that I would run into a Jew by the name of Eizik in whose chimney a great treasure is hidden."

Reb Eizik quickly packed his equipment and returned home. Without further delay, he demolished the chimney on his roof. There, encased in bricks and mortar, he found a rich cache of precious jewels and gold coins. Eizik the pauper had become a rich man overnight! Grateful to Hashem for his newfound wealth, he built the magnificent *shul* that bears his name.

Unfortunately, not all the *shuls* had such fortuitous circumstances related to them. No sooner had Reb Mendel finished his anecdote than Reb Betzalel, a heavy-set *chassid* with a straggly white beard, broke in with a story about the Alte Shul.

"They have a very strange *minhag* in the Alte Shul," he said. "Every year, on *Simchas Torah*, in the middle of the third *hakafah*, the *shamash* pounds his hand on the *amud*. At this signal, the dancing stops, and everyone sits down on the floor for a few minutes in absolute silence, just like on *Tishah b'Av*. This *minhag* commemorates a horrendous pogrom that took place in the seventeenth century, when a band of bloodthirsty hoodlums entered the Alte Shul on *Simchas Torah* during the third *hakafah* and set about killing all the worshippers."

I was quite young at the time, and this story of the *Simchas Torah* pogrom haunted me for a long time afterwards.

In addition to the large *shuls* in Cracow, there were also numerous *shtieblach* for the various *chassidic* groups, like the Sanzer, Dzhikover, Gerrer, Tchortkover, Radomsker, Belzer,

Bobover, Boyaner, Dzialoshitzer and Stutchiner *chassidim*, to name just a few.

Cracow had always been one of the foremost Jewish communities of Europe, and some of the most eminent *talmidei chachamim* in our history officiated as its *rabbanim*. The rabbinate of Cracow was served by prominent personalities such as Rabbi Yaakov Pollak, who founded a *yeshivah* in 1503, the Rema and Rabbi Yoel Sirkis, famous for his commentary *Bayis Chadash* (*Bach*) on the *Tur*.

Other famous *rabbanim* in Cracow were the Tosefos Yom Tov (Rabbi Yom Tov Lipman Heller), author of the famous commentary on the *Mishnah* and the Rebbe Reb Herschel, author of *Chanukas Hatorah*, who succeeded the Tosefos Yom Tov.

Cracow also boasted of Rabbi Nassan Note Shapiro, known as the Megaleh Amukos, who was a famous Kabbalist in Cracow and the mentor of the Shach; Rabbi Shimon Sofer, son of the Chasam Sofer, who, while serving as *rav* of Cracow, also held a seat in the Austrian parliament under Emperor Franz Joseph.

The last *rav* to officiate in Cracow was Rabbi Yosef Nechemiah Kornitzer. As a young boy, I had the great honor of singing as the soloist in Rabbi Kornitzer's *beis midrash* for the *Yamim Tovim*. Shortly before *Yom Tov* that year, the regular *chazan* of the *shul* had become ill, and the Gerrer *baal tefillah* was asked to officiate. As a soloist in the Gerrer choir, I naturally accompanied him.

Rabbi Kornitzer passed away in 1933, and I vividly recall attending his funeral. I was a young boy at the time, and the vast throng of thousands of mourners, Jews and non-Jews alike, made an overwhelming impression on my young mind.

The atmosphere in Cracow was saturated with genuine

Yiddishkeit. This was most evident on Friday afternoon with the approach of *Shabbos*, when the thousands of hardworking Jewish tradesmen and coachmen closed their shops, unharnessed their horses and carriages and went home. A few hours later, these coarse-looking men emerged from their homes looking like royalty, dressed in their *Shabbos* finery. Garbed in *bekishes* and *shtreimlach*, they hurried with their children to *shul* to welcome the *Shabbos*.

A *Yom Tov* in Cracow was an unforgettable experience. The *kedushah* was so palpable, one could almost touch it. On *Sukkos*, for example, the people outdid themselves in decorating their *sukkos* in the most original and ingenious ways. I remember that one year admirers came from all over the city to Krakowski Street to view a *sukkah* that was a marvel of sheer artistry. The owner had built life-like mechanical birds with moving wings that literally circled the *sukkah*.

In the Jewish sections of the city, *Shabbos* was strictly observed, with very few exceptions. I remember one occasion when a Jew had the audacity to open his store on *Shabbos*. The reaction was swift and furious. After *davening* on *Shabbos* morning, thousands of *chassidim* wearing *shtreimlach* and *bekishes* converged on the store and drove the customers out with angry shouts, forcing the shamefaced owner to close his business.

In another incident, a kosher butcher store suddenly began to sell non-kosher meat. The store was located opposite the Gerrer *shtiebel* on Estera Street. It did not take long before an angry crowd began to demonstrate against the outrage, and the impudent butcher was forced out of business.

Not only were the people of Cracow zealous in maintaining a high level of Torah and *avodah* in their community, but

gemillus chassadim, as well, was a strong priority in the *kehillah*. The populace gave generously to *tzeddakah*, and the city abounded with *chessed* institutions. There were hospitals, free-loan societies, *hachnassas kallah* funds, orphanages and special organizations dedicated to caring for the needy in a dignified manner.

Our home exemplified *gemillus chassadim* and *hachnassas orchim* the way it was practiced in Cracow. My father Reb Yisrael Aryeh, a prosperous wholesaler of men's shirts and dry goods, was a prominent member of the community and an assiduous *tzeddakah* activist. Whenever a Jew needed help, he sprang into action, tirelessly knocking on doors to solicit the funds that were needed. Travellers passing through town, *meshulachim* for *yeshivos* and poverty-stricken individuals knew that in the Werdyger home they would find food and lodging. My father, upon meeting a newcomer in *shul*, would insist that he join us for a meal. Since most travellers could not afford to stay in a hotel, he often suggested that they spend the night in our house. I clearly remember countless occasions when I had to give up my bed and sleep on the floor. On *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov*, we always had ten or more guests at our table; the singing of *zemiros* rang out through the neighborhood, and discussions of *divrei Torah* and tales of *tzaddikim* dominated the conversation.

My mother, a goodhearted and noble woman, participated wholeheartedly in the *chessed* organizations of the community and toiled ceaselessly on behalf of the needy. On her mother's side, she was a descendant of the illustrious Lellover *chassidic* dynasty, founded by Rabbi David Biederman of Lellov.

In 1933, soon after rising to power, Hitler expelled all Polish Jews living in Germany. Forced to abandon their

homes and businesses, they were sent across the border to Poland, with little more than the clothes on their backs. Many of them arrived in Cracow, where they described the horrors they had lived through at the hands of the Nazis. They spoke of long-time neighbors and supposed gentile friends who had suddenly turned against them, beating and robbing them mercilessly. Horror-stricken, we listened to these accounts, dreading what the future held in store for us.

With the arrival of these unfortunate refugees, the Jews of Cracow went to work. Overnight, the newcomers were provided with food and shelter. Women set about cooking vast quantities of tasty, nourishing meals, and the men collected clothing, shoes and other basic necessities. Each day, my siblings and I carried food and supplies to these dejected people, the first victims of the German reign of terror.

Meanwhile, dark clouds continued to gather on the horizon. Germany swallowed up its neighboring countries, the Saar basin, Austria, Sudetenland and Czechoslovakia, while England and France, terrified at the prospect of war, repeatedly gave in to Hitler's demands. Poland, blinded by a false sense of security, did not make any concerted effort to prepare for the impending battles. Totally unaware of technological military advancement, they relied on their outdated army of cavalry and horse-drawn artillery that was infiltrated by dozens of German spies and sympathizers.

News of Hitler's violently anti-Semitic tirades reached the Jews of Poland, and they trembled with fear. Polish Jew-haters, encouraged by the impunity with which the Nazis persecuted the Jews, brazenly began to attack Jews in the streets, and stabbing and shooting became rampant in Cracow and throughout Poland.

Still unwilling to accept reality, the eternally optimistic

Jews continued to hope for better days and made no attempt to escape the threatening disaster. Slowly but inexorably, Polish Jewry drifted toward its fateful encounter with Amalek.

CHAPTER 6

Our World Is Shaken

ON FRIDAY, THE SEVENTEENTH DAY OF *ELUL*, SEPTEMBER 1, 1939, Hitler's army invaded Poland. At the crack of dawn, unidentified planes could be seen in the skies over Cracow.

"*Nasze*," said the Poles. "These are ours."

It didn't take long to figure out that they were mistaken. The bombs fell ceaselessly, raining death and destruction on the city. The cacophonous din of the explosions mingled with the cries of the wounded and the blaring sirens of ambulances racing to and fro, trying to provide assistance to the many wounded citizens. Cracow was in chaos, and the Jews were seized with panic.

"Should we run away?"

"Where can we go?"

Hysteria reigned supreme. In consternation, people fled in all directions, carrying a few belongings on their backs, clogging the roads and highways. The long columns of refugees became an easy target for German fighter planes, who strafed them with machine-gun fire, killing thousands.

Horror-stricken, some Jews returned home, while others doggedly continued their journey, determined to leave Cracow behind them. Many made their way to Lemberg, which was to be annexed by Russia, but tens of thousands of these Jews were deported to Siberia by the Russians in whom they had placed their trust. Still, although life in Siberia was certainly difficult, they escaped the claws of the Germans and were able to survive the holocaust. Tragically, many of these survivors were men who had left their families behind, naively thinking that the Germans would not harm women and children. They never saw their families again.

With lightning speed, the German forces advanced into Poland, their motorized columns, accompanied by tanks and artillery, easily overwhelming the Polish defenders. German bombers and fighter planes flew overhead unchallenged, sowing their deadly cargo indiscriminately on civilian targets. Within six weeks, the German blitzkrieg forced Poland to its knees, bringing over three million Polish Jews into the clutches of the Nazis.

Our house was on the main street of Cracow. Coming home from *shul* on Friday night, the first day of the war, we saw the remnants of the Polish army pass in front of our house as they returned from battle. Exhausted and famished, they trudged by despairingly, many in complete disarray, without helmets, rifles or guns. Was this the vaunted Polish army that was supposed to defend us?

An atmosphere of fear and anxiety gripped the Jewish

quarter. We had hoped that the Polish army would be able to resist the German onslaught; no one dreamed that the Germans would attack with such overpowering force. On *Shabbos* morning, *shuls* remained closed, for people were afraid to walk the streets. People assembled for *minyanim* in private homes, *davened* quickly and rushed home to eat the *seudah*, anxiously awaiting the latest news reports from the front.

Since my father was a highly respected member of the community, many people came to him for advice in this hour of crisis.

"What shall we do, Reb Yisrael Aryeh?" they asked.

"I am staying right here," he answered. "You cannot run away from the *Ribono Shel Olam.* We must accept whatever Heaven decrees."

On Wednesday, September 6, the German army entered Cracow. I stationed myself among the spectators on Krakowska Street, one of the main thoroughfares, to observe the tanks and troop carriers roll down the wide avenue. In horror and dismay, I watched the Poles wave at the Nazi troops and shower them with flowers and candy. The same day, posters appeared all over town proclaiming a curfew for Jewish citizens.

"Any Jew caught outdoors after six o'clock in the evening will be shot summarily," the posters read.

After this, new decrees were issued daily: Jews must wear arm bands with a *Judenstern*; Jews may not own more than five hundred *zlotys*; Jews must hand over their radios; Jews must surrender their fur coats.

"Any Jew disobeying this ordinance will be shot summarily," was the line that invariably followed these announcements.

A short while later, the Germans suddenly went on a three-day rampage of looting and robbing through the Jewish quarter. A convoy of large trucks appeared on the street, and SS men in black uniforms with skull insignias on their caps charged into the houses, confiscating anything that caught their fancy. Furniture, silverware and valuable paintings were carried out and loaded onto the waiting trucks. Anyone that dared protest was given a sound thrashing that left him more dead than alive.

My brother, who lived on Ditlovska Street, was one of the many whose homes were searched in this manner. After inspecting his house, the SS men ordered him in no uncertain terms to prepare his bedroom furniture to be removed.

"When we come for it tomorrow, it had better be ready," the officer said, gesturing with his gun.

After they left, we quickly took apart the furniture and carried it away. When the Germans returned the next day and saw the empty bedroom, they exploded with rage.

"Wo sind die Moebel?" the officer shouted. "Where is the furniture?"

My brother politely explained that other German soldiers had come in the interim and taken the furniture.

"We told them that you were coming for it today and tried to stop them," he said, feigning innocence, "but they would not listen. There was nothing we could do."

Fortunately, the disappointed Germans believed his story and left him unharmed.

The Jews of Cracow called the raids the *"sheloshes yemei afeilah*, the three days of darkness," ironically reminiscent of the plague of darkness in Egypt, when the Jews were able to search the Egyptians' homes and remove the valuables.

CHAPTER 7

The Nightmare Begins

DURING THE THREE-DAY ROBBING SPREE, NO JEW WAS allowed in the streets. When the German trucks pulled up, anyone who happened to be outside ran quickly to hide inside the closest house, afraid for his life.

We heard gruesome accounts of Jews who were rounded up in the streets and put to work in a coal mine. To amuse themselves, the German guards ordered the Jews to pelt each other with large chunks of coal. As a result, many Jews were taken to the hospital with serious injuries.

It became a commonplace occurrence for Germans to round up Jews on the street and send them off to do heavy labor. Often, these groups of Jews were never heard from again, and occasionally, their families received boxes containing ashes, the cremated remains of their loved ones.

Early one morning, on my way to *daven*, a German soldier appeared out of nowhere and stopped me suddenly.

"*Komm sofort mit mir! Schnell, los, los!*" he shouted as he pushed me into a waiting truck. "Come with me! Quickly!"

I was taken aboard a truck, which continued to circle the Jewish quarter as the soldiers tried to round up a group of Jews. This was not easily done, however, since anyone who saw them approaching quickly took cover in one of the houses. Some of the captives even managed to jump off the truck, miraculously dodging the German gunfire as they escaped.

By mid-afternoon, the Germans had taken ten prisoners. The truck drove a distance beyond the edge of the city and unloaded us at a small building. Shouting menacingly, they pushed us into a small room where we were made to stand. After a long day without food I waited anxiously, feeling weak and exhausted. At last, the door opened, and a vicious-looking German emerged. He was wearing a white apron that was splattered with blood, and he held a long, sharp, blood-stained knife in his right hand. With his left hand, he pointed at one of us.

"*Du, komm hier!*" he barked. "You, come along with me!"

The man went in, and as time elapsed and he did not emerge, we became increasingly frightened. I began to say *Vidui*, and the others followed suit. After a few moments, the Germans began calling each of us into the room. Finally, it was my turn. As soon as I entered, I realized what the sadistic Germans were up to. They were killing geese, and to entertain themselves, they had decided to frighten some Jews. Seeing my terrified expression, these products of German *Kultur* shook with raucous laughter.

I came home late that night, shaken and exhausted, but

my parents were overjoyed to see me alive and well. When I had disappeared without a trace, they automatically feared the worst. After this incident, I did not leave the house for a very long time.

Some time later, I began to venture out into the streets again, always on guard and keeping a careful watch behind me. One day, though, a German soldier suddenly jumped out from behind a corner.

"*Komm hier, Jude,*" he bellowed. "Come here, Jew." He motioned me into a waiting truck that was already loaded with other captives.

My mind raced as the truck sped off. Where would they take me this time?

Finally, after driving for some time, the truck stopped at a cemetery.

"*Alle raus!*" came the command. "Everybody out!"

Shaking with fear, I climbed down. Were they actually planning to kill us here? I didn't have much time to wonder. An SS man handed each of us a shovel and broom and gave us instructions.

"Clean up this place!" he ordered. "German soldiers who fell in the war are buried here, and their relatives are coming to visit the graves. I want this place spotless, so be quick!"

Happy to be alive, we worked through the night on empty stomachs, secretly wishing that all the Germans would soon join their fallen comrades.

On *Rosh Hashanah* that year, *davening* in an official *shul* or *shtiebel* would have been far too dangerous. A *minyan* was organized in an apartment on the top floor of a building so the blowing of the *shofar* would not attract any unwanted attention. Never before did the Jews of our city *daven* with as much *kavanah* and sincere *teshuvah* as they did that year.

Many tears were shed as we poured out our broken hearts to the *Ribono Shel Olam, davening* that "He may nullify all harsh decrees upon us." The words of *Avinu Malkeinu* held new meaning for us as we thought of the cruel acts being carried out by the Germans at those very moments.

That year, we built our *sukkah* above the restaurant in our building, as we had done in previous years. The non-Jewish workers were very cooperative, and they shouted a warning whenever German soldiers approached. At night, in order to remain as inconspicuous as possible, we refrained from turning on any lights and ate in the dark.

From day to day, life became increasingly difficult. To buy bread, we had to wait on long lines, where we were often subjected to taunts and abuse. Dressed in *chassidic* clothes, I made a perfect target for the Poles, who would frequently push me to the back of the line, showering me with obscenities. Displaying a strong streak of anti-Semitism, the Polish peasants derived great pleasure from mocking the defenseless Jews.

The Jews were now becoming increasingly desperate to find some way of curbing the German terror, and it was decided that Sapiecha, the archbishop of Cracow, would be the ideal person to intervene on their behalf. Rabbi Shabsai Rappaport and Rabbi Schmelke Kornitzer, the son of the late Chief Rabbi Yosef Nechemiah Kornitzer were among the committee that was formed for this purpose.

The archbishop cordially received the Jewish leaders and promised to use his influence with the German authorities. With renewed optimism, the delegation returned to the Jewish community, assuring them that the archbishop would indeed be of great service to them.

However, their newfound hopes were short-lived. A short

time after the meeting, all the members of the delegation were arrested and taken away in the middle of the night. It was learned that the fiendish Sapiecha had gone straight to the Gestapo and informed them of the meeting. The Jews of Cracow were seized with despair; they had nowhere to turn.

Several days later, the families of the delegation members received packages containing the ashes of their remains. These heroic Jews, who had displayed such *mesiras nefesh* in trying to relieve the plight of their fellow Jews, had been brutally murdered. "*Al tivtechu benidivim* . . . Do not rely on nobles or in mortal man who cannot save." (*Tehillim* 146:3)

Day after day, the *Aktionen* intensified. Hundreds of people were picked off the streets, loaded onto trucks and hauled to the Pustkov concentration camp. There, many were killed by starvation, disease and ruthless beatings. Frequently, these hapless prisoners were used as human targets in German sharpshooting contests.

No one knew when an *Aktion* would occur, and it was impossible to predict the ruthless schemes that continuously hatched in the twisted minds of the German officers.

At one point, a hundred and twenty men were selected for a labor detail to be sent to work at a construction site. The men considered themselves lucky, hoping that working for the Germans would prevent them from being sent to the Plaszow concentration camp or being shot at random by roving SS men. That evening, before marching home, the men were ordered to line up for roll call, in rows of five abreast. When the *Oberscharfuehrer* counted the rows, he discovered that there were a hundred and twenty-seven men lined up. Evidently, seven men had sneaked into the detail, hoping to avoid deportation or harassment.

"The seven unauthorized men in line step forward

immediately!" the *Oberscharfuehrer* shrieked.

No one came forward, and no one betrayed the extra men.

The Germans were livid. They had to set an example and teach these Jews a lesson in German order and obedience. The Jewish police of Cracow was ordered to furnish ten hostages to be shot. The ten young men were selected, loaded on a truck and taken to the town square, where a public execution was to be held. Sound trucks informed the populace of the upcoming event, striking terror in the hearts of the Jews of Cracow.

Chief of Police Pilartchik, a bloodthirsty Jew-hater in charge of the execution, sent an underling to the nearby Yulag camp to summon an SS death squad. The SS men arrived, set up their machine guns and while waiting for their orders, callously joked about the event at hand.

"Get ready . . . fire!" Pilartchik's command rang out.

Enthusiastically, the SS men took aim and ruthlessly mowed down the ten young men. The ten lifeless bodies lying at awkward angles on the ground were a gruesome sight, but to the SS men, it was just a routine job. They nonchalantly packed their gear and moved on to their next brutal assignment.

One of the ten young men lying in the square that day was a good friend of mine by the name of David Wazecha. Miraculously, the bullet that was aimed at his head pierced his cheek instead and emerged from his mouth. Instinctively, he fell to the ground, pretending to be dead. He lay motionless, afraid to breathe, until the Germans left and the *chevrah kadisha* arrived to remove the bodies. Finally feeling safe, he stood up, bleeding profusely but thankful to be alive.

David Wazecha survived the holocaust and lived to tell

about his own shooting. After the war, he got married in Bratislava (Pressburg), Czechoslovakia, and I was happy to act as his *unterfihrer*. It was a *chasunah* I will never forget. As I danced with the *chassan,* we shed tears of gratitude to Hashem for living to see this moment and, at the same time, tears of sadness for all the bitter memories that would never leave us. As it says in *Tehillim*, "*Samcheinu kimos inisanu.* Give us joy for as long as You have afflicted us." (*Tehillim* 90:15)

CHAPTER 8

A Reign of Terror

THE WAR RAGED ON, WITH THE GERMAN INVADERS meeting little resistance on their march into Poland. Only in Warsaw, the capital city, did the Polish army fight stubbornly, hoping vainly to maintain some territory. As a result, the city was heavily damaged. In the first German bombing raid, over two thousand Jews perished. On *Erev Sukkos,* 1939, Warsaw surrendered.

Under German occupation, Warsaw lost its official title as the Polish capital. Instead, Cracow became the seat of the so-called General Government, which was headed by Governor General Frank, a savage Jew-hater.

The Germans' campaign to annihilate the Jews was characteristically methodical. First, individual Jews were targeted, and they were indiscriminately shipped off to labor camps or

simply beaten or killed at the whim of the German forces. In the next stage, the screws were tightened as Jews were herded into ghettos in large cities such as Warsaw, Cracow, Lodz and Lublin. Jews from smaller towns and villages in the countryside were stripped of all their possessions and transported to the ghettos, where they were forced to live in unbelievable squalor, starvation and disease. Overnight, established businessmen and their families were reduced to paupers and had to beg for a rind of bread. Most of these refugees died within a short time, and their bodies lay in the streets.

Still, the Jews were not dying fast enough for the Germans. Mass executions by *Einsatzgruppen*, the notorious killing squads, accelerated the pace of death, but eventually, even this process proved too slow. More efficient methods had to be devised.

On the 8th of *Sivan*, 1940, the Germans opened the largest death camp at Auschwitz. Auschwitz and the concentration camps of Dachau, Ravensbruck, Bergen-Belsen, Mauthausen, Belzec, Treblinka, Sobibor, as well as many others rivaled each other in bestiality. Their names will be remembered in infamy until the end of time.

The descriptions of the mass extermination that took place within the concentration camps are mind-boggling. There are many people who cannot comprehend how the Germans were able to carry out their diabolical plans without meeting any resistance. "Why did the Jews not resist?" they ask scornfully. "Why did they go like sheep to the slaughter?"

Only people who have not been there can ask such questions. Those who lived through the holocaust know how the fiendish Germans starved and beat the Jews, humiliating them to the point where death was welcomed as the liberator from unbearable agony.

Nevertheless, despite the torturous circumstances, there were many instances where the Jews did resist. In the Warsaw Ghetto, for example, on the first night of *Pesach*, April 19, 1943, a small band of heroic Jewish fighters battled bravely, sending a heavily armed German unit fleeing for their lives.

And even more important, the most crucial form of resistance was our tenacious clinging to Hashem, His Torah and the *mitzvos*. With unwavering faith, we actually triumphed over the vicious beasts that tried so hard to annihilate us.

While most of the Jewish community in my own city of Cracow lived in constant terror of the daily roundups and unrelenting persecution, a hundred *yeshivah bachurim* risked their lives each day to carry *Gemaros* and other *sefarim* to an underground cellar. Following in the footsteps of their forebears, who studied Torah in hidden caves in defiance of the Roman oppressors' edicts, these young men immersed themselves in the *Talmud*, studying with incredible *hasmadah* and intensity, oblivious to the mortal peril that threatened them should they be discovered. At all times, a *bachur* was posted outside as a guard to warn of approaching SS men.

Late one evening, returning from a day of heavy forced labor and beatings, I stopped at the cellar where the *bachurim* were learning by the light of one bare bulb. Taking a seat, I was suddenly overcome with agonizing sadness. I burst into tears and wept uncontrollably. Gently, one of the *bachurim* tried to console me and strengthen my *bitachon*.

"'*Imo anochi betzarah*,'" he quoted. "Hashem is with us when we are in distress. If we cry out to Him, He will answer. '*Al shachal vafesen tidroch.* On the lion and the viper you will tread.' Just have *bitachon*, and be *besimchah*. The day of vengeance will come."

His soothing words calmed me and lifted my spirits. Afterwards, I learned that the *bachur's* name was Mattes, and that he had come to Cracow from Vienna in 1934. Born into a non-religious family, he felt drawn to Torah and made his home in the Gerrer *shtiebel.* He grew a beard and *peyos,* studied assiduously and within a few short years, became an outstanding *talmid chacham.* Inspired by his selfless dedication, the brightest students in the *shtiebel* gathered around him, recognizing him as their leader. People called his followers "the Mattes Brigade." In the days of Nazi terror, these "Mattes troopers" exhibited great *mesiras nefesh* in saving people's lives and helping the needy, often in total disregard of their own safety. While darkness was descending on the Jews of Cracow, the spirit of Torah was shining brightly in the hearts of these young *bachurim.*

Unfortunately, their secret haven of Torah was not to last very long. One day, in a house-to-house search, the Germans discovered the underground *beis midrash* and arrested all one hundred *bachurim* while they were engrossed in studying *Gemara.*

The young men were taken to the Plaszow concentration camp and told to line up in front of a battery of machine guns manned by SS men. When the *bachurim* realized what their fate was to be, some began to falter, but Mattes heartened them.

"*Chevrah!*" he called out. "We are going to give our lives *al kiddush Hashem,* like Rabbi Akiva and the *Asarah Harugei Malchus!* Let us be *besimchah* that we are *zocheh* to this. *Ashreinu mah tov chelkeineu.* We are fortunate, how good is our portion! *Shema Yisrael . . .*"

At that, the *bachurim* spontaneously began to sing and broke into a joyous *rikud.* The infuriated Germans let loose

a hail of machine gun fire, frustrated at the obvious elation of their victims. As the shooting intensified, the young men danced on and on, singing Hashem's praises until the last one fell silently to the ground.

These were the real heroes of the ghetto. We will never forget them.

CHAPTER 9

Foundations Uprooted

WITH EACH NEW EDICT, THE NAZIS CLOSED THEIR tentacles ever more tightly around the Jews of Cracow. Eventually, they set up a Judenrat, a council of prominent Jews, to act as their henchmen and implement their sinister schemes. The Judenrat used the Ordnungsdienst, a Jewish police force, to carry out their orders. Dressed in German-style uniforms, these men were armed with night-sticks to enforce obedience. With few exceptions, the members of the Judenrat became corrupted by their German masters and slavishly obeyed them, hoping to save themselves from hard labor, starvation and eventual death. However, in the end, the Germans thanked them for their services by sending them to the gas chambers.

At this early stage, the Germans issued a decree ordering

everyone to obtain a labor pass that would prove he was working for the German war effort. Anyone caught without this pass would be deported to Auschwitz immediately. Naturally, everyone was desperate to obtain this pass, and people did all they could to find a job in a factory or shop that produced articles for the German Wehrmacht. People paid large sums of money to gain entrance to these defense projects, expecting to be safe from deportation. However, the labor pass edict turned out to be just another German ruse for obtaining cheap labor, and eventually, the workers at these factories met the same end as the ones without the treasured passes. Each day brought new arrests and ominous reports of friends and acquaintances who had been hauled off to unknown destinations.

Finally, the Germans issued the earthshattering decree we had all been dreading. In the summer of 1940, about one year after the German invasion, large yellow posters appeared all over Cracow. On orders of Governor General Frank, the city of Cracow was to be made *Judenrein*, cleared of Jews. All seventy thousand Jews of Cracow had to leave the city, with the exception of ten thousand, who would be relocated to a ghetto in the Padgursz district of the city.

The Jews were horror-stricken. What would they do? Where would they go? By early winter, the Judenrat had mailed out eviction notices to all the Jews in Cracow informing them that they were to leave the city by a certain date. Those who did not comply with the order would be dealt with harshly. Everyone knew the Germans meant business.

The ten thousand slots available in the Padgursz ghetto were filled immediately. Naturally, the members of the Judenrat reserved the best spaces for themselves. The rest of the slots simply went to the highest bidder. Wealthy Jews paid

vast sums of money for the "privilege" of becoming ghetto residents. The rivalry among the rich for ghetto "apartments" turned into a veritable bonanza for the members of the Judenrat. They profited handsomely from the desperation of the frightened Jews.

The rest of the Jewish community was left to fend for itself. Those who did not vacate their homes by the specified date were shipped to unknown destinations, and their possessions were carted off by the Jewish police. Others found shelter with relatives who lived in small towns and hamlets in the countryside.

Coming home after a day of work in a German defense plant one day, I was told that my parents had decided to move in with my mother's sister who lived in a small village outside Cracow.

"We're going to Proshevitz, where we'll stay with Uncle Elisha Shidlovsky," Father said firmly. "With Hashem's help, we'll be safe there."

At the time, six of my brothers and sisters were already married, and only my unmarried sister and I were still living at home. My sister Yettie, a teacher at the Bais Yaakov Girls' School of Cracow, was a close assistant of Sarah Schenirer, the legendary founder of the Bais Yaakov movement.

My older brothers and sisters all married into prominent families known for their *tzeddakah, chessed* and *hachnassas orchim.*

Yaakov Meir, the eldest son, was the son-in-law of Reb Binyamin Horowitz. Pinchas, the next in line, was the son-in-law of Reb Herzl Halpern, and Chanoch Henach was the son-in-law of Reb Paltiel Silberstein of Sosnowice. My sister Sarah was the daughter-in-law of Reb Mordechai Luxenberg, and her husband was a noted *lamdan.* My sister Chaya was the

daughter-in-law of Reb Yonasan Geldwerth, a prominent Radomsker *chassid*, and my third sister, Rivkah, married the son of Reb Henenberg of Sosnowice.

Being uprooted from our home in Cracow marked the end of the sheltered life I had led for the first fifteen years of my life. I clearly remember the spacious house in Cracow where my parents had raised the eight of us. There, my parents had hosted some of the most eminent personalities in the rabbinic world. Rabbi Yehudah Leib Orlean, the famous educator and author, was one of the prominent guests who stayed at our house while in Cracow. And when the Imrei Emes came to Cracow with his family to attend his grandson's wedding, his son Reb Itche and a number of other members of the wedding party stayed at our home. On that occasion, Reb Itche, who was an outstanding *talmid chacham*, spent the entire night "speaking in learning" with my brother-in-law, amazing him with the breadth and depth of his knowledge.

The memories I have of our home in Cracow are filled with joy and laughter, and it was no wonder that the news of our forthcoming departure made me apprehensive.

CHAPTER 10

Flight to Proshevitz

MEANWHILE, WE WATCHED WITH ANXIOUS EYES AS the electrified barbed wire fence went up around the Padgursz district of Cracow in preparation for the ghetto it would contain. Overnight, a peaceful neighborhood was transformed into a prison. The only entrance to the ghetto was a single gate that was manned by a menacing-looking guardhouse.

Ten thousand residency permits were issued by the Germans, but eventually, twice that number of Jews crowded into the ghetto. Periodically, the Jewish police conducted raids, and anyone caught without a permit was handed over to the Germans. These hapless Jews were loaded onto waiting trucks and immediately taken to the Auschwitz gas chambers.

At the outskirts of Cracow, there were two Jewish cemeteries situated right near each other. It was on the site of these cemeteries that the ruthless Germans built the large Plaszow labor camp. After destroying the tombstones, they built large barracks which were connected with paved roads. Thirty thousand Jews were crammed into this camp, ostensibly to work as laborers. Its true purpose, however, was to destroy the Jews by working and starving them to death. Doing backbreaking labor with little nourishment or sleep, the Jews were constantly subjected to brutal beatings and random shootings. Whenever the camp population dwindled, a new supply of Jews was ordered. This was easily accomplished, for an *Aktion* in the ghetto always netted a rich supply of expendable Jews. With vicious cynicism, the Germans gave Plaszow the nickname Jerusalemski, "Little Jerusalem."

Meanwhile, we were busy preparing for our exodus from Cracow. We packed all our belongings and loaded everything onto a horse-drawn wagon my father had rented. Soon, the wagon was piled high with an assortment of boxes, bundles, suitcases, linen and dozens of odds and ends. Sitting on top of the entire load was our immediate family and my married sister with her husband and six small children.

Slowly and laboriously, the horse began to move, pulling the unwieldy load. We were on our way to Proshevitz! Wistfully, I looked back as our house disappeared in the distance. Would I ever see it again? Was this good-byee forever?

Every time a German military vehicle passed, we held our breaths. Would they stop us? Would they confiscate our belongings, or worse? We knew they could do as they pleased.

Suddenly, a German soldier riding a motorcycle came up behind us.

"Halt!" he shouted.

"You there, come down!" he called to my brother-in-law, who was sitting in the back of the wagon.

The German slapped him in the face and punched him, while we looked on, terrified.

"Why are you letting the poor horse pull you?" he shouted. "Get behind the wagon and start pushing!"

My brother-in-law, obviously in great pain from the beating he had just endured, went through the motions of pushing the wagon. Fortunately, the German did not stay to watch and rode off.

This was a typical example of the twisted German mentality. They murdered human beings without blinking an eye and at the same time, showed compassion to animals. "*Zovechei adam agalim yishakun*," the *navi* Hoshea poignantly describes these *reshaim*. "They slaughter men but kiss calves." (*Hoshea* 13:1)

Finally, without further incident, we reached our destination. Our new home in Proshevitz was a modest house located on a narrow side street of the town. We were ready to begin a new phase in our lives. As we unloaded the wagon, we found that many of our things had been broken during the bumpy ride, but we knew better than to complain. We realized that, in spite of everything, we were more fortunate than many others who could not find apartments or houses and had no place to go.

It did not take long for us to notice that life in a small village was not as hectic or perilous as in the big city. There were only a few Germans stationed here, and we were alerted whenever the occasional convoy passed through so we could stay out of harm's way.

We moved to Proshevitz during the summer, and *Rosh*

Hashanah was soon upon us. Fortunately, we were able to find a place to hold regular *minyanim*. This was the second *Rosh Hashanah* under German occupation, and consequently, there was no shortage of broken spirits and despondent hearts. Death was all around us, and we all knew that it was just a matter of time before our conditions worsened. The *chazan davened* with deep *kavanah* and feeling, and I acted as his *meshorer*, assisting him and singing the harmony for the *tefillos*.

My uncle and aunt in Proshevitz had been well-to-do owners of a hardware store before the Germans arrived. However, as one of the first anti-Jewish measures, a German manager was assigned to each Jewish business, denying all access to the true owners. Overnight, wealthy businessmen were turned into penniless paupers. Our relatives in Proshevitz lost the flourishing business they had built over a lifetime of honest hard work.

Consequently, the Jews of Proshevitz organized a soup kitchen where the poor could receive hot meals every day free of charge. My friends and I collected groceries and volunteered to dish out meals and do odd jobs related to the soup kitchen. It was mortifying to see dignified people who had once been prosperous merchants and pillars of the community reduced to such poverty that they had to stand in line for a bowl of soup. Still, everyone was happy to be alive.

Each day, reports of German brutality reached us from the surrounding towns. The notorious German killing squads raided villages without warning, shooting randomly at Jews and grabbing people off the street to ship them to unknown destinations.

As soon as the Germans established themselves in a city, they would appoint a Judenrat, who would be in charge of

compiling lists of Jews to be sent to the labor camps. The Germans, always the masters of deception, fooled the Jews into believing that these people were being shipped off to work on various defense projects. The Ordnungsdienst, the Jewish police, did not help matters much, telling the frightened Jews that a little work wouldn't hurt them. Naively, most believed them, thinking that sooner or later, the deportees would all come back. It was only much later that we learned what actually happened to these people.

The manner in which the Jewish policemen and *kapos* ruled over us reminded me of a well-known *Midrash.*

During the six days of Creation, when Hashem was about to create iron, all the trees of the world began to tremble with fear.

"Please, *Ribono Shel Olam,*" the trees appealed to Hashem. "Create anything You wish, but don't create iron. You see, the iron blade of the ax will come and cut us all down."

"My dear trees," replied the *Ribono Shel Olam.* "As long as you stay together and none of you lend a hand to the iron, an ax can never be made. You see, every ax has a wooden handle. Only if one of you becomes that handle can the iron have any power."

The Nazis' terror across Europe was remarkably similar to the *Midrash* of the iron and the trees. It is doubtful that the Germans could have carried out their program of total extermination of the Jews without the help of collaborators like the Judenrat, the Ordnungsdienst and the Jewish *kapos.*

If the Judenrat refused to carry out the orders of their German superiors, they themselves were shot. Most of the members of the Judenrat, therefore, cravenly tried to ingratiate themselves with the Germans, following instructions unquestioningly. Still, there were some exceptions. When

the Warsaw Judenrat was ordered to supply Jews to be transported to the Treblinka extermination camp, Adam Cherniakow, the chairman of the committee, understood what the unspoken fate of these deportees would be. On July 23, 1942, he committed suicide, preferring to die rather than be an accomplice to the murder of his own people.

Aside from the Judenrat, the Ordnungsdienst also played a shameful role in the way they participated in the Nazis' dirty work. They conscientiously rounded up the Jews, beat them and betrayed their hiding places to the Germans. The members of this Jewish police force were the dregs of society, empty shells who had severed all ties to *Yiddishkeit*. As a tribute to Torah Judaism, it must be said that no observant Jew ever acted as a member of the Ordnungsdienst.

CHAPTER 11

Terror Penetrates Proshevitz

LIFE IN A HAMLET LIKE PROSHEVITZ WAS RELATIVELY peaceful, and we gradually adjusted to the simple life. Only when German vehicles passed through the village on their way to Cracow did the tension mount. We knew that at any time, a vehicle could stop and disgorge a rowdy group of soldiers looking for some violent form of entertainment.

One day, a German car bearing the military white cross insignia stopped at the local tavern in Proshevitz. After downing several rounds of drinks, four SS men, their faces flushed from the liquor they had consumed, summoned the entire Judenrat of Proshevitz to the Jewish community hall.

Typically, only Getzel Pintchevsky, the president of the Judenrat, showed up at the impromptu meeting. Getzel was

a simple Jew with a heart of gold. Whenever people needed help, they turned to Getzel, knowing that he would do anything for anybody. It was no wonder, then, that Getzel Pintchevsky was a village favorite.

When Getzel was the only one to respond to the Nazis' summons, they were furious.

"*Wo sind die anderen?*" they demanded angrily. "Where are the others?"

"*Ich weiss nicht,*" Getzel replied innocently. "I have no idea."

That set them off. With unrestrained rage, the four drunken Germans pounced on poor Getzel, beating and kicking him mercilessly.

Getzel's five sons, all decent and upright young men, heard what was happening to their father and ran to present themselves in place of the five missing Judenrat members. The Germans realized immediately who they were and grew even more enraged. They dragged the hapless Getzel outside and strung him up on a tree by his arms, wrenching his bones out of their sockets. As he hung there helplessly, the brutal officers shot his five sons to death, one by one. Then, after beating him unconscious, they shot him, too, obviously relishing every minute of the torture.

Having quenched their thirst for Jewish blood, the four Germans drove off cheerfully, singing arias from German operas. These savages were the products of the vaunted German universities, sons of the "*Volk von Dichter und Denker,*" the "nation of poets and philosophers."

The death of Getzel Pintchevsky threw the Jews of Proshevitz into a panic. Rumors of an impending *Aussiedlung*, a mass deportation, were circulating, and they added to the fear and confusion. People began to build underground

bunkers, hoping to hide there when the Germans began rounding up the Jews for deportation.

However, there were still many who believed that the Jews were being resettled in Belzec and various other places, where they would be put to work while the women, children and elderly were cared for. Unfortunately, these Jews were lulled into complacency, trusting that the cultured Germans were incapable of any of the barbaric acts they were hearing about.

Little did they realize that the freight trains with their human cargo were heading straight for Auschwitz. It was to be the last phase in "the Final Solution." People were pressed into these cattle cars with barely enough room to breathe and made to travel for days without food, water or sanitary facilities.

As time went on, the rumors continued to spread, and people did not know what to believe. Clusters of despondent men huddled on street corners, speaking in hushed tones. Still an inquisitive youngster, I listened with fascination as each man analyzed the reports that reached our small town. The notion of an impending *Aussiedlung* was the main topic on everybody's mind.

"Have you heard the news?" asked Reb Leizer, the baker, in a frightened voice. "In the Chrzanow *Aussiedlung*, the Germans, with the help of the Polish police, went from house to house, driving all Jews into the street. Even the elderly, the sick and women with babies all had to assemble in the market square. Then they searched the houses, and anyone found hiding was shot on the spot."

"Yes," Reb Hersch Meilech, the milkman, chimed in. "And the people had to leave behind everything they owned. A knapsack filled with some bread and fruit was all they were

allowed to take with them."

"After that," added Shloime, a lanky, dark-eyed *yeshivah bachur*, "they were shoved into cattle cars. Ninety men, women and children were packed like sardines in each car, barely able to breathe in the stifling heat, without a drop of water."

"Where do you suppose the Germans are taking them?" asked Reb Chaim, one of the elderly citizens of the village.

"Nobody knows," several men answered simultaneously. "Rumor has it that they are being sent to a labor camp where the men are put to work. You know, people have received postcards from relatives who had been deported to a place called Belzec. They wrote that the Germans were treating them well and giving them enough food."

The men were obviously eager to convince themselves that the rumors were true; the alternative was simply too horrible to contemplate.

Only later did we learn that upon arriving at the Belzec death camp, the deportees were forced to write these false postcards, and by the time the letters arrived at their destinations, many of the writers had long since been gassed.

Meanwhile, the rumors of an impending deportation were confirmed, sparking a virtual panic in the community. People ran about frantically, trying to find buyers for their furniture and valuables and selling everything they owned. The Poles, taking advantage of the Jews' plight, made ridiculously low offers.

"You'd better accept my bid," a Pole would say maliciously. "Tomorrow, I'll get it all for free."

In our house, too, we began to contemplate our plans for the future. Sitting around the family table, we discussed the inevitable *Aussiedlung*.

"What are we going to do?" my sister Rivkah asked anxiously.

My father repeated the rule he had set for himself. We had heard him say it many times.

"We're not going to follow their directives," he said slowly and deliberately. "We'll stay right here."

"But if we are seen after the *Aussiedlung*," I protested, "we'll be shot instantly!"

"We'll have to build a bunker and go into hiding," my father replied. "With the *Ribono Shel Olam's* help, they won't find us."

CHAPTER 12

The Hardship in Hiding

THE NEXT DAY, WE BEGAN TO BUILD OUR HIDEOUT IN the big warehouse behind my uncle's hardware and plumbing supply business. Spreading heavy metal sheeting and long brass tubing across the wooden beams beneath the warehouse roof, we created a hiding place that was three feet high. This would serve as our bunker, and it was virtually detection-proof.

"They'll never find us here," I said confidently after it was finished.

"It certainly won't be too comfortable," my father commented. "There is not enough room to stand and barely enough space to sit. Still, it's better than being put on a train to some unknown destination."

"How are we going to get food?" I asked.

"Uncle Elisha took care of that," my father replied. "Janek, the Pole who has been working for Elisha for the last forty years, is a very decent fellow. He promised to keep us supplied with everything we need and take care of our sanitary necessities. Mind you, he is risking his life to help us. If he is caught harboring or helping Jews, the Germans will finish him off immediately."

We brought all the blankets, pillows and heavy down quilts we owned into the bunker. We were going to need every one of them since it was the height of winter and of course, we had no heating. Several families joined us in our hideout, and our bunker housed twenty people altogether.

The warehouse in which we were hiding was situated in a large courtyard. In this very courtyard there was an outhouse that was used by the German soldiers and Polish policemen stationed at the local headquarters across the street. Peering through the cracks of our bunker, we could see the men walking back and forth, less than one hundred feet from our hiding place. We held our breaths each time a German entered the courtyard; the slightest noise would have given us away.

Time passed, and we lay in our dark hideout on quilts and pillows, covered with heavy blankets and comforters, shivering constantly from the cold. We spoke in only the softest whispers, wondering how long it would last and how we would survive the ordeal.

Janek, the Pole who faithfully brought us food, water and other provisions, spoke a fluent Yiddish. A tall, robust man in his sixties with cheerful blue eyes glittering in his round face, he had always been an honest, hard-working and devoted employee. Janek was grateful to my uncle, who had always treated him fairly and with respect, and now he was

happy to act as our angel of mercy. Besides bringing food, he kept us abreast of the developments in the village and any rumors that were circulating. He also reported to us on the latest news from the war front, most of which was quite depressing.

Altogether, we were twenty people squeezed into the dark and freezing hideout. With death hanging over our heads, we tried to pass the time learning *Chumash*, *Mishnayos* and *Gemara* by the light of flashlights. During the night, when any light would certainly betray us, my father, who was a marvelous storyteller, tried to keep our spirits up by telling wondrous tales about *gedolim* and *tzaddikim* of long ago.

One wintry night, the icy wind was howling across the rafters and blowing through the cracks. We were lying on our quilts in the dark, covered with heavy blankets, when Father began to reminisce about the Cracow of old. I'll never forget the fascinating story he told us.

"The illustrious Rema," Father whispered, "was appointed Chief Rabbi of Cracow when he was still in his teens. Yet despite his young age, he commanded the respect of all the scholars in the community.

"In those days, there was an old tradition in Cracow, based on an edict by King Sigismund II. The Archbishop of Cracow would have to give his imprimatur, ratifying any new chief rabbi the Jewish community would elect. By the same token, the Chief Rabbi of Cracow would have to endorse the appointment of any new archbishop of the Catholic Church.

"The leaders of the *kehillah*, in conformance with the ancient custom, invited the archbishop to attend the installation ceremony of the new appointee to the Chief Rabbinate of Cracow, Rabbi Moshe Isserles.

"The archbishop, who was a learned man, inquired about

this new rabbi and was told about the Rema's towering greatness in Talmudic and Judaic studies and his proficiency in philosophy and the sciences. He sent a message that in honor of this scholarly rabbi, he would personally come to the ceremony at the head of a delegation of one hundred priests.

"At the hour of the installation, the archbishop arrived in full regalia, followed by a large contingent of priests. But hardly had he laid eyes on the Rema, when he angrily turned around and left in a huff, with his priests in tow.

"A few days later, the *gabbaim* of Cracow went to see the archbishop to find out the reason for his display of hostility.

"'When your representatives told me that your new Chief Rabbi was an eminent scholar, I personally came to show my respects,' said the archbishop. 'But instead of a distinguished scholar, I saw a young fellow, barely out of seminary. You obviously wanted to ridicule and humiliate me. You have disgraced me and my religion, and in retaliation, I will try to expel all Jews from Cracow.'

"The *gabbaim* were stunned.

"'We can assure you,' they said, 'that Rabbi Isserles is indeed a prodigious scholar, and to prove it, we suggest that you yourself engage him in a debate. You will be convinced of his erudition, we are certain of it. We definitely did not intend to belittle you or your faith.'

"'Have him call on me here at the palace in a week's time, at eleven o'clock in the morning,' said the archbishop brusquely. 'Then we'll see how much he knows.'

"The Jews of Cracow fasted and *davened* fervently that the expulsion decree would be rescinded. At the appointed hour, the Rema was received by the archbishop, who was attired in his ornate vestments and seated in a large auditorium filled

to capacity with black-robed monks. The scene was reminiscent of a hearing of the Spanish Inquisition.

"'*Salutatio*,' the archbishop addressed the Rema. 'Greetings.' He then explained to him in Latin the ground rules for the debate.

"'*Dominus vobiscum*,' the Rema replied in faultless classical Latin. 'G-d be with you.'

"The archbishop was speechless. He had tried to trap the rabbi by speaking Latin, but now he was caught in his own web. This young rabbi seemed to be an extraordinary personality indeed. In the ensuing debate, the Rema showed his superior knowledge in the fields of philosophy, physics, metaphysics and, of course, religion. The archbishop was awestruck.

"'I must apologize,' he said meekly. 'Your youthful appearance misled me. I am overwhelmed by your sublime intellect. The Jewish community of Cracow is fortunate indeed to have you as their Chief Rabbi. Naturally, my expulsion order will be revoked. I would consider it an honor if you would be willing to discuss with me problems of mutual interest.'

"'As you wish,' the Rema answered half-heartedly."

This short story, and other fascinating tales that my father related during those dreadful days in our bunker, lifted us out of our dreary existence. It was always inspiring to hear of the glorious days of Polish Jewry of long ago, when Torah was flourishing and its scholars commanded universal respect.

Silently, I prayed, "*Chadeish yameinu kikedem.* Renew our days as of old." (*Eichah* 5:21)

CHAPTER 13

The Aussiedlung

NOT LONG AFTER WE WENT INTO HIDING, A TRANSPORT of several large trucks filled with soldiers and *Volksdeutsche* arrived in Proshevitz. These *Volksdeutsche* were Poles of German ancestry who were every bit as inhuman as their German cousins, and who assisted them in rounding up the Jews. The *Volksdeutsche*, who had lived among Polish Jews all their lives, could easily spot us by our facial features, characteristic gestures and Yiddish accent, something the Germans were not able to do. Indeed, some Jews who did not have typically Jewish features tried to save themselves by pretending to be Poles and obtaining bogus Aryan papers. Many of these Jews were betrayed by their Polish neighbors, and they were killed instantly.

The *Aussiedlung* of Proshevitz proceeded without delay.

The Germans and their cohorts fanned out through the village, firing wildly into the air. The Jewish population was thrown into hysteria.

"*Alle raus!*" the soldiers shouted as they kicked open the doors. "Everybody out into the street! Anyone staying inside will be shot!"

Everyone, even the very old and infirm, came out into the street carrying their pitiful bundles on their backs. Many glanced back repeatedly to gaze at the homes where they had raised happy families and seen the fulfillment of their dreams. Would they ever see them again?

There wasn't much time for nostalgia as the Germans' shouts pierced the air.

"*Vorwaerts! Los, los! Schneller, schneller!*" they roared, prodding the pathetic procession of Jews with clubs and rifle butts. Children shrieked with terror, women wiped away silent tears, and the men walked dazedly, staring despondently at their captors. On to the railroad station they trudged, where a long freight train was waiting at the platform.

The station was a scene of havoc. The unfortunate Jews were driven into the suffocating boxcars amidst heartrending cries that pierced the heavens. Pushed and shoved like cattle, they were squeezed into the wagons until there was no room to move. Then, with a loud rumble, the heavy doors were shut tight, the metal latch clanging as it was locked with finality.

"*Nechshavnu katzon latevach yuval.* We are regarded as the sheep led to slaughter, to be killed, destroyed, beaten and humiliated." (*Tehillim* 44:23)

Meanwhile, as most of the Jewish residents of Proshevitz embarked on their torturous journey, we remained holed up in our bunker, shaking with terror. Maintaining absolute silence, we peered through the tiny cracks in the warehouse

wall and noticed the *Verwalter*, the new German manager that was running my uncle's business, poking around, looking for something. He searched the cellar of the warehouse thoroughly, peering behind boxes, shelves and storage bins. We realized immediately that we were the objects of his search. He had been helping the soldiers round up Jews for the *Aussiedlung*, and when he did not see us among the deportees at the station, he concluded that we had gone into hiding. Now, the cold-blooded German was trying to ferret us out, knowing that we would be shot instantly.

Not daring to move, we watched him, petrified. Finally, having looked high and low without success, the *Verwalter* gave up. We all breathed sighs of relief and thanked the *Ribono Shel Olam* from the bottoms of our hearts. It was truly a miracle that he did not find us.

After a few days in our hideaway, we began to lose track of the time. If not for the *Shir Shel Yom* that we said each day after *davening*, we would not even have known what day of the week it was. Even *Shabbos* brought little relief to the monotony of our existence. Only the Torah learning and the stories of *tzaddikim* kept us from going insane.

During those few days following the deportation, we could hear the Poles emptying Jewish homes and carrying away furniture, dishes, linen and clothing. Like vultures, they descended on the vacant homes, stripping them of everything. Often, the greedy Poles broke out into bitter fights over the valuables and furniture. Their shouts and curses filled the air, and the arguments frequently ended in fist fights and knifings.

Day after day, Janek brought us food and took care of our needs. But as time wore on, he became more and more nervous. What if someone began to wonder why he was

buying so much bread? What if someone would see him entering the warehouse carrying a basket of groceries? He was certain that people would begin to be suspicious. And the fact that the military headquarters was right across the street did not help the situation.

"Don't worry about it," my father said soothingly, trying to placate him. "You are just imagining things. Proshevitz is *Judenrein*; nobody thinks of Jews any more."

Then one day, three weeks after we had gone into hiding, Janek came into our bunker, crying bitterly.

"I know they are following me," he whimpered. "Karl, the SS *Scharfuehrer*, gave me a piercing look this morning. I know he suspects me, and they're definitely going to shoot me. I just know it."

My father tried to calm him.

"I'm sorry, but I can't help you any more," Janek muttered, obviously distraught. "I wish I was able to, but I just don't think it's possible. I wish you luck. Good-bye."

My uncle thanked him for all he had done for us, and with tears in his eyes, he shook hands with him and said good-byee. With that, Janek turned around and left.

CHAPTER 14

Furtive Escape

WITHOUT JANEK TO PROVIDE US WITH FOOD AND water, how would we go on living in the bunker? Even with Janek's help, our stay had become untenable. Lying horizontally in virtual darkness in our tiny, freezing bunker for three weeks was already more than we could bear. Janek's departure was the last straw.

But where could we go? All the towns and villages that we knew of had been cleared of Jews. Either they had been deported to unknown destinations or transferred to the ghetto in Padgursz.

After a short discussion, we decided that the Padgursz ghetto was the only viable alternative for us.

That night, when all was quiet outside, my cousin Gershon Weinstein and I lowered ourselves out of the bunker. Our

plan was to sneak into the Padgursz ghetto and, somehow, arrange for the rest of the family to move there.

Just standing up straight after three weeks of forced reclining was an exhilarating experience. "*Baruch zokeif kefufim*," I murmured under my breath. "Blessed are You who straightens the bent."

It was a clear winter night. A full moon illuminated the glistening snow that covered the earth. Like a glorious canopy, the star-studded sky hovered over the pure white fields and straw-thatched cottages of the flat Polish countryside. The peaceful stillness was broken only by the dull thuds of our steps as we trudged through the deep snow. The *Borei Olam* created His world with such perfect harmony, I thought ruefully, and evil men have come to destroy it.

In spite of the frigid weather, we were both extremely thirsty. In the bunker, we never had enough drinking water. Janek had only brought one quart of water each day for the twenty of us, since carrying a pail of water through the streets would certainly arouse suspicion. Now, surrounded by an endless expanse of snow, we could finally quench our thirst.

Immediately, I made a snowball and held it to my lips, letting the cold water run down my parched throat. It was delightfully refreshing, and I repeated the process again and again. Nectar and ambrosia could not have tasted better.

Dressed like Polish peasants in shabby quilt jackets and caps, Gershon and I tried to make our way to Cracow. Trudging through the deep snow, we made slow progress.

"At least we won't run into any German patrols," I said to my cousin. "You can see, the roads are impassable."

"I wonder how far it is to the Kotzmizev station," he replied hopefully. "There we can catch the train to Cracow."

A few minutes later, we spotted an old Polish peasant

walking slowly in our direction with the help of a cane.

"Could you tell us how to get to Kotzmizev?" I asked, trying hard to speak in the local Polish dialect.

"Just go straight ahead," he said, pointing a crooked finger. "The Germans are waiting for you there; they'll take care of you!" He laughed wickedly, leering at us with hate-filled eyes. "We thought you Jews were all gone already. This place is supposed to be *Judenrein*, you know."

A surge of fury welled up in me at this worthless Polish peasant, and I thought how easy it would be for the two of us to kill him. After all, he was probably planning to report us to the Germans, and the Sages said, "*Haba lehorgecha hashkeim vehorgo*. If someone has come to kill you, be quick and kill him first."

Gershon and I looked at each other, and the same thoughts crossed our minds. Even though the killing would be justified, we could never bring ourselves to do it.

Ignoring the old peasant's obviously false instructions, we headed in another direction, and after an hour's march, we spotted the deserted Kotzmizev station. We bought two tickets, and after waiting some time for a train, we arrived in Cracow at the crack of dawn.

We blended in with the crowds pouring out of the station, and no one paid attention to the two country boys walking the streets.

As we passed through the familiar streets of Cracow that were now empty of the usual throngs of Jews rushing to *daven Shacharis*, we got the eerie feeling of walking through a ghost town. Moments later, we approached the entrance to the Padgursz ghetto and noticed column after column of Jewish slave laborers who must have been returning from work on the night shift. Guarded by German soldiers holding vicious

dogs on leashes, the exhausted laborers shuffled along in rows of five abreast, their heads bowed. This was our chance. Inconspicuously, we slipped into one of the columns and marched along with the labor detail. At the gate, a sleepy-eyed German guard perfunctorily counted the rows, opened the gate and waved the columns through. We had made it to the Cracow ghetto of Padgursz; the first phase of our mission was accomplished.

BOOK THREE

Songs of Supplication

CHAPTER 15

The Padgursz Ghetto

AFTER ASKING A FEW PEOPLE, I GOT DIRECTIONS TO the home of Reb Leizer Landau, a good friend of my brother's. He was a man who had the right connections, and in the ghetto, if you knew the right people and you had the money to pay, the impossible suddenly became feasible. Cynically, some people called this "using Vitamin B," referring to *Beziehungen*, the Yiddish word for connections. The Germans, Poles and *Volksdeutsche* were all equally corrupt, and in Padgursz, almost anything could be accomplished at the right price.

Reb Leizer made arrangements with one of the *Volksdeutsche* who owned a car to pick up my parents and the others in the bunker and drive them to the Padgursz ghetto. He also paid off a guard who would allow the car through the

gate into the ghetto. And so, after several trips, my parents and all the others were settled in the ghetto.

Padgursz was divided into two sections, Ghettos A and B. People who were working for the Deutsche Reich and who held a worker's certificate were assigned to Ghetto A, while the elderly and the infirm, or anyone else who did not have a labor certificate, were designated to Ghetto B. Living in Ghetto B was therefore quite precarious, since it was there that the Germans often conducted raids that resulted in people being dragged off the streets or from their homes and disappearing without a trace.

One of the jobs that fell to the workers on the labor battalions was emptying the homes that were abandoned by the deported Jews. The men had to load all the possessions onto trucks which deposited the goods in large warehouses. There, other Jewish slave laborers sorted and classified the loot which consisted of furniture, clothing, shoes, linen, silverware and valuables. This process of German piracy went on around the clock, with the labor details working in day and night shifts.

The two ghettos were rigidly separated; anyone caught in the wrong ghetto was arrested. Since none of us had a labor certificate, we had no choice but to set up residence in Ghetto B. Once again making use of the right connections, our family was fortunate enough to be assigned a small kitchen in a five-room apartment as our living quarters. Every night, the room was filled wall-to-wall with beds, which were piled up against one wall in the morning. This left us with precious little living space, but after living in a bunker for three weeks, our present lodging seemed like a palace.

However, living in these overcrowded unsanitary conditions with so little nourishment became increasingly difficult.

Bathing was out of the question, and no matter how people tried to keep clean, there was a terrible infestation of lice and vermin. The apartments in the ghetto, where eight to ten people lived in one room, became breeding grounds for an epidemic of typhoid fever, a contagious disease transmitted by the bite of a louse. The disease spread like wildfire, sparing neither young nor old. Many succumbed to the dreaded typhus, and death from the disease became a common occurrence.

After a week in Padgursz, I suddenly fell ill with high fever, severe stomach cramps, and an eruption of red spots all over my body. I felt so weak, I could not stand up straight.

The ghetto doctor examined me and grimly announced his diagnosis. "He has all the symptoms of typhoid fever, no question about it. And if he stays in this room, the rest of you will probably catch it, too. Try to get him into the hospital. They can't do much for him there, but at least he'll be quarantined."

Medical care in the ghetto was horrendous. The "hospital" lacked even the most essential medications and instruments, and basic diagnostic tools such as an X-ray machine were non-existent. Even bandages, cotton, adhesive tape and thermometers were in short supply. Before the German occupation, Cracow's Jewish community used to point with pride at its well-equipped and highly advanced Jewish hospital, located in the heart of the Jewish section. Now it served only Polish patients and wounded German soldiers. By contrast, the ghetto hospital was no more than a third-rate infirmary. It came as no surprise, therefore, that there were no available beds for me, and I was denied entrance.

The doctor had said that if I stayed in our tiny room, the entire family would be infected. What were we to do? Where

could I receive the care I needed? Just when my parents were beginning to despair, an angel of mercy appeared in the person of Reb Aharon Geldwerth, my brother's brother-in-law, whose family occupied several rooms nearby.

"Duvid can stay with us," he offered. "He can have the small room, and I'll just move the children into our room."

It is difficult to describe the *chessed* and the self-denial of Reb Aharon. I moved into his small room, delirious with fever and without an ounce of strength left in me, unable to retain any food. With superhuman kindness, he and his wife nursed me back to health. After a week of hovering between life and death, the fever subsided, and with the *Ribono Shel Olam's* help, I gradually began to regain my strength. A few days later, I returned to our room, still very weak, but thankful to Hashem for being alive.

Every night, the Germans conducted raids in Ghetto B, rounding up people for forced labor or to be shipped off to the extermination camps. We lived in constant fear, feeling like prisoners on death row, awaiting certain execution. We truly experienced the frightening description in *Parshas Haazinu*, "Outside, the sword shall butcher boys, girls, infants and white-headed elders, while inside, there shall be terror." (*Devarim* 32:25)

To avoid forced induction into a slave labor unit, I would venture outside wearing a girl's kerchief on my head. One day, I was not wearing the protective kerchief, and before I knew it, two Germans snatched me and dragged me to the square where the laborers were being assembled. I stood with the others, weakened from my recent bout with typhus, contemplating my predicament.

If I can't do the work, I thought with a shudder, they'll ship me off to a place from where I'll never come back.

Just then, I heard a familiar voice shouting above the commotion, and I spotted my sister Yettie calling urgently to the SS officer in charge.

"*Mein bruder hat typhus; er wird alle anstecken!*" she shouted. "My brother has typhus; he'll give it to all the others! *Dies ist seine aertzliche Bescheinigung!*" she continued, waving a paper in the German's face. "Look, here is his doctor's certificate!"

The German, who evidently was afraid of catching the disease, pointed his finger at me.

"*Mach dass du fort kommst!*" he hissed. "Get away from here. Back into the ghetto!"

Yettie had saved me from certain death, for in my frail condition, I would not have lasted through the day. Silently, the two of us walked home together. Words could not express my feelings of gratitude for her courage and determination.

Amidst the trials and tribulations of the ghetto, people's true characters came to the surface. Some broke under the pressure, becoming self-centered and hostile, while others, often simple people, performed acts of unbelievable *chessed* and exhibited supreme levels of *bitachon*.

Of course, learning Torah was strictly forbidden. One day, as I was walking through one of the narrow ghetto streets, I peered into a cellar that had some light coming from it. To my surprise, I saw a group of young men bent over their *Gemaras*, engrossed in an intricate *sugya*. I made my way down the narrow steps, and I entered the dank and dreary basement to find a scene of pure *mesiras nefesh* for Torah. Ten gaunt, hollow-eyed young men were risking their lives to keep the flame of Torah burning. Transported into a world of *ruchnius*, they felt neither hunger, cold nor fear. As I watched them learn Torah, a *pasuk* in *Tehillim* came to mind.

"*Zos nechamasi be'anyi* . . . This is my comfort in my affliction, that Your promise has preserved me. Though the arrogant have cruelly mocked me, I have not swerved from Your Torah." (*Tehillim* 119:50-51)

Each day, large posters announced new decrees, designed to make life more and more intolerable. One morning, coming home from a clandestine *minyan* for *Shacharis*, I noticed a new poster announcing that it was illegal to have a beard. I knew that for my father, removing his beard would be an agonizing experience. A devout Gerrer *chassid*, he had never even trimmed his beard since it had first begun to sprout. Now an older man, the white beard graced his countenance, giving him a real *hadras panim*.

My father turned to me, his youngest son, to perform the terrible task of shaving him. It was sheer torture for both of us, and when the clippers bared his face, the tears rolled down his cheeks. My mother, too, upon seeing his clean-shaven face, began to weep bitterly. Throughout all the *tzaros*, I had never seen my parents break down and cry. Somehow, it was the removal of my father's beard that brought home the full extent of the tragedy that had befallen us.

CHAPTER 16

Toil and Trouble

ONE OF MY MARRIED SISTERS, RIVKAH HENENBERG, WAS living in Sosnowice at this time, and we thought it would be best for my parents to leave the ghetto and join her there. Since this was a city that had been annexed by Germany, the Jews there were spared the constant deportations and killings that were carried out throughout Poland. However, moving around from place to place was not an easy feat.

Somehow, through various connections, my father made contact with Fritz, an influential German who was able to drive freely in and out of the ghetto. For a sizeable payoff, he agreed to smuggle my parents out of the ghetto and get them to Sosnowice.

On the appointed day, Fritz showed up at our room and

removed a Polish railroad engineer's uniform from the case he was carrying.

"Put on this uniform," he said matter-of-factly, "and I'll tell the guard at the gate that you are a railroad man. Then I'll put you in the cab of the locomotive, where you'll be the engineer's helper. Don't worry, I've taken care of the engineer. He won't double-cross you."

"Frau Werdyger," he continued, bowing to my mother with mock gallantry. "You'll masquerade as my wife and ride on the train together with me. Try to act the part."

Mother was aghast, but she realized that she had no choice. This was her ticket out of the ghetto. After a tearful but quick good-byee, my parents left together with Fritz. I didn't know it at the time, of course, but it would be the last time I saw them.

A day later, we received the report that my parents had made it safely to their destination. Fortunately, we were able to stay in touch through a Pole who worked in the ghetto and travelled regularly to Sosnowice.

The Jews of Sosnowice did indeed remain unmolested for quite a while. In fact, long after I was deported from Padgursz, my parents continued to live in relative safety together with Rivkah and her family.

Meanwhile, life in the ghetto went from bad to worse. I went to work with a labor detail every day, as the Germans had made it known that those who worked would be exempt from deportation. The work was certainly not easy. We were forced to carry heavy pieces of furniture out of the homes of deported Jews, lay foundations for new camps and erect barracks, all accompanied by beatings and a never-ending flood of curses. Of course, like everything the Germans said, the safety of belonging to a labor detail was illusory; the

Germans' real intent was to destroy every Jew, regardless of whether or not he worked.

Eventually, rumors of forthcoming deportations began to spread through the ghetto. By now, we knew that deportation meant a one-way trip to a place from where no one had ever returned. A group of us joined together to prepare a bunker where we would hide when the *Aktion* would start. In one of the larger houses in the ghetto, we began to excavate a small room underneath the cellar. We supported the floor of the cellar with heavy beams, leaving a small opening that would serve as an entrance and exit to the bunker. We then camouflaged this opening with floor tiles, making it virtually detection-proof. We laid in a supply of bread and staples, a barrel of drinking water and other necessities. Since our labor detail worked outside the ghetto, we were able to purchase food from the Poles we came in contact with, albeit at exorbitant prices. Smuggling the food into the ghetto posed a greater danger, since we were all searched thoroughly at the gate. Only by slipping the guard a few *zloty* did I avoid a severe beating.

All the work on the bunker had to be done at night, since carrying bags of earth through the streets would undoubtedly arouse suspicion. Finally, after two weeks of hard work the bunker was ready, and we prepared ourselves for the worst.

In the weeks that followed, there was a marked increase in the number of sporadic raids and roundups. On one occasion, I was suddenly awakened in the middle of the night and dragged outside by a member of the Ordnungsdienst, the Jewish ghetto police. Without any explanation, I was brought to an old *beis midrash*, where I found myself in the company of about a hundred men and boys of my age.

The OD-men were the scourge of the ghetto. Callous, violent beings, they tried to outdo the Germans in brutality. If the Germans decreed that minor infractions of their laws were punishable by twenty-five lashes, the Jewish police were most willing to administer the punishment. As soon as a man was arrested, he was taken to the jailhouse of the OD, and there the groveling Jewish policemen gave the poor fellow the most brutal thrashing imaginable.

Now, in custody and heavily guarded by the OD, I tried to figure out what was going on.

"What's the meaning of this?" I asked the others.

No one had any idea.

They kept us there for what seemed like an eternity, without any explanation. Soon, word got around that we were being held captive, and before long, several young men came to our assistance. Equipped with various tools, they began to remove boards from the outside wall, creating a man-sized hole. One after another, a dozen or two of the imprisoned *bachurim* slipped out through the hole and disappeared.

An OD-man who had been standing guard in front of the door peeked inside and instantly noticed the gaping hole in the wall. He called for help, and immediately, a group of furious OD-men pounced on us, viciously beating us with their clubs. I and a few others were taken into a separate room for interrogation.

"You stand accused," the OD-chief shouted at me, "of plotting the breakout and helping the prisoners escape! That's a crime punishable by death. The only way to clear yourself is to give us the names of the conspirators."

"But sir," I stammered, "I-I really had nothing to do with the—"

Before I could finish the sentence, his stick came down on me from all sides.

"Who are the others?" the OD-man shrieked, hitting me viciously with his club. "Who are the others? You'd better tell me!"

Like a man obsessed, he continued to beat me brutally on my shoulders, head and arms. One of the hardest blows landed very close to my eye, leaving a wide gash. I felt the warm blood running down my face and realized that he had come very close to knocking out my eye.

The sight of the blood streaming from my eye brought him to his senses. All at once, he seemed startled by his own fury, and a spark of compassion was stirred in him. Perhaps he remembered that, after all, he was still a Jew, one of the *rachamanim benei rachamanim*, the compassionate children of compassionate parents, and not one of the German beasts he was trying so hard to emulate. Suddenly, he sat down beside me and gently started to bandage my eye with a piece of cloth.

"Are you okay?" he asked with genuine concern. "How could I have done that? Did I really hit you so hard?"

When the bandage was in place, he looked me straight in the eye and shook my hand.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "You are free to go. Go home and get a good rest."

To this day, I have a scar over my eye, a reminder of my painful encounter.

The other detainees in the *beis midrash* were inducted into a labor battalion and put to work constructing the notorious Plaszow concentration camp. The Germans had cynically chosen to build the labor camp on the site of the Jewish cemeteries, and as the first step in the building process, the Jewish slave laborers had to remove all the headstones. When

the land was cleared, concrete foundations were poured for long rows of barracks and the roads connecting them. Thus, the Jewish labor crews, and later the inmates of the camp, were forced to desecrate the graves of their ancestors.

CHAPTER 17

Daily Perils

THE DAILY ROUNDUPS FOR THE LABOR DETAILS intensified, and I was rarely able to avoid joining one of the units. One day, our detail was sent to Cracow to work in a warehouse where the contents of the looted Jewish homes were being stored. Our job was to sort the various items, such as furniture, linen, clothing, sewing machines, radios and appliances.

We were supervised by a bald, red-faced Pole, whose breath smelled from vodka and who spewed anti-Semitic venom all day long. At a whim, he would lash out at a worker, beating him senseless, or knock him to the ground for no reason, enjoying the spectacle of a helpless man writhing in agony.

One day, we noticed this Polish supervisor stealing an

expensive short-wave radio and furtively hiding it in his locker. Moments later, he returned to his post, cursing and hitting anyone who crossed his path. Just then, an SS officer entered. One of the men in our unit stepped up to him, standing at attention.

"*Herr Obersturmfuehrer*," he said respectfully as he opened the locker door with a flourish. "Our Polish supervisor has stolen a radio. Moreover, his constant shouting and cursing prevents us from doing a good job."

The Pole knew he was in serious trouble, since stealing German property was considered sabotage, a crime punishable by death.

"Pack your things and report to my office in thirty minutes," the SS officer ordered the Pole brusquely. With that, he turned around and left.

The Pole turned pale, and his eyes burned with hatred. Then, in sheer frustration, he picked up a piece of electric wire and stretched it between his fists, as if to choke us with it.

"You men would like to see me hang, wouldn't you?" he roared. "Well, I'm coming back, and when I do, I'll have my revenge. When I'm through with you, you'll be sorry you were born." Then he let forth a string of Polish obscenities.

We had trouble suppressing our triumphant smiles. Naturally, that was the last we saw of him, and we all returned to work in slightly better spirits.

Soon afterwards, we were taken to a warehouse, where we had to sort out military uniforms, underwear, sweaters and boots. One of the men had the job of sorting sweaters according to sizes and packaging them in bundles of five. That evening, just when we were getting ready to leave, an SS-man came in to check the merchandise. When he counted the

bundles of sweaters, he noticed that one bundle contained only four sweaters.

"Verfluchte Juden Verbrecher, wer von Euch hat den Sweater gestohlen!" he screamed. "You dirty Jewish criminals! Which one of you stole the sweater?"

He was beside himself with rage, and shaking his fist, he pounded on the table and stamped his foot, his face flushed with anger.

"If I don't find that sweater," he roared, "I'll have you all shot!"

We trembled with fear. We knew that this was no empty threat. People had been shot for far lesser crimes. We tried to reason with him, explaining that after all the sweaters were packed into bundles of five, there were four left, so the fellow had made one bundle of four.

"Why don't you search him, sir?" I suggested. "You'll see that he's not hiding a sweater. The man is innocent."

The German calmed down and finally let us go. I returned to the ghetto thoroughly shaken. By the grace of Hashem, we all came out unscathed. We had witnessed open miracles.

Incidents like this happened frequently, and I saw clearly that only through Hashem's protective *hashgachah* was I able to survive.

CHAPTER 18

Suspense Underground

EVERY DAY FOR SIX MONTHS, THE JEWISH LABOR DETAILS went out to the site of the Plaszow camp, where they erected barracks and barbed wire fences and connected roadways. The workers were under the impression that by doing the work conscientiously they would gain preferential treatment once the ghetto population began to be transferred to Plaszow. They imagined that the old and weak people from Ghetto B would bear the brunt of the German rage, while the laborers would be spared. They found out soon enough that their thoughts were nothing but wishful thinking. The Germans made no distinction between working and non-working Jews. To them, the only good Jew was a dead Jew.

As the work on the Plaszow concentration camp neared

completion, we knew that the deportations from the Padgursz ghetto were imminent. People began to panic, knowing that their world was about to cave in.

As distasteful as the ghetto was, our lives still had some semblance of normalcy. Each week, when *Shabbos* arrived, families could still get together and sit around a *Shabbos* table of sorts, and although congregating for *davening* was forbidden, people managed to find underground *minyanim*. There was definitely not an abundance of food, but labor crews could still smuggle in the extra necessities from Cracow. And although we all missed the comforts of home, at least we had our own beds. Reports of life in a concentration camp described separation of families, starvation, back-breaking work, endless beatings and ultimate death. This was the fate that was sure to await the inhabitants of the Padgursz ghetto.

Meanwhile, our bunker was completed and stocked with basic provisions, each of us having contributed a knapsack filled with staples. As the *Aussiedlung* approached, our group made its way unobtrusively into the bunker, one by one. Altogether, there would be fifteen of us, including a small infant. Knowing how uncomfortable life in a bunker was, I decided not to go into hiding until the very last minute.

Several days later, the fateful order was issued for everyone to assemble on Zgadi Square, the largest square in the ghetto. I knew instantly that the *Aussiedlung* was upon us. I knew I'd better hurry into the bunker before it was too late.

I picked up the knapsack that had been packed in advance, and as the sun began to rise, I made my way to the bunker. Furtively slinking along the back alleys behind the ghetto buildings, I desperately tried to avoid being seen. Still, people kept stopping me.

"Duvid, where are you going so early in the morning?" they all asked.

I quickly invented a reason that seemed to satisfy their curiosity and continued on my way. Finally, I entered the cellar, made sure I was not being watched and lowered myself into our sub-basement bunker. A good friend of ours had agreed to cover the opening after we were all inside the bunker and camouflage it with old doors, broken window frames and other debris. As the head of a large family with a number of small children, he himself could not join us in the bunker. Unfortunately, we learned later that he and his family were forced to join the transport, and like all the other deportees, were never heard from again.

The fifteen of us sat on benches in total darkness, breathing the stale, musty air and feeling as though we had been buried alive. But listening to the terrifying sounds that penetrated our hideout from the outside, we felt fortunate indeed. We could hear the Germans herding the entire ghetto population onto trucks, and we knew we would probably never see them again. The air was filled with a cacophony of shouting Germans, yelping attack dogs and crying victims, punctuated by rifle shots and the sounds of roaring truck engines. We could not see anything, but the infernal sounds we kept hearing painted a vividly horrifying story.

We sat transfixed in our cellar, not making a sound. Only the small baby, in the care of his ten-year-old sister, cried inconsolably. The parents of the baby had been deported, and the poor girl was doing her utmost to soothe the unhappy child. Although my heart bled for the poor children, the constant wailing proved very unnerving in our cramped surroundings.

Gradually, the terrifying sounds from the streets above began to die down, and soon, there was only absolute silence. The ghetto was empty, and Cracow was now *Judenrein*.

Time slowly passed, and the only way we could tell if it was day or night was by lighting a match and looking at a watch. We had prepared a two-week supply of food, but we soon discovered that much more was needed. Water, especially, was in very short supply, and we knew that something had to be done.

A few nights later, three of us climbed through the opening of the bunker into the cellar of the apartment house, hoping to find some food and water to replenish our supplies. We slipped stealthily up the stairs of the apartment house and were amazed at the sight of all the unlocked and abandoned apartments. There was no time to think about the terrible tragedy reflected in these silent, empty Jewish homes that had been bustling with vibrant and loving family life, and we hurried through the homes, searching for the supplies we lacked.

Fortunately, we were able to find an ample supply of bread, milk, cooked food and everything else we needed. We filled several bottles with water and made our way back to the bunker, where our haul was greeted with big smiles. For the time being, we would have sufficient food and water, and everyone was relieved. Even the baby stopped crying and eagerly drank the milk we had brought.

CHAPTER 19

Stifling Conditions

SANITARY CONDITIONS IN OUR HIDEOUT WERE VERY dreadful, and the stale, fetid air we breathed was unbearable. Only for a short spell each night did we dare remove the cover of the bunker for a few minutes to allow some fresh air to come in. Exposing the opening during the daytime hours would have been suicidal, and the few minutes of pure air each night did not do much to alleviate our suffering.

We continued to sit in the darkness, hour after hour, day after day, struggling to pass the time. I recalled the stories of *tzaddikim* my father used to tell when we had been hiding in the Proshevitz bunker and how they had helped to lift our spirits. Hoping to ease the gloomy atmosphere that had pervaded our hideout, I decided to follow his example.

"Does anyone know the story behind the Friday weddings in Padgursz?" I asked suddenly, breaking the silence.

"What are you talking about?" the others replied, probably thinking I was losing my mind. A wedding was the farthest thing from their minds.

Unabashed, I launched into my story. "Long ago, a wealthy, assimilated Jewish industrialist named Ignaz Silberstein lived in a mansion across the street from the Rema Shul. His only daughter, Helena, was getting married to the son of a prominent Jewish banker, and the wedding was set for a Friday afternoon. That day, hundreds of Cracow's richest and most prominent society people flocked to the Silberstein mansion for the gala celebration. A ten-course dinner was served, the wine flowed freely, and the hundreds of wedding guests were entertained by Cracow's most fashionable symphonic orchestra. Bejeweled women wearing the most exquisite Parisian gowns were accompanied by men dressed in elegant dinner clothes and ruffled silk shirts. It was obvious that these non-observant Jews were doing their utmost to imitate their gentile acquaintances.

"Meanwhile, as the fiery-red twilight sun began to set, the Jews of Cracow prepared to welcome the rapidly approaching *Shabbos*. From all directions, men dressed in their *Shabbos* finery hastily converged on the Rema Shul, casting puzzled looks at the house facing the *shul*.

"'What's going on in there?' they asked.

"'It's Silberstein's daughter's wedding banquet,' someone answered, shrugging his shoulders.

"The *shul* was already filled to capacity, but the music at the Silberstein mansion showed no sign of abating.

"'*Ashrei yoshevei veisecha* . . .' the *sheliach tzibbur* intoned as he began to *daven Minchah*.

"The music blared on and on, disturbing the concentration of the *mispallelim* as they tried to say the *Shemoneh Esrei.* After the *Kedushah,* the Rema dispatched the *shammash* to the big house.

"'In the name of the Rabbi, I ask you to stop the music,' the *shammash* said politely to Silberstein. 'You see, *Shabbos* has arrived, and playing music is forbidden on *Shabbos.*'

"'You tell the Rabbi to mind his own business,' Silberstein answered gruffly. 'It's my party, and nobody is going to tell me to stop the music.'

"Shamefaced, the *shammash* returned to the Rema with Silberstein's reply.

"'Go back, and tell him once again to stop the music instantly,' the Rema told the *shammash.*

"The music was getting louder and louder, and the dancers were whirling around exuberantly as the *shammash* entered once more. He stepped up to the bleary-eyed Silberstein and repeated the Rema's request.

"'Haven't I told you not to bother me?' Silberstein shouted angrily. 'Now get out, or I'll throw you out! And if you come back, I'll beat you black and blue!'

"When the *shammash* returned to the *shul* with this message, the Rema signaled the *sheliach tzibbur* to start *Kabbalas Shabbos.*

"'*Lechu nerannenah Lashem,*' he slowly intoned, trying to drown out the din of the music.

"Piqued by Silberstein's insolent defiance, the worshippers enthusiastically rang out with a thundering rendition of the familiar *mizmor,* their bodies swaying with fervent *kavanah.*

"Then it happened. They began the third *mizmor,* '*Eish lefanav teileich uselaheit saviv tzarav.* Fire will advance before

Him, and consume His enemies all around.' Suddenly, an ear-shattering blast rattled the windows of the *shul*, followed by a terrifying, rumbling sound. Before the horrified eyes of the congregation, the Silberstein mansion and all that was in it collapsed in flames. Within seconds, the mighty mansion turned into a pile of rubble, crushing the entire wedding party.

"In the aftermath of the disaster, the Rema issued a decree prohibiting the people of Cracow to make weddings on Friday. Since then, it became a Cracow *minhag* that those wishing to make a wedding on Friday would perform the *chupah* before noon in the suburb of Padgursz and thus avoid any possibility of *chillul Shabbos*. After the *chupah*, the guests would return home, and later that night, the wedding party would assemble once again for a festive *seudas Shabbos* in honor of the *chassan* and *kallah*.

"Incidentally," I added, at the conclusion of the tale, "that *mizmor* ends with the words, '*Ohavei Hashem . . . miyad reshaim yatzileim*. The lovers of Hashem . . . from the hand of the wicked He rescues them.'

"Let us *daven* that, soon, '*uselaheit saviv tzarav,* a fire will consume His enemies and Hashem will rescue us from their claws."

For a brief spell, the story of the Rema cheered the people in the bunker. The mention of the Friday night *seudah* with *Sheva Berachos*, singing and *badchanus* reminded the group of their own wedding days, and they reminisced about the *simchos* they had celebrated before the Germans had arrived. A brief ray of light shone through the darkness of our existence.

CHAPTER 20

Snared by the Germans

WE SPENT TWO WEEKS IN OUR DANK UNDERGROUND hideout, two dreary *Shabbosim* in the subterranean pit. We were reminded of Yosef Hatzaddik who was also thrown into a pit with no salvation in sight. Yosef, however, stayed in the pit for only a short time, while we spent endless days in our cellar.

When the story of Yosef is mentioned in the Torah, it says, "*Vehabor reik, ein bo mayim.* The pit was empty; there was no water in it." (*Bereishis* 37:24) Rashi remarks, "While it is quite true that there was no water in the pit, it did contain snakes and scorpions."

Struck by the similarities of our predicament to that of Yosef, I wondered if we, too, would be saved from the German serpents and scorpions that thirsted for our blood.

As time wore on, we constantly turned to Hashem, imploring Him to help us overcome our miserable conditions. We had our *talleisim* and *tefillin* with us, and we *davened* and said *Tehillim* with all the *kavanah* we could muster. At those times, the words from *Tehillim* 130:1 held so much meaning for us. "*Mimaamakim kerasicha Hashem.* From the depths I called out to You."

After nearly two weeks in the bunker, our food and water supply was dwindling rapidly, and our nerves were frazzled beyond endurance. How much longer could we go on like this? We knew that if we left our hideout, certain death awaited us. We were close to despair.

Determined to find some way out of our predicament, we examined the various facets of our captivity, hoping to find some means of escape.

The house beneath which we were hiding was part of an entire block of apartment houses. This block abutted a main road which formed the outer perimeter of the ghetto. It was closed off by a barbed wire fence and guarded by Polish police.

"One thing is certain," said Chaim Ber, the oldest member of our group. "The only way out is to try to bribe the Polish guards who man the fence."

"But many Poles hate the Jews," his wife Shaindel countered. "How can we trust them?"

"Money is very powerful," interjected Pinchas, a former *melamed.* "And besides, we have no choice. *Zoll der Oibershter uns helfen.* May the Almighty help us. "

"I suggest," said Chaim Ber, "that two of us climb out of the bunker and sneak outside. Obviously, they should not emerge from our building, since that would give away our hiding place. Rather, they should find their way through the

other apartment houses and come out at the far end of the block. That way, the Poles and Germans cannot trace them back to this house." Turning to me, Chaim Ber continued, "I think you and Shloime are best suited for this mission. Do you agree to go?"

Shloime and I both nodded affirmatively. I felt a knot in my stomach, but it was a job I had to do, and I placed my *bitachon* in Hashem.

At midnight, we sneaked out of the bunker, and by the light of the moon, we slithered on hands and knees through the other buildings. Haunted with fear, we approached the Polish guards who were stationed at an opening in the barbed wire fence. Timidly, we made our offer.

"Are you mad?" one of the guards shouted. "We wouldn't risk our lives for you if you paid us all the money in the world! If they catch us letting Jews escape, we'll swing from the gallows. You people have no right to be in the ghetto; you should have been deported along with the others."

We quickly turned and rushed back into the bunker before they could arrest us, making sure that the cover was secure and well-concealed.

At the news of our failed mission, a mood of utter hopelessness gripped the entire group.

"Are the Poles going to report us to the Germans?" Menachem Berkowitz wondered. "If they do, the Germans will come looking for us. You can be sure of that."

"*Oy, Ribono Shel Olam*, what is going to become of us?" one of the women moaned. "*Helf uns schoin. Schick uns a yeshuah.* Please, Hashem, save us from our misery!"

Shortly before dawn, we suddenly heard sounds indicating that the Germans were trying to track us down. Obviously, the Poles had betrayed us. Since they did not know

which of the houses we were hiding in, they went from building to building knocking down doors, banging on walls and searching thoroughly for our hiding place. Their dogs barked menacingly as they vainly tried to sniff us out. We all held out breaths.

"They'll never find us," I tried to reassure the others. "The opening to our bunker is detection-proof."

By now it was six o'clock in the morning, and the Germans were coming closer. We could hear their shouts in the adjacent building, and soon, we heard them entering the house under which we were hiding.

"*Die sind nicht hier*," the leader said. "They're not here. *Gehen wir weiter ins naechste Haus*. Let's go on to the next house."

Just then, when we were sure the worst was over, the baby started to cry. We could hear the Germans retracing their steps until they were directly above us. They pushed away the trash and pulled off the debris that was concealing the entrance to our hideout.

"*Alle raus! Sofort raus mit Euch! Schneller! Los, los!* Everybody out! Quickly!"

One by one, we climbed out of our bunker and were confronted by two SS men who were pointing their rifles at us and shouting savagely.

"Are you going to shoot us?" my sister Yettie asked boldly.

"No," they answered. "We're taking you to the Ordnungsdienst jail."

At the jail, we were met by a large assembly of Jews who had also been ferreted out of their various hiding places. They looked like ghosts, more dead than alive, and with a sense of shock, we realized that we probably looked exactly the same.

We were all pushed into jail cells where we sat on the floor, pale and disheveled, and feeble from fright and starvation. Heartrending cries arose from the cells, but the hearts of the callous Germans remained cold.

"What will become of us?" I asked one of the Jewish policemen.

"Don't you know that the Germans shoot all the people they catch hiding?" he murmured in a low voice, averting his eyes.

As we sat in that jail with death hanging over us, we made use of the proverbial weapons of Yaakov Avinu. When Yaakov fought Eisav, he says it was "*becharbi uvekashti*, with my sword and my bow." (*Bereishis* 48:22) But the *Targum* translates these words as "*bitzlosi uvebuosi*, with my prayer and my supplication."

Indeed, *tefillah* and *Tehillim* are the sole armaments of the Jewish people, and in times of distress, we direct our cries to Hashem.

In each cell, different chapters of *Tehillim* rang out, piercing the heavens above. "Why do You hide Your Face, ignoring our affliction and distress? We lie prostrate in the dust; our body clings to the ground . . ." (*Tehillim* 44:25-27)

"*Meiayin yavo ezri*, From where will come my help? My help is from Hashem, Maker of heaven and earth." (*Tehillim* 121:1)

We remained in the OD jail for several days while the Germans continued to drive the clusters of Jews out of their hiding places. They then herded us into the street and ordered us to line up in rows of five. We made a pitiful spectacle. Barely able to stand erect, our senses were numbed, and we shuffled along like convicts on the way to their execution. We all assumed without the least doubt that we

were going to be shot and that this would be our final march in this world.

As we stood in rows, I spotted my brother-in-law Hersch Leib Geldwerth among the prisoners. A wonderful man with a heart of gold, his wife, who was my sister, and his children had been deported some time ago. With tears in our eyes we looked at each other.

"Come, Duvid, let's stay together," he said sorrowfully. "And we'll die together."

We were prodded along like cattle by the bloodthirsty Ukrainian guards who beat us viciously with their clubs as we marched.

"You there, move quickly! Get in line!"

The blows continued to rain down indiscriminately as the guards shouted and cursed.

Suddenly, the entire column was brought to a halt. A Jew who evidently had connections was conferring with the SS men at the head of the column.

"Do you know who that is?" I asked Hersch Leib. "That's Eliezer Landau; I recognize him. He's done business with my brother for years. You see, he's holding a list of people who are to be released."

Landau called out the names on his list, and the fortunate prisoners were told to stand on the side.

"Yaakov Meir Werdyger and Yettie Werdyger," Landau called out.

I was stunned. These were my oldest brother and my sister, and they had just been granted a miraculous reprieve from the death sentence.

"Eliezer Landau," I called out. "Let me go, too! I'm Duvid Werdyger. I am the younger brother of the two other Werdygers."

"I'm sorry," he said sincerely. "I can release only two members of each family."

Both Yaakov Meir and Yettie survived the holocaust. Undoubtedly, Eliezer Landau was Hashem's instrument in bringing about their rescue.

CHAPTER 21

Saved by a Song

OUR COLUMN OF CONDEMNED JEWS MARCHED IN THE direction of the Plaszow extermination camp, each step bringing us closer to the jaws of death. As I trudged along with my brother-in-law Hersch Leib Geldwerth, I clasped his hand tightly; the leaden sky matched our sullen mood.

"*Mir gehn yetzt oif kiddush Hashem*," Hersch Leib whispered. "We are going to offer our lives to sanctify the Name. Up in Gan Eden, the *tzaddikim* are preparing to welcome us. We'll have the best seats at the magnificent *tisch* presided over by Moshe Rabbeinu, Aharon Hakohein and the three *Avos*, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. The Chiddushei Harim and the Sfas Emes will be there to receive us with open arms, and they will give you the honor of singing the Gerrer *Yedid Nefesh*.

You remember the verse, '*Ki zeh kamah nichsof nichsafti* . . . Because it is so very long that I have yearned to see the splendor of Your strength.' Today it will come true. You will see the sweet radiance of the *Shechinah.*" He choked, trying to hold back his tears.

"Let's prepare ourselves and say *Vidui.* I can see the Plaszow gate in the distance, and I don't know how much time we have."

His words lifted my spirits. Suddenly, I did not fear death any longer. A better world awaited me. All the beautiful *niggunim* of Ger echoed in my mind, and I saw myself again as a little boy singing in the choir on *Rosh Hashanah.*

"Kevakoras roeh edro . . ." The solo I had sung on that memorable *Yom Tov* echoed in my ears, the words of the *tefillah* so appropriate to our situation. "Who will live and who will die, who by water and who by fire, who by the sword and who by the beast, who by famine and who by thirst . . ."

Moved by the memory of the hauntingly beautiful melody, tears came to my eyes. I was overcome by mixed emotions, faced with the prospect of certain death, yet knowing that like Yitzchak Avinu, I was going to my *akeidah al kiddush Hashem.*

As we marched, the holy *niggunim* that were so familiar to me rang in my ears. The solemn melody of *Kevakoras Roeh* was followed by the rousing "*Ein kitzvah lishnosecha.* There is no limit to Your years." It was an exuberant marching *niggun,* and I found myself keeping step with the beat of the tune. When I came to the words, *"Vekadeish es Shimcha al makdishei Shemecha,* Sanctify Your Name through those who sanctify Your Name," I was shaken. How fitting this phrase was for our group of condemned prisoners.

As we neared the Plaszow death camp, the main gate swung open. In this camp, thirty thousand Jewish inmates

were dying a slow death, but we quickly realized that for us, a swift end loomed ahead. In the central square, a firing squad was in readiness, their machine guns in place, and in the rear, several trucks were waiting to haul away the bodies.

At the gate, our column was ordered to halt.

"Sturmbannfuehrer Goeth, the *SS Lager Kommandant*, is coming." The ominous news spread through the column.

The mere mention of Kommandant Goeth sent shivers up the spine of every inmate of Plaszow. A typically coarse, vile German, he was the embodiment of evil.

He approached us slowly, his steely blue eyes devoid of any human emotion, his thin, cruel lips pursed tightly together. He was wearing the green uniform of the *Waffen SS*, and a Luger handgun dangled casually from his belt. In his right hand, he held a black wooden cane.

"*Hashem ro'i lo echsar*," I whispered feverishly. "Hashem is my shepherd, I lack nothing. *Gam ki eileich begei tzalmaves lo ira ra* . . . Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no harm, for You are with me." (*Tehillim* 23:1-4)

"*Achtung!* Halt!" the command rang out.

Our column came to an abrupt stop, and one by one, we filed past the *Kommandant*. Motioning with his cane, he directed most of us toward the square where the machine guns were set up.

Soon it was my turn, and I tried to look confident as I met Goeth's stare.

"*Was ist Dein Beruf?*" Goeth asked. "What kind of work do you do?"

"*Ich bin Saenger von Beruf, Herr Kommandant,*" I replied straightforwardly, standing sharply at attention. "I am a professional singer, and I have a trained soprano voice. Would you like to hear something?"

Goeth was taken aback. He hesitated for an instant.

"*So sing doch mal den juedischen Totengesang,*" he said as a diabolical smile spread across his face. "Sing the song you Jews chant when you bury your dead." He was obviously very amused at the thought of my singing the memorial chant for those who were about to die.

I took a deep breath and began to sing, knowing that my fate depended on the quality of my performance. Hashem was with me, and suddenly, I felt like a thousand *malachim* were standing behind me, lending my voice new resonance and strength.

"*Keil malei rachamim . . .*" I began slowly and hesitantly, terror gripping my heart. "Oh, Lord full of mercy, Who dwells on high . . ." I closed my eyes and concentrated on the meaning of each sacred word of the *tefillah*. "*Hamtzei menuchah nechonah al kanfei Hashechinah* . . . Grant proper rest on the wings of the Divine Presence to the souls of the martyrs and the pure ones who were killed, murdered and slaughtered for the sanctification of the Name . . ."

Seized with emotion, I sang with a vibrancy and fullness I did not know I possessed. Never before had I felt the meaning of a *tefillah* with such immediacy.

"*Began Eiden tehei menuchasam, veyanuchu beshalom al mishkevoseihem.* May their resting place be in the Garden of Eden, and may they repose in peace in their resting places . . ." I threw all my might into the last verse, concluding with a thunderous, "*Venomar Amen.*"

As one, the prisoners standing nearby responded softly, "*Amen.*"

There was a moment of absolute silence as the *Kommandant* stared at me, transfixed. At that moment, I believe that a small spark of humanity, hidden under an impenetrably

hard shell of depravity and malevolence, was aroused by my singing.

"Geh ins Lager," he said hoarsely, and with an abrupt gesture of his cane, he directed me toward the Plaszow camp, saving me from immediate execution.

Keil malei rachamim. Hashem, in His abundant mercy, had saved me from certain death.

I was among the forty men who had professions that were deemed useful enough for them to be sent to the Plaszow camp. The remaining hundred and forty prisoners were led to the square, and within moments, they were machine-gunned to death. My brother-in-law Hersch Leib Geldwerth was one of those *kedoshim. Hashem yinkom damo.* May Hashem avenge his blood.

CHAPTER 22

The Plaszow Camp

UPON ENTRANCE TO THE PLASZOW CAMP, ALL INMATES were required to register.

"What kind of work do you do?" the German registrar asked me.

I had to think fast. I knew better than to tell this German officer that I was a singer. Singers could not contribute much to the war effort, and I would probably be signing my death warrant. And telling him that I was a *yeshivah bachur* certainly would be no better.

As I groped for an answer, I remembered how Goeth had spared any prisoner that claimed to have a useful trade. An elderly man who had been standing in line with me told the *Kommandant* that he was a plumber, and he was saved from certain death. I knew that the man had actually been the

owner of a well-known dairy establishment in Cracow, and I realized that I could fabricate a profession just as easily.

"I'm an electrician," I blurted out.

The officer dutifully registered me as an electrician, a highly prized profession among the Germans. It didn't matter that I couldn't tell the difference between a volt, a watt, a condenser or an armature. I was now a registered electrician. As a youngster, I had always been handy at fixing electrical appliances and replacing light switches, but that was really the extent of my ability.

Why I did not claim a trade when I was faced with Kommandant Goeth at the Plaszow gate remains a mystery to me. Perhaps the terror of the moment had prevented me from thinking clearly. Certainly, though, it was Hashem Who put the words "I am a singer" into my mouth, ultimately saving me. *"Maves vechayim beyad halashon.* Death and life are in the power of the tongue." (*Mishlei* 18:21)

Tired and hungry, I had to wait until evening before I was assigned a bunkbed in one of the barracks. By then, of course, I did not receive any food, but I was not complaining. *Baruch Hashem,* I was alive.

I was given the top bunk of a triple-decker wooden bunkbed and a thin straw mattress and pillow to sleep on. As I settled into my new surroundings, I realized that it was the night of *Purim*, but despondent and weary as I was, I could not muster up much Purim spirit. I felt like I had suddenly been transported to a different planet, a topsy-turvy world where nothing made sense any more. All I wanted was to lie down and get some sleep, but that soon proved to be impossible. A number of Cracow acquaintances who shared my barracks kept me awake with their questions.

"Where were you hiding?"

"How did they catch you?"

"How were you saved?"

They listened with bated breath as I described the tumultuous events that had led to my incarceration in Plaszow.

"*Mamash nissim,*" they all agreed. "True miracles happened to you."

Seeing how depressed I was, they tried to cheer me up with words of encouragement and inspiration.

"*Ad heinah azarunu rachamecha,*" one said. "Until now Your mercy has helped us, and Your kindness has not forsaken us."

"Don't give up hope," said another. "*Imo anochi betzarah.* Hashem is with us in our distress. He is right here with us in Plaszow, and He shares our distress."

Their kind words heartened me, and I felt like a new person, ready to take on the challenges that were sure to come my way.

"At nine o'clock they shut the light in the barracks," I was advised, "and at four in the morning they wake you up. So hurry up and go to sleep."

I climbed into my bunk and discovered that lying next to me was a Gerrer *chassid*, Moshe Leib Sternhell, one of the outstanding young members of the Gerrer *shtiebel* in Cracow. I was delighted to find him there, and we began to talk.

"Yes, we knew about your group of a hundred and eighty prisoners," Moshe Leib said. "But I did not know that you were one of them. You know, there are quite a few Gerrer *chassidim* here in Plaszow, like Reb Fishel Karmel and many others."

We conversed briefly, and then Moshe Leib pointed to a *sefer* he was holding. "Come," he suggested. "Let's learn a few *mishnayos* before they close the lights."

I joined him eagerly, and we learned together until the lights were turned off. Completely exhausted, I lay down on my hard bunk and fell into a troubled sleep. That night, my dreams were punctuated with vivid nightmares of club-wielding German soldiers beating me brutally. When I awoke, I was told that I had been screaming all night long and that my neighbor had to keep waking me to stop me from shouting.

The schedule in the camp was an exceedingly grueling one. We were awakened at four o'clock each morning, and at four-thirty we lined up for "coffee." This lukewarm and muddy beverage looked and tasted much like roofing tar. The menu for the rest of the day consisted of a thin slice of bread and a bowl of watery soup with a few cubes of turnip floating in it.

As an "electrician," I was among the fortunate inmates who worked in a shop. Those without a trade were forced to do construction work outside, in full view of the SS men who roamed the camp site, gunning down people at will. And if their lives were spared by the brutal guards, they still had to contend with Goeth, the *Kommandant*, who made it a sport to ride into the Plaszow camp every day on his horse, shooting Jews at random.

"How many Jewish people did Goeth kill today?" was the first question people asked when they returned to their barracks.

The random killings never ceased, and whenever the camp population was depleted, Goeth simply ordered a new supply of slave laborers to be rounded up from the towns and ghettos of Poland.

On my first day in Plaszow, I was assigned to work in a shop that was full of washing machines and other electrical

appliances that the Germans had stolen from Jewish homes. It was our job to clean and recondition these machines, making them look like new and preparing them for shipment to Germany.

Every evening there was an *Appell*, a roll-call, at which the inmates had to line up in rows of five abreast to be counted. At each *Appell*, the Germans entertained themselves by ordering the Jewish *kapos* to beat their fellow inmates. Every tenth person was pulled from the line, and the *kapos*, on orders from their German superiors, would administer twenty-five vicious lashes to the bleeding backs of their defenseless brothers.

I had been told about these roll-calls upon entrance to the Plaszow camp, but I soon learned that the Germans did not really have an exact tally of the total camp population. With so many people being shot every day and others dying of starvation and disease, there was no way for them to keep an accurate count.

Still, hiding out during an *Appell* involved grave risks, and anyone caught doing so was publicly hanged. Fortunately, on my first day on the job at the electrician's shop, I made friends with some of the more experienced workers, and I asked them how I could possibly avoid the *Appells* without being discovered.

"Well, I simply never show up for the *Appell*," a worker named Shiyah explained.

"And where do you hide out?" I asked.

"When the time comes, I'll signal you," he replied. "Just follow me."

Shortly before quitting time, Shiyah gestured to me and left the shop. I followed him as he crept into a hiding place underneath another barracks. I thought we would be the only

ones there, but I found a whole group of people who had the same idea. We lay quietly on the ground listening to the count, the inevitable beatings and the pathetic cries of the victims. When all was quiet, we knew that the *Appell* was over, and we sneaked back into our barracks.

CHAPTER 23

Hope and Prayer

WHENEVER WE COULD FIND A FREE MOMENT IN THE hectic routine of the labor camp, a group of us would gather in a corner, and for a short while, we would escape the misery of our surroundings. We exchanged Torah thoughts, told stories of the *rebbes* and even sang *niggunim* and pieces of *chazanus*. While I was in Plaszow, my entire existence revolved around these intimate get-togethers. The glowing warmth of the fellowship and the camaraderie gave me a sense of belonging, and my *chaveirim* became the family I missed so much. The Torah thoughts and the singing of *niggunim* were the balm for my wounded soul.

Among the members of our *chevrah* was Meilech Kaufman, the son of the famous Chazan Kaufman of the Kifer Shul in Cracow. We were often asked to sing pieces of

chazanus, and the others listened with fascination as we sang the *Tefillas Tal* of Rosenblatt or pieces by the great *chazanim* Pintchik, Herschman, Sirota and Kvartin. Of course, the favorites were always the compositions of Reb Yankel Talmud, the genius who composed the magnificent Gerrer *niggunim*. These songs aroused memories of *Pesach*, *Sukkos* and the *Yamim Noraim* and evoked the tastes and aromas associated with the foods of each *Yom Tov*. In my mind's eye, I would recreate the glittering *sedarim*, the fragrances of the *sukkah* and the *arba minim* and the exquisite joy of sitting at a sparkling white *Shabbos* table together with my father, mother, brothers and sisters. Memories such as these gave us the courage to carry on in spite of the starvation, death and misery that surrounded us.

On *Shabbos*, we organized a *minyan*, thankful for the few *siddurim* and *Chumashim* that people had brought with them from home. Each week, we tried to get together for *shalosh seudos*, where we would sing *zemiros* and eat the few crumbs saved from our meager rations. Usually, after we sang, Moshe Leib would be ready with an interesting story.

One *Shabbos*, he told a fascinating story about Rabbi Nassan Note Shapiro, better known as the Megaleh Amukos, the famous Kabbalist who served as Rabbi of Cracow.

"The Megaleh Amukos was in the habit of *oprichten Tikkun Chatzos*, that is, he would seclude himself at midnight to lament the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash and *daven* for its restoration. It was known that during these moments of intense *tefillah*, the *tzaddik* reached great spiritual heights. Once, completely engrossed in his *tefillos*, the Megaleh Amukos was singing a beautiful, heartrending melody when Eliyahu Hanavi appeared to him.

"'I want you to know,' said Eliyahu, 'that the angels in

heaven are using this very *niggun* when they bewail the *churban* before the Throne of Hashem.'

"Day and night, the Megaleh Amukos was besieged with petitioners and questioners who sought his help and advice," Moshe Leib continued. "But he let it be known that he would not see visitors after eleven at night, since it was then that he prepared himself for the *Tikkun Chatzos.*

"Burning with curiosity, a brother-in-law of the Megaleh Amukos sneaked into the rabbi's study one night and crept under the couch. He simply had to observe the awesome scene of the rabbi's *avodah.*

"At the stroke of midnight, the Megaleh Amukos began to say *Tikkun Chatzos*, ecstatically singing his plaintive *niggun* in harmony with the angels in heaven. His soul soared aloft . . . Higher and higher his soul climbed, until finally, the saintly rabbi had *hispashtus hagashmius*, and his yearning soul temporarily departed his body to perceive the glorious splendor of the Divine Light.

"Peering from beneath the couch, the *tzaddik's* brother-in-law observed the awesome sight of the mystic *avodah.* Overcome with fright, he began to tremble violently, and within moments, his heart gave out, and he died.

"The sudden death was reminiscent of the tragic passing of Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aharon, who died as a result of entering the *Kodesh Kadashim* without proper authorization.

"Blaming himself for his brother-in-law's death, the Megaleh Amukos was inconsolable. He immediately took it upon himself to go into self-imposed exile for an entire year, following the Torah decree that anyone who accidentally kills a person shall go into exile to an *ir miklat*, a city of refuge.

"The rabbi wandered about the countryside, never

revealing his identity and never staying in the same place for more than one day. On *erev Sukkos,* he arrived at a small town and found lodging at the home of a wealthy Jew. The man owned the most beautiful *sukkah* in town, decorated with exquisite golden ornaments and magnificent silver candelabra and bowls.

"'You are welcome to sleep in the *sukkah,*' his host told him after they had eaten a sumptuous *seudah.* 'Just make sure you lock the *sukkah* door before you go to sleep. There are many valuables here, and I don't want them stolen.'

"The Megaleh Amukos remained in the *sukkah* where he immersed himself in learning. After a few hours, he lay down to sleep, forgetting to lock the door. Sure enough, during the night, thieves made off with all the gold and silver valuables in the *sukkah.* The next morning, the indignant owner discovered the theft.

"'You fool!' he shouted. 'Didn't I tell you to lock the door?'

"Livid with rage, he grabbed the Megaleh Amukos by the collar, slapped him in the face and threw him out into the street.

"'You'll pay for this!' he yelled. 'I'll call you to a *din Torah* for what you did to me!'

"After *Yom Tov,* the Megaleh Amukos was summoned to appear before the *Beis Din.* However, as soon as he entered, the *dayan* recognized him as the venerated Chief Rabbi of Cracow.

"'I think you owe an apology to this man,' the *dayan* told the owner of the *sukkah.* 'He is an eminent rabbi and a great Torah scholar. You should have been honored by his visit, but instead, you abused and offended him.'

"'And you, Cracower Rav,' the *dayan* declared. 'Your

galus has ended. Go home to your family and your community. They are anxiously waiting for your return.'

"The Megaleh Amukos returned to Cracow, where he received an enthusiastic welcome. The wealthy owner of the *sukkah*, in Divine retribution, fell on hard times and lost much of his fortune . . ."

At the conclusion of the story, Moshe Leib pointed out its underlying message.

"'*Al tigu bimshichai*, Dare not touch my anointed ones,'" (*Tehillim* 105:15), he quoted. "No one can hurt a *tzaddik* with impunity. Sooner or later, justice will be done. Our oppressors will also receive their punishment, you can be sure of that. '*Ki dam avadav yikom*. Hashem will avenge the blood of His servants.'" (*Devarim* 32:43)

These inspiring stories, coupled with the soul-stirring songs we sang, lifted us out of our dreary existence and kept up our spirits. We truly felt the meaning of the *pasuk*, "*Nafsheinu chiksah Lashem* . . . We set our hope on Hashem; He is our help and shield. In Him our hearts rejoice, for in His holy Name we trust." (*Tehillim* 33:20-21)

Our non-religious inmates, on the other hand, who lacked the most basic principles of *emunah*, sank into despair, and driven by hunger pangs, they thought only of food. Their conversations centered on various menus and the delicacies that had been served at the feasts they once attended. They argued about recipes, about spices and condiments and about the various methods of baking a *Sachertorte*.

CHAPTER 24

Pesach in Plaszow

PESACH WAS APPROACHING, AND I WONDERED HOW I would be able to celebrate the *Yom Tov*. Where would I obtain *matzah*? Removing the *chametz* presented no problem, since our daily ration of one thin slice of bread did not leave any crumbs. But what would I eat for eight days?

Fortunately, I knew a kind and goodhearted woman by the name of Esther Eckstein who worked in the Plaszow kitchen. Recognizing my predicament, she was willing to risk her life to help me.

"Come to the kitchen tomorrow morning carrying a pail full of trash," she told me, a few days before *Pesach*. "Empty the pail on the trash pile in back of the kitchen so you won't arouse any suspicion, and then come to me."

The next day, I did as she had told me and came to her with my empty pail. She quickly filled the pail with potatoes and covered them with a layer of coffee grounds so it would not look conspicuous. The kind Mrs. Eckstein did the same for several other of my friends, and these potatoes enabled us to survive the eight days of *Pesach* without violating the *issur* of *chametz*.

Our main concern now was obtaining *matzos*. A few of my friends were willing to risk their lives for the cause, and they managed to procure a little flour. We then fashioned a small oven out of an empty can and cut shavings from a bed board that would serve as fuel. We immediately set to work in our miniature *matzah* bakery, producing tiny *matzos* that were absolutely kosher. We were so absorbed in the joy of baking *matzos* that we were oblivious to the serious danger we were in. Discovery by the Germans would have meant a public hanging for our crimes, which included the destruction of the bed boards, property of the Third Reich.

Hashem was with us, and our small operation went unnoticed. As we sat at the *sedarim* eating our small portions of *matzah*, I felt triumphant. *Matzah*, the bread of affliction, is also the symbol of freedom. With *mesiras nefesh*, we had outsmarted the German tyrants, and with Hashem's help, we would go "*meiavdus lecheirus*, from bondage to freedom."

At both *sedarim*, we sang the traditional songs and recited the familiar questions and answers, feeling much the way our ancestors must have felt in Egypt. Our grieving hearts took the place of the *marror*, and our genuine tears provided an abundance of salt water.

During the following days of *Pesach*, I put my position in the electrician's shop to good use. With a pail full of raw potatoes in my possession, I had to come up with a way to

make them edible. Together with my co-workers, who saw this as a challenge to their resourcefulness, I set about constructing an electric stove using various parts from other appliances. The product of our efforts was an ingenious contraption that worked perfectly, and all *Pesach*, I was able to cook the potatoes unhindered by any practical obstacles.

A few weeks later, on one of his daily rounds of the *Lager*, Kommandant Goeth aimed his pistol at Mrs. Eckstein, the kind woman who had saved us from eating *chametz* on *Pesach*. Miraculously, the bullet merely grazed her shoulder, and she was unharmed. I am sure that it was the merit of her incredible *mesiras nefesh* that saved her.

Meanwhile, our existence in the camp became increasingly more difficult. Escape was just an impossible dream. When I had first arrived in Plaszow, we were able to wear our civilian clothes. Although our apparel was worn and rumpled, it was still ours. Then one day, we were ordered to line up in the main square. As we filed by the OD-man standing there, he painted red stripes on our suits, two stripes across the front and two in the back. The same was done to the women's dresses. The purpose of the stripes was to prevent us from escaping the camp. With such conspicuous marks on our clothes, we wouldn't get very far without being spotted. This was just another step in the dehumanization process of the concentration camp.

Living conditions in Plaszow were unsanitary and practically inhuman. Our barracks was a vast structure that held a thousand prisoners, with no ventilation and insufficient water and toilet facilities. As a result, there was a widespread infestation of lice, breeding typhus and other diseases among the vulnerable prisoners housed there.

Once a prisoner contracted a disease, his chances of

being cured were slim. The *Revier*, which was the camp "hospital," made a mockery of medical care. The small staff of incompetent doctors was totally incapable of attending to the patients who were sick and dying. Due to the lack of the most basic medications, most patients just stagnated. Most people were afraid to even enter the hospital, since it was known that the Germans would frequently round up patients and shoot them. "Unproductive workers," they would say, as if this was a perfectly valid reason for killing them. Consequently, the camp population dwindled from day to day.

Food was scarce, and starvation turned the camp inmates into living skeletons known as *Muselmanner*. Among these hapless prisoners, the sure sign of impending death was edema, a swelling of the ankles caused by an accumulation of fluids.

Prisoners from wealthy backgrounds were usually the first to succumb to the diseases that were rampant in the camp. Used to a pampered life of luxury and indulgence, they were unable to adjust to the deprivations of concentration camp life. The inmates that had always been poor, on the other hand, were accustomed to a meager diet and frequent hunger pangs, and they adapted more easily to the harsh environment.

In labor camps such as ours, there were no small children to be found. The brutal Germans had rounded up all the Jewish children from the start and shipped them straight to Auschwitz or similar extermination camps. There were, however, several young children who were fortunate enough to look older than their age, and they were spared the gas chambers and put to work as slave laborers. But these were rare exceptions.

Included among the prisoners that were in Plaszow while

I was there were many well-known rabbinic personalities from Cracow and other cities. Rabbi Shem Kleinberg, the Dzialoshitzer Rebbe of Cracow, was housed in our barracks. This venerable sage, a scion of the Ziditchoiv-Komarna dynasty, was one of the foremost Kabbalists of his time, and his Torah thoughts were published under the title *Oholei Shem*.

On the first day of *Chol Hamoed Pesach*, 1943, the Ordnungsdienst received orders from the Germans to round up ten prominent *chassidic* rabbis. Late at night, the OD-men entered our barracks and took the seventy-one-year-old Dzialoshitzer Rebbe with them, along with Rabbi Nassan Kuperwasser. They then combed the other barracks to find another eight preeminent leaders. The ten men were led to the execution field, lined up in front of a German firing squad and with no explanation given, were mercilessly shot to death. *Hashem yinkom damam.*

The murder of these *gedolim* shocked us to no end. I was particularly appalled by the death of the illustrious Dzialoshitzer Rebbe, Reb Shem.

Strange as it may sound, living in Plaszow, where death was so commonplace, had numbed my feelings, and the daily struggle for survival had rendered me impassive. At first, I was horrified at my own coolness and that of the others, but I realized eventually that this aloofness was merely the defense of the soul in the face of overwhelming tragedy. If we would have felt the full impact of the daily atrocities, we would have lost our minds. Nevertheless, the brutal massacre of the ten *gedolim* was different. Everyone, even the non-observant Jew, was jolted out of his stupor.

Among our small group of *chassidim*, we referred to this incident as the *asarah harugei malchus*, reminiscent of the Ten

Martyrs who were killed by the Romans. Those ten Sages were tortured and brutally put to death, and their memory has become legendary in Jewish history, particularly through the *Eileh Ezkerah*, a liturgical poem that is said during *Mussaf* on *Yom Kippur*. The comparison was a fitting one.

Shortly afterwards, we heard that a similar fate had befallen the Radomsker Rebbe, Rabbi Shlomo Chanoch Hakohein Rabinowitz. At the start of the war, the Radomsker *chassidim* in England had made arrangements for the Rebbe to be flown out of Poland on a special airplane, but the Rebbe had refused to take advantage of the opportunity.

"*Besoch ami ani yoshev*," the Rebbe said. "I remain among my people. I cannot abandon my *chassidim*."

On *Shabbos*, the 18th of *Av*, 1942, the Germans broke into the house in Warsaw where the Radomsker Rebbe was staying. Without hesitating, they killed the Rebbe, his wife, their only daughter Raizel and her husband, the saintly Rabbi David Moshe. In the same house, the Germans killed scores of other Jews, leaving only one boy alive to carry down the bodies. They planned to kill him afterwards, but fortunately, he managed to escape. Reb Dov Berish Erlich buried the Radomsker Rebbe in the Warsaw Gensher cemetery alongside the grave of the Novominsker Rebbe.

Thus, the Angel of Death continued to dance his macabre dance in Plaszow, Auschwitz, Dachau, Bergen-Belsen, Majdanek, Belzec, Treblinka... Millions of Jews went to their gruesome deaths, and the world, aware of what was happening, remained silent.

"*Vayivaseir Yaakov levado*. Yaakov remained alone." (*Bereishis* 32:25) Since that first time, when Yaakov wrestled with the guardian angel of Eisav, the world has turned a deaf ear to our cries.

After Yaakov encountered Eisav, the *pasuk* describes his arrival in Shechem as *shaleim* (*Bereishis* 33:18), "perfect." Rashi explains that he was physically and spiritually intact. May it be the will of Hashem that the Jewish people will emerge intact from all their afflictions.

CHAPTER 25

The Schindler Camp

ONE WEEK FOLLOWED ANOTHER IN THE MISERY OF Plaszow as I labored under the harshest conditions, always fearing for my life. Finally, after five long months, my fate seemed to take a turn for the better.

One day, we were notified that a group of technicians and electricians from Plaszow would be transferred to the NKF *Lager*, a satellite camp that had been built not far from Plaszow. The list was issued, and my name was included among the group of electricians.

The *Kommandant* of the NKF camp was SS Obersturmfuehrer Schindler, a man who was known to be totally different from the other officers in his league. As *Kommandant*, he acted like a human being, with a kind heart and genuine compassion. He treated his prisoners humanely, and no Jew

was ever killed or abused in his camp. After the war, in recognition of his outstanding qualities and the lives he saved, Schindler received a number of decorations, honors and citations from the Allied powers. Several years later, a book entitled *Schindler's List* was written about him, enumerating the positive and humane deeds he performed while he was an officer.

Since we would be leaving Plaszow, we were discharged from our job in the shop and temporarily assigned to a labor unit. We were all given spades and ordered to plow the fields, preparing them for planting. Split up into groups of ten, we were told to work on the field in sections. The soil was very hard and rocky, and I was not used to this kind of backbreaking work. To make things even worse, we were guarded by a German killer who enjoyed twirling his gun on his forefinger. A tall, blond fellow whose dull look reflected witless stupidity, he had no hesitations about viciously tormenting the defenseless Jews. The monster would place himself near one of the groups and carefully survey the workers. As soon as he noticed a man not digging vigorously, he would beat him with his horsewhip until the poor fellow fell unconscious to the ground. Frequently, the guard would raise his gun and nonchalantly shoot the unconscious prisoner to death.

Each time the guard came near our group, we all redoubled our efforts, working with every ounce of strength we could muster. *Baruch Hashem,* I was a fast worker, and I was never a victim of the guard's brutality. One day, the German picked on one man in my group who was so weak he could barely move his spade. The German whipped him savagely in the face, and when the man fell down, he shot him through the head.

We were all devastated. The man had been a quiet,

unassuming worker, always willing to lend a helping hand to the rest of the group. And we had to stand by, watching helplessly as this German brute tortured and killed him.

A few days after this incident, our group of selected workers was loaded onto a truck and driven to the NKF camp. As I passed through the gates of Plaszow, I felt tremendous relief. I felt that anything after this would be an improvement.

Shortly afterwards, we arrived at the new camp, instantly noticing the different atmosphere. When we alighted from the trucks, the guards did not yell or curse, and none of us were beaten. We were shown to clean and airy barracks, and the food, although not abundant, was adequate.

A few days later, our camp was visited by Kommandant Goeth, the Angel of Death from Plaszow whom we thought we had seen the last of. As soon as we heard of his arrival, we all went into hiding. Only Zanvil Borenstein, a slightly retarded man, walked aimlessly around the camp grounds as Goeth made his entrance.

"You dirty Jew!" Goeth cried. "Why aren't you at work?"

He grabbed Borenstein and threw him into a pit near the latrines. He then pulled out his gun and was about to shoot when Schindler suddenly appeared, wresting the gun from his grasp. He quickly placed a bottle of whiskey in Goeth's still outstretched hand, diverting his attention from the hapless Jew. At the sight of the bottle, Goeth's face broke into a big smile, and he raised it to his lips immediately.

"Ahh . . ." he grunted, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Come on, have another," Schindler said jovially. "You know, in this camp we don't shoot Jews. My Jews are good craftsmen and mechanics. They know their business, and they do a wonderful job. I need every one of them."

Schindler called over a few men and ordered them to pull Borenstein out of the hole. The poor fellow was in a daze and did not realize what was happening.

In the NKF camp, Schindler made life bearable for us. We were able to *daven* with a *minyan* every day, and at night, after a day's work, we got together to learn *Chumash* with *Rashi* and exchange *divrei Torah* and stories of *gedolim*.

"If ten Jews come together and talk *divrei Torah*," Rabbi Mendel of Rimanov, one of the great *chassidic* masters, used to say, "they feel none of the hardships of exile. But when they separate, each to his own corner, every individual begins to feel the rigors of exile."

How true this was. Our talks about Torah topics gave us the strength and the *bitachon* to endure the hardships of our *galus*.

Our crew of electricians had the job of disassembling and repairing the cooling systems of aircraft engines. These engines came from German Air Force planes that had been shot down or wrecked and the cooling systems were full of bullet holes and covered with a thick film of oil, grease and dirt. To remove this oil, we used a very powerful detergent and wore thick gloves. Inhaling the fumes of ammonia and other chemicals made us drowsy and dizzy, and every hour, we would go outside to get a breath of fresh air.

Our foremen were Germans, and they instructed us on how to proceed. They acted quite civilized and treated us like human beings. Here there was none of the shouting, abuse and random killing we had experienced in Plaszow. My nerves, which had been shattered by the terror and the tension of Plaszow, gradually began to be restored.

One day, however, we were cruelly reminded of the grim reality of living under German domination. Since our camp

was a satellite camp of Plaszow, we occasionally received inspection teams from Plaszow to check on the work in progress. On one of these occasions, Schindler was absent, and one of the visiting inspectors was determined to demonstrate his power over the defenseless workers. It did not take long for him to find a man standing around idle.

"A public flogging!" he shouted triumphantly. "Twenty-five lashes for slacking off on the job!"

All the inmates had to watch the flogging, and the poor victim had to count the strokes. To our dismay, it was a member of the Jewish police who administered the lashes. With all his might, he beat down on the man, and after counting nineteen lashes, the victim passed out. Although the Jewish "officer" was simply carrying out the German's orders, the idea of one Jew beating another so ferociously was horrifying.

After the beating, we had to carry the poor fellow back to the barracks. He could not move for several weeks, and the incident symbolized the true character of the Nazis.

Shabbos in the Schindler camp was infinitely better than in Plaszow. Of course, we had to go to work, but afterwards, we all got together for *shalosh seudos*. We were able to purchase eggs and onions from the Poles who worked with us, and Reb Chaim Kleiner prepared the traditional dish each week. These Poles were able to supply anything we needed, and through them, I was even able to correspond with my parents in Sosnowice.

At *shalosh seudos*, we created a true *Shabbos* atmosphere, singing *zemiros*, saying *divrei Torah* and telling stories of *tzaddikim*. At those times, I forgot my misery, feeling as if I was back home, enjoying a *Shabbos* meal with my parents, brothers and sisters. Each week, as the sun slowly set, we took turns

relating tales of the great rabbis of the past.

One week, when it was my turn to speak, I told a fascinating story I had once heard about the Rema.

"Many people visiting the *beis olam* in Cracow wonder why the grave of the illustrious Rema is situated at the edge of the cemetery among the graves of the paupers.

"Legend has it that in the days of the Rema there was a baker in Cracow who made it a practice to distribute *challos*, wine, chickens and meat for *Shabbos* to the needy Jewish families of Cracow. The baker did this for many years, until one week the weekly deliveries suddenly ceased. The poor people were dismayed and implored the generous baker to continue his munificence. At first, the baker refused to explain his actions, but at the poor people's insistence, he began to speak.

"'Do you remember Yankel the miser?' he asked.

"'Of course we remember him,' a disheveled beggar replied. 'That stingy man wouldn't give a nickel to a poor man. He would never even answer the door when a beggar rang the bell.'

"'Why, he was so frugal,' said another pauper, 'that he once refused a crust of bread to a poor widow who hadn't eaten all day.'

"'He died last week,' said a third one, 'unmourned and unlamented. As a matter of fact, they buried him in a pauper's grave at the edge of the cemetery.'

"'Well, let me tell you something,' said the baker, after all the beggars had vented their anger. 'It was not I who sent you the food every *Shabbos*. It was Yankel the miser who, week after week, gave me the money to buy all the food I distributed. The man whom you so despise fed all the poor people of Cracow. When he died last week, the money stopped

coming, and I was forced to cease the distribution. In reality, Yankel the miser was a *tzaddik nistar*, a hidden *tzaddik*.'

"When the Rema learned the truth about Yankel the miser," I concluded my story, "he let it be known that when his time would come, he wanted to be buried next to this great *tzaddik*."

When I finished my tale, the others asked me to lead them in singing *Deror Yikra*. I chose a lively Gerrer *niggun*, and the entire group sang along exuberantly.

Because the Germans rarely patrolled the barracks, we were not afraid to sing out loud. One *Shabbos*, though, when we had finished working and sat down to our usual *shalosh seudos* with lively singing, the door suddenly opened and in stepped an SS *Unterscharfuehrer*.

"*Was ist denn da los?*" he asked. "What's the meaning of this?"

Dumbfounded, we did not know what to say, certain that we were in serious trouble.

"*Herr Unterscharfuehrer,*" one of our group finally replied, rising respectfully and standing at attention. "*Sie wissen doch, 'Arbeit macht das Leben suess.'* You know the saying, 'Work makes life enjoyable.' Well, we worked hard, and now we sing so that we can work even harder."

The German burst out laughing. No doubt, this was the strangest excuse he had ever heard.

"*Weiter machen!*" he chuckled. "Keep going!"

We had feared the worst, but now we all breathed more easily and burst once again into song.

"*Hadoch kamai Keil kana,*" I intoned lustily. "Hashem, in Your zealousness, crush my foes!" Over and over, we sang this stanza, louder and louder, until we broke into a *chassidic* dance around the table.

The other inmates in the barracks watched in utter amazement. They could not understand the joy a *chassid* could feel even in the midst of his misery. That *Shabbos*, the *shalosh seudos* continued until nine o'clock at night, when all the lights were turned off.

CHAPTER 26

Days of Awe

THE SCORCHING SUMMER DAYS LAY BEHIND US, THE nights were becoming crisp and cool, and the trees in the forest surrounding our camp were beginning to turn a golden yellow. On the way to work in the semi-darkness of early morning, we noticed a white coating of frost on the leaves, a sure sign that the *Yamim Noraim* were approaching.

We began to make arrangements for the forthcoming holidays. Fortunately, *Rosh Hashanah* fell on a Sunday that year, and we did not have to go to work. At sunrise, we assembled in a storage shed, posting a guard outside to warn us of unwelcome intruders. I was asked to be the *sheliach tzibbur* for *Mussaf*, and I led the *davening* using one of the *machzorim* that some of the inmates had brought from home.

Although most of the men in the camp were non-observant Jews, the Days of Awe stirred their Jewish consciousness. They all wanted to be inscribed for a good life, especially this year, when our very existence hung precariously on the whims of our German overseers. Even some of the *kapos* and OD men joined our *minyan*. Filled with anxiety and fear of what the future held in store for us, we *davened* more fervently than we had ever done before. With the nightmare of German oppression upon us, we worried about parents and relatives who had been deported, praying to be reunited with them under better conditions. Of course, we had no way of knowing that most of them had already been annihilated. We poured out our broken hearts to Hashem, observant and non-observant Jews alike, all praying with equal fervor.

I prayed softly, singing the familiar Gerrer melodies as I tearfully implored Hashem to be merciful to His people on the Day of Judgment and bring an end to all our troubles.

On *Yom Kippur*, which fell out on a weekday, we could not stay in the barracks but had to go to work. We fasted and tried to avoid doing any actual forbidden labor. But this was very dangerous, since anyone caught shirking his job was considered guilty of sabotage, a crime punishable by death.

After work, we assembled for *davening*, and once again, I led the *tefillos*. As I sang the words of *Neelah*, which so aptly described our situation, there was not a dry eye among the worshippers. "O mighty Redeemer, deliver us for Your Own sake. See, our strength is gone. Behold, our devout ones are lost . . . and save us for Your Name's sake."

Time passed, and although Schindler was a humane *Kommandant* who did not allow any abuse of his prisoners, he was not always around to protect us from abuse.

One night, after everyone was asleep, the door of our

barracks was flung open, and five SS men staggered in, obviously quite drunk.

"Everyone throw off your blankets!" they barked. "Inspection time!"

The drunken Germans then went from bunk to bunk, pulling down prisoners at will. Apparently, they did not like the looks of the fellow sleeping next to me, and along with several others, he was dragged down from his bunk and led outside.

"*Schneller! Schneller!*" the drunken Germans hollered. "Faster! Faster!" They pushed the startled men forward, enjoying themselves immensely.

Paralyzed with fear, we could not bring ourselves to go back to sleep. What was being done to the unfortunate victims? With Schindler not around to subdue the sadistic animals, they were capable of doing anything.

Baruch Hashem, the men reappeared an hour later, unharmed. The Nazis, explaining that they did not like the way the men were sleeping, had forced them to run on their hands and feet for an hour.

Grateful that nothing more serious had happened, we all went back to sleep. The prank had been typical of the way the Nazis derived amusement at the expense of the vulnerable Jewish prisoners, and we were growing accustomed to their impulsive actions.

At work one day, I was cleaning a large coil of the cooling unit of an aircraft engine that was caked with mud and oil. Wearing my rubber gloves, I scrubbed the coil, using the strong chemical solution that dissolved the grease. Eager to finish the job quickly, I did not notice the fumes of the solution that were slowly overpowering me. Suddenly realizing that my eyelids were beginning to droop, I dazedly made

my way upstairs to the attic, where I fell into a deep sleep. I noticed a few fellow workers taking a short break in the attic, but they must have gone back to work right away. Soon I was left to my slumber, totally oblivious to the world.

Before long, the Jewish *kapos* in the workshop noticed that someone was missing. A furor broke out.

"If he escaped," the *kapos* said nervously, "there will be terrible consequences. They'll hold us responsible, and we will be the ones who will get into trouble."

Frantically, everyone started looking for me behind the engines, in the tool shed and all over the shop. Driven by their fear of the Germans, the *kapos* searched every corner. Suddenly, the men who had been resting in the attic reminded themselves that they had seen me.

"Werdyger must still be sleeping up there!" one of them shouted, and they all ran upstairs. Spotting me, they shook me out of my stupor and led me downstairs.

Feldstein, who was one of the *kapos* in charge of our group, began to berate me furiously. Shouting angrily, he grew red in the face, unable to contain his rage. Aware that my life was in danger, I tried to calm him down, explaining that I had been overcome by the fumes and had fallen asleep inadvertently. Fortunately, he accepted my excuse, and the incident ended peacefully.

BOOK FOUR

Songs of Despair

CHAPTER 27

Fearful Anticipation

BY 1944, THE TIDE OF BATTLE HAD TURNED. THE ADVANCE of Hitler's armored divisions in Russia came to a screeching halt, and the surrender of the German troops at Stalingrad marked the turning point in the war. Relentlessly, the Russian armies pushed westward into Poland, decimating the German Luftwaffe and torching their tanks. The vaunted German Wehrmacht retreated, leaving guns and artillery behind. Hundreds of thousands of bedraggled German soldiers were carried off into Russian captivity.

In France, the mighty armada of American landing crafts and the influx of Allied forces was followed by a bloody conquest and an advance into the German heartland.

Soon, we were able to hear the steady drone of Allied bombers overhead. It made our hearts quiver with joy, and

we were filled with renewed hope. With Hashem's help, we would survive!

Nevertheless, the Germans were not so willing to concede defeat. Hasty explanations were given with each setback. Their front lines were not caving in; their troops were merely making "a strategic withdrawal." As their cities were ravaged by bombs, the official statement was that the Wehrmacht was "regrouping" and that they would soon throw back the enemy. The *Fuhrer* had a secret weapon!

Ignoring the multitude of German prisoners taken every day, the Nazis concentrated completely on the destruction of the Jews. This was their first priority. Trains that could have been used to ship essential war material to the front were diverted to haul Hungarian Jews to the death factories of Auschwitz. And rather than allowing the prisoners of the concentration camps in Poland to fall into the hands of the advancing Russian troops, the Germans spared no effort to transfer them to camps inside Germany.

With the approach of the Russian armies, the tension in the Schindler camp increased daily. Hundreds of conflicting rumors were circulating, and no one knew what to expect.

"The SS is packing their bags," someone whispered. "They are burning their records and fleeing for their lives!"

"I heard they are planning to take us into the woods and shoot us," another said ominously.

"No," someone else countered. "They'll just ship us off to Germany."

At this point, we were ready for anything. Knowing that nothing was in our power, we listened anxiously to all the rumors and hoped for the best.

One cool autumn morning, as dawn was just breaking over the Schindler camp and the invigorating air stimulated

our senses, we got ready for a new day of hard labor in the workshop.

"Alle antreten! Alle antreten!" the *Scharfuehrer* called out. "Everyone fall into position!"

This was not the customary daily summons for roll-call, and the order had an ominous ring to it. Were they evacuating the camp? Would we now be taken to the woods and shot?

After we had all lined up, we were ordered back into our barracks.

"You have ten minutes to pack your bundles," the *Scharfuehrer* announced. "Make sure that you're back here punctually!"

I was relieved. If they told us to pack our things, then surely they weren't planning to shoot us.

I hurriedly packed my meager belongings, placing my *tefillin* in the center of the bundle. Within four minutes, I was back outside at the line-up.

"Vorwaerts marsch!"

The entire camp population began to march, and I fell in, swinging my small bundle on my back. At the gate, the barrier was lifted to let us out. The open road stretched invitingly before us, winding its way through a forest of majestic pines. If I could only slip away from the column and hide among the trees, I would be free.

However, any hope of escape was quickly dashed. Rifle-toting SS men with growling watchdogs tugging on their leashes guarded us carefully. The Nazis would not loosen their hold on the Jewish prisoners, even when faced with the aggressive Allied onslaught and imminent defeat in the war.

The fragrance of the forest was delightful, and it reminded me of summer vacations spent with my parents in the Polish countryside. We used to stay in a bungalow in Otvock,

the resort where many of the *rebbes* retreated for their vacation.

"*Baruch borei atzei vesamim,*" I murmured. "Blessed are You, Who creates fragrant trees."

I slowed down to admire the magnificent scenery, envying the chirping birds and the squirrels that were scampering about carelessly. Abruptly, though, I was jolted back to reality.

"*Rasch, rasch! Weiter!*" an SS man barked, poking me in the ribs with his rifle butt.

After ten minutes, many prisoners threw away their bundles, littering the road with assorted bags and backpacks. Marching with a load was just too cumbersome. Still, I held on to my bundle for dear life; the ragged bag contained my precious *tefillin*. After marching about ten kilometers, we arrived at the "railroad station." This was actually no more than a series of sidings without a station building or waiting rooms. There was certainly no need for a window at which to purchase tickets.

Alongside one of the sidings, a freight train of fifty slate-colored boxcars was waiting.

"*Alle einsteigen!*" sounded the command. "All aboard!"

Scrambling wildly, we climbed into the boxcars. More and more people were pressed into the car until there was barely room to move. Pushing, shoving and screaming, the frightened passengers tried to find some breathing space for themselves.

The Germans placed one container of watery soup in each car, and when the soup was all gone, the container served as a latrine for the ninety passengers, most of whom were suffering from dysentery. There was not a drop of water to be found anywhere on the train, and we wondered if this

was the way they were planning to kill us all.

The door was slammed shut with a loud bang. All was quiet in the crowded freight car, and we were able to hear the droning of bombers overhead. We had no way of knowing if the planes were American or Russian, but we were glad to know that the Germans were under fire.

"*Shefoch chamascha al hagoyim,*" I prayed silently. "Pour Your wrath on the German nation. Pursue them with fury and annihilate them from beneath the heavens."

Night fell as our train remained motionless at the station, and we wondered when we would depart for our unknown destination. Meanwhile, we continued to stand in our places, unable to move, yet also unable to sleep. We were pressed tightly against one another, knee to knee, shoulder to shoulder. With time, several of the older and weaker prisoners, unable to withstand the conditions, died quietly in their places, remaining rigidly upright.

Night turned into day, and still, the train did not move. How long would we go on suffering like this?

Then, all of a sudden, metal clanged against metal, and with a jolt, the train set into motion.

On and on the train moved, carrying its cargo of living dead. Looking around, I realized that my friend Shulem Herzberg was standing right next to me. He had been one of the workers in the concentration camp kitchen. Although kitchen workers labored longer hours and the work was very strenuous, they were usually envied by the other inmates because they had access to unlimited amounts of food. Occasionally, Shulem was even able to obtain bottles of whiskey, which he would save for times of need. Now, standing pressed together in the crowded boxcar craving a drink of water, Shulem had the solution.

"Look what I've got here," he said, pulling a bottle of whiskey from his pocket. Generously, he offered me a drink.

"Take a little at a time," he warned me, "and drink it slowly, so it won't go to your head."

We each took a sip of the precious drink. The liquid revived me, moistening my parched throat and lips. We continued to take one sip every hour throughout our eight-day journey that took us from Poland to Austria.

En route, the train made several stops in towns and villages along the way. Through a small opening in the wall, we pleaded with the passersby for some food and water. However, although a few kind souls proffered bottles of water and bread, our German guards chased them off, menacingly pointing their guns at them.

Throughout the journey, the nights proved to be the most trying times. For as difficult as it was to endure the pangs of hunger, the inability to sleep was pure agony. As we stood in our places, we would frequently doze off, but these unsatisfying catnaps would only foster bloodcurdling dreams and bizarre hallucinations. As time went on and our positions had not changed, our feet began to swell, adding more pain and soreness to our misery.

As we travelled, the thought of escaping frequently crossed our minds, but we knew that the heavily armed German guards were keeping a close watch on the train and would not hesitate to shoot any would-be escapee on sight.

In desperation, one fellow managed to cut a hole in the floor of the wagon, and at night, while the train was moving at a very high speed, he lowered himself out of the car. He then rolled nimbly onto the wooden ties between the tracks, taking a terrible risk of being maimed or killed by the wheels. After the war, I learned that he lived to tell about

the ordeal and had survived the holocaust.

As we neared the end of our journey, death claimed more and more victims, all of them dying quietly, often without uttering a cry. They died from hunger, thirst, dysentery and countless other diseases. Overwhelmed by the horror and the misery, they just gave up. Numbed and apathetic, the other passengers did not mourn or weep for the unfortunate victims. Perhaps the surviving prisoners envied them, for at least in death they had found peace. I thought of the *pasuk* in *Koheles* that precisely echoed our feelings. "I consider more fortunate the dead who have already died than the living who are still alive." (*Koheles* 4:2) Shlomo Hamelech must have had us in mind when he wrote these words.

Many of those that survived the treacherous trip lost control of their sanity and went mad. Overcome by claustrophobia, hunger and thirst, they went crazy, shrieking impulsively and flailing their arms. The train began to resemble a madhouse.

Of course, this agonizing train ride was all part of the German "Final Solution," the plan to annihilate every last Jew, and each torturous aspect of the journey was well thought out.

CHAPTER 28

Arrival in Mauthausen

FINALLY, AFTER EIGHT SEEMINGLY ENDLESS DAYS crammed into the airless boxcars, we reached our destination. We had arrived in Mauthausen.

Mauthausen was a place that will be remembered in infamy until the end of time. It is a shameful mark on the face of the German nation, a stain that will never be erased. Along with Auschwitz, Mauthausen has become the symbol of German barbarism. It is a name that we must etch into the memories of our children and grandchildren as a symbol of the depths of depravity to which a nation can descend. Considering themselves the *Herrenrasse*, the master race, the Germans acted on the theory of "survival of the fittest." Ethics had no place in this scheme, and therefore, they set out to destroy the nation that exemplified the divine laws of

morality, the chosen people of Hashem.

Mauthausen, like Auschwitz, was a *Vernichtungslager*, a vast extermination camp that was equipped with crematoria and surrounded by a high-voltage electrified barbed wire fence. The overseers, the camp's *kapos*, were non-Jewish hardened criminals who tortured the Jewish inmates with a sadistic gleam in their eyes. Shootings and hangings were the order of the day.

It was here that our train came to a halt, our final destination. The door of our boxcar was thrown wide open, the bright sunlight blinding my eyes.

"Have we arrived?" someone asked.

"I think so."

"Where are we?" I asked.

"The sign says Mauthausen," a fellow standing at the door replied.

I shuddered involuntarily, and horror-stricken, I turned to my friend.

"Tell me it's not true, Shulem!" I pleaded.

"*Alle raus!*" the German soldiers howled, interrupting my cry. "*Schneller! Los, los!*" They prodded us roughly with their truncheons. "Get out! Faster, faster!"

I could barely move. My legs were stiff and my ankles swollen from standing in one position for eight days. Emaciated and severely weakened, most people could not walk at all. We were herded out of the boxcars and onto a grassy field. Desperate for anything edible, we all threw ourselves to the ground, eagerly pulling out the grass and stuffing our mouths with the luscious green herb. To me, the grass and dandelions tasted like the finest chef's salad.

Moments later, we were struck by the sickening smell that pervaded the air. Horrified, I recognized the foul odor of

burning flesh. In the distance, we could see immense smoke stacks spewing forth red and yellow flames that rose menacingly to the sky. Dazedly, I realized that in this place, human beings were reduced to ashes.

Suddenly, shots rang out, indicating that our tormentors were there in full force.

"*Alle antreten!*" they shouted. "Everyone line up!"

We were led to the *Registratur*, the registration building, where our paltry possessions were taken away, and we were searched from head to toe. My bag was wrenched from my grasp, along with the *tefillin* I had packed carefully inside. These were the *tefillin* my father had given me at my *bar-mitzvah*, and no matter where I was or what happened to me, I had never missed a day putting them on. They were my most precious possession, and when the *kapo* took them, I felt as though he was cutting off a limb.

Frisking me thoroughly, the *kapo* found the money I had sewn into the seams of my jacket. Hiding foreign currency was a serious crime, and with savage delight, the *kapo* beat me viciously, punching me in the stomach and face.

"This will teach you to follow orders!" he cried, rubbing his hands with glee.

After the pummeling, I felt more dead than alive. My whole body ached, and blood ran from my nose and lips.

After registering, we were kept in the building for the rest of the day without a morsel of food. As we were standing there, several veteran inmates passed by. They were non-Jewish prisoners from France, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Russia, and their words sent shivers up my spine.

"The only way you'll get out of this place," they called to us, smiling callously, "is through the chimney!"

Soon afterwards, we were told that we would be taken to

the delousing facility. The word "delousing" alarmed us. We had heard rumors of the "shower rooms" in other camps that were actually gas chambers, and we were convinced that we were being led to our deaths.

I overheard several prisoners talking gloomily to one another.

"If you survive," one said, "tell my family that I died here today, so they will say *Kaddish* on my *yahrzeit*."

When we got to the delousing building, we were told to strip to the waist, and each of us had the letters KL, for *Konzentrationslager*, tattooed on his forearm, making us feel like cattle branded with a hot iron. From that moment on, I ceased to be Duvid Werdyger and simply became a nameless beast of burden, identified only by my number.

Next, our hair was cropped very close, and a stripe was shaven across the top of our heads. This marked us as convicts and would make any escape impossible. We were then told to undress, and we were herded into a large washroom with showerheads suspended from the ceiling. The heavy steel door was closed tightly behind us as a German guard watched through the small glass window. There was an anxious moment of suspense. Would this be the end? Were they going to throw in the canisters of poison gas, like they were doing in the other camps?

To our great surprise and relief, a torrent of real water poured from the showerheads, and we actually washed ourselves. We looked at one another in utter amazement, and tears came to our eyes. Could this be true? Had Hashem given us a new lease on life? The warm water running over my pain-racked body was soothing, and for a brief moment I forgot that I was in Mauthausen.

My musings came to an abrupt end. A group of brutal,

club-wielding *kapos* burst suddenly through the door to the showers and chased us to a large wooden barracks, ostensibly for a medical examination. There, other German *kapos* went through the motions of giving us a health check-up. In truth, they were just checking to see if we had any hidden valuables on our bodies.

Since they had taken all our clothes, they now gave each of us a shirt and a pair of shorts. They did not issue shoes or clogs, and I was forced to walk barefoot on the rough pavement, cutting the soles of my feet on the sharp-edged gravel. Each step was sheer agony.

In the next phase of our induction, we were assigned sleeping quarters. Four men were assigned a bunk that barely fit one person. The *Scharfuehrer* made it a point to show us how to make the beds. With maniacal German precision, he insisted that the blankets had to be absolutely smooth, without any bulges or folds.

"*Betten wie Streichholzschachteln!*" he shouted. "Make sure your beds look like matchboxes!"

The barracks leader dished out bowls of watery soup with a few turnip cubes floating in it, and consumed with hunger, I eagerly slurped it down, not caring how it tasted.

When we bedded down in our bunks that night, we lay like sardines in a can, heads facing feet. Still, no one complained about the cramped conditions; we were only too grateful to the *Ribono Shel Olam* to be able to lie down. Totally exhausted, I immediately fell into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER 29

Rigorous Routines

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, WE ALL LINED UP TO HAVE our mugs filled with Mauthausen coffee. Although it tasted like dishwater, it was something to fill the stomach.

At nine o'clock, I noticed that the *kapos* were rounding up people for work. I quickly found someplace to hide and waited there until I saw that they had filled their quota for the labor detail. The *kapos* marched them off to work and left the rest of us alone. From that day on, whenever I spotted the officers approaching to round up workers, I ran to hide. In this way, I was usually able to avoid doing the backbreaking labor.

As time went on, the horrendous sanitary conditions in Mauthausen took their toll, and many of us became ill. There

was no medical care to speak of and certainly no doctors or a hospital. As in Plaszow, the *Revier*, the camp's version of an infirmary, provided a modicum of care, but people went there only if they were seriously ill, as a last resort. It was known that the Germans routinely raided the *Revier*, removing the patients for extermination.

"*Dies ist kein Erholungsheim*," the SS men would say, as they dragged the patients out of bed. "This is no health resort."

In Mauthausen, our situation was far worse than anything we had experienced until now. To begin with, we were severely weakened and close to death when we arrived at the camp after our arduous train ride. Then, with no substantial food or nutrition, we hovered on the edge of starvation, and our conditions continued to decline. In the camps in Poland, the labor crews still had contact with the local population and could purchase food which was smuggled into the camp. Now we were living in total isolation, cut off from civilization and surrounded by vicious fiends who were bent on our destruction. It was no wonder that many succumbed to the hardships. Only those with strong *emunah* and a powerful will to resist managed to survive.

It took sadistic cruelty to dream up a place like Mauthausen, whose sole purpose was to inflict pain and degrade and dehumanize its inmates. The Germans did succeed in inflicting pain in the most gruesome ways, but they failed in their attempts to dehumanize us. Even in his deepest misery, the simplest Jew felt infinitely superior to the well-fed, pompous Germans. He knew that while the ancestors of his German oppressors were still illiterate and uncouth, his own ancestors had been creating such immortal works as the Talmud and the *Midrash*. And deep in their hearts, the Germans also knew that they were an inferior and barbaric race, this

awareness resulting in their jealousy and boundless hatred of the Jews.

Our Sages explained this in a powerful way. "Why was the mountain where Hashem gave the Torah called Sinai?" they asked. "Because the giving of the Torah at Sinai was the source of all the *sinah*, hatred, that descended upon Yisrael."

The man in charge of Mauthausen was *Kommandant* Franz Ziereis, a man of bestial cruelty. Veteran prisoners told us that this ruthless fiend once gave his son a birthday present of fifty Jews to use as target practice. Throughout our stay in the camp, he proved his brutality again and again.

Not long after we arrived at the camp, we were issued blue and white striped convicts' uniforms. With this, the last semblance of normalcy vanished from our lives. Dressed in drab uniform, with the stripe shaven across my head and the number tattooed on my arm, we looked like real convicts, individualized only by the black numerals emblazoned on our arms.

Several times each day we had to assemble on the *Appellplatz* to line up for roll-call. Without exception, every prisoner had to drag himself on his sore and bleeding feet to the big square where we lined up in rows of five abreast. The *kapos* prodded us like cattle with their clubs, yelling and screaming at the tops of their voices, making sure that everyone was standing erect in military formation.

"*Achtung!*" a *kapo* would shout suddenly. "Attention!"

Complete silence descended over the *Appellplatz* as all the prisoners stood at attention.

"*Muetzen ab!*" the next command rang out. "Take off your caps!"

The *Unterscharfuehrer* then approached, obviously taking pride in the subservience of the vulnerable prisoners before

him. He was a strapping young man who, in any country except Germany, would have been a useful citizen. Germany, though, in its self-destructive and all-consuming hatred of the Jews, turned him into a thoughtless beast.

As he reviewed column after column of living skeletons, he counted them with the same delight that a miser counts his money. If the number of prisoners matched the official count, the *Appell* would take about two hours. However, very often the tally came up short one person. In that case, the roll call would take from four to six hours. Each prisoner was called by his number and checked off against the list. Usually, after a thorough search, the missing prisoner turned up, giving the *Scharfuehrer* an opportunity to vent his anger.

"*Saujuden!*" he would bark. "Jewish pigs, with no sense of discipline!"

He would then hit the man ferociously, beating him almost unconscious. Often, as a punishment, the man would be forced to go down on his knees and hold up a heavy chair with both his hands. After a few moments, this feat usually proved impossible, giving the Germans a new opportunity to punish their hapless victim.

Meanwhile, the rest of us had to stand stiffly at attention without uttering a word. If there were no *kapos* nearby, I quietly reviewed the *mishnayos* I knew by heart, whispering to my friend Shulem, who tried to stay near me at roll call for this reason. Sometimes we would tell each other the *Rashis* we remembered on the *parshah* of the week or recite chapters of *Tehillim* that we had memorized. As soon as the *kapo* approached, we broke off and stood stiffly at attention again. If it had not been for these surreptitious Torah thoughts, I don't think I could have survived the ordeal. The Torah thoughts gave us the strength and the determination to resist

the tyrants. I often recalled the *pasuk*, "*Lulei Sorascha shaashuai* . . . Without Your Torah as my delight, I would have perished in my affliction." (*Tehillim* 119:92) Even in the great concealment of the Face that Mauthausen represented, His Word sustained us.

CHAPTER 30

Slaves in the Quarry

EACH DAY, THE PEOPLE WHO HAD BEEN ROUNDED UP for the labor units were marched off to the stone quarry, the notorious Mauthausen *Steinbruch*, and each evening, they returned with countless tales of German brutality. The stone quarry was a huge excavation that had been blasted in the mountainside to produce stone and rocks for construction. Huge granite boulders were dynamited into rocks of various sizes and were scattered across the bottom of the pit. These rocks had to be retrieved and brought to the various places of construction.

A hundred and eighty-six narrow and slippery steps had been carved into the side of the excavation leading to the bottom of the vast pit. Barefoot, the prisoners had to climb down the narrow stairs, pick up a heavy chunk of granite,

carry it back up the steps and haul it to a road construction site. Again and again, they had to go through the same torturous process, all the while cutting their feet on the sharp rocks that were strewn about the site. The workers in these units were given no respite.

To make the work a little easier, the prisoners would try to select the smaller and lighter rocks that would not be too difficult to carry. However, there was not much time to choose, because a German *kapo* was stationed at the bottom of the pit, ready to pounce on anyone showing signs of weakness. If the guard detected a prisoner trying to catch his breath or displaying fatigue, he would beat him brutally with his club, often knocking him senseless.

Frequently, the sadistic Nazis employed trickery to entrap the vulnerable prisoners.

"Go and sit down near the fence," an SS man would tell his unfortunate victim. "Take a rest. You're in no shape to carry rocks."

In his bewilderment, the prisoner would not realize that all along the electrified fence there were guard towers, manned by SS men and equipped with machine guns and searchlights. As soon as the bloodied inmate approached the fence, he was shot down by the SS man in the tower with one quick burst of machine gun fire. His body was then left there to serve as a warning to the others not to shirk their jobs. Not a day went by without several men being killed this way.

I was determined to avoid the treacherous stone quarry at all costs, and along with several other inmates, I ran to hide whenever a roundup for the labor detail was in progress. Even the agony of the endless *Appells* was preferable to working in the abyss of the *Steinbruch*.

Unfortunately, it was not always easy to hide from the

meticulous Nazis, and one day, the inevitable happened: I was inducted into the quarry labor detail.

Early in the morning, we were marched to the quarry in formation, walking barefoot on a gravel road. I watched my steps very carefully, trying to avoid treading on sharp-edged rocks.

"*Schneller! Schneller!*" the *kapos* goaded us, poking us with their clubs. I immediately quickened my pace. How was I going to survive this day? How many of us would die in that quarry?

After quite a long march, we arrived at our destination. The quarry, a huge hole in the ground, eerily resembled a mass grave. The descent to the floor of the excavation was accomplished with little difficulty, and when we reached the bottom, we were greeted by a fat *kapo* with round red cheeks.

"Your job is to carry the rocks out of the *Steinbruch*," the *kapo* announced. "Germany needs those rocks for pavement for a new road. Your work is important, so don't slack off on the job. *Los, los!*" he shouted suddenly. "Hurry up and lift some stones!"

We all began to look for the small rocks, trying one stone and then exchanging it for another.

"Stop wasting time!" the *kapo* yelled. "Pick up your rock, and run up the steps." Menacingly, he waved his club. "If you don't rush, you'll get a taste of this!"

The narrow steps that led out of the pit could accommodate only one person at a time, so when I had found a suitable rock, I took my place on line. Not having eaten anything since the watery soup of the night before, my stomach grumbled loudly, and I felt weak. Finally, it was my turn to exit the pit. Making my way up the steps with the heavy rock was certainly not as easy as coming down had been. With each step, the

rock seemed to grow heavier. It was a hot summer day, and the blazing sun beat down on me. As I ascended, I got quite dizzy, and I began to feel faint. Was it the heat or the hunger?

"Hey, you!" the *kapo* shouted. "You'd better move quickly. You're holding up the works!" With that, he threw a small rock in my direction, hitting me in the shoulder.

The stabbing pain brought me out of my daze, and I continued to climb. Finally, I made it to the top and was permitted to sit down and rest for a few minutes. Then, I had to pick up the rock once again, carry it a good distance and deposit it on the new roadbed that was under construction. After a short rest, it was back to the quarry.

I climbed down the steps again, noticing at once that several men were missing. Obviously, they had collapsed from the heat or under the burden of the work and had been shot, probably without compunction. After all, according to German morality, if a slave cannot work, he deserves to be shot.

This time, I was more experienced in choosing a rock that would be easy to carry. Although I was near exhaustion, I quickly picked up a suitable stone and stood on line waiting for my turn to climb up the steps. With my strength waning and my feet bleeding and aching, this second climb was even more arduous than the first. Still, knowing that a German bullet was the only alternative, I drew on a hidden reservoir of strength that must have come straight from Hashem, and I finally made it to the top. Once again, I marched to the new roadbed and deposited my second rock. It took three hours for me to make the two round-trips into the quarry, resulting in a grand total of two rocks for the "advancement of the German Reich."

When I returned to my barracks after that day in the

Steinbruch, I vowed to make every effort to avoid being caught in a roundup for a labor detail again.

"I'd rather spend the entire day being counted on the *Appellplatz*," I told my friends, "than have to work in that miserable quarry once more."

The daily roundups for workers in the quarry continued, but I managed to stay clear of those *kapos* for the remainder of my stay in Mauthausen. Although standing on the *Apellplatz* for the eternal daily roll calls was sheer misery, when I reminded myself of the agony of the quarry, I was happy with my lot.

CHAPTER 31

Playing with Fire

ONE SUMMER DAY, OUR LIVES TOOK A SUDDEN TURN FOR the better. Quite unexpectedly, our entire group of Jewish prisoners was marched to the Mauthausen railroad siding and shipped off to a different camp in Linz, only a few miles west of Mauthausen. Unlike the extermination camp of Mauthausen, KZ Linz was an *Arbeitslager*, a labor camp, with workshops for various trades. We were the first Jews to come to the camp. Until then, the camp population had been made up of Frenchmen, Czechs, Yugoslavs, Russians and Poles.

KZ Linz was definitely an improvement over Mauthausen. There were no club-wielding *kapos*, and we were not subjected to the constant yelling and screaming to which we had become accustomed. It was a genuine labor camp where the

inmates were expected to be productive slave workers. I was overcome with relief. *Baruch Hashem*, I had survived Mauthausen, and the *Ribono Shel Olam* would spread His wings over me here as well.

As an experienced electrician and refrigeration expert, I was assigned to a technical workshop. After the work I had done in the Schindler camp, I had the ability to do a creditable job. Most important, though, I would work indoors in a shop. Those prisoners who were without a trade were put to work outdoors doing all kinds of backbreaking labor such as digging ditches, cutting trees or carrying heavy loads. Many of them did not survive very long.

Although conditions were slightly improved, I was still dressed in my striped prison uniform, and I still sported the shaved stripe down the middle of my head. To my horror, I soon realized that my appearance had taken on all the characteristics of a *Muselmann*, a walking skeleton.

As a technician, I enjoyed a small measure of preferential treatment. My sleeping quarters were a slight improvement over those in Mauthausen, and the food ration, though still far from adequate, was somewhat better.

Reveille was at four-thirty each morning, and by five o'clock, we were lined up for a mug of black coffee. This was followed by the inevitable *Appell* on the big square, where we had to wait for the *Scharfuehrer* to show up and count us. In rain or snow, we had to stand at attention as we waited to be counted. After the *Appell*, we marched to our workshops, did our jobs, and in the evening, marched back to our barracks. We had the same routine, day after day.

Just as I began to believe that things were improving, and that perhaps the Germans still had a spark of humanity left in them, an incident occurred that brought home to me the

innate German brutality that was behind the camps.

After a short while in the Linz camp, a few of the men in our workshop began to grumble about the long working hours and the poor quality of the food. Forgetting that they were slaves under the most ruthless taskmasters in history, they imagined that they were members of a labor union, fighting for better working conditions and increased food rations.

"Let's organize this shop and present to the Germans a list of our grievances," they suggested. "The Germans need our skills, and they'll accede to our demands."

"You're playing with fire," I warned them. "If you annoy the Germans, they'll show you who is boss. You'll be sorry!"

A few days later, confident of success, the five men approached the *Lagerfuehrer*, the camp commandant.

"We respectfully ask for double food rations and shorter working hours for the workers in this shop," the spokesman said, standing at attention.

"What?" the *Lagerfuehrer* exploded. "How dare you, you miserable wretches!"

The man remained silent, quaking with terror.

"*Oberscharfuehrer!*" the German yelled. "Put all five of them into cells. I'll teach those Jewish dogs to complain!"

Early the next morning, there was a tremendous commotion in the camp. Everyone was summoned to line up on the *Appellplatz* where, overnight, five gallows had been erected. We knew only too well the meaning of this. With a sickening feeling in my stomach, I watched as the five young men were led to their execution. Their hands were tied behind their backs, but their heads were held high as they marched toward the scaffold. We all stood in deathlike silence as they stepped on the chairs, and the nooses were placed around their necks.

As the executioner nonchalantly kicked away the chairs, causing the men to fall to their deaths, their last words were heard clearly.

"May G-d curse this nation until the end of time!" they shouted. "*Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad!*"

Their voices are not lost. Their cries, along with so many other innocent pleas, will wander through the world and haunt the German nation for thousands of generations.

"*Yisgadal veyiskadash shemeih rabbah*," some of us murmured. "*Hashem yinkom damam*. May Hashem avenge their blood."

We were appalled at the execution of these innocent young men. These five, all good friends of ours, had given their lives for our sakes. What had been their crime? Asking for a little relief and an extra slice of bread for their fellow prisoners. Silently, we wiped away our tears, the same question on all of our minds. Would we ever escape from this Gehinnom?

CHAPTER 32

Sacrifice and Suffering

WE HAD ARRIVED IN LINZ IN MID-SEPTEMBER, AND the *Yamim Noraim* were drawing near. The cool morning air beckoned us to *Selichos*, and the Austrian Alps south of Linz, covered with fresh snow, rose majestically in the background. The mighty peaks glistening in the sunshine evoked a *pasuk* in *Tehillim*.

"*Essa einai el heharim meiayin yavo ezri,*" I recited fervently. "I raise my eyes to the mountains; from where will my help come? *Ezri me'im Hashem,*" the mountains seemed to answer. "My help comes from Hashem, Maker of heaven and earth." (*Tehillim* 121:1-2)

Rosh Hashanah in Linz was like any other day. Reveille was at four-thirty in the morning, followed by the daily coffee, *Appell* and long hours of exhausting work. *Davening* and

tekias shofar were just fond memories from a time long gone. Only after work, back in our barracks, were we able to organize some semblance of a *minyan.* A year ago in Poland, the *davening* had been much easier, because all the inmates of the camp were Jewish. Here in Linz, we were a small minority among thousands of prisoners of different nationalities who looked askance at our prayers. The Russians in particular were determined to make life difficult for us.

To avoid any altercations, we lay on the grass behind the barracks, pretending to be relaxing outdoors. Meanwhile, lacking *machzorim* and *siddurim,* I led the *davening* by heart, summoning the words of the *tefillos* from memory. Although our *davening* was far from perfect, our *kavanos* were sincere. And as it says in Tehillim, "Hashem does not despise a contrite and crushed heart." (*Tehillim* 51:19) Crushed hearts we certainly had.

When we reached the words of *Avinu Malkeinu,* we all wept sincerely, pleading with Hashem to save us from the evil decrees and redeem us from all our sorrow.

"Have pity on us and on our children."

"Act for the sake of those who were murdered for Your holy Name."

"Act for the sake of those who went into fire and water for the sanctification of Your Name."

"Avenge before our eyes the spilled blood of Your servants."

Oh, how I missed my home, my parents, my brothers and sisters, the *davening* in *shul* and the *tekias shofar.* Would this vanished world ever rise again?

As we *davened,* I was reminded of the *marranos* in Spain. Mortally afraid of the prying eyes and ears of the Inquisition, the secret Jews of Spain hid in cellars and attics to *daven* and

celebrate the *Yamim Tovim*. Still, our fate was far worse. Although the Spanish Jews were driven from their country, they were welcomed in other countries, and they were able to start their lives anew. But to us, all doors were closed. The British had closed the gates to Palestine, and the Americans were turning back ships that were loaded with desperate Jewish refugees. Even when Eichmann offered to trade Jews for trucks and ammunition, the Allies refused to make deals. Therefore, while the whole world looked on, the carnage continued, and millions of Jews went to their deaths.

In a few days it would be *Yom Kippur*, and I was determined to fast, no matter what the consequences.

"If you don't eat, you're going to die," my friend Velvel Steinberg warned. "Here we fast all year round. Every day is *Yom Kippur*."

Stubbornly, I refused to budge from my resolution.

"In this camp, we are as good as dead," he persisted, adding a Talmudic twist. "And the dead are permitted to disobey the commandments of the Torah."

I kept quiet.

"Look, Duvid, it's an *inyan* of *pikuach nefesh*," he argued. "Preserving one's life takes precedence over everything, even fasting."

Nothing Velvel could say would make me change my mind. However, I knew that if I was going to fast, I would need some help. Over the previous few weeks, I had struck up a friendship with Yuri, a kindhearted, non-Jewish Russian prisoner. We got along well, and we often helped each other at work or filled in for one another. A jolly fellow, he did not display a trace of anti-Semitism, and he often asked me questions about G-d and the Jewish religion. Having grown up under the Communist regime, these concepts were strange

to him. He loved to hear stories from the Bible, listening with rapt attention as I spoke.

"Yuri," I said to him on *erev Yom Kippur*, "what I'm going to tell you may sound strange, but it means a great deal to me. Tomorrow, we Jews celebrate the holiest day in the year. It is a festival called *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. The Bible forbids us to eat or drink anything on that day."

"You can't eat anything at all?"

"I can't eat or drink for twenty-four hours, and therefore, I'd like to ask you to do me a great favor. Tomorrow, I want you to stand in line for me, pick up my rations of bread and soup and hide them. Then, when the fast is over, I'll be able to eat the food. Would you do that for me?"

Yuri smiled. The good-natured Russian really wanted to help.

"Absolutely," he said immediately. "But I just don't understand how you can fast in a place like this. Just look at you; you're nothing but skin and bones. You're near starvation as it is. Fasting an entire day might just kill you."

"Look, Yuri," I said. "I appreciate your concern. But I simply must fast. G-d will help me, I'm sure of it."

"Okay," Yuri replied, "but you surely can't work on an empty stomach. How can you handle heavy tools and soldering machines, and move heavy equipment around? Listen, I'll cover for you tomorrow. You come to the shop, but I'll do the work for both of us."

Tears welled up in my eyes. Overcome with gratitude, I was unable to say a word. I merely shook his hand, looking him meaningfully in the eye. Righteous gentiles still existed, even in this inferno.

Yuri told his Russian friends about my intention to fast for an entire day.

"That Jew must be insane," was the consensus. "He's committing suicide."

"Quite the contrary," said Yuri. "He believes in something and is willing to put his life on the line for his beliefs. As skinny as he is, he is stronger than any of us."

That *Yom Kippur*, I fasted for the full twenty-four hours. After breaking my fast on the slice of bread and watery soup Yuri had saved for me, I regained a little strength. The next day at work, a strange thing happened. Velvel, the *chaver* who had tried so hard to dissuade me from fasting, came over to me with a sheepish look on his face.

"Duvid, I have to tell you something," he said. "I also fasted yesterday. You see, Hashem is testing me, trying to see if I will maintain my belief. But I wanted to show Him that no matter how hard He punishes me, I remain faithful to Him. "*Hashem li lo ira, mah yaaseh li adam*. Hashem is on my side, I have no fear; what can man do to me?" (*Tehillim* 118:6)

In the weeks that followed, I fell ill several times. This was not surprising, given the inadequate sanitary conditions in the camp. It was impossible to maintain any degree of personal hygiene since we could not launder our uniforms, which were the only clothes we had. Each day, we worked on the grimy machinery, and we had little opportunity to bathe or cleanse ourselves. The filth and squalor in the barracks resulted in an infestation of lice, and disease was rampant. For a Jew, whose entire life was based on purity and cleanliness, on pouring *negel vasser* in the morning, washing hands before meals and regularly immersing in the *mikveh*, the repulsive filth in the camp was as difficult to endure as the pangs of hunger.

Once or twice during my illness, when I was running a high fever, I resorted to moving in to the *Revier*, but I made

sure not to stay there overnight, aware that the Germans would constantly raid the infirmary and exterminate the weakened patients.

Looking back at the suffering I endured while I was sick, I am certain that without the constant *hashgachah pratis* of the *Ribono Shel Olam*, I could not have survived.

In a powerful prophesy in *Yechezkel*, the prophet describes how Hashem ordered "the man clothed in linen" to put a mark on the foreheads of certain people. Then Hashem said, "Kill off old men, youth and maiden, women and children, but do not touch any person who bears the mark." (*Yechezkel* 9:6)

While I was in the concentration camps, I felt like a person who bore the "mark of life," the sign that made me immune to the Angel of Death. Let no holocaust survivor believe for one moment that he remained alive by dint of his own wits, ingenuity or courage. It was the *tav chaim*, the "mark of life" that Hashem placed on his head, that made him invulnerable to the German oppressors. Day after day, I experienced overt miracles, as did everyone else who survived the camps. Unfortunately, there are many who persist in denying that our lives were guided by Divine Providence, and I pity them for their lack of understanding.

The Chiddushei Harim explains this thought very beautifully. Quoting the *pasuk*, "*Ve'anochi hasteir astir panai bayom hahu*; on that day I will utterly hide My face," (*Devarim* 31:18) the Rebbe is struck by the redundant phraseology of *hasteir astir*, literally, "hide I will hide."

He explains that if Hashem's concealment is noticed and felt, then He is not truly hidden; He is only waiting for His people to do *teshuvah*. The real tragedy is when the concealment itself is hidden, and no one senses that Hashem has

removed Himself. In that instance, the people do not seek Hashem, and no one feels the need to do *teshuvah*.

Thus, the meaning of *ve'anochi hasteir astir* is "I will hide My concealment." Hashem will dull their senses so they don't feel the lack of Divine radiance in their lives. That is truly the harshest punishment.

CHAPTER 33

The Woes of Winter

THE COOL AUTUMN DAYS BEGAN TO TURN WINTRY, AND the alpine mountains that surrounded us were covered with a layer of glistening white snow. The splendid chain of imposing peaks proclaimed the greatness of the Creator. However, although the scenery was magnificent, we could hardly appreciate it, since the bone-chilling winds that blew into the valley numbed our senses and clouded our minds. The winter garments we were issued were striped prisoners' coats made of paper-thin material that offered no protection at all against the wind and cold.

Personal hygiene in the camp was taken care of on routine trips to the bathhouse, a large brick building located a good distance from our barracks. During the warm summer days, this presented no problem, but now that winter

was upon us, these trips to the showers at night in sub-zero weather were sheer agony.

The *kapos*, who were dressed in heavy quilted woolen jackets and gloves, drove us like cattle, prodding us with sticks and mercilessly hitting people over their heads with their clubs.

"*Schneller! Schneller!*" they howled. "Faster! Faster!"

We ran as fast as our frozen limbs would carry us until we reached the bathhouse. Before entering the large communal shower room, each prisoner received a small bar of soap with the letters RJF imprinted on it. The soap had a strange texture, and although at the time we were puzzled by it, we never would have dreamed the gruesome truth that lay behind it. With horror, we later learned that this soap was produced from the ashes of the Jews who had been gassed and burned in the crematoria of Auschwitz and other extermination camps, and the letters RJF stood for *Reines Juedisches Fett*, Pure Jewish Fat.

We quickly entered the showers, and before we could properly rinse ourselves, we were chased out again. Dripping wet, we were pushed outside into the bitter cold and goaded along the main road back to the barracks. With only a thin towel to dry ourselves off, we all trembled violently, sure that we would freeze to death. And in truth, by the time we reached our bunks, our bodies were often coated with sheets of ice.

After each of these winter trips to the shower, dozens of prisoners died of pneumonia and hypothermia.

It was at these times, lying half-frozen in my bunk, numbed by the cold, that I made my pledge. If the *Ribono Shel Olam* allowed me to survive this Gehinnom, I would take upon myself the duty of recording my experiences during the

great *churban*, beginning with the day the Germans entered Poland on September 1, 1939.

During the winter of 1944, life in KZ Linz was getting progressively worse. The cold wind blew right through our striped convicts' suits, and the wooden clogs that served as our shoes caused painful blisters.

The days seemed interminably long, and the aches and pains brought on by the bitter cold competed with the ever-present pangs of hunger. Even the quality of the food was getting worse by the day. The turnip soup was full of sand, and the only alternative was starving to death.

The only ray of hope in our wretched situation was provided by the rumors of the Allied advances. From day to day, the tension in the camp increased as we received news of retreating German forces. The rumors often were contradictory, but desperate as we were, they inspired us with hope.

"The Americans have crossed the Rhine."

"The British have captured Bremen."

"The Germans have launched a counter-offensive."

"The Russians are advancing through Poland."

No one could pinpoint the source of the rumors, but looking at the downcast faces of the Germans, we knew that their defeat would not take much longer. Still, aware that ruin was inevitable, the Nazis held on to their Jewish prey. Although Hitler's generals were clamoring for trains to send troops to the front, the trains were allocated to Eichmann for shipping Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz. Killing Jews took priority over military conquest!

Linz, however, was far removed from the battlefront. In fact, there was talk that the Germans would make their last stand here in the Bavarian and Austrian Alps. I wondered anxiously if I would survive until the Allied victory. All

around me, people were dying from starvation and disease. Typhus, malaria and cholera were taking their toll. There were rumors that the Germans had poisoned the food and the drinking water with bacteria of various diseases. Many people, overwhelmed by hunger, misery and despondency, lost their will to live and simply lay down and died. Never in history had our *emunah* been so cruelly tested. Yet I palpably felt that "*Bechol tzarasam lo tzar*. In all their troubles, Hashem was troubled." (*Yeshayahu* 63:9) Hashem commiserated with us in our afflictions, and He would have pity on us.

BOOK FIVE

Songs of Anticipation

CHAPTER 34

Bombs over Linz

AT LONG LAST, THE DREADFUL WINTER GAVE WAY TO an early spring. The gentle rays of the sun caressed the frozen earth, and even in our miserable camp, the trees began to sprout. Fragrant blossoms in a riot of bright colors announced the rebirth of life. "*Ki hinei hasesav avar, hanitzanim niru baaretz, eis hazamir higia.* For now the winter is past, the blossoms are seen in the land; the time of song has come." (*Shir Hashirim* 2:11-12) Spring was in the air. This year, it heralded liberation, and I felt like singing. In my misery, I had almost forgotten what it meant to sing. I had become one of the living dead; my flesh was wasting away, and my strength was waning. Were my vocal chords still intact? Did my voice still have its resonance? *Eis hazamir higia*, I told myself joyously. It's time to sing again!

I was weak from hunger and my stomach was empty, but I had a song in my heart. A song expressing hope that *zeman cheiruseinu* was at hand. The sweet *niggun* of the *yotzros* of the *Arba Parshiyos* rang in my ears, sending shivers of anticipation down my spine. *Pesach* was coming! I was jolted back to reality by the practical difficulties I would have to deal with. How would I avoid eating *chametz* this year?

Once again I turned to Yuri, my Russian friend.

"There is another Jewish holiday coming up," I began, "and I have to ask you a favor."

"Don't tell me you're fasting again," Yuri replied.

"No, Yuri, this holiday is called *Pesach*, and it lasts for eight days. I don't have to fast, but during that time, I won't be able to eat any bread or soup from the camp kitchen."

"No bread or soup for eight days?" Yuri exclaimed incredulously. "We're on a starvation diet as it is, and now you want to cut out the little food we are getting? Giving up bread was possible back home in Poland, but not in Linz, my friend!"

After a lengthy discussion, we agreed that for the duration of *Pesach*, I would give Yuri my daily food ration. He, in turn, would supply me with some raw potatoes. I assembled a makeshift electric oven in the plant where I was working, using assorted spare parts, and I was ready for *Yom Tov*. Each day, I cooked one or two potatoes, and although I was terribly hungry, keeping a kosher *Pesach* made me the happiest man on earth.

Throughout those eight days, I lived in mortal fear of getting caught. Having an electric oven in my possession and eating illegally obtained potatoes were crimes for which I would be hanged. But the adage of our *Chachamim* proved to be true. *Chazal* say in *Kiddushin* 39b, "*Sheluchei mitzvah einan*

nizakin. Those who are doing a *mitzvah* will not be harmed."

Baruch Hashem, the *Yom Tov* came and went, and my "crimes" remained undetected.

Meanwhile, American and British bombers flew countless missions over our region. They came in wave after wave, flying in triangular formation and dropping their deadly cargo on the city of Linz and other targets in the surrounding countryside. We listened with glee to the earsplitting blasts of the falling bombs which brought death and destruction to the German and Austrian populace. Unlike the German bombs that had terrorized me at the beginning of the war, these explosions were music to my ears. Finally, the Germans were getting a small dose of their own medicine.

Several bombs hit the plant where we were working, piercing the roof and killing a number of Germans. We had been huddled in the air raid shelter, but when fires broke out in the plant, we were chased outside to put out the blaze. As we poured buckets of water on the flames, American fighter pilots mistakenly took us for German personnel and began strafing us with machine gun fire. Luckily, none of the Jews were hit. After surviving six years of German carnage, it would have been terribly ironic to be killed by our long-awaited liberators.

Our plant was in shambles, with machinery scattered all over the floor. The office and filing cabinets were smoldering, and the stench of charred German bodies filled the interior. We savored the sweet taste of revenge.

Each time the Allied bombers were sighted near the camp, the air raid sirens were sounded. The Jewish prisoners would calmly walk to the airraid shelters, knowing from experience that their lives were in Hashem's Hands. If Hashem wants them to live, they would be shielded, and

chalilah, if it was decreed that they were to die in an air raid, running to the bomb shelter wouldn't do any good.

The Germans, on the other hand, ran hurriedly into the shelters at the first sound of the siren. The members of the Aryan master race fell over one another in wide-eyed panic, pushing aside their comrades as they tried to be the first ones in the shelter. Once inside, the members of the dreaded *Waffen SS* were gray with fear, their eyes reflecting desperation as they contemplated their impending doom.

While the blood of countless innocent Jews dripped from their hands, they pointed at us accusingly, blaming us for their misfortunes.

"*Die Juden sind unser unglueck!*" they cried. "The Jews are the cause of our troubles!"

During the bombings, it was plain to all the Jewish inmates that Hashem was spreading His protective wings over us. One day, as American bombs rained down relentlessly, we sat in the bomb shelter feeling a bizarre mixture of apprehension and delight. Closer and closer the blasts seemed to come, and as the earth under us trembled, cracks appeared in the walls of the shelter. A direct hit would mean the end of all of us. I tried to comfort myself with the thought that even if I were killed, there would be many Germans dying alongside of me. "*Tamos nafshi im Pelishtim,*" I told myself, remembering the *pasuk* in *Shoftim*. "Let me die with the Philistines." (*Shoftim* 16:30)

But the bombers moved on, and we were still alive. Emerging from the shelter, we found the entire area riddled with bomb craters, the dust just beginning to settle. Cadavers of German soldiers littered the campsite, and the burned ruins of the plant were completely flattened. Miraculously, our shelter had been spared.

Squadron after squadron of Allied bombers continued to fly overhead, the steady drone of their engines sounding more pleasing to my ears than the most beautiful symphony.

Since our plant was destroyed, we were put to work cleaning up and repairing the bombed roads and buildings. This was heavy labor, especially in our weakened condition. Lifting boulders, moving earth and filling bomb craters required more strength than we could muster. To make matters worse, our daily bread ration became smaller, and the soup became more watery by the day.

The SS men who watched over us were as sadistic as always, prodding us with their clubs and shouting and cursing ceaselessly. Even as the Allies approached, the Germans would not stop tormenting us until the last minute. How true are the words of *Chazal*, "A *rasha* will never repent, even when he is standing at the gates of Gehinnom." (*Eruvin* 19a)

The bombing raids were continuous, laying to waste factories, power stations and railroad terminals. Each day we were sent to different locations to fill in the huge craters that were left by the bombs. Germany lay in ruins. Among the strategic targets bombarded by the Allies was the Linz railroad station, which was completely destroyed. The elegant terminal was a scene of utter desolation, railroad tracks reaching upward in grotesque, pretzel-like shapes.

With each passing day, the conditions in the camp grew increasingly more difficult. Food was scarcer than ever, and the inmates were becoming desperate. I remember seeing some of the Russian prisoners cut meat from a dead horse in order to still their hunger, and at one point, I recall some of the inmates cutting pieces of human flesh from the bodies of dead prisoners.

Tragically, with freedom almost within reach, people

were dying left and right. The campgrounds began to resemble a huge morgue, with bodies piled high among the barracks.

Still, Hitler did not surrender. "*Wir werden nie kapitulieren!*" he would shout hysterically. "We will never capitulate!" And the German people all applauded.

"*Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil! Heil Hitler!*" the millions of Germans shouted deliriously. The German nation adored their *Fuehrer* and followed him blindly. Those people stand accused before the tribunal of history, guilty of the most loathsome atrocities committed by mankind. Let no German try to exonerate himself by saying that it was the Nazis who did it; they all must share the responsibility for the holocaust. They were the ones who brought Hitler to power, and they all cheered his exploits. We, the survivors, cannot forget the crimes that were committed against our people. "*Kol demei achicha zo'akim.*" (*Bereishis* 4:10) The voice of our brothers' blood is screaming from the ground.

As the bombs continued to fall, our repair crews worked around the clock in eight-hour shifts. For several weeks, I was assigned to working on the night shift, and in total darkness, we would be forced to clear the debris and put out raging fires.

Often, the bombs would rain down as we worked. At these times, everyone took cover, falling to the ground or seeking shelter in the previously bombed ruins. Still, the flying debris and the shrapnel took their toll, killing a number of our fellow workers. Liberation was so close and yet so far.

In the camp, the tension mounted. We all knew that the German defeat was imminent, but what were the SS going to do to us? Rumors circulated at a feverish pace.

"Before surrendering, they're going to shoot us all."

"They're going to take us on a death march."

"They'll stop giving us food, starving us until we're all dead."

Meanwhile, they continued to torture us, pushing us to work harder and harder, until our minds were numb with disappointment. How much longer must we suffer? When would it end?

CHAPTER 35

Destruction and Defeat

WITH *PESACH* BEHIND US, *SHAVUOS*, THE TIME OF *Kabbalas Hatorah*, was drawing near. Sadly, by this time, many of the *chassidic bachurim* had become lax and indifferent in their *Yiddishkeit*.

After six years of suffering and starvation, surrounded by riffraff and deprived of parents and Rebbe, many a *chassidic bachur's* fervor had cooled. All tangible reminders of his *Yiddishkeit* had been removed. *Shabbos* and *kashrus* could not be observed, and his *tefillin*, *siddur* and *Chumash* had been taken from him. Surrounded by cynics and agnostics who ridiculed his beliefs and mocked his Rebbe, the helpless *bachur* had no one to answer his questions and explain to him the bewildering *hastaras Panim* that made the holocaust possible. Was it any wonder that an impressionable young

bachur lost his bearings, and that his faith began to waver?

And yet, in times of desperation, all returned to Hashem. When the bullets were flying and the bombs were exploding all around us, everyone, *chassid, yeshivah bachur*, freethinker and non-believer alike, all *davened* to Hashem.

"*Ribono Shel Olam!*" cried each one in his own way. "You have helped me until this moment. Please don't abandon me now that the *yeshuah* is so close."

Indeed, Hashem heard every heartfelt plea, for even during the greatest *tzaros*, He never abandoned His people. This thought is poignantly expressed in the Baal Shem Tov's explanation of a verse in the *tochachah*, the series of dreadful curses in *Parshas Bechukosai*.

"*Ve'af gam zos* . . . Yet even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or spurn them so as to destroy them, annulling My covenant with them, for I am G-d their Lord." (*Vayikra* 26:44)

"Even when they commit all these *aveiros*," explains the Baal Shem Tov, "I will take into consideration that they are in the land of their enemies. And compared to the utter depravity of the gentiles, Yisrael's sins are insignificant. Therefore, I will not reject them or spurn them so as to destroy them . . ."

Meanwhile, throughout Germany, railroad stations, viaducts and communication centers were targeted by the Allied bombers and summarily destroyed. The country was now virtually paralyzed. Still, the SS men continued to force us to clear the rubble, lift the mangled railroad tracks and fill the bomb craters, as if that would get the trains rolling again. Ironically, the bombed locomotives still bore the large sign that read, *Raeder muessen rollen fuer den sieg*, wheels must keep rolling for victory.

During the aerial attacks, the Germans would listen intently to the news reports on the portable radios they brought into the shelters. With pleasure, we listened to the positive news of Allied advances.

"The American murderers have come back," the German newscaster reported. "Joined by the French and British bandits, they have bombed Berlin, Leipzig and Dresden. Fires are raging out of control, and thousands of buildings have been reduced to rubble. The cities are in total chaos.

"When the *Fuehrer* leads us to victory, the Allied criminals will pay a heavy price . . ."

Displaying no emotion, we tried to remain expressionless as we listened to the reports. However, these reports lifted our spirits and gave us the courage and determination to persevere.

"Just a few more days, and our troubles are over," we encouraged one another.

"*Im yirtzeh Hashem*," said Menachem, a former atheist. "If Hashem wills it."

As the Allies drew nearer, our SS guards seemed not to care about us any more. They became preoccupied with their own problems, anxious about their fate and that of their families back home.

One spring evening towards the end of April, my unit was on a typical march through the countryside. We were on the night shift, and each of us carried a shovel on his shoulder and a small lantern in his hands. The crickets were chirping in the pastures, and the refreshing, cool breeze made our hunger pangs even more acute.

We halted at a large field dotted with bomb craters and prepared to go to work. Just then, a formation of Allied bombers flew overhead. They flew quite low, and their

powerful floodlights illuminated the entire field. Assuming we were German soldiers, the bombers launched a ferocious attack, dropping hundreds of bombs and explosives. Some of the prisoners ran for cover, and the SS men fled into the woods in a mad scramble, scared for their lives.

After all that we had been through, many of us watched passively as the bombs rained down all around us. The misery, pain and hunger had made us indifferent, and we were ready to accept whatever Hashem had in store for us. Perhaps a quick death was even preferable to the slow death of starvation and misery that awaited us in the camp.

The panic and terror that had stricken our brutal German guards provided us with a measure of delight. I thought of my early encounters with the arrogant monsters and how they ordered us around, beating and cursing us. How superior these empty creatures had felt, and now, like deflated balloons, their haughtiness had evaporated in an instant.

Back in the camp, the SS food rations had been drastically cut, and we received no food at all. But the *yeshuah* could not be far off. We were sure that any day now, the Americans would arrive. Still, we lived with the constant fear that at the very last moment, the Germans would take us into the woods and massacre us.

With salvation just around the corner, we were still quite helpless. Some of the prisoners spoke of forming an uprising, but it was out of the question. Our SS guards still had their guns and would mow us down at the first sign of insurrection. Besides, we were so weak, we were certainly no match for the healthy, well-fed Germans. Even if we ran away, we would not get very far in our striped camp uniforms.

During this time, some prisoners from a concentration camp in Wels, Austria, arrived in our camp. The newcomers

related stories of unbelievable horror and inhumanity.

"In Wels we had a German *kapo*," one of the new arrivals told us, "who was the epitome of heartlessness. His greatest enjoyment was seeing us suffer. When he realized that our camp was being liquidated, he filled a huge cistern with water. He then rounded up all the weak and infirm prisoners and threw them into the cistern, holding their heads underwater until they drowned."

"The SS men relished the spectacle of the Jews drowning," another prisoner continued, "and there was nothing we could do. Protesting would mean suicide."

We were appalled. Was this the fate that was in store for us?

Day by day, the tension in our barracks grew. For an entire week, the bombs fell all around us, destroying buildings and killing countless people. The ground beneath us shook, and the walls and windows rattled constantly.

I noticed that with time, there were fewer and fewer SS men to guard us. I realized that the Nazis were abandoning their weapons and changing into civilian clothes, trying to blend into the local population. However, their disguise would not be of much help to them, for every SS man had a serial number tattooed under his arm. The Allies learned of this, and after the liberation, they arrested anyone branded with this identifying mark.

It was Friday, May 4, 1945. Although many SS men had fled, there were quite a few diehards who remained at their posts. Germany was crumbling and the Americans would soon make their appearance, but the SS men still beat the emaciated prisoners with their clubs and slapped their faces until the last minute.

That Friday was a critical day. From the gloomy news

reports, the Germans knew that the end was near. We, too, were kept abreast of the latest developments, but we were worried about the coming transition.

Several Russian prisoners, along with a band of Italians, Frenchmen and Yugoslavs, picked up the weapons the SS had abandoned, and left the camp, making their way into the city of Linz. There, they gave vent to the pent-up rage within them and wrought utter havoc, beating and killing the German deserters who had changed into civilian clothes.

Friday night I lay down, but sleep was impossible. The exciting news stories made my mind race. The Russians were at the gates of Berlin, and the Americans had captured Munich and had advanced to within one hundred miles of Linz. Our nightmare was almost over.

CHAPTER 36

Liberation at Last!

AFTER A SLEEPLESS NIGHT, I WOKE UP EARLY ON *SHABBOS* morning. The camp commandant, an elderly German, was making an announcement.

"Everyone is requested to leave the camp," he said, uncharacteristically polite. "We are taking you to an air raid shelter that is located inside a large mountain at the outskirts of Linz. In that shelter, you will be safe from bombs and artillery fire. There is plenty of room for everyone."

No one moved. What were they doing? Was this another German trick?

A fierce-looking Russian stepped forward.

"We will not budge!" he announced firmly. "You are just trying to fool us; you're probably planning to kill us all."

The *Lagerfuehrer* begged us to believe his sincerity.

"I'm really doing this to save your lives," he pleaded. "Maybe when the Americans come, they'll be lenient with me. By the lives of my wife and children, I swear that no harm will come to you. Trust me, please trust me."

As a sign of goodwill, he ordered the barracks leaders to hand out two-pound loaves of bread to each prisoner. Accustomed to receiving one slice of bread daily, these loaves were unbelievable treasures.

If they were going to kill us, I reasoned to myself, they would not distribute bread to everyone. Maybe the *Lagerfuehrer* really meant what he said.

Hungrily, I bit into the bread. It had been a very long time since I was able to still my hunger. At that moment, I understood clearly why we say a special *berachah* over bread. Those who survived the terrible hunger pangs of a German concentration camp know to treat bread with the proper respect.

Seeing how afraid the Germans were of the Allied liberators, we were convinced that they were indeed trying to protect us, if only to curry favor with the Americans.

"Look, we even tried to save their lives," the Germans would probably tell the Americans.

We marched past the city of Linz. As we moved on, there were fewer and fewer guards watching us. One by one, the Germans changed their clothes and ran off. Several Russian prisoners who had gotten hold of rifles, began shooting at the fleeing Nazis, killing a number of them. Our SS guards began to return fire, and the armed Russians escaped quickly.

The march came to a halt at an enormous shelter inside a tall mountain. The cavernous, cave-like shelter was able to hold the entire camp population, more than twenty thousand men.

Still hesitant to believe the good intentions of the Germans, we wondered if they were planning to blow up the shelter once all of us were inside, as a grand finale to their macabre plan of extermination.

Looking around, we noticed that every uniformed SS guard had vanished. The German *kapos* who were with us looked around nervously. They knew that without SS protection, they would be in serious trouble. Indeed, before long, many of the bitter, outraged prisoners attacked their hated oppressors, beating them to death with wild abandon. A few of the *kapos* managed to escape, but they were pursued and quickly put to death.

After all the years of intimidation at the hands of the Nazis, we were hesitant to leave the shelter on our own initiative. But upon hearing the American artillery and tank fire close by, we ventured slowly outside. Ingrained with the concentration camp mentality, we automatically lined up in rows of five abreast, just as we had done until then. It would be a while before we would really be able to act like free men.

Similar to this is the Kotzker Rebbe's comment on the phrase "*Vehotzeisi eschem mitachas sivlos Mitzrayim*. I will take you away from your forced labor in Egypt." (*Shemos* 6:6)

"The word *sivlos*," writes the Kotzker Rebbe, "stems from the root *saval*, to suffer, to be resigned.

"The first step to freedom is to rise up against slavery. As long as Yisrael is resigned to enslavement and operates with a slave mentality, they cannot be redeemed. In this *pasuk*, Moshe announces that Hashem will remove from their hearts the *sivlos Mitzrayim*, their feeling of submission. This is the mental attitude that is needed before they can have divine liberation."

As we neared our liberation, we still had slave laborers'

frames of mind. The idea of liberty had not yet taken hold. The Germans had obliterated our sense of freedom and independence. Marching like docile sheep under the watchful eyes of SS guards had become second nature to us. Even now, although there were no guards, we walked in military formation, as if we expected to be beaten at any moment.

With no place to turn, we marched back to the Linz concentration camp. Gradually, an exhilarating feeling welled up in my heart. *B'ezras Hashem*, the nightmare would soon be over. Freedom was at hand. Prisoners of all nationalities were singing their national anthems and patriotic songs, something they would not have dared to do before.

By early afternoon, we approached the Linz camp. In the distance, we saw a large group of machine gun-toting prisoners guarding a group of Germans who had been trying to run away.

In the camp, some of the more vicious German guards received perfunctory trials and were shot on the spot. The others were beaten until they lay submissively on the ground. Suddenly, we heard the roar of approaching motorcycles. The Americans were here! A small motorcycle patrol soon entered the campgrounds.

With the agility of athletes, the soldiers jumped off their motorcycles and removed their goggles. It was the first time I had ever seen the olive-green uniforms and helmets of the American Army, and it was a sight I will never forget. Everyone rushed forward to embrace the angels of liberation. Grown men wept openly. The Americans' warm smiles and outstretched hands released a flood of tears that had been suppressed by years of suffering, pain and fear.

Incredulously, the Americans gazed at the living skeletons all around them and cringed with genuine compassion.

They had heard stories about concentration camp atrocities and outrages, but this was their first encounter with actual survivors. It was much worse than they had imagined.

"*Shalom aleichem!*" a Jewish soldier called out. "We have come to set you free. But we must ask you to put down your weapons. You cannot go on shooting the German guards, no matter what they did to you. We are taking them as prisoners, and justice will be done."

"Tell us, please," we pleaded with the Jewish soldier. "What happened in the other camps? Do you have any idea where our parents and family might be, and what conditions they're in? How can we go about finding them?"

"I'm sorry," he replied sadly. "I might as well tell you the truth. I doubt you will ever be able to find your friends or family again, because most of them are probably no longer living. The Germans wiped out the Jews of Poland in the gas chambers of Auschwitz."

After these soft-spoken words, the soldier's voice took on a vehement tone.

"You see this gun?" he cried, pointing at his pistol. "As long as I have a breath of life in me, I will take revenge on these wretched murderers!"

His answer struck me like a thunderclap on a clear day. I stood there speechless, unable to utter a word.

In a daze, I returned to my barracks to collect my meager belongings. The soldier's words had clouded my mind, leaving me numb. Just then, I came upon a group of friends, and without uttering a word, we all broke into tears, bemoaning the dreadful loss of our families. Throughout the bitter years of suffering, we clung to the hope that we would one day be reunited with our loved ones. It was this spark of hope that had given us the courage to carry on despite all our suffering,

and now our fondest dreams were shattered.

The day of liberation had finally arrived, but instead of exhilaration, I felt a crushing depression. Instead of bright sunshine, I saw black clouds. I gazed around me listlessly as conflicting thoughts raced through my mind.

Searching for inspiration, I recalled the *pasuk* that describes Aharon's reaction to the tragic death of his two sons. The Torah merely says, "*Vayidom Aharon.* And Aharon was silent." (*Vayikra* 10:3)

Like Aharon, I would abide by Hashem's infinite wisdom; like Aharon, I would remain silent.

A short time later, we were all driven to a hospital where an American army doctor examined us. Continually shaking his head, he expressed amazement that people in such deteriorated physical condition were still able to cling to life. The textbooks in medical school had not prepared him for dealing with concentration camp survivors.

After the examination, most of us were released immediately, but some men had to stay in the hospital for treatment.

Now, after living on the verge of starvation for so long, the Americans lavishly provided us with any foods our hearts desired. We were offered an abundance of bread, butter, milk, chocolate, ice cream and other delicacies. I had already forgotten how most of these foods tasted, and I was delighted with this new feeling of being satisfied. Unfortunately, many of the starved prisoners gorged themselves rapidly, and as a result, they became seriously ill. It was painfully ironic that a number of people, having survived the torments and misery of the concentration camp, now died after the liberation from the effects of overeating.

CHAPTER 37

The Taste of Freedom

WITH THE LIBERATION, A NEW WORLD WAS OPENING up for me, and I felt utterly lost. Where to turn? Where to go? Where would I find a place to sleep?

"Let's go back to our barracks," one of my friends suggested. "At least, we'll have a place to sleep and a roof over our heads."

"Are you out of your mind?" the others shot back indignantly. "We'd rather sleep outdoors than go back into that wretched camp."

"Come, let's go into the city and see what we can find there," someone else suggested.

And so we walked to Linz, past wheat and corn fields until we came to the outskirts of the city. Right away, we came upon a large, empty house. The Austrians in the neighborhood,

who only yesterday would have slit our throats, politely told us that the owners had run away.

"You see," they said, smiling graciously, "they were Nazis. Now that the war is over, they abandoned everything and went into hiding with friends in the countryside."

Weak though we were, we broke into the house and made ourselves comfortable. We took turns taking baths in the tub, which was a luxury we had almost forgotten. Meanwhile, the others took stock of the closets and cabinets, and they found enough suits and clean underwear for all of us. Finally, physically and emotionally spent, we all went to sleep. There were not enough beds for all of us, so several men bedded down on the floor, using the heavy German feather quilts as mattresses.

My first night as a free man was an experience I will never forget. Emotions and memories overwhelmed me. Sleeping in a normal apartment with a regular bed and bathroom meant rejoining a civilization that I did not know existed any more. I felt like I had lived through the Exodus from Egypt, making the awesome transition from bondage to freedom. However, one aspect of our liberation contrasted sharply with the Exodus from Egypt. At the splitting of the Red Sea, Moshe and Bnei Yisrael were inspired to sing the *shirah*, a song of jubilation. We, on the other hand, torn from our families and bereft of all our possessions, were steeped in the darkest bereavement. All night, I heard the people around me sobbing and moaning as the terrible truth began to sink in.

We got up early the next morning, wondering where we would get food for breakfast. We tried knocking on some of the neighbors' doors, but they were afraid to open up. Finally, we banged with our fists on one of the doors.

"We are inmates of the concentration camp, and we want food!" we shouted. "If you don't open up, we'll break down the door and take what we want!"

At that, an Austrian slowly opened the door and timidly handed us some bread and a jar of jam. This was hardly enough for our group of eighteen ravenous men, and we continued on our way, hoping to find some way to still our hunger.

After walking a few blocks, we came upon a grocery store that was closed, and we gazed despairingly at the big padlock hanging from the door. So much food only a few feet away, yet it could not be touched. Desperate for something to eat, we checked all the entrances to the store, finally finding a door that could be forced open. We all poured inside and began to fill sacks with as much food as we could carry. Some of our group simply went wild, unable to hold themselves back from eating from the wide array of foodstuffs that were before them. Unfortunately, a few of these men grew violently ill and had to be taken to the hospital. Their experiences reminded us to be cautious and go very slowly in adjusting to a normal diet.

We returned to the house, and just as we were unloading the groceries, we heard one of the group, Shmelke Blumenkranz, calling from down in the cellar.

"Hey, come down, fellows!" he shouted. "You won't believe what I found here!"

We all bolted down the stairs into the cellar where we found large bins filled with potatoes, carrots and onions. It was as if Hashem sent us manna from Heaven. *Baruch Hashem*, our food problems were solved.

After recuperating for a few days, we explored the city of Linz and established contact with the city administration.

One of the municipal officials proved to be very friendly and helpful.

"You know," he told us smilingly, "here in Linz we have a beautiful palace that used to belong to Hermann Goering, Hitler's right-hand man and marshal of the Luftwaffe. During the war, Goering looted all the museums in the occupied countries, taking possession of many of the most exquisite paintings. These priceless art treasures were displayed in his palace in Linz. Now that Goering and his entire staff have been arrested by the Allies, this palace is empty. Why don't you all move into one of the buildings on the huge estate? There you'll be able to live comfortably and recover from the terrible distress you have suffered."

The following day, our entire group moved into one of the huge buildings on Goering's estate. Each of us was given a luxurious bedroom furnished in baroque style, with a private bath and a balcony with a magnificent view. The rooms were adorned with hundreds of paintings by the great masters, including Rembrandt, Velasquez and Renoir.

During this time, the officers of the American Army High Command were extremely helpful.

"If there's anything you need, just let us know," the American colonel told us.

"Could you supply us with kosher food?" we asked, not even daring to hope that it was possible.

That same day, to our delight, we received the first of many shipments of kosher food from the Joint Distribution Committee. The colonel and other military personnel regularly visited us to make sure that our group was receiving the best of care. In short, we were given everything and treated like royalty. Living on a magnificent estate and provided with nourishing food, we enjoyed complete rest and slowly began

to recuperate from our harrowing ordeals.

As the days went by, a warm friendship developed between the American soldiers, many of whom were Jewish, and our small group of concentration camp survivors. Eventually, we invited them to join us for *Shabbos*, and the invitation was gladly accepted.

That Friday night, I officiated as *chazan*. I sang a familiar *niggun* for *Lechah Dodi* that delighted all those that recognized the tune. Even the Americans, who had never heard the *niggun* before, caught on quickly and joined in the singing. It was wonderful to be able to sing the words, "*Rav lach sheves be'eimek habacha.* Too long have you dwelt in the valley of weeping." And tears filled our eyes as we sang, "*Vehayu limshisah shosayich* . . . May your oppressors be downtrodden, and may those who devoured you be cast far off. Your G-d will rejoice over you like a groom rejoicing over his bride."

After *davening*, we sat down together to a festive meal in a true *heimishe Shabbos* atmosphere with *Kiddush*, *zemiros* and *divrei Torah*.

Over and over, we sang the *niggun*, "*Perok yas anach mipum aryevasa.* Save Your sheep from the mouths of lions, and bring the people out of its exile, the people that You chose from all the nations."

It was obvious that the American Jewish soldiers were deeply moved. This was their first contact with *chassidim*, and they loved the fervor, the beautiful singing and the *simchah* that filled us in spite of all we had been through.

As we celebrated the *kedushah* of *Shabbos*, we clearly recognized the Hand of Hashem that had allowed us to rejoice in the castle of our archenemy while he was incarcerated in an American dungeon.

Meanwhile, many former inmates from other camps

converged on Linz, and they joined us in Goering's palace. The buildings of the estate were soon full of people, many of them broken in body and spirit. Still, many others refused to despair. Although they knew that most of Polish Jewry had been wiped out, they hoped in their hearts that one or two relatives had survived. They simply could not believe that all the horrifying tales of the holocaust had actually happened, and that six million Jews had been killed in cold blood. If they were to maintain their sanity, they could not believe that their families were truly gone.

Among the new arrivals, I found several acquaintances from Cracow. We related our woeful tales to one another, bemoaning the dreadful loss of our loved ones.

Shabbos was the one day each week that we were lifted out of our melancholy moods. On this day, everyone *davened* and sang with fiery intensity, as though they were making up for the many *Shabbosim* that were missed in the concentration camps. Week after week, the Jewish soldiers kept coming for *davening* and the *Shabbos seudah*, obviously uplifted by the joyous singing and spirit. One Friday night, after I had *davened Kabbalas Shabbos* for the *amud*, I was approached by a Jewish army chaplain who had been among the worshippers.

"I enjoyed your *davening* immensely," he said, "and I'd like to ask you to officiate as *chazan* for the *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* services for the Jewish soldiers in the U.S. army. If you're interested, you'd be *davening* for about three thousand soldiers. I know they'll be thrilled."

"I consider it an honor to *daven* for the Jewish soldiers," I replied without hesitation. And indeed, the experience was a moving one. I will never forget it.

CHAPTER 38

Searching for Relatives

AS WE RECUPERATED IN THE LUXURIOUS PALACE IN Linz, our hearts and minds were consumed with worries and fears concerning the families from which we were so violently severed. During the first few weeks after the liberation, we were all too frail and weak to undertake any type of search, but as we grew stronger, we all felt compelled to make the trip back to Poland. We knew full well that finding our relatives would be as difficult as finding a needle in a haystack, but we were driven by the slim possibility of being reunited with our loved ones.

At this time, the trip to Cracow was a long and difficult one. Poland was now occupied by the Russian army. The European railroad system was at a virtual standstill, and a trip that normally took a few hours lasted for several days.

Nevertheless, feeling much stronger than I had felt in a long time, I was determined to get to Cracow, no matter what obstacles lay ahead.

Hitchhiking for parts of the journey and walking or riding on crammed trains at other times, I finally made it to Cracow. Seeing the familiar streets of my hometown again after the horrors of the last six years sent shivers up my spine. In a daze, I walked through the city until I came to the street where I had grown up. There was our house, looking exactly the way it had when we left it. In my mind's eye, I saw my father sitting at the head of the *Shabbos* table, saying *divrei Torah* and singing Gerrer *niggunim*. I envisioned my mother sitting demurely beside him, listening intently and seeing to it that no one disturbed his discourse. And I could clearly picture the eight of us sitting around the table, four brothers and four sisters.

Hesitantly, I rang the bell. Yes, it still had the same ring. A gruff stranger opened the door.

"I am Duvid Werdyger," I said politely. "Before the war, my family used to live here."

"How come you're still alive?" the Pole asked derisively. "You're supposed to be dead!" With that, he turned away, slamming the door in my face.

Feeling as though I had been stabbed through the heart, I made my way back down the street, wondering where I could find some assistance.

"Could you direct me to the Jewish community building?" I asked a policeman.

"It's on Dlugi Street," he replied, showing me how to get there.

The *kehillah* building which used to be in the Jewish section in Kazimierz had been relocated to a different

neighborhood. I walked inside and gave the secretary at the front desk a list of the names of my parents, brothers and sisters. He immediately sat down and perused the register where all survivors had listed their names.

"The only Werdygers I can find here are Yaakov Meir and Yettie," he said gently, as if he wished to soften the blow. "It says here that your sister is in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia. Perhaps if you come back a week from now, more of your relatives will show up. Meanwhile, let me list your name in the register." With that, he entered "Duvid Werdyger."

"Any address?" he asked.

"*Na venad* is my address," I replied forlornly. "I am a restless wanderer."

Leaving the building, I tried to concentrate on the good news that my brother and sister had survived the war. *B'ezras Hashem*, I would travel to Bratislava, and it would not be long before I would see them. Meanwhile, though, I had to find some temporary lodging where I could eat and sleep.

I wandered through the streets, noting the familiar landmarks and sights of my youth. Physically, Cracow had not changed a great deal. Its magnificent structures and historic buildings had survived the war unscathed.

The Rema Shul was still standing, but it had become shabby and dilapidated. Kazimiersz, the Jewish section, was still there, and the fruit store and the grocery were intact. Only the Jews were missing. The Poles had descended on the abandoned buildings like hungry vultures, taking possession of all the Jewish property and valuables immediately.

Cracow was not my beloved city any longer. Gone were its *chassidim*, its *yeshivah* students, its dignified rabbis, its merchants, doctors and craftsmen. Aside from the transient survivors who had descended upon the city in search of their

relatives, the only Jews who were still in Cracow were interred in the *beis olam*.

An atmosphere of anti-Semitism pervaded the air. Afraid of having to give back the possessions they had stolen from the Jews, the Poles watched us warily, wishing we had been exterminated by the Nazis. Hate-filled eyes pursued me wherever I went. How come you're still alive? they seemed to say. You're supposed to be dead.

A Polish hate group known as the K.A. made it their goal to kill every Jew who had survived the war. Knowing this, I felt unsafe walking the streets, as if death were lurking at every corner, ready to strike.

Where would I spend the night? I had no money for a hotel, and I was a virtual stranger in my old hometown. I was riding on a streetcar, absorbed in thought, when suddenly, I recognized a familiar face. Could this be Yisrael Neufeld, my *chaver* from the Gerrer *shtiebel*? I approached him gingerly.

"Yisrael?"

I was greeted by a puzzled stare, but I continued, sure that it was indeed my old friend. "Don't you recognize me, Yisrael?"

"*Oy*, is it really you, Duvid?" he exclaimed, rising from his seat.

In front of all the passengers we embraced.

"It was your voice, Duvid," he said, his eyes filling with tears. "I recognized your voice. Your looks have changed, and you've lost a lot of weight. But your voice is still the same."

We were two lonely, lost souls that had found each other, relics from a vanished world. There was so much to talk about.

"When the Germans came to Cracow, I fled to Lemberg," he explained. "And when Lemberg was taken over by the

Russians after the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, I was deported to Siberia. It was rough, but *baruch Hashem*, I survived.

"Now tell me, Duvid, what happened to you, and what brings you here to Cracow?" he asked. "By the way, you probably don't have anywhere to stay. Come to my house, and we'll talk there."

"Thanks, Yisrael," I replied, overcome with relief. "I will."

Arriving at his apartment, I noticed that the door was bolted with a heavy iron bar with a large security lock.

"You know, Duvid," Yisrael said, following my gaze, "Cracow is not what it used to be. A Jew's life is under constant threat. Marauding gangs break into Jewish homes and kill the few Jews that have survived. I have to protect myself.

"You see what I carry around?" he said, showing me a handgun. "I know how to use it, and I will, if I have to."

Then and there I made up my mind. I was not going to stay in Poland one extra day. I had not survived the concentration camps to live in constant fear for my life.

We talked until way past midnight, and Yisrael tried to convince me to stay on in Cracow a little longer. His entire family had perished, and I was now his only link to the past.

"There are daily *minyanim* again," he argued. "We have organized *shiurim* in *Gemara* and *Mishnayos*. We even have a *shochet*. You can even stay at my apartment for as long as you wish."

"Look, Yisrael," I explained. "I cannot stay in Poland in this climate of lawlessness, where I would have to live in fear every day of my life. I've had enough of that. Besides, I must find my brother and sister. Tomorrow morning, I'm leaving for Bratislava."

CHAPTER 39

Reunion in Bratislava

TRAVELING TO BRATISLAVA WAS EASIER SAID THAN done. The distance from Cracow to Bratislava across the Carpathian Mountains was less than two hundred miles, and under normal circumstances, it was usually a five-hour trip by train. But in 1945, the trains were running sporadically or not at all. The only remaining means of transportation was hitchhiking on Russian army trucks.

Fortunately, the Russian soldiers I encountered were very friendly, and I was given a ride on their military vehicles whenever I held out my thumb. Without a penny to my name, I spent one sleepless night outdoors in an open field, and the next night I passed on a moving truck. The worst part of my trip was the agonizing hunger. I did not even have enough money to purchase an apple, and although the panorama of

the snow-capped Carpathian Mountains was breathtaking, I was too famished to enjoy it.

After two days of travelling, I finally arrived in Bratislava. Formerly called Pressburg, this city was famous for the illustrious Chasam Sofer who served as *rav* in the *kehillah* for thirty-three years. The Chasam Sofer, who lived from 1763 to 1839, was the *manhig hador*, the leading authority of his generation, a man who fought valiantly against the encroaching Reform movement and whose influence endures until the present time. A towering Torah scholar and prolific writer, he founded the Pressburg *yeshivah* that produced a number of outstanding rabbinical leaders.

Now that I was in Bratislava, a strange city where I did not know a soul, I wandered aimlessly. I didn't even have an address where I might find my brother and sister.

"Could you tell me how to get to the Jewish neighborhood?" I asked a mail carrier.

Helpfully, he gave me directions, even drawing a little map for me on the back of an envelope.

"It's quite a walk," he said as he waved good-bye. "You'd better take a bus."

I certainly had no money for a bus, so I started walking. After an hour, I began to recognize Jewish facial features on the people around me. This must be the Jewish quarter. My heart started beating faster. Would I find Yettie?

"Do you know where I might find a young woman by the name of Yettie Werdyger?" I asked a *heimishe Yid*. "She is a refugee from Cracow."

"Yes, of course," he replied to my surprise. "I know her quite well. She lives nearby, and I can take you there."

As I walked with the man the short distance to the house, my excitement grew.

"This is the house," the man said, coming to a halt in front of a small building. "She lives on the second floor."

"Thank you. Thank you so very much," I said wholeheartedly to the kind man.

"Yett . . . ie! Yett . . . ie!" I called out from the street, cupping my hands around my mouth.

The window opened, and a young woman stuck her head out. There she was . . . my kid sister, Yettie.

"Duvid . . . Duvid!" she cried. "*Geloibt der Oibershter! Baruch Hashem*, it's you, Duvid!"

I ran into the building and met her as she ran down the stairs. We hugged each other in a wordless embrace, tears streaming down our cheeks.

"Yettie, Yettie!"

"Duvid, Duvid!"

Alerted by the commotion, the neighbors came out to witness the emotional scene. Smiling benignly, they withdrew into their apartments after a few moments. They understood.

Our happiness knew no bounds. The words poured forth as we both tried to describe the experiences we had been through. There was so much to tell, so many miracles to recount, so many praises to give to the *Ribono Shel Olam* for protecting us and keeping us alive. And with anguish in our hearts, we lamented our parents and our five brothers and sisters who had gone to their deaths *al kiddush Hashem.*

We talked and talked until deep into the night. Yettie, who was liberated by the Russian army earlier on, had been living in Bratislava for quite a while. She told me that our brother Yaakov Meir was living in Budapest.

"Unfortunately, his wife and six children were killed by the Germans," she said sadly. "Still, life goes on. He met a

wonderful woman, and they are planning to get married in Hungary a few days from now. The *Oibershter* planned for you to find me now, so that you, too, will be able to attend your brother's *chasunah.*"

Still wearing the old and ill-fitting suit I had found in the Nazi's house in Linz, I looked quite disheveled. Yettie obtained a decent suit for me, a few shirts, socks and underwear, and before long, I felt like a member of the human race again.

"Duvid, even with your new suit, you still look like a *Muselmann,*" Yettie said. "If not for your voice, even I wouldn't have recognized you. We have to fatten you up, and you have to get your old strength back. From now on, I'll make sure to provide you with wholesome, nourishing meals, and you'll be back in shape in no time."

CHAPTER 40

Narrow Escape

MY STAY IN BRATISLAVA WAS COMING TO AN END. Yettie had already left for Budapest, and now I was getting ready to join her there for my brother's *chasunah*. After hitchhiking on several Russian military trucks, I was able to catch a train that was going all the way to Budapest. It was an international train, and the passengers were assigned to separate compartments that opened to a long, narrow corridor.

At the Hungarian border-crossing town of Komarno, inspectors of the border patrol entered the train to check passports and travel documents. In those unsettled days after the war, it was nearly impossible for a person like me to obtain a passport or any other documents. Since all my papers had been taken from me during the war, I had no way of

establishing my identity, and without valid identification, no new passport could be issued. Naturally, the inspector on the train was adamant that I display some sort of identification if I wanted to continue on the trip. The Hungarians were very stringent in enforcing these laws because they were on the lookout for *Nyilashes*, Hungarian Nazi-sympathizers.

I tried to reason with the inspector, explaining to him that I was a former prisoner of a concentration camp. However, since I was pleading my case in German and he only spoke Hungarian, there was a distinct communication gap, and I was making no progress.

In my compartment were several *heimishe Yidden* I had become acquainted with in Bratislava. One of these, Reb Yisrael Mordechai Grossman, pleaded my case in Hungarian, but it was useless. The Hungarian officer insisted that I leave the train and go to headquarters where the chief inspector would investigate my case.

"Take this man to headquarters," he curtly instructed a Hungarian soldier who was standing nearby.

I was desperate. After all I had gone through, it meant so much for me to attend my brother's *chasunah*. And now the Hungarians were going to lock me up, and I didn't even speak a language that they understood. I had to think of some way to save myself.

Slowly, I got up from my seat, lifted my suitcase from the rack and followed the soldier into the long corridor. As we walked along the passage, I came up with a risky plan. At the end of the corridor, there were two doors facing each other. One was the lavatory, and the other was the door of the railroad car. I would make use of this arrangement to escape the soldier's clutches.

When we reached the end of the corridor, I swiftly

opened the door to the lavatory and shoved the soldier inside, closing the door behind him. Then, quick as a flash, I dashed outside, ran underneath the motionless train and came out on the other side, where I mingled with the passengers on the platform. Before the soldier realized what had happened, I took off my glasses and put on the coat I was carrying, hoping he would not recognize me.

As the train began to move, I jumped onto the stairs leading into one of the cars and held tightly onto the railing. The train was full of passengers, and as it picked up speed, I slowly pushed my way inside. The corridor was crammed with farmers carrying their chickens to the market in Budapest. The noise of the cackling fowl was deafening, and the stench was unbearable. Of course, there was not a seat to be had, but I was used to travelling in discomfort. I thought of the torturous train ride to Mauthausen, next to which this was pure pleasure.

Finally, at around midnight, the train pulled into the Budapest railroad station. I had been told to go to One Klazalter Street, where I would find my brother's friends, Meir Wolf Mendlovitz, Yehoshua Vorhand and several others. They would tell me where to go from there and what arrangements had been made for the *chasunah*.

As I proceeded into town, I ran into several *frum* Jews who strongly advised me and the other arriving passengers not to walk the streets at night.

"Russian soldiers are known to hold up civilians and rob them of all their valuables," they warned me. "They'll grab your watch, your coat and even your shoes."

"I've just been freed from a concentration camp," I answered wryly. "I've seen much worse. Things like that don't scare me."

"You don't know the Russians; some of them are very tough," one Jew insisted.

"I don't care," I said. "I'm going into town; I don't feel like spending the night at the station. Does anybody want to join me?" I asked, turning to the others. "Come on, *chevrah*, let's all go together."

A group of young men who knew the way into town decided to come along. It was a long way to our destination, and we did run into quite a few Russian soldiers, but none of them bothered us.

It was close to one-thirty in the morning by the time I reached my destination. At that late hour, the main entrance of the apartment building was already locked, and in order to gain entrance, I had to identify myself and pay the custodian a fee. When I got to the apartment, I found that all the beds were taken, so I bedded down on the floor, falling instantly into a deep sleep. Finding out about the *chasunah* arrangements would have to wait until morning.

The next morning, all the men in the apartment got up early to go to *daven*, but seeing how deeply I was sleeping, they decided not to wake me. In *shul*, they met Reb Yisrael Mordechai Grossman, the man who had tried to persuade the Hungarian passport inspector to let me go.

"Do you know what happened?" Reb Yisrael Mordechai asked the young men. "Yaakov Meir Werdyger's brother was arrested in Komarno yesterday as he was on his way here for the *chasunah*. We've got to try to get him released. If we don't get him out, he'll miss the *simchah*."

"What are you talking about?" the young men replied, laughing heartily. "Duvid Werdyger is sleeping in our apartment right now!"

"That's impossible," said Reb Yisrael Mordechai. "I clearly

saw him being led away, and you're telling me that he is sleeping in your apartment? I have to come see for myself."

After *davening*, they all came to wake me up. Reb Yisrael Mordechai was flabbergasted when I explained to him what I had done.

"Unbelievable," he muttered. "It's simply unbelievable. I can't get over it."

After the excitement had calmed down, I brought up the purpose of my visit.

"Will someone please tell me where my brother Yaakov Meir is, and when and where the *chasunah* is going to take place, in *a mazeldike sho*?"

"The *chasunah* will be held tomorrow night in Makova," was the reply. "There are no trains or buses running between Budapest and Makova, but you can hitch rides on Russian army trucks very easily."

I thanked them for their help and departed immediately, hoping to reach Makova early enough to spend some time with my brother before the *chasunah*.

CHAPTER 41

Celebration and Renewal

FOLLOWING THE INSTRUCTIONS I HAD BEEN GIVEN, I arrived in Makova, which was about a hundred miles south of Budapest, early that same evening.

Makova was a town with a large *frum* Jewish population. It was not long before I met the first *chassidishe Yid*, who graciously brought me to the house of the *mechutanim*. I was treated to a cordial reception, and they invited me to stay with them, but I was anxious to see my brother. Our reunion was a mixture of laughter and tears, a combination of joyous greetings and bitter memories.

After our initial emotions had calmed down somewhat, Yaakov Meir began to relate to me all that had happened to him since that fateful day when he was saved from entering the Plaszow concentration camp.

Together with his brother-in-law, Yaakov Meir had headed for Bochnia, a town that was located twenty miles east of Cracow. Marching along the highway, they hid in the underbrush whenever a German vehicle approached. At one point, they were spotted by a German soldier who was coming down the road on horseback.

"*Kommt raus!*" he shouted, wielding his gun. "Come out!"

"Let's make a run for it," Yaakov Meir whispered urgently to his brother-in-law. "We'll split up. You'll run this way, and I'll run in the other direction. That way, at least one of us will get away."

The German had chased after his brother-in-law, and Yaakov Meir escaped into the forest. Starved and exhausted, he lay down in the shade of a tree, worrying how he would survive. Suddenly, as if Hashem was allaying his fears, he noticed two juicy pears lying in the grass next to him.

"*Es hat mir mamesh derchapt das leben*," Yaakov Meir said, recalling the miraculous incident. "Those pears really breathed new life into me!"

Revived by the fruit, he made his way to Bochnia, hiding under a pile of hay that a farmer was hauling on his horse-drawn wagon. He never found out what had happened to his brother-in-law, but he feared the worst.

By the time Yaakov Meir reached Bochnia, the entire ghetto had already been liquidated, and all the Jews had either been shot or sent to the gas chambers. There were, however, several Jewish families living in Bochnia who held foreign citizenship and were thus exempt from deportation. Yaakov Meir was able to obtain a forged foreign passport, and for a while, this afforded him a small measure of protection. Nevertheless, when the Germans began to doubt the authenticity of these foreign documents, he sneaked

across the Carpathian Mountains into Czechoslovakia and from there into Hungary. Life in Hungary was relatively safe, since the country was not yet occupied by Germany at that time. It was only in the spring of 1944 that the Germans invaded Hungary, and the infamous Eichmann sent three hundred thousand Hungarian Jews to their death in Auschwitz within three months.

Yaakov Meir stayed in Budapest, where he obtained bogus Aryan papers certifying that he was a Polish non-Jew. Miraculously avoiding the concentration camps, he was liberated by the Russian army in January, 1945.

As we exchanged stories over cups of coffee, we were overwhelmed by the realization that so many miracles had occurred in order to make this moment come true.

"With our puny minds," I told Yaakov Meir, "we cannot begin to fathom the infinite wisdom of Hashem. I quoted to him the famous *pesukim* from *Yeshayahu*: "*Ki lo machshevosai machshevoseichem*... For My plans are not your plans, nor are My ways your ways, declares Hashem. But as the heavens are high above the earth, so are My ways high above your ways and My plans above your plans." (*Yeshayahuu* 55:8,9)

The following night, the entire Jewish population of Makova participated in the *simchah*. The joy was indescribable, all the more so since it was one of the first weddings in town after the years of fire and fury. After millions of our people were annihilated, it was a source of boundless joy to witness the building of a new Jewish home, to see a new sapling being planted that would one day grow into a fruitful tree. A wedding in 1945 meant that the generation that had vanished into the abyss lived on, that Torah had survived and that Hashem was calling out, "*Nachamu nachamu ami.* Comfort, O comfort My people . . . *Ki lakechah miyad Hashem*

kiflayim bechol chatoseha. For she has received at the hand of Hashem double for all her sins." (*Yeshayahuu* 40:1)

Baruch Hashem, the Jews of Makova had been spared great suffering during the holocaust. They had not been shipped to the extermination camps, but miraculously, they were transported en masse to a town in Austria where families were permitted to stay together and live out the war. Almost all of them returned home after the German defeat.

And so, Makova rejoiced, like one happy family. The whole town had helped prepare the *seudah,* and every *balebusta* proudly presented her specialties.

"Oh, you must taste my *kreplach.*"

"Here, have some of my *gefilte kraut.*"

"You know, my wife made this *kokosh* cake."

"Please have a spoonful of my *galeretta.*"

After singing a few solos, I led the others in song, and everyone joined in full-throated renditions of the traditional *chasunah niggunim.* Everyone was in high spirits, and we danced around and around until the wee hours of the morning.

In my mind, the highlight of the wedding was the number of children scampering about, being carried on the shoulders of their proud fathers as they sang and shouted with glee. Such joy, such *nachas, baruch Hashem.* For six years, I had lived in a world that was devoid of the joyous sounds of children. During that time, millions of innocent Jewish children had been brutally murdered by the Germans. Now, I could not get enough of watching the Jewish children as they laughed, danced and sang. *Am Yisrael chai*; the Jewish people live on. With these children, Jewish life would be renewed.

During the week of *Sheva Brachos,* I received several discreet suggestions for *shidduchim.* Finally, I was introduced

to Malkah, the daughter of Reb Meir Godinger, one of the pillars of the Makova *kehillah*. Everything went very smoothly, and before long, we celebrated our *tenaim*. A short time later, our *chasunah* also took place in Makova, with the Rabbi of Makova, Rabbi Lemberger, acting as *mesader kiddushin*. Our *chasunah* had a warm, intimate atmosphere, and although there was no elaborate smorgasbord or eight-piece orchestra, there was genuine *simchah shel mitzvah*. The whole town shared in our *simchah*, and everyone stayed until after *bentching* and *Sheva Brachos*.

As I sat next to my *kallah*, I could not help but think back to the misery of the past six years, and how Hashem led me *"mitzarah lirvachah, meiafeilah leorah, mishibud ligeulah,* from distress to relief, from darkness to light, from slavery to redemption."

"*Odeh Hashem bechol leivav,*" I whispered to my *kallah*. "I thank Hashem with all my heart."

The only impediment to my joy was that my parents did not live to see the *nachas* of our *simchah*.

For many months, the people of Makova reminisced about our *chasunah*. "*Dus iz geven an emese simchah,*" they would say. "That was a real celebration."

Life in Makova was generally drab and dismal. The Jews grew more and more depressed as, slowly, the unspeakable tragedy of the holocaust began to sink in. Most of the people lived in abject poverty, because in the aftermath of the war, Hungary's economy was in shambles.

For as long as I stayed in Makova, I tried to inject some happiness into the gloomy atmosphere. On *Shabbos*, when I was asked to be the *chazan*, I sang lively *niggunim*, and at *shalosh seudos*, I led the singing of joyous *zemiros*, introducing

many Gerrer melodies from Poland that the Makover people had never heard before. They sang along joyously, some of the men even creating harmony. The spirited singing heartened them and filled them with *bitachon* for a better future.

Although the vast majority of the Jews of Makova were strictly *frum* and predominantly *chassidic*, most of them did not converse in Yiddish, and the women did not speak Yiddish at all. This presented a problem for me, since I could not speak any Hungarian. Russian and Czech, both Slavic languages, were easy for me to understand since they were closely related to Polish. Hungarian, however, a language related to Finnish, bore no resemblance at all to Polish. Still, I managed to get by, in spite of the language barrier.

Meanwhile, the Russian Communist regime was spreading its tentacles throughout eastern Europe, making life difficult for everyone, especially the *frum* Jews. After staying in Makova under Russian occupation for a few months, I realized that we would have to emigrate. There was no time to lose, as the Russians were beginning to tighten their net. Before long, the borders would be closed, and we would be caught in the Communist trap.

Our ultimate goal was to move to America, and we planned to leave immediately and make an intermediate stop in Paris, where we would apply for immigration and wait for our visas to arrive.

The months we spent in Makova after our *chasunah* were filled with true happiness. We established our home in an idyllic atmosphere of Torah and *chassidus*, savoring the love of Malkah's parents and the adulation of a community of gentle, kindhearted people.

In Makova, we laid the foundations of what we hoped would be a *bayis ne'eman b'Yisrael*, a stalwart Jewish home.

CHAPTER 42

Moving to Paris

THE FIRST STOP ON OUR WAY TO AMERICA WAS BUDAPEST, the capital of Hungary, where we hoped to obtain Polish passports and visas for entry into France. However, having no official documents, I had no way to prove that I was a Polish citizen who was entitled to a passport.

The bureaucrats at the Polish consulate were in no hurry to accommodate me, and they made me return numerous times. Finally, after much pleading and countless trips to the consulate, we were handed our passports. These documents, embossed with the official spread-winged Polish eagle, represented the passage to the new world and a new life.

The next step was getting the visa to France stamped into our passports. Travelling through Europe meant moving

across a checkerboard of smaller and larger countries with a number of borders to be crossed. In order to cross each border, a separate visa stamp was required. The added confusion of the many different languages made a trip of a few hundred miles a major undertaking.

Once our papers were in order, we were ready to embark on our journey. After a brief stop in Bratislava, we moved on to the beautiful city of Prague. We spent some time there, thrilled to walk on the same cobblestone streets that the Noda BiYehudah, the Sheloh, the Tosefos Yom Tov, the Maharal, the Kli Yakar and Rabbi Yonasan Eibeschutz trod. We visited the famous Altneu Shul with its high-domed ceiling that was built in the thirteenth century. It was in this *shul* that the Maharal used to *daven,* and legend has it that the *golem* he created lies hidden in the attic.

From Prague, we boarded the train to Paris, riding clear across Germany. As I sat among the German passengers, listening to the language of my former oppressors, I felt sick. I couldn't help wondering where these Germans had been during the war and how many Jews they had killed.

In Paris, we found a sizable *frum* community, and we felt at home from the very start. At this time, everything was in flux, with refugees arriving in droves, staying a while and moving on to other destinations. I was able to find stability in this maelstrom in the Rashi Shul, a *heimishe shul* that was led by Rabbi Stern. There were many people there that I could relate to, and although we were all coming and going, we found comfort in the daily *shiurim* we organized. After six years of living without a *sefer,* I had a lot of catching up to do.

The *gabbai* of the *shul* often invited me to officiate as *chazan,* and the *mispallelim* always enjoyed my *davening.* On the *Yamim Noraim,* however, I preferred to act as the *sheliach*

tzibbur in a small *minyan* upstairs that was set aside for *chassidim*, while the services in the main *shul* were attended by the general public.

Before the war, the Torah observance of most Parisian Jews had been marginal at best. Even the Jews who professed to be *frum* and who *davened* in an Orthodox *shul* did not keep a kosher kitchen or observe *Shabbos*. However, with the arrival of the post-war refugees, things began to change dramatically. *Yeshivos* and *chadarim* were established, *shtieblech* began to proliferate, and a *yeshivah* for advanced learning was founded in Paris by Beis Yosef of Novardok. As a result of the influx, Torah observance increased markedly. A growing number of families who had been lax in their observance of *Shabbos* became strict *shomrei Shabbos* and began to adhere to the laws of *kashrus*.

Not long after our arrival in Paris, my wife gave birth to our *bechor*. We made a modest *bris* and named our first son Yisrael, after my father.

With tears in my eyes, I listened to the *mohel* pronounce, "*Veyikarei shemo b'Yisrael, Yisrael Aryeh ben Duvid.* May he be known among the Jewish people as Yisrael Aryeh, the son of Duvid."

I pictured my father standing next to me and my mother peeking through the curtain of the women's section. And I thought of all my brothers and sisters who were not there to share in my *simchah*.

"*Vae'evor alayich va'ereich misboseses bedamayich,*" the *mohel* intoned. "Then I passed by you and saw you downtrodden in your blood, and I said to you, '*Bedamayich chayi!* In your blood, live!'" (*Yechezkel* 16:6)

A cold shiver passed through my body. These words said it all. "*Bedamayich chayi.*" After this terrible bloodbath, after

six million Jews had gone to their deaths, the Jewish people continue to live, clinging fervently to Hashem.

I was overcome with emotion. In this newborn baby, my father lives on, I thought. With him, the glorious chain continues.

The *mohel* dipped his finger into the wine and put a drop into the baby's mouth. Instantly, the baby stopped crying. The wine of *bedamayich chayi* had comforted him.

May we all find a *nechamah* in the words *bedamayich chayi*, I thought, looking at the peaceful child.

We prayed that little Yisrael Aryeh would follow in the footsteps of the grandfather whose name he bore. He would carry on the proud Werdyger tradition of *Torah vezimrah*, Torah and song. In truth, Torah and song are synonymous, as it says in *Devarim* 31:19, "*Ve'atah kisvu lachem es hashirah hazos.*" Referring to the Torah, it says, "Now write for yourselves this song."

Later on, as my wife held the new baby, she wondered aloud. "Do you think he has a Werdyger voice?"

"Judging by the way he cries," I would say, "he definitely sounds like a Werdyger. But really, the main thing is that he should grow up to be a *talmid chacham* and an *erlicher Yid.*"

My brother Yaakov Meir and my sister Yettie also managed to escape from behind the Iron Curtain, and they joined us in Paris. My brother remained there for a few years, and subsequently, he and his family moved to America. My sister got married in Paris to a fine young man by the name of Yaakov Ashkenazi. A short time later, they moved to Belgium and from there to Eretz Yisrael.

In Paris, I concentrated all my efforts on obtaining an immigration visa to the United States. The quota for Polish citizens was limited, and there were very few slots available.

However, the Department of Immigration and Naturalization made an exception for former inmates of concentration camps. A special quota number was granted to each ex-inmate of a concentration camp, giving him priority for entrance to the United States. This special quota number was only issued at the camp where the inmate had been imprisoned, so I had to return to the Linz concentration camp in order to claim my number.

"We're practically on our way to America," I said to my wife. "All I have to do is go to Linz and pick up my quota number."

Without further delay, I travelled to Linz. Arriving at the registration office there, I walked over to the clerk, smiling confidently. I had no doubts that I would shortly be on my way to America.

"My name is Duvid Werdyger," I said confidently. "I am a former inmate of the Linz concentration camp, and I have come to pick up my American quota number."

"Werdyger . . . Werdyger," the clerk mumbled as he scanned the pages of the register. "Ah, here it is . . . Duvid Werdyger. I'm sorry, sir. It says that you've already received your number. See, you signed for it right here."

I almost collapsed. Evidently, someone had fraudulently used my name to obtain my quota number and was probably well on his way to America already. I was outraged, but there was nothing I could do.

Back in Paris, I retained an attorney, and after a great deal of hard work and expense, he secured a visa for me and my family. We stashed the passport and visa in a safe place.

"These documents are more valuable than precious jewelry," I said. "Let's not risk losing them."

The next problem was booking passage on one of the

trans-Atlantic steamers. All the ocean liners were fully booked years in advance, as thousands of people were trying to emigrate to the United States. Hoping for the best, I registered with the Joint Distribution Committee, and after a long wait, we were finally notified that we would be able to sail within three months.

BOOK SIX

Songs of Joy

CHAPTER 43

A New World

IN THE MIDDLE OF FEBRUARY, 1950, AFTER HAVING SPENT four years in Paris, we boarded the ocean liner in Cherbourg, France. Sailing with a six-month-old baby was not easy. The ship's kitchen did not provide kosher meals in those days, so we lived on fruit, salads and hard-boiled eggs. After a turbulent two-week crossing, our ship docked safely in the New York harbor.

My wife's relatives greeted us warmly at the dock and invited us to stay with them in their home on the East Side. We gratefully accepted the offer and remained with them until we found our own apartment on East Broadway.

The first *Shabbos* in America, I *davened* in the Gerrer *shtiebel* on the East Side. That Friday night, upon entering the *shul*, I was bombarded with questions.

"Where are you from?"

"When did you get here?"

"Where were you during the war?"

As I tried to answer all their questions, new queries were put forth.

"You're from Cracow? Then you must have known my uncle Moishe Blumenkranz. Do you know what has become of him?"

"What are you planning to do in America?"

This was a question to which I had given much thought. "I would like to serve as a *chazan*," I answered without hesitation.

Overhearing my reply, the *gabbai* turned to me, smiling. "I didn't know you were a *chazan*. How about *davening Kabbalas Shabbos* for us tonight?"

That *Shabbos*, I *davened Kabbalas Shabbos* and *Shacharis* and *Mussaf*, too. After each service, the congregants thronged around me.

"Yeyasher ko'ach! Yeyasher ko'ach!" they exclaimed enthusiastically as they reached out to shake my hand. "Your *davening* was magnificent."

I was overjoyed by the congratulatory remarks, and I hoped it would not be long before I had an official position in a *shul*.

Baruch Hashem, people spread the word that a new *chazan* was in town, and on Sunday, a distinguished-looking rabbi appeared at my apartment. It was Rabbi Nassan Sheinberg, the Rabbi of the Warshever Shul on Rivington Street.

"*Shalom aleichem*, Reb Duvid," the rabbi said, smiling jovially.

After some small talk, he came right to the point. "Reb Duvid," he said, "I've been told that you are an excellent

chazan. We have been looking for a *chazan* to officiate on *Pesach* in our *shul*, and I would like to offer you the position. Are you interested?"

"Yes, I certainly am," I replied straightforwardly.

The rabbi pulled out a piece of paper and wrote out a contract. Joyously, I signed on the dotted line, formally accepting my first position in America.

The position in the Warshever Shul meant a great deal of publicity for me, an unknown *chazan*, and soon afterwards, I received a contract to officiate for an entire year. For an Orthodox *chazan*, finding a position was a difficult task. I rejected many prestigious positions in synagogues and temples that did not live up to the requirements of *Halachah*, finally settling for a post in a strictly Orthodox *shul* that paid a more modest salary.

A few blocks from where I lived on East Broadway was the main office of *The Jewish Morning Journal*, a daily Yiddish newspaper with a wide circulation. Because of my proximity to the building, I was able to scan the advertisements earlier than the other job seekers. Late every night, I bought the next morning's paper and read through the list of wanted ads in the *chazanim* column. I often rejected the important-sounding offers if I felt they would compromise my adherence to *Halachah* or the *frumkeit* of my family.

Once, a *shul* in Chicago offered me a five-year contract at an annual salary of ten thousand dollars, an enormous sum in 1950. Although the offer was very tempting, I was concerned about the kind of future my family would have in Chicago, and I did not accept the offer. In retrospect, I believe that I made the right decision. Although today there is a thriving nucleus of *chassidic* life in Chicago and there are Gerrer *chassidim* who wear the traditional *bekishes* and *spodeks*,

the Orthodox community in 1950 was practically nonexistent.

Finally, I accepted a position in the Chasam Sofer Shul on the East Side. It was a prestigious *shul* that was led by Rabbi Mordechai Meyer. The Lower East Side was the center of American *chazanus*, and a position in one of the *shuls* there was highly rated among my peers. That first year, I was accompanied on the *Yamim Noraim* by the renowned Henry Spector Choir, and my career began to soar.

Times were good for the *chazanim* of my generation. Famous cantors were the darlings of the Jewish public, and *chazanus* was the topic of the day. The renowned *chazan* Berele Chaggai was officiating in Temple Beth El in Boro Park, and his talents, along with those of the other famous *chazanim*, were the subjects of many a conversation and argument. If a *chazan* was popular, he was a superstar, but if someone of authority turned up his nose at this same *chazan*, he could end the *chazan's* career instantly.

Chazanim used to joke about their tenuous popularity, playing with the words of the verse, "*Ki be'apam hargu ish.* For they have killed men with their anger." (*Bereishis* 49:6) *Be'apam* can also mean "with their noses," so that the verse would imply, "For they have killed men by turning up their noses."

CHAPTER 44

Endless Opportunity

AFTER THE FIRST *YAMIM NORAIM* THAT I *DAVENED* FOR the *amud*, the *shul* was always packed when it was known that I was officiating as *chazan*. The following year, on *Shemini Atzeres*, the *shul* was especially crowded, and after I *davened Tefillas Geshem*, an elderly gentleman came over to introduce himself to me.

"My name is Lipschitz," he said. "I enjoyed your *davening* immensely. But you don't belong in this *shul*. After *Yom Tov*, I'll get in touch with you, and we'll talk some more."

True to his word, Mr. Lipschitz, accompanied by another gentleman, came to visit me shortly after *Yom Tov*.

"I really meant what I said about you not belonging in the Chasam Sofer Shul," Mr. Lipschitz began. "That's why I am offering you a *chazanus* position with a big choir at twice the

salary you are earning now, just for the *Yamim Noraim*."

Gesturing to his companion, Mr. Lipschitz made the introduction. "This is Mr. Jacobowitz, the president of the New Lots Talmud Torah Shul."

"We would like you to come and *daven* for us on a *Shabbos*," Mr. Jacobowitz said. "Just tell me when it is convenient for you."

I was so overwhelmed, I could hardly speak. The New Lots Talmud Torah Shul, led by Rabbi Mintz, a well-known Torah scholar and powerful orator, was one of the foremost *shuls* at that time in America. The *shul* gained worldwide fame for the legendary *chazanim* it attracted. Herschman, Moshe Kussevitzky and many others had *davened* there, enthralling thousands with their coloratura. I knew how hard it was to just get an audition in this *shul*, and an outright invitation to *daven* for the *amud* was next to impossible.

Mr. Jacobowitz and I settled on a date on which I was to audition in his *shul*. Large ads in the Yiddish papers announced the forthcoming event.

That *Shabbos*, the cavernous *shul* was filled to capacity, and I knew that among the *mispallelim* there would be a number of agents who had come in search of a qualified *chazan*. I spared no efforts in my *tefillos*, singing in the full range of my abilities with trills, runs and fancy florid decorations. With the accompaniment of the choir and the excellent acoustics of the *shul*, the total effect was even better than I had hoped for. Immediately after *Shacharis*, a group of talent scouts and agents besieged me with offers for the most prestigious positions in the country.

"Please, gentlemen," I pleaded. "Leave me alone. I don't talk business on *Shabbos*."

Buoyed by the praise I received from many of the

congregants, I *davened Mussaf* with all my heart, singing a *Kedushah* that contained many intricate and difficult twists.

As I was getting ready to leave, the president approached me.

"Chazan Werdyger," he said, "in our *shul* we have a custom. If a *chazan* who auditions on a *Shabbos* is approved by the congregation, we sign a contract on *Motzei Shabbos*. I want you to know that we are enthusiastic about your *davening*, and I would appreciate it if you could come to my office right after *Havdalah*."

I was familiar with the hiring process in other *shuls*. Usually, after a *chazan* auditioned on a *Shabbos*, the Board of Directors would hold a meeting, then other *chazanim* would be invited to audition, and throughout, there would be protracted discussions. A *chazan* could spend many days awaiting the decision as to whether or not he was accepted.

There was no doubt about my interest in this position. The *shul* was perhaps the most celebrated Orthodox *beis haknesses* in New York, and officiating as its *chazan* would be a great honor. And so, that *Motzei Shabbos*, I happily came home with a contract tucked into my pocket.

I got along well with the members of the congregation, and I enjoyed *davening* in the *shul*. After several months, invitations to participate in concerts began to pour in from Canada, Eretz Yisrael and cities all over America. In Chicago, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and other cities, I gave concerts to audiences that ran into the thousands. I shared the podium with famous American *chazanim* like Shalom Katz, Moshe Genchoff and others, and I was accompanied by the famous Sam Sterner Choir. I was also invited to *daven* in Vancouver for several *Shabbosim* in the *shul* where Rabbi Heyer officiated as Rabbi.

From the start, I knew that in order to reach my fullest potential in the field of *chazanus*, I would need voice lessons. Only with a voice coach could I widen the range of my voice to enable it to reach the highest and lowest notes. I also had to learn how to project my voice and how best to protect it from abuse. I turned to Joshua Weiser, who was known to be one of the best coaches in the field. He not only trained my voice, but he also gave me valuable pointers. Among other things, he taught me how to create my own compositions of *chazanus*.

One day, I came to my lesson with the proud announcement that I had composed a new *Rosh Chodesh bentchen*. I had worked very hard on it, perfecting and refining the basic theme until I came up with an original piece of my own.

Weiser listened with a critical ear, obviously impressed.

"I need your advice, Mr. Weiser," I said, overjoyed with his reaction to my composition. "Now that I have the piece just as I want it, shall I sing it the same way each time I *daven*?"

Shaking his head, Weiser replied, "Absolutely not. You can make a hundred *Rosh Chodesh bentchen* out of this one. Make sure that you never sing the same composition twice the same way."

His answer shocked me. For weeks I had worked very hard to produce this *Rosh Chodesh bentchen*, yet now he was telling me that I could use it only once.

"How can I ever make one hundred musical pieces out of just one composition?" I asked, throwing up my hands in a gesture of despair.

"Improvisation," he said. "That's the name of the game. You must always improvise on the same theme. It's not something I can teach you, but you'll learn from experience. You take a basic *nussach* and add a trill here and a tremolo or

vibrato there, and before you know it, you have a new piece of *chazanus*. Just remember, the key is to always improvise, even while you are singing. That's what all the great *chazanim* have been doing, from Yossele Rosenblatt to Moshe Kussevitzky."

I took his advice to heart and eventually learned never to sing the same *Kedushah* or any other piece of *chazanus* twice. As I stood before the *amud*, I would improvise spontaneously so that the composition sounded new every time. After a while, I was not even able to repeat a piece precisely if I tried.

With time, I mastered the various singing techniques and styles, and young, aspiring *chazanim* would often ask me to give them lessons. Some wanted to learn how to sing the elaborate cantorial compositions, while others wanted me to teach them *nussach hatefillah*, the traditional recitative chant.

Nussach is an important aspect of *chazanus* that is often overlooked. Each *tefillah* has a traditional chant that must be adhered to. The *nussach* of *Shabbos* differs from that of *Yom Tov*, the *Yamim Noraim* have an altogether different *nussach*, and there is a distinct *nussach* for *tefillas Geshem* and *Tal. Selichos*, too, have a *nussach* of their own. It is not enough for a *chazan* to have a good voice and to know cantorial pieces; he must be thoroughly familiar with the *nussach. Nussach's* origins go back to ancient times, perhaps even to the days of the Beis Hamikdash, when the Leviim would sing during the bringing of the *korbanos.*

In the early stages of my career, I accepted several students, but as time went by, I had to stop giving lessons. I was officiating as a *chazan* on *Shabbosim* and *Yamim Tovim* and operating a travel agency during the week; teaching *chazanus* just demanded too much time and exertion.

CHAPTER 45

Reaching for the Top

THE GOLDEN AGE OF *CHAZANUS* IN AMERICA WAS JUST reaching its peak, and I was among the rising stars of the day. My position as *chazan* of the New Lots Talmud Torah Shul gave me exposure to thousands of people who appreciated *chazanus*, and I was besieged by brokers who constantly offered me attractive new positions. The agents called persistently, and although I listened to what they had to say, I was satisfied with my position and the spare time I had for my business. Contentedly, I remained at the New Lots Shul for several years.

During this time, monumental changes were taking place among American Jewry. Previously, flourishing neighborhoods such as the Lower East Side and East Flatbush had taken great pride in their ornate *shuls*. These magnificent

edifices were filled to capacity every *Shabbos* with Jews who relished the *davening* of a *chazan* and did not mind staying in *shul* until after one o'clock in the afternoon. They were the European-born Jews of pre-war America who attended Orthodox *shuls*, kept kosher homes and ate *matzos* on *Pesach*. Their children, however, received only a minimal Jewish education in after-hours Talmud Torahs or Sunday schools. Instead of building *yeshivos*, the older generation erected impressive synagogues and temples and sent their children to college. The *shul* embodied their link to the past, and the *krechtz* of the *chazan* brought back nostalgic memories of the *alte heim*. Their sons became doctors and lawyers, but they knew very little about Judaism. Many of them joined the Conservative or Reform congregations in the suburbs and were completely assimilated.

Gradually, the old Orthodox *shuls* lost their memberships, and within the short span of a decade, they fell into disuse or were sold and abandoned.

The post-war era brought to America an influx of holocaust survivors and their towering leaders. Most prominent among them were Rabbi Aharon Kotler, the *rosh yeshivah* of Kletzk and Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, the Satmar Rebbe. These luminaries totally revolutionized Jewish life in the United States.

Rabbi Aharon Kotler established Beth Medrash Govoha in Lakewood, where he championed the principle of Torah *lishmah*, uncompromised Torah study for its own sake. From a very modest beginning, this *yeshivah* grew into the largest of its kind in the world. In turn, *talmidim* of Reb Aharon established *yeshivos* in many cities in the United States, Eretz Yisrael and as far away as Australia.

On his part, the Satmar Rebbe almost single-handedly

created a *chassidic* community in New York that was patterned after the model of his ancestor, the Yismach Moshe of Ujhel. He imbued his followers with *ahavas Torah* and *yiras shamayim* and fought valiantly for uncompromising adherence to all requirements of *Halachah*. For the young generation of *bachurim*, he founded Yeshivah Torah Veyirah and for the girls, Beis Rochel. Above all, he was the trailblazer of the *chassidic* movement in America, attracting thousands of ardent *chassidim* among the young generation that were in danger of losing touch with their roots.

These illustrious leaders and many others like them educated thousands of Torah scholars and created a climate of love for Torah among the Jewish public at large. They imbued in the young generation a burning desire to reach out to the estranged masses, and *yeshivah bachurim* and *chassidim* joined hands in welcoming the legions of *baalei teshuvah* who began to join the ranks of Torah-observant Jewry.

These fundamental changes were also making themselves felt in the world of Jewish music and *chazanus*. Until the advent of recorded *chassidic* music and popular *frum* singers, the only records available to the Jewish public were those of the great *chazanim*. Popular entertainment was provided by recordings of the syrupy songs of the Yiddish theater which flourished on Second Avenue at that time. Often these songs were sung by female ensembles, and in some instances, there was even a woman "*chazante*." At *frum* weddings, "Here Comes the Bride" was invariably played instead of the traditional *chasunah niggunim*. Through music, the spirit of looseness and laxity that was prevalent among the assimilated Jewish youngsters in America was worming its way into the most observant homes.

By the mid-Fifties, however, young *frum* Jewish singers

were gaining popularity with a new style of song that appealed to the younger generation. Their songs bore no relation to *chazanus*, but their voices were pleasing and their music was well-liked. Most celebrated among the new artists was Shlomo Carlebach, whose simple but intoxicating compositions swept his audience along with him when he sang. His first record, on which he sang *Essa Einai* and *Haneshamah Lach*, was unforgettable, and his music has remained popular until today. Another singer who made a name for himself was Reb Yom Tov Ehrlich, who composed and sang moving ballads and inspirational songs in Yiddish.

At the same time, boys' choirs such as the Pirchei Agudas Yisrael also made their debuts, and they were instantly popular.

An entirely new panorama of Jewish song was opening up. *Yeshivah* students and young *chassidim* eagerly picked up the new tunes, singing them at home and at *bar-mitzvahs*, engagements and weddings. The Wagnerian wedding march was left by the wayside and replaced by meaningful Jewish songs that were chosen by the *chassan* and *kallah*.

While these changes were in progress, I remained in my niche, singing *chazanus* on *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov* and keeping busy with my travel agency during the week. After several years in one place, though, I felt ready to try something new.

One day, a broker suggested a position that was to open new horizons for me. The famous Rabbi Meir Simchah Hakohein Shul on East 53rd Street in East Flatbush was interested in having me officiate as their *chazan*. The *shul* bore the name of the illustrious Rabbi of Dvinsk who wrote *Meshech Chachmah*, a commentary on the Torah and *Or Sameiach*, a commentary on the *Rambam*. The *rav* of the congregation was Rabbi Yaakov Yehudah Hecht, one of the

leading figures of the American rabbinate.

I was invited to *daven* for a *Shabbos* in the *shul* together with a large choir, and it was not long before I had a contract to be their official *chazan*.

As part of Rabbi Hecht's wide-ranging activities on behalf of the Lubavitch *chassidic* movement, he conducted a weekly radio program entitled *Shema Yisrael*. The program, which attracted a large audience, contained inspirational messages based on the *parshah* of the week or discussions of the laws of a forthcoming *Yom Tov*. To enhance the program, he asked me to present a selection of *chazanus* during every broadcast. The response to my singing on this program was gratifying. People called in to compliment my interpretations of their favorite pieces of *chazanus*, and I received numerous invitations from various organizations to sing at their dinners and functions. I realized that while a *chazan* of the largest *shul* could reach no more than a thousand listeners, singing on the radio touched an audience of a hundred thousand.

One Sunday, Rabbi Hecht took time out from his busy schedule to call me over.

"Listen, Reb Duvid," he said in his congenial way. "There's only one way that you can make it in today's world of popular singers and children's choirs. You've got to make a record."

"But today, people are only interested in songs with fast beats," I protested. "Have you heard the latest hits? They have rhythms that are straight from Africa; they don't even sound like Jewish songs. Although the music does not really match the meaning of the words, the kids like it. The young crowd today doesn't go for *chazanus*."

Rabbi Hecht smiled at my comments, shaking his head. "Believe me," he said, "people will snap up your records."

After wavering for a long time, I decided to give it a try.

At a professional recording studio in Manhattan, I cut my first record, entitled *Tefillah l'Duvid*, and I held my breath. Would Rabbi Hecht be right? Could this record be a hit in today's generation? After all, it was 1959, and Shlomo Carlebach, the Rabbis' Sons and Mark III were the top-ranking singers.

Fortunately, my worries proved to be completely unfounded, and *Tefillah l'Duvid* was a success. Within a short time, the entire production was sold out, and a second recording was done. A year later, I recorded another album, *Mizmor LeDavid*, which was also widely acclaimed.

It was always interesting to me that there is such a wide variety of musical preferences in any given group of people. Many individuals could be listening to the same music, and each will react differently. A single tune can elicit pained expressions and grimaces from some listeners and joyous smiles and nods from others. Often, the taste in music varies with the generations, and while the *bachurim* and youngsters thrive on noisy beats and quick rhythms, their elders usually prefer slower, calmer melodies.

Baruch Hashem, this generation gap exists only with regard to music. In all the more important aspects of *Yiddishkeit*, old and young see eye to eye.

CHAPTER 46

Successful Endeavors

AS I LISTENED TO THE TUNES OF THE POPULAR SINGERS and bands, I was struck by the thought that there still existed a vast, untapped resource of genuine Jewish music. There were thousands of moving *chassidic niggunim* that had never been recorded. These beautiful, wordless melodies were uplifting; they spoke to the heart and had the power to soothe pain and inspire faith. Yet, except for a few classic *niggunim*, the non-*chassidic frum* Jews were not familiar with any of these melodies.

In truth, there was one *chassidic* record featuring the famous Modzhitzer *niggunim* sung by Reb Benzion Schenker. However, there was a vast store of Gerrer *niggunim* just waiting to be discovered by the world. Putting my thoughts into action, I got in touch with Reb Yankel Talmud in Eretz

Yisrael, the gifted composer whom I remembered from my days in the Gerrer choir. Before the war, Reb Yankel Talmud had composed over one thousand *niggunim* for the Imrei Emes.

"Reb Yankel," I told him excitedly. "Give me your best *niggunim*. Include some soulful melodies, some marches, some slow tunes and some fast ones. I'm going to make a Gerrer record, and Gerrer *niggunim* will become known all over the world."

That was my initial step on the road to creating my first Gerrer record. I began to look for words to fit the various melodies, but it was not always easy, hence the frequent use of *oy, ay, day* or other such interjections to make the lyrics fit the music.

I sang the Gerrer *niggunim* on that record, and accompanied by an orchestra and a choir, we created an exquisite tonal quality. One of the selections on the record was *Kevakoras Roeh Edro*, the piece I had sung solo on the *Yamim Noraim* as a six-year-old boy in the choir of the Imrei Emes.

The record, which featured Reb Yankel Talmud's picture on the cover, was distributed to the stores and immediately was a smashing success. *Niggunim* such as *Loi Seivoishi* caught on quickly, and before long, they became favorites, not only in *chassidic shuls*, but in Modern Orthodox ones as well. These congregations learned to sing with a fervor that only *chassidim* were thought to possess.

People who had never heard of the Gerrer *chassidus*, and had no idea what it stood for, now *davened*, marched and learned to the beautiful *niggunim* that it had produced. Thousands of *Shabbos seudos* now concluded with the Gerrer *Shir Hamaalos*, a rousing march that could set the soul afire, and compositions such as *Befi Yesharim* and *Hallelu es Hashem*

became standard *niggunim* that were sung throughout the world. In Boro Park, London, Zurich, Johannesburg, Moscow and Yerushalayim, the tunes from that first Gerrer record can still be heard.

I was thrilled to be able to work with Reb Yankel Talmud, whom I had admired so much in my youth, and the praise I received from him meant a great deal to me.

At one concert in Eretz Yisrael, Reb Yankel introduced me to the audience as "a diamond cutter, who cut and polished my *niggunim* like diamonds, bringing their full brilliance to light."

His words truly made me feel proud.

One winter, while vacationing in Miami, I became acquainted with the Melitzer Rebbe, Rabbi Yitzchak Horowitz. A descendant of Rabbi Naftali of Ropshitz, who was one of the great *chassidic* masters, the Melitzer Rebbe had established a *chassidic shtiebel* in Manhattan and was known for the enchanting *niggunim* he composed. I attended one of his *tischen*, and I found myself entranced as I listened to the sonorous rendition of his original *niggunim*.

After *Shabbos*, we had a leisurely talk beneath the gently swaying palm trees, enjoying the soothing sound of the rushing surf and the cool ocean breeze.

"Melitzer Rebbe," I respectfully opened the conversation, "my Gerrer record is proof that the Jewish public is starved for authentic Jewish *niggunim*."

"Well, I have a large repertoire of original *niggunim* that I composed," the Rebbe replied, reading my mind. "If you're interested in recording an album of Melitzer compositions, I'll gladly supply the material."

The Rebbe gave me several *niggunim*, some of which were simple melodies and others that were sung to words. These

became the basis of the Melitzer record that I made. It was comprised of fourteen songs, including the well-known *Kol Yisrael, Lecha Dodi* and *Yismechu Bemalchuscha*. This record too, became a big seller, and for a long time, selections from it were played daily on the Jewish program of WEVD radio.

These and other *chassidic* records began to give young people enormous pride in their heritage. Parents were now able to satisfy their children's thirst for music by offering them meaningful songs in the place of the decadent music the secular world provided.

The records also projected a new image of *chassidus* to the world. Many alienated Jews who could not understand the meaning of *chassidus* were now captivated by the *niggunim*. Through the language of the music, they were introduced to the beauty of Torah and *mitzvos*, and the warmth with which the melodies were sung drew many *baalei teshuvah* who had been searching for a way back to their roots.

My next project, entitled *Melaveh Malkah*, was a sequel to my first Gerrer record, and on this album, my son Mordechai sang a solo. More than thirty thousand copies of the record were sold, and its *niggunim* have become standard melodies that are sung all over.

The *chassidic niggun* is the heartbeat of a Jew, and therefore, it has endured through the generations, never losing its appeal. Today, new records and cassettes are constantly being produced. Like meteors streaking across the sky, the new songs are temporarily on everyone's lips, but before long, they are forgotten. By contrast, the early *chassidic* records have remained perennial favorites, and instead of fading with time, they have become classics.

CHAPTER 47

Skulener and Bobover Records

ALTHOUGH I HAVE BEEN A *CHASSID* OF THE GERRER Rebbe since early childhood and I am familiar with all the Gerrer *niggunim*, I have always been keenly interested in the *niggunim* of the other *chassidic* movements.

One Rebbe in particular always fascinated me. Rabbi Elimelech Horowitz, the previous Melitzer Rebbe, had lived in my hometown of Cracow until he became Rebbe. A musical genius, the Rebbe was known to create a new *niggun* almost every week. The window of his apartment opened to the main square of the city, and when he practiced his compositions, Jews and non-Jews alike would stop to listen to his singing. His *beis midrash* was always packed with adherents, and hundreds more would *daven* outside just to hear the Rebbe sing. Tragically, the Melitzer Rebbe was killed in the

holocaust, and he is said to have composed a new *niggun* as he was being led to his execution by the Germans.

Another of the most admired and beloved *chassidic* leaders of the recent past was the Skulener Rebbe, Rabbi Eliezer Zisha Portugal. Most noted among the Skulener Rebbe's character traits was his self-effacing humility, his passionate *ahavas Hashem* and his love for every fellow Jew. He dedicated himself to helping the needy and oppressed, even when his own life was in danger. In Bucharest, he saved thousands of Jewish children whose parents had perished in the holocaust. Using ingenious methods, he succeeded in saving them from the spiritual perdition prevalent under Communist rule and bringing them to freedom. His activities landed him in prison, but when he was released, he went on with his work.

The Rebbe treated these hapless children as his own, supporting them, guiding them and often even marrying them off. In return, the children looked to him as a father all their lives.

Upon his arrival in the United States, thousands of *chassidim* flocked to the saintly Rebbe to be inspired by his pure character, his personal warmth and the intensity of his *davening*.

Aside from being an eminent *chassidic* leader, the Skulener Rebbe was a brilliant composer of *niggunim*. Even while he was incarcerated in a Communist prison, he continued to create beautifully moving *niggunim*. His melodies have a very special quality of tenderness and are true reflections of the texts to which they are set. The Rebbe's *niggun* for *Lulei Sorascha* stands out in particular for its wondrous combination of melody and content.

"Were not Your teaching my delight
I would have perished in my affliction.

I will never neglect Your precepts,
For You have preserved my life through them.
I am Yours; save me!
For I have turned to Your precepts."
(*Tehillim* 119:92-94)

The gentle *deveikus* melody expresses the yearning of a Jew who is suffering but is sustained by the Torah and the *mitzvos*. It conjures up the image of the Skulener Rebbe languishing in a Communist prison. Each time I hear the song, I cannot help but think back to my own years of suffering and how the Torah and *mitzvos* sustained me.

One day, I received a visit from a dignified, middle-aged gentleman who introduced himself as a *chassid* of the Skulener Rebbe. After exchanging some pleasantries, he came straight to the point.

"Reb Duvid," he said, "we've heard all your records, and we love your songs. Therefore, I have a proposal to make. You are well aware that the Skulener Rebbe has composed a great number of *niggunim*. I'd like to know if you would be interested in making a Skulener record.

"Before giving your answer," he continued, "you must hear some of the *niggunim* and judge whether they have the potential for broad appeal. Come to our *melaveh malkah* this *Motzei Shabbos*, and listen to the Rebbe leading the singing of old and new *niggunim*. I'm sure you'll enjoy it. Besides, you'll meet the Rebbe, and that in itself will be an experience."

Fascinated by the prospect, I did not hide my enthusiasm.

"Yes, I'll be there, *im yirtzeh Hashem*," I replied, smiling broadly. "I'm looking forward to meeting the Skulener Rebbe."

On *Motzei Shabbos*, I was ushered into the packed Skulener

beis midrash and given an honored seat at the Rebbe's table. An aura of *kedushah* pervaded the large room. All eyes were focused on the Rebbe, whose gentle face radiated purity and kindness. Not a sound could be heard. Softly, the Rebbe intoned the words of "*Bemotzaei yom menuchah* . . . At the departure of the day of contentment, provide relief for Your people." His lifting voice had an angelic quality of purity, and as he sang, he motioned with his hands, encouraging the *chassidim* to join in. Instantly, the room reverberated with the emotional singing of hundreds of voices.

Singing along with the others, I felt transplanted into a higher world. Then and there, I decided that I would indeed make a Skulener record.

The Skulener melodies were not long or intricate musical compositions. Most of them were short and simple, so they were easy to learn and to sing. Their beauty lay in that they came from the heart and touched the soul. I chose a representative selection of songs and began producing the record. My four sons, all of whom have beautiful voices, sang a four-part harmony, their voices blending perfectly to create the symphonic effect of a double choir. Within a few weeks, the Skulener record was available in all stores. Sales exceeded our wildest expectations, and on the first day, the entire production was sold out. Storekeepers were clamoring for records, and when the second edition became available, it too was gone within days. A short time later, I made a second Skulener record featuring the songs the Rebbe composed while in prison, and this also sold very well.

The Skulener records were distributed throughout America, Europe and Eretz Yisrael, giving hundreds of thousands of Jews a small taste of the spirit of *chassidus*. The people loved the exuberance and the *simchah* that these

niggunim conveyed. I am convinced that the spread of *chassidic* music is responsible for breaking down many of the barriers that have separated *chassidim* and non-*chassidim*. To paraphrase a famous saying of *Chazal*, "Songs that come from the heart have the power to enter the heart."

Another prominent *chassidus* which claims numerous adherents all over the world is the Bobover dynasty, led by the current Rebbe, Rabbi Shlomo Halberstam. Born in 1910, he is the great-grandson of the Divrei Chaim and the son of Rabbi Benzion Halberstam, the previous Bobover Rebbe, who had a tremendous following of tens of thousands of *chassidim*. Rabbi Shlomo miraculously escaped the fires of the holocaust and arrived in America in 1946, immediately beginning to rebuild the grandeur of Bobover *chassidus*. Originally settling in Manhattan, the Rebbe moved to Crown Heights and then to Boro Park, which became the new center of Bobover *chassidus*. He erected an impressive *beis midrash* that seats two thousand worshippers, and he established a *yeshivah* and a girls' school in which thousands of students are reared in the spirit of Bobov and Sanz.

I had been personally acquainted with the Bobover Rebbe since the days when his *beis midrash* was still in Crown Heights. During the summer months, when my family was in a bungalow colony in the country, I would often spend *Shabbosim* with my brother, who was then living in Crown Heights. On those occasions, feeling a close affinity to the Rebbe, I would *daven* at the Bobover *beis midrash*, and I was regularly asked to be the *chazan*. Quite familiar with all of the Bobover *niggunim* that were composed by the previous and present *rebbes*, I sang the pieces that the *chassidim* liked best.

The Rebbe, like his father, composed many exquisite *niggunim*, some of which are true musical masterpieces.

These melodies are sung by all circles, *chassidic* and non-*chassidic* alike.

Bobover melodies possess a special quality that is unmistakable. They have a certain *simchah* and vivaciousness that give the listener a sense of bubbling over with joy. It is impossible to describe a musical sound with words, but anyone who has heard *niggunim* such as *Tzahali Varoni* or the famous Bobover *Kah Ribon Olam* will notice the special feeling they instill at once.

As a great admirer of all Bobover *niggunim*, my dream was to make a record of the beautiful melodies. I broached the idea to the Bobover Rebbe, and after working out the details, we decided to produce a record that would feature his original songs and *niggunim*. For the recording, I would be accompanied by the Bobover choir and an orchestra.

The moment I received the first test pressing of the record, I rushed over to the Rebbe. As he listened to the arrangement of his own *niggunim*, he was ecstatic. It truly had an extraordinary tonal quality; the sound was superb, and the magnificent composition of the melodies came across to all who heard them.

The record has become a classic, and its songs are favorites that have stood the test of time. They are sung around family tables and on festive occasions, by young and old, generation after generation.

CHAPTER 48

New Musical Vistas

THE BOBOVER RECORD WAS FOLLOWED BY ANOTHER Gerrer record, this one featuring *niggunim* of the *Yamim Tovim* that were composed by Reb Yaakov Talmud. These melodies, like all Gerrer *niggunim*, were composed without words, and it was my job to find the proper *pasuk* or verse to fit each *niggun*. On the record, I was accompanied by an orchestra and a choir, with my sons singing many of the solos.

As time passed, I received invitations to give concerts in many of the major cities throughout the United States and Canada. For my program, I would alternate cantorial selections with *chassidic* songs, trying to strike a balance between the two styles of Jewish music. Invariably, the concert would reach a climax towards the end of the evening when the men

would spontaneously sing along as I chanted the popular *chassidic* melodies.

A few days after coming home from a concert in Toronto, I received a telephone call from a *yeshivah* in London.

"We heard about your concert in Toronto," said the voice on the other end, speaking in a clipped British accent. "Our *yeshivah* is sponsoring two concerts next month in order to raise money, and we'd like to know if you would be interested in coming to London as the featured artist."

I had serious misgivings about appearing in London. I had never been to England, but I knew that British audiences were notorious for their aloof and unemotional attitudes. Would I be able to elicit even a tepid applause?

"I am not sure that a British audience would enjoy my repertoire of *chazanus* and *chassidic* songs," I said hesitantly.

"Don't worry," came the reply. "The president of our *yeshivah* heard you in Toronto, and he was really excited about your performance."

Reluctantly, I agreed to perform, but I was haunted by the specter of an impassive British audience staring at me with cold reserve. What was I to do?

Suddenly, an idea came to mind. The concert is being sponsored by a *yeshivah*, I said to myself. Let me have a choir of the *yeshivah* students accompany me. Then, at least the parents of the boys will applaud. Once they start to clap, the others will join in.

I sent them a tape of the songs I wanted them to learn, and when I arrived in London, I found a prepared choir of forty delightful little *yeshivah* students who sang like nightingales. After just a few rehearsals, we were ready.

On the night of the concert, the hall was filled to capacity. Each of the forty boys had brought his own cheering section;

parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, relatives and neighbors occupied most of the seats.

At the beginning of the performance, there was only polite and very subdued applause, which is exactly what I had expected from a British audience. But as the evening wore on, more and more people dropped their cool reserve. The applause grew louder and louder. The notorious British iciness had melted away in the warmth of the *chassidic* music that emanated from the mouths of forty little *Yiddishe yingelech.*

The next morning, the concert was the talk of town. Hours before the second concert was to begin, people began queuing up, but every seat had been sold in advance. When loud protests were heard, the organizers relented, ignoring the concert hall's regulations and bringing in additional chairs.

This performance, like the first one, was greeted with enthusiastic applause, and the *yeshivah* administration, along with everyone else who participated in the concert, was elated.

The two London concerts had been hits, and they taught me an important lesson. Children with good voices and the proper training greatly enhanced a performance, whether they accompanied an adult vocalist or sang solo. Thereafter, I set to the difficult task of teaching boys to sing, and many of my subsequent records included young soloists.

Everyone wanted to climb on the musical bandwagon. I produced a record for the Boyaner *chassidim* on which my son Mordechai and I sang together, accompanied by the Boyaner men's choir. At that time, I also made a record for the Radomsker *chassidim*, whose *rebbes* were outstanding singers and composers. It was particularly gratifying for me to make a record for Radomsk. Refusing to abandon his *chassidim* in

Warsaw, the last Rebbe, Rabbi Shlomo Chanoch Rabinowitz, was brutally killed at the hands of the Nazis. There is no survivor of the illustrious Radomsker lineage that began with the Tiferes Shlomo, but the thousands of *chassidim* carry on the glorious tradition. I was honored to help in perpetuating the Radomsker *niggunim*.

Soon after making the Radomsker record, I produced a record for Camp Kol Rinah and another Skulener record. Subsequently, I made the second Melitzer record, which featured the *niggunim* of Rabbi Elimelech who had lived in Cracow and perished in the holocaust. Included among the songs on this record is his famous and very beautiful *Yedid Nefesh*, a *niggun* that has gained worldwide popularity.

In order to fully appreciate the *mesikus* of this moving melody, one must picture a *rebbishe tisch* at *shalosh seudos*. With the *beis midrash* wreathed in shadows in the waning hours of *Shabbos*, hundreds of *chassidim* crowd around the long table. It is the time of *raava deraavin*, the climax of the *kedushah* of *Shabbos*. "*Bnei heichalah*" has been recited, inviting the assembled *chassidim* to see the glow of the Divine Presence. "Be exultant now at this very time in which there is favor but no anger." A feeling of *deveikus*, of intense yearning for closeness to the *Shechinah*, is tangible. Finally, as a tribute to the departing *Shabbos*, the Melitzer *Yedid Nefesh* is sung. Melody and words are in perfect harmony, lifting the soul to a higher realm, a world of peace and *simchas olam*.

CHAPTER 49

Mordechai's Rise to Fame

THE TIMES WERE WONDERFUL FOR JEWISH MUSIC. Youngsters, teenagers and their parents played the new records day and night. The music played while families did work, during dinner and while they relaxed. And not only did the people listen to the songs, they sang them at every occasion, for these were melodies that remained in their heads. Small groups that had begun with two or three singers and a few simple melodies developed into major musical productions with choreography and large orchestras.

One of the most successful singing groups of that time was the London Pirchei, under the direction of Yigal Calek, a brilliant composer and arranger. Consisting of about thirty English boys, the group sang a series of stimulating songs

composed by their director. Listening to their harmonious voices was sheer delight, and their first record turned out to be a resounding triumph. The album was the springboard for the London Pirchei to embark on a concert tour to America. A multi-faceted performance including choreographed medleys and dance routines was put on in a large auditorium. The arrangements and promotions for the concert, which was sold out weeks in advance, were made by David Kahan.

Mr. Kahan, who had heard my son Mordechai sing on several occasions, arranged for him to sing a duet at the London Pirchei concert, together with a magnificent young singer from Eretz Yisrael. The new song, *Achas Shaalti Mei'eis Hashem*, was greeted with thunderous applause that did not seem to die down; the audience went wild with enthusiasm.

It was this appearance that launched Mordechai's successful career as a singer. Invitations for appearances at various functions began pouring in, and before long, everyone was talking about Mordechai, the new singing sensation. Since I was well-known at the time, he chose the name Mordechai ben David as his trade name.

Requests for guest appearances and concerts came in quick succession, and Mordechai made several records, including one for the *kiruv* organization Hineini, under the auspices of Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis.

Always the perfectionist, Mordechai was meticulous in his singing and in the production of his records. He never released a record unless every note was absolutely perfect, regardless of the cost or the time it took to achieve it.

Hailing from generations of singers, each of my four sons is an excellent *baal menagein*. My son Mendy has made several cassettes, and my grandson Yeedle recently released his first record. But most importantly, all of my sons are a source of

nachas to me, for they are *yerei shamayim* and *lomdei Torah*, steadfast *talmidei chachamim* who pursue *tzeddakah vachessed*. I see in them the continuation of the illustrious heritage dating back to the Lelover Rebbe and the embodiment of the tradition I received from my father and mother, *Hashem yinkom damam*.

At about the same time that Mordechai was developing into a popular singer, the Ribnitzer Rebbe, a great *tzaddik* by the name of Rabbi Zanvil Abramovitz, arrived from behind the Iron Curtain to settle in Boro Park. Answering to an inner urge to meet this remarkable personality, Mordechai went to see the Rebbe. The meeting proved to be a turning point in his life. So impressed was Mordechai with the Rebbe's saintliness, that he became his devoted *chassid* and, eventually, his *gabbai*. This was no easy task, as the Rebbe kept very unconventional hours. He would fast all day, *daven Maariv* at three o'clock in the morning, and only after immersing in the *mikveh* would he break his fast. Meanwhile, his waiting room would be filled with people who had been up all night, patiently waiting to receive the Rebbe's *berachah* or ask for advice on personal problems.

With time, I also became very close to the Ribnitzer Rebbe, recognizing him as a great *baal mofeis*. I recall one particular occasion that left me in awe of his saintliness. It was a *Motzei Shabbos* during his annual visit to Miami, and the Rebbe wanted to recite *Kiddush Levanah*.

"Rebbe," I asked, mystified, "how can you even think of saying *Kiddush Levanah*? Look how thick and black the clouds are. It would be impossible to glimpse a trace of the moon, even if we waited up all night."

"Don't worry, Duvid," the Rebbe replied as he got ready to go to the *mikveh* in preparation for the *Kiddush Levanah*.

Then, as he stepped out into the street, the Rebbe did a bizarre thing. He pulled out a white towel, and with a sweeping motion, he slowly waved it back and forth over his head several times. Without saying a word or seeming to notice our confused expressions, he confidently made his way to the *mikveh*. When he emerged, I was utterly amazed to look up and find the moon shining brightly in a cloudless, star-studded sky. I was speechless.

"That's nothing to be surprised at," the *chassidim* assured us. "The Rebbe does things like that all the time."

Led by the Rebbe, we all said *Kiddush Levanah* with deep *kavanah*, after which we joined him in a lively *rikud*. Hardly had we ended the dance when a heavy fog descended, obscuring even the street lights that had previously been so illuminating. In fact, so dense was the fog, that as I drove home that night, I was unable to see the car ahead of me and became involved in a minor traffic accident.

On one *Shabbos* that I was with him in Los Angeles, the Ribnitzer Rebbe asked me to be the *chazan* for *Mussaf*. However, by the time the Rebbe was ready to *daven Mussaf*, the stars were out, and most people had said *Havdalah* already. All the same, there was a big crowd as I began to *daven*. When I came to *Av Harachamim*, a stirring, meaningful *tefillah*, I chose a very beautiful, plaintive melody. When I noticed that the Rebbe was moved to tears and sobbing uncontrollably, I speeded up the chant, toning down its mournful cadences.

"*Nu, nu*," murmured the Rebbe, indicating with his hand for me to slow down and resume the emotional chant.

The Ribnitzer Rebbe possesses mystical powers that are truly astonishing. Once, a man came to him with a serious problem. He had just arrived from Eretz Yisrael, but due to

a bureaucratic blunder in connection with his family's passports and visas, his wife and children were unable to join him. When weeks had gone by and he was still separated from his family, the man became despondent. Day after day, he went to the Ribnitzer Rebbe, pleading with him to help. The Rebbe's answer was always noncommittal, but the man did not give up and kept coming back. Then one day, all of a sudden, the Rebbe gave him the long-awaited answer.

"*Reb Itche Mayer, eir weib kimt zi foren.* Your wife is on the way."

Shortly afterwards, the family was reunited.

The most bizarre *minyan* for *Minchah* that I had ever attended took place one summer night with the Ribnitzer Rebbe. The Rebbe had recently been ill and was recovering at a *chassid's* home in Far Rockaway. After *Havdalah*, I drove out there to pay him a *bikur cholim* visit. I waited and waited, but I was not admitted. Finally, at three o'clock in the morning, the *shamash* made an announcement.

"*Der Rebbe geht davenen Minchah!*"

We were all taken aback, but we knew better than to ask questions of the Rebbe.

Fifteen minutes later, the Rebbe appeared and *Minchah* began. I was astounded when I was called up for *shlishi* at that late hour.

After *Minchah*, everyone sat down to *shalosh seudos*, after which we *davened Maariv*. The Rebbe made *Havdalah* just as the sun began to rise. It was an experience I will never forget.

This quiet and unassuming *tzaddik* has helped thousands of people, and I am firmly convinced that Mordechai owes his success to the many *berachos* he received from the saintly Rebbe.

CHAPTER 49

The Hachnassas Sefer Torah

TO PERPETUATE THE MEMORY OF MY PARENTS, I arranged to have a *sefer Torah* written by a *sofer* in Eretz Yisrael. In 1976, when the *sofer* completed the writing, he brought the *sefer Torah* to America, where I presented it to the Gerrer *beis midrash* in Boro Park.

As I prepared for the presentation, I was overwhelmed with emotion, aware that I was fulfilling the *mitzvah* of *kibbud av va'eim* at the same time as the *mitzvah* of writing a *sefer Torah*.

The ceremony began in my house early in the morning, as members of the Gerrer community, friends and relatives gathered for the customary writing of the final lines of the Torah. One after another, each guest selected one of the letters that had been outlined and filled it in under the

watchful eyes of the *sofer*. After writing his letter, the guest drank a *lechayim* and wished me *mazel tov*.

The last few letters I wrote myself, dedicating the *sefer Torah* to the memory of my parents.

I had the honor of *hagbah*, raising the *sefer Torah* for all to see, whereupon a beautiful new mantle and silver crown were placed on the Torah.

Outside, a large crowd of adults and children had gathered, and a group of musicians were playing some popular tunes. Escorted by numerous friends and family members, I emerged with the *sefer Torah*, and the band came alive with *Toras Hashem Temimah*. Everyone sang along while I stepped under the *chuppah* canopy that was held up by four men.

Led by the band, the parade set into motion, winding its way toward the Gerrer *beis midrash* at 49th Street near 13th Avenue. People took turns carrying the *sefer Torah*, while children danced and clapped their hands with joy. Everyone was smiling happily with the genuine *simchah shel mitzvah*. Even the weather cooperated, and the sun shone brightly.

In anticipation of our arrival, the police had cordoned off the block of the *beis midrash*, and when we arrived, the band struck up the lively *niggun*, *Ki Mitzion Teitzei Torah*. The entire group of hundreds of people formed a large circle and began to dance around the Torah. Around and around we whirled, and with the children's sweet voices blending with those of the adults, we sang songs like *Eileh Chamdah Libi* and *Chasdei Hashem Ki Lo Samnu*.

At last, the *sefer* was brought into the *beis midrash*, where a *parshah* was read from it out loud. Then the *sefer Torah* was placed in the *aron hakodesh* amidst the singing of the Bobover *niggun*, *Yehalelu es shem Hashem*. I myself sang *Seu Shearim*, followed by *Uvenucho Yomar*.

After *Minchah*, everyone sat down to a sumptuous *seudah*. Throughout the meal, Gerrer *niggunim* interspersed with *divrei Torah* could be heard. And the happiest moment of the day was when I sang a solo accompanied by my four sons. *Baruch Hashem*, I was *zocheh* to have such a moment of *Yiddishe nachas*. Not only was I able to write a *sefer Torah*, but I also had four sons who were all living *sifrei Torah*.

CHAPTER 51

Sarah Werdyger's Story

AFTER THE PETIRAH OF MY WIFE IN 1980, I EXPERIENCED a very difficult time of grieving, despondency and loneliness. We had enjoyed many good years together, and I missed her very much. But with *bitachon* in Hashem and the help of my children and good friends, I eventually adjusted to the new reality.

Just as Hashem had helped me in countless ways in the past, He was good to me again. Not long after my wife passed away, I met my wonderful *zivug sheini*, Sarah Wercberger. She had been a close friend of my first wife, and my wife had loved and respected her for her noble qualities.

Sarah's father, Rav Osher Zelig Marton, was the *dayan* and *shochet* in a small town near Dej, Romania, and he was a highly respected *talmid chacham*.

In 1944, at the height of World War II, Sarah was engaged to Wolf Wercberger, a fine young man from a well-known family. Together, they were looking forward to a happy life and a glorious future. However, events took a dreadful turn, shattering their lives and those of their families. The German army overran the town of Dej, and Eichmann was put in charge of deporting all the Jews.

On *Erev Shavuos*, shortly after Sarah's engagement, all the Jews of Dej and the surrounding towns were herded to the railroad station. Screaming, beating and cursing, the German soldiers forced the panic-stricken Jews into the cattle cars that were waiting on the platform.

When the doors were shut tight, Sarah was relieved to discover that she and her father were in the same boxcar. For four horrendous days, the train kept rolling. There was no food or water, and it was difficult to breathe with eighty people packed like sardines in each car. Children screamed ceaselessly, and many of the elderly and the sick died in their places.

Surrounded by this misery, Sarah's father tried to lift the people's spirits.

"*Rabboisai!*" he called out. "It's *Shavuos* today, *Zeman Mattan Toraseinu! Yidden*, let's say *Akdamus*, and in that *zechus*, the *Oibershter* will help us."

Total silence descended upon the boxcar as her father began to intone the familiar chant. "*Akdamus milin vesharayus shusa . . .*" he sang.

"Even if all the heavens were parchment and the forests quills . . . if all the oceans turned to ink . . . if all the earth's inhabitants were scribes, they could not describe the strength and might of the Creator."

All through his recitation, the prisoners in the cattle car

cried bitterly. The *niggun* of *Akdamus* reminded them of the beautiful *Yom Tov* they were accustomed to celebrating with flowers, dairy dishes and all-night learning sessions of *Tikkun Leil Shavuos*. What a beautiful world was now lost!

And as the train kept rolling, the people grew more and more anxious. Would this journey never end? The hours dragged on, and finally, four days later, they came to a halt in Auschwitz.

When they alighted from the train, they all filed before Mengele, the Angel of Death incarnate, as he flipped his little cane that would determine their fate. If he gestured to the right, it meant a slow death as a slave in the labor camp; the left signified immediate death in the gas chambers.

Sarah was dispatched to the labor camp, and her father was sent to the gas chambers. In the confusion, there was not even time to say good-byee.

In Auschwitz, Sarah was one of thirty-nine thousand girls who were tortured and starved. Each day at two o'clock in the morning, they were chased out of their barracks for interminable roll-calls, where they were forced to stand at attention for hours on end. She vividly recalls the instance when at one of those *Appell*, the count came up one short. After a search that lasted for hours, the missing girl was found in bed, too sick to get up. The unfortunate girl was immediately sent to the gas chambers, while the other inmates were forced to kneel for the remainder of the day.

Once every month, there was a dreaded *Selektion*, when all the girls had to line up for inspection. Anyone that looked pale or weak was summarily sent to the gas chambers. The girls would pinch their cheeks to put some color into them and stand as straight as they could to give the appearance of being in good health.

Finally, Sarah's agony came to an end when the Russian army liberated Auschwitz. Upon returning to Dej, Sarah was fortunate to find her *chassan*, who had also survived the holocaust. A few years after their marriage, they emigrated to America and settled in Williamsburg, where they raised four sons and one daughter, all of them esteemed members of the Satmar community and incidentally, excellent *menagnim*.

In her quiet and humble way, Sarah does a great deal of *chessed*. As a member of the Satmar *Bikur Cholim*, she visits the various hospitals, and she prepares special dishes on her own so the patients can enjoy some home-cooked food. She is a member of Tomche Cholim and feeds patients in the hospitals who are unable to take the food themselves. Many of these patients are feeble and have to be coaxed into eating, but with gentle persuasion, she manages to nourish them and nurse them back to health.

A true *eishes chayil*, Sarah supports me in all my undertakings and encourages me to go further. *Baruch Hashem*, our life together is filled with *nachas* and *simchah*.

CHAPTER 52

Highlights of My Career

THROUGHOUT THE YEARS, FROM MY CHILDHOOD IN Cracow, to the terrible times in the concentration camps and finally, to the new life I began in America, it was always my dream to become a *chazan*. Hashem gave me a good voice, and that is what saved me from execution at the gates of Plaszow. I would use this voice to sing Hashem's praises and bring joy into the hearts of the people around me. Hashem delivered me from the hands of my enemies, and like David Hamelech, I wanted to declare, "*Aromimcha Hashem ki dilisani*. I exalt You, Hashem, for You have lifted me up, not letting my enemies rejoice over me." (*Tehillim* 30:2) *Chazanus* was to be my vocation.

Music and song do have a mysterious power to bring us close to Hashem. In the Beis Hamikdash, the *Leviim* sang and

played their instruments; even the saintly prophet Elisha became receptive to *nevuah* only after listening to a musician play. "*Ve'ata kecha li menagein*," Elisha said. "Now, get me a musician. *Vehayah kenagein hamenagein* . . . As the musician played, the Hand of Hashem came upon him." (*Melachim II* 3:15)

Although I have appeared in many concerts over the years and performed before wide and varied audiences, certain occasions will always remain clear in my mind. One such high point of my career occurred in Eretz Yisrael on *Chol Hamoed Sukkos* of 1985.

A group of land developers and investors had launched a vast project to build a modern city for *frum* families in the so-called occupied territories. The site for the new settlement was located about twenty miles east of Bnei Brak and ten miles west of Shechem, in the scenic mountains of Shomron. This is a region where every rock, hill and stone is endowed with *kedushah*. This land was inhabited by the tribes of Efraim and Menashe. Now, the area would once again be settled by *frum* people, in the new city that would be called Emmanuel.

A hill had been cleared, and several model homes had been erected on the site. In a mass marketing campaign, thousands of brochures had been sent out, and advertisements announcing the affordable prices had been placed in all the major newspapers. The developers were now faced with only one major problem. How would they get a large number of potential buyers to come view the projected town?

At a board meeting, one of the directors had a brainstorm.

"Why don't we invite the whole country to a free concert on *Chol Hamoed Sukkos*?" he suggested excitedly. "On *Chol Hamoed*, everyone is on vacation. The children will be off

from school and clamoring to be taken on outings. We'll provide them with a concert in Emmanuel and free round-trip transportation. It will make a fabulous *Chol Hamoed* excursion. Thousands of people will come and look. Some of them are bound to be interested in buying a home, but more importantly, the publicity will be enormous, and soon enough, everyone will be talking about Emmanuel."

"We would have to find a singer who has universal appeal in the *chareidi* community," another director chimed in. "We need a singer who will attract both young and old, *chassidim* and non-*chassidim* alike."

"Why don't we get Chazan Duvid Werdyger and his son Mordechai?" a member of the board proposed.

The motion was adopted, and Mordechai and I were invited to perform at the forthcoming concert. Preparations began at a feverish pace. A week before *Rosh Hashanah*, posters went up throughout the country announcing the musical extravaganza that was to be held on the first day of *Chol Hamoed Sukkos*.

How many people would show up? Ten thousand? Twenty thousand? One optimist predicted forty thousand, but his suggestion was greeted with condescending laughter. Reservations for seats on buses started pouring in. Before long, it became clear that forty thousand had been a conservative figure. More buses had to be rented. A theatrical event of grandiose proportions was in the making.

Political leaders began taking note of the upcoming event. After all, huge crowds were fertile ground for politicians in search of votes. Besides, according to the right-wing members of the government, settling the *shetachim*, the "occupied territories," was in the best interests of the country. If Emmanuel was successful, a new trend would be set.

A large area was cleared on the future site of Emmanuel, a large top-notch orchestra was hired, and a huge sound stage was erected. Powerful loudspeakers would carry sound across the wide area. Parking for hundreds of buses was provided, and a number of large *sukkos* were built so people would be able to enjoy refreshments and light meals. After feverish preparations, everything was finally ready.

From the early morning hours on that first day of *Chol Hamoed*, hundreds of buses and thousands of private cars began to converge on Emmanuel from all parts of the country. From Yerushalayim and Tel Aviv, from Haifa and Beer Sheva, from the Negev and the Galil they all came. Like pilgrims on the *shalosh regalim*, hundreds of families streamed toward Emmanuel, and monitors guided them from the parking lots to their seats in the huge open-air amphitheater that had been erected. By the time everyone was seated, a crowd estimated at well over eighty thousand people had gathered. For security purposes, an army helicopter circled overhead, and soldiers, their Uzis at the ready, stood guard all over the grounds.

The audience was in high spirits. Old friends greeted each other effusively, and children shrieked with delight as they scampered about, waiting for the concert to begin. The din of laughter and exuberant shouting, punctuated by the whirring sound of the helicopter engine, filled the air.

"Will we able to get their attention?" I worriedly asked Mordechai. "The people are so excited just to see each other, I don't know if they'll have the patience to listen to us."

Just then, the spokesman for the Emmanuel Development Association mounted the rostrum, and a hush fell over the entire audience. The talking ceased as all eyes focused on the prominent personalities seated on the podium. Prime

Minister Shamir wished everyone a happy *Yom Tov* and spoke a few words about *zeman simchaseinu*, commenting that this concert was the proper way to celebrate the *Chol Hamoed* in a spirit of Torah-oriented joy.

Next, the Minister of Defense, General Ariel Sharon, spoke forcefully about the importance of settling every part of Eretz Yisrael.

"This is the land that was given to us by Hashem!" he thundered. "*Lezaracha nasati es ha'aretz hazos.* I have given this land to your descendants." (*Bereishis* 15:18) Hashem promised this land to Avraham, and it will remain ours forever!"

The setting was overwhelmingly beautiful. Like a brilliant jewel in a splendid setting, the hill of Emmanuel is surrounded by a ring of towering mountains. The pine trees dotting the hillside swayed gently in the cool breeze as the large crowd waited in eager anticipation for the performance to begin.

The large band struck up a few introductory bars, and Mordechai and I entered from opposite ends of the grand sound stage. Meeting at the center of the platform, we immediately launched into the first number, *Yadin Bagoyim Malei Geviyos*, a beautiful melody composed by the Skulener Rebbe. Our rendition was rewarded with a thunderous ovation. With one song, we established a rapport with the eighty thousand listeners; they were inspired by our singing, and we were energized by their enthusiastic response.

From that moment on, we were of one mind with the audience. One song followed another; songs of *deveikus* alternated with joyous marches and modern, rhythmic numbers. When the program was over, the crowd refused to leave.

"More! More!" they shouted exuberantly.

We happily obliged. My heart overflowed with *simchah* at

seeing so many *frum Yidden* enjoying a *simchas Yom Tov* with Hashem's praises set to the tunes of traditional *chassidic* melodies.

After the concert, Mordechai and I were both physically exhausted, but at the same time, we were spiritually exhilarated.

The performance was a tremendous *kiddush Hashem*. The people had enjoyed the combination of old and new *niggunim*, and they all went home with the melodies on their lips. The secular press paid tribute to the *chareidim* for organizing such a smooth-running event and to the huge audience for behaving in such a disciplined manner. They compared the uplifting spirit and dignified conduct that was prevalent at our concert with the rock-music performances that invariably resulted in orgies of drinking and debauchery. More than one journalist came to the conclusion that this refined behavior could only be a result of the Torah values shared by the members of our audience.

Since then, I have sung in some of the largest auditoriums in the country. I had one of the greatest thrills of my life a few years ago when I performed in Yerushalayim and Tel Aviv with my son Mordechai and his son Yeedle. The concert, entitled *Mizmor l'David*, was a smashing success. Although Mordechai's style of singing differs markedly from mine, our voices blended well, and little Yeedle stole the show with his charming presentation. As I watched him sing, I saw myself again as a boy his age singing a solo in the choir of the Gerrer Rebbe.

Although these concerts and many others like them have provided me with tremendous satisfaction and gratification, my greatest fulfillment has come from *davening* before the greatest *tzaddikim* of our generation.

From the start, I have had this *zechus* on numerous occasions, beginning with my very first solo in the Gerrer choir, in the presence of the Imrei Emes. After listening to me sing *Kevakoras Roeh Edro*, the Rebbe called me over and gave me a special *berachah* which I will never forget.

Years later, in the Gerrer *beis midrash* in Yerushalayim, where no outsider is permitted to *daven* before the *amud* on the first day of *Yom Tov*, I was asked to be the *chazan* on the second day for the guests who had come from outside Eretz Yisrael. I was honored to hear that the Beis Yisrael himself had come out to his porch to listen to my *davening*.

I have also had the opportunity to *daven* for Rabbi Simchah Bunim, known as the Lev Simchah, the Tchebiner Rav, the Bobover Rebbe, the Papa Rav and the Tzelemer Rav. As a descendant of the Lelover dynasty, it was especially gratifying when I was asked to *daven* for the Lelover Rebbe in Yerushalayim.

In Miami, I was asked to sing *Hamavdil* after *Havdalah* before Reb Yoilish, the previous Satmar Rebbe, and I also *davened* before the current Satmar Rebbe in the Satmar *batei midrash* in Williamsburg and Monroe.

To have been considered worthy to act as the *sheliach tzibbur* for these luminaries was in itself the greatest accolade and honor.

CHAPTER 53

The Grand Finale

THE EMOTIONAL CLIMAX OF MY ENTIRE CAREER CAME on April 26, 1990, the day of the *Siyum Hashas* of the *Daf Yomi*.

The idea of a *Daf Yomi*, a program in which Jews from all over the world would study one folio of *Shas* each day, hails back to the Kenessiah Gedolah of the Agudas Israel World Organization, held in Katowice in 1923. At that assembly, Rabbi Meir Shapiro gave a memorable address. A dynamic personality and great Torah scholar, Rabbi Shapiro had been the *rav* of Sanok and had been appointed to the prestigious rabbinate of the *kehillah* of Lublin. In an attempt to increase the quality of Torah scholarship, he founded Yeshivah Chachmei Lublin, patterned after the great Lithuanian *yeshivos*. He built an imposing structure to house the *yeshivah* and

set extremely high standards for admission. Only truly outstanding scholars were able to pass the rigid entrance exam. The result was an elite Torah institution that produced eminent rabbis and leaders who were the pride of Polish Jewry. A fiery orator who was well-versed in the Polish language, Rabbi Meir Shapiro was an elected member of the Sejm, the Polish Parliament.

In his address to the Kenessiah Gedolah, Rabbi Meir Shapiro electrified the assembled delegates with his revolutionary idea. He proposed that the following *Rosh Hashanah*, every Jew throughout the world should begin studying *Shas*, one *daf* each day. He called the project *Daf Yomi*, and he proclaimed that it would create a vast bond of Torah scholarship among all Jews. Wherever a Jew might travel, he would find a study partner with whom he could continue studying and discussing the daily *daf*. Joining the program would provide the participant with a powerful incentive to study and keep up with the worldwide schedule. Rabbi Shapiro calculated that at the rate of studying one *daf* a day, the entire *Shas* would be completed in seven and a half years.

The proposal was enthusiastically adopted, and on *Rosh Hashanah* of that year, thousands of men throughout the world began studying the *Daf Yomi*. They studied in small and large groups, with or without *maggidei shiur*. As time went by, more and more people joined the program. From Poland, the idea spread through eastern Europe, to western Europe, to Eretz Yisrael and the United States. Seven and a half years later, the first *Siyum Hashas* was celebrated with great fanfare in Lublin, and a new cycle was begun.

With the second series, the popularity of the *Daf Yomi* idea increased tremendously, and after the dreadful years of the holocaust, it continued to grow with renewed vitality in

Eretz Yisrael and America. Now, there are daily *shiurim* in all major cities throughout the world. Study groups comprising twenty to one hundred participants who gather to learn *Gemara* night after night are not unusual.

The ninth *Siyum Hashas* of *Daf Yomi* took place in New York City's Madison Square Garden, one of the largest sports arenas in the country, on April 26, 1990. It was a momentous event. In an unprecedented demonstration of love for Torah, twenty thousand Torah-observant Jews filled the mammoth hall, which only the night before had housed a circus performance. More than five thousand requests for tickets had to be turned down for lack of space, and the hall was so crowded, binoculars were needed in order to take in the awe-inspiring view. *Chassidim* and non-*chassidim*, men wearing black hats, *chassidic* hats or knit *yarmulkas*, were all gathered together, striving to fulfill the will of the *Ribono Shel Olam.* The women, who also attended in large numbers, were allocated a separate section.

At 6:20 p.m., the first speaker was introduced. From that moment on, the excitement rose from minute to minute. The *siyum* itself was recited by the Novominsker Rebbe, Rabbi Yaakov Perlow, and the new cycle was begun by Rabbi Elya Fischer, head of the Gerrer *kollel.*

Among the speakers were such outstanding personalities as Rabbi Shimon Schwab, Rav of Khal Adath Jeshurun, Rabbi Elya Svei, *rosh yeshivah* of Philadelphia Yeshivah, and Rabbi Moshe Neuschloss, the *rav* of Skver.

At 8:48 p.m., the giant electronic screen lit up with the words, "*Keil Malei Rachamim,*" and underneath it, "Reb Duvid Werdyger."

I stepped up to the rostrum. On the podium were seated some of the great Torah leaders of our generation: The

Skulener Rebbe, Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg of Ner Yisrael, the Amshinover Rebbe, the Rachmestrivka Rebbe, Rabbi Aharon David Dunner from London, Rabbi Aharon Schechter, Rabbi Binyamin Paler, the Bluzhover Rebbe and many others.

This is what the gathering at Mount Sinai must have been like, I thought, as my eyes surveyed the vast throng. "*Ke'ish echad, beleiv echad.* As one man, with one heart."

I felt like I was actually witnessing the Giving of the Torah, and the congregated people were all shouting "*Naaseh venishma!* We will do, and we will listen!" (*Shemos* 24:7) Just as the Jewish people had proclaimed over three thousand years ago at Mount Sinai.

As I stood there facing the immense sea of humanity, I felt as if the souls of six million *kedoshim* were standing by my side. Tonight, I was their spokesman.

"*Keil maleh rachamim* . . ." I intoned in the traditional melody.

"Oh, G-d full of mercy, Who dwells on high,
grant proper rest on the wings of the Divine Presence,
in the lofty levels of the holy and the pure ones,
who shine like the glow of the firmament.
For the souls of the holy and the pure ones who were killed,
murdered, slaughtered, drowned and strangled
for the sanctification of the Name,
through the hands of the German oppressors,
may their name and memory be obliterated,
because, without making a vow,
we will contribute to charity in remembrance of their souls.
May their resting place be in Gan Eden
And may the Master of Mercy shelter them
in the shelter of His Wings for eternity;
and may He bind their souls in the Bond of Life.
Hashem is their heritage, and may they repose in peace

on their resting place.
Now let us respond: Amein."

As the ancient words reverberated through the cavernous hall, they penetrated the hearts of the entire assemblage. Closing my eyes, I saw myself singing the same solemn *Keil Malei Rachamim* at the behest of Goeth, the bestial commander of the Plaszow death camp who had been ready to send me to my death. Half a century had passed since that fateful day, but the memory of that event and of my loved ones who had perished at the hands of the bloodthirsty Germans was indelibly etched in my consciousness.

When I concluded with the word *venomar*, "let us respond," there was a brief instant of absolute silence, and then twenty thousand men lifted their voices in a resounding *Amein*, producing a booming sound that echoed through the stadium.

The *Keil Malei Rachamim* that I sang that evening at the *Siyum Hashas* was undeniable proof that the *kedoshim* live on and that the Torah for which they gave their lives is flourishing, thriving and bearing rich fruit. And the *zechus* of this enormous outpouring of *ahavas Torah* surely gave an *aliyah* to their *neshamos*.

As the voices died down, I could see many people unashamedly wiping away their tears. Deeply moved, they felt the historic impact of that moment, one they would surely remember for the rest of their lives.

The *Siyum Hashas* ended with an explosive *Maariv*. Twenty thousand voices joining together to say *Shema Yisrael* in unison; twenty thousand voices shouting, *Yehei shemeih rabba mevorach le'alam ulealmei almaya!* May His great Name be blessed forever and ever!" It was truly a *kiddush Hashem*.

Never before has there been such a mass demonstration for Torah in America.

Going home that night, one Skulener *niggun* kept going through my mind. "*Chasdei Hashem ki lo samnu ki lo chalu rachamav.* Hashem's kindness has not ended, His mercies are not exhausted." (*Eichah* 3:22) The song repeated itself in my mind again and again. How true were those words!

I could not sleep that night. In my darkest hours in Mauthausen I had tried to imagine what the future would be like if Hashem saved me from my misery. I conjured up the most wonderful images of Jewish life, with *chassidim* and *rebbes*, with *yeshivos* and *gedolei Torah*. But never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined the incredible scene that I had witnessed at the *Siyum Hashas*. And by letting me be a part of it, with the opportunity to inspire an *olam* such as that one, Hashem was giving me more than I could ever have asked for.

Hashem had opened up the floodgates of Heaven, releasing His *berachos* on Klal Yisrael and on me, the little choir boy of the Gerrer Rebbe.

EPILOGUE

IN WRITING THESE MEMOIRS, I HAVE KEPT THE PROMISE I made to myself during the most terrible times of despair. I was forced to relive many painful moments, episodes that I had tried to banish from my consciousness. I often trembled as the anguished thoughts streamed from the deep recesses of my memory where I had buried them. Wounds that time had begun to heal were opened again, recollections that had been submerged were raised to the surface once more.

If there is a thought that emerges as the dominant theme of my life, it can be found in the juxtaposition of my two recitations of "*Keil Malei Rachamim.*" The first, in Plaszow, was amidst a cloud of gloom, while the other, at the *Siyum Hashas*, was pronounced at an hour of dazzling splendor and

bright hope. The one theme that enabled me to endure the years that spanned these two points in time was "*ivdu es Hashem besimchah*, serve Hashem with joy." The spirit of *simchah* has been ingrained in my consciousness by my parents, and by the Gerrer Rebbe. *Simchah* was the guiding light in my hours of agony and torment and of course, in my moments of blissful joy. And through my singing, I have tried to share my *simchah* with others and give them spiritual pleasure.

Hashem performed countless miracles to bring me from the valley of death in Plaszow to the summit of fulfillment at the *Siyum Hashas*. A never-ending stream of *chasdei Hashem* has accompanied me every step of the way.

Odeh Hashem bechol leivav. I must give thanks to Hashem from the bottom of my heart. I thank Him for giving me the voice with which to sing His praises, and I thank Him for all the bounty, the *nachas* and the *simchah* He has bestowed upon me.

In his famous commentary on the *siddur*, Rabbi Yaakov Emden comments on the *pasuk*, "*Samcheinu kimos inisanu shenos ra'inu raah*. Give us joy according to the days You afflicted us, for the years we have suffered misfortune." (*Tehillim* 90:15)

Rabbi Emden is struck by the apparent redundancy of the two segments of this verse and is mystified by the alternate use of the terms "days" and "years." He explains that we are asking Hashem to give us joy, "*yom lashanah*," a year of joy for each day that we have been afflicted.

For six bitter years, Klal Yisrael was afflicted in the most dreadful way. In six years of fire and fury, of death and destruction, our people were decimated.

Now, following the words of the *mizmor*, we *daven* to

Hashem, "Give us many years of *simchah* for the countless days You afflicted us. Bring us to Zion Your city in glad song, and to Yerushalayim, the home of Your Beis Hamikdash in eternal joy."

with his records

below:
at the completion
of his personal
Sefer Torah

singing at the Ninth Siyum Hashas

at a command performance

GLOSSARY

Aktion: round-up [Ger.]
al kiddush Hashem: to sanctify the Name
amud: cantor's lectern
Appell: roll call [Ger.]
arba minim: four species taken on *Sukkos*
aron hakodesh: holy ark containing Torah scrolls
baal tefillah: one who leads the prayers
baalei teshuvah: penitent
bachur: youth
bar-mitzvah: *halachic* adulthood
Baruch Hashem: Blessed is the Name; thank Heaven
beis haknesses: house of prayer
beis midrash: study hall
bentch: to bless [Yiddish]
berachah: blessing
Bereishis: Book of Genesis
B'ezras Hashem: with G-d's help
bikur cholim: visiting the sick
chametz: leaven; bread
Chazal: the Sages, of blessed memory
chazan: cantor

chazanus: cantorial singing
cheder: elementary Torah school
chessed: kindness
chevrah kadisha: mortuary
chillul Shabbos: desecration of the Sabbath
Chol Hamoed: Intermediate Days of the Festivals
Chumash: the Pentateuch
chuppah: bridal canopy
churban: destruction
daf yomi: program of daily Talmud study
daven: pray
dayan: rabbinical judge
Devarim: Deuteronomy
deveikus: devotion
divrei Torah: words of the Torah
Eichah: Book of Lamentations
eishes chayil: women of valor
Elul: Jewish month
emunah: faith
frum: observant [Yiddish]
gabbai: synagogue president
galus: exile
gaon: Talmudic genius
Gehinnom: Purgatory
Gemara: part of the Talmud
gemillus chassadim: acts of kindness
hachnassas kallah: charitable wedding assistance
hachnassas orchim: inviting guests
Halachah: Jewish law
hashgachah: divine providence
Havdalah: concluding ritual of *Shabbos*
issur: proibition
Judenrein: free of Jews [Ger.]
Kaddish: mourner's prayer
kallah: bride
kashrus: state of being kosher
kavanah: concentration
kehillah: community
kibbud av va'eim: honoring father and mother
Kiddush: sancification of *Shabbos* or festivals
kiddush Hashem: sanctification of the Name
Kiddush Levanah: prayer sanctifying the new moon
Kissei Hakavod: Throne of Glory
Kodesh Kadashim: Holy of Holies
kollel: Torah study center
korban: sacrifice
Lag Baomer: thirty-third day of the *omer*
lechayim: to life, traditional toast
levayah: funeral
Maariv: evening prayers

machzorim: prayer books for high holy days and festivals
malachim: angels
marranos: secret Jews [Sp.]
marror: bitter herbs
mazel tov: congratulations
melamed: teacher
melaveh malkah: post-*Shabbos* meal
meshulachim: collectors
Midrash: body of homiletics from Talmudic period
mikveh: ritual bath
Minchah: afternoon service
minhag: custom
Mishlei: Book of Proverbs
Mishnah: part of the Talmud
mispallelim: ones who prays
mitzvah: Torah commandment
mohel: performer of circumcisions
Mussaf: supplementary service
Neelah: concluding prayers of Yom Kippur
neshamos: souls
niggun: tune
nussach: version
parshah: portion of the Torah
pasuk: verse
Pesach: Passover
Purim: Festival of Lots
rav: rabbi
Rosh Chodesh: New Month
Rosh Hashanah: New Year
rosh yeshivah: dean
sefer: book
Selichos: penitential prayers
seudah: feast
Shacharis: morning prayers
Shalom aleichem: peace unto you; greeting
shalosh seudos: *Shabbos* meal
shammash: beadle
Shas: the entire Talmud
Shavuos: Pentecost, late spring festival
Shechinah: Divine Presence
sheliach tzibbur: the representative of the congregation
Shema Yisrael: Hear, O Israel
Shemini Atzeress: Festival of the Eighth Day
Shemoneh Esrei: the Eighteen Benedictions, fundametal part of daily prayers
Shemos: Exodus
Sheva Berachos: the Seven Nuptial Blessings
shirayim: remnants
shiur: lecture
shochet: ritual slaughterer
shofar: ram's horn
shtiebel: *chassidic* synagogue
shtreimel: *chassidic* headdress
shul: synagogue [Yiddish]
Shulchan Aruch: Code of Jewish Law

siddur: prayer book
Simchas Torah: Festival of the Torah
shofar: ram's horn
siyum: conclusion
sofer: scribe
sukkah: *Sukkos* booth
Sukkos: Festival of Tabernacles
talmid chacham: Torah scholar
tefillah: prayer
tefillin: phylacteries
Tehillim: Book of Psalms
teshuvah: repentance
Tikkun Chatzos: esoteric midnight prayers
tisch: *chassidic* gathering
tzaddik: righteous person
tzaros: troubles
tzeddakah: charity
Vayikra: Leviticus
Vidui: declaration of transgressions; confession
yahrzeit: commemorative day [Yiddish]
Yamim Noraim: Days of Awe
Yamim Tovim: festivals
yarmulka: skullcap
yeshivah: Torah school
Yiddishkeit: Jewishness
yiras shamayim: fear of Heaven
Yom Kippur: Day of Atonement
zechus: privilege; merit
zemiros: songs

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In Preparation:

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